

Framing a Methodological Approach to *God's Fierce Whimsy*

Introduction

Before beginning an investigation of any historical text, the question “why” is warranted. Why delve deeply into an examination of *God's Fierce Whimsy*? Why give a careful reading to this text in particular? My answers to these questions—hinted at in the Introduction above—are twofold. First, there is historical significance to *God's Fierce Whimsy* that warrants attention. Second, *God's Fierce Whimsy* is a methodological gem. Its profundity has been lost on many—maybe because of its initial lackluster reception or perhaps due to the fact that many theologians who do not self-identify as feminists have failed to understand that feminist theologies bear significance for them, too. In order to more fully ground the study of *God's Fierce Whimsy*, I will present this twofold rationale in this initial section.

A Unique Literary-Historical Moment

Tracing the evolution of feminist theologies in recent decades is a rich and profound experience that brings one into contact with intense and visceral stories of the pain that women have endured simply for being women. Yet such an examination reveals almost immediately that all women do not have the same struggles. In other words, sexism does not exist in isolation of other discriminatory systems. In the history of the United States in particular, perhaps one of the most poignant instantiation of intertwined injustices concerns that of sexism and racism. In fact, in our cultural context, any examination of sexism in the church and the theological guild would be profoundly anemic—if not simply incomplete—if racism is not also considered in such a historical investigation.

This awareness of the interconnected nature of systems of oppression was a central focus for a group of diverse women who, in 1982, formed the Mud Flower Collective and subsequently published the text *God's Fierce Whimsy* in 1985. In the authoring of this text, their shared task was to reenvision theological education. They united with an awareness that such education necessarily entailed a commitment to justice—and more specifically, justice for women, who themselves experienced oppression in a matrix of unjust systems and situations that included, but were certainly not limited to, sexism. In many ways, the work of the Mud Flower Collective was a progenitor. Prior to the publication of *God's Fierce Whimsy*—specifically in the early moments of feminist theologies in the theological academy mid-twentieth century—the reality of concomitant injustices was just beginning to be recognized and explored in the theological academy. The text by the collective is both an incisive acknowledgment of the complexities of the histories

of feminist theologies and also a critical response to these early feminist theologies.

Taking a broad view of the timeline of contemporary theology, *God's Fierce Whimsy* can be positioned as a part of this feminist theological lineage itself, standing at a unique historical juncture between the second- and third-wave feminist movements in the theological guild. Valerie Saiving's seminal article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," appeared in print twenty-five years prior to the publication of *God's Fierce Whimsy*.¹ Mary Daly's works and her move to a post-Christian perspective were relatively well known at this time. The preface to a compilation on the topic of women in religion published the same year as *God's Fierce Whimsy* notes, "[T]he scholarly output on women and religion has so increased and so deepened that it is difficult to stay on top of current developments in even a rather narrow specialization."² Moreover, the ideas of self-identified feminist theologians and biblical scholars—such as Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Phyllis Trible—were gaining momentum, with feminist theologies beginning to have a presence at some theological institutions in North America, albeit not necessarily a welcomed presence and a limited one at that.

The writing of *God's Fierce Whimsy* is approximately concurrent with critiques of this compact history of feminist theologies thus signaling a transition to another wave of scholarship. While feminist theological developments after Saiving's publication were still of a nascent nature, by the early 1980s such theologies were beginning to be challenged in the scholarly realm in light of the limited descriptions and essentialized definitions of feminist ideas and women's experiences that they presented and perpetuated.³ Although writing about and for a sphere broader than the religious sector, bell hooks, for example, issued such a critique in her work *Ain't I a*

*Woman?: black women and feminism.*⁴ Even prior to this publication is Audre Lorde's letter to Mary Daly written in 1979 and published openly in 1980, in which Lorde challenged Daly's inattention to matters of race.⁵ Standing alongside these works and cited extensively for its innovation and influence,⁶ the work *God's Fierce Whimsy* positively aids in the shifting and expanding of the conversation among women theologians in North America. This unique positioning is not only evident externally in these tracings of the conversations and publications in feminist theologies, it also is apparent internally in the identification of the central task of *God's Fierce Whimsy*. The work possesses a transitional orientation—namely to both take seriously the doing of theology in light of the differences of race, sexual orientation, and class and also reconceive theological education in light of an acknowledgment of an “unrealized vision of solidarity” among the members of the collective (ix). Undeniably, for these reasons, as it exists in the history of feminist theologies, *God's Fierce Whimsy* is a compelling work to consider.

A Challenge to the Present

While the historical significance of *God's Fierce Whimsy* is a cogent factor supporting an analysis of the text, I also want to contend here that the book's significance extends beyond its unique historical location. There exists methodological significance for the entire theological academy here. The dynamical relationships between the authors as well as the issues and questions raised in the process of authorship still bear relevance to the manner in which contemporary discourse is approached and construed, especially as it concerns the role and presence of difference in the theological guild.

Certainly, such relevance extends to feminist theologies. In recent years, these theologies have been foremost characterized by their

burgeoning differences.⁷ This is both a challenge and an opportunity. As Margaret Kamitsuka notes, “The implications for feminist theology of attending to difference . . . are not superficial but rather decisive, radical, and systemic. Attending to difference affects how feminist theologians engage each other’s work, how we remain accountable to the needs and resistance activities of our various constituent communities, how we position ourselves in relation to the Christian tradition, and how we conduct ongoing self-critical reflection as we encounter new forms of otherness and new repressed voices.”⁸ Difference—and especially the differences that exist in access to power—continues to be central to the task of theology.

Yet this is true not only for feminist theologies but contemporary theologies in general. Unlike any historical era prior, the theological terrain in the academy and church is marked now by increasing intersections of difference—be that difference ideological, experiential, cultural, ethnic, or global. How theologians perceive, embrace, and navigate such multiteity is as significant as the particular theological developments that such difference generates. This point cannot be overemphasized. How we do theology is as important as the content of the theology we do. Moreover, continuing to cultivate recognition of where power lies and is lacking in these intersections of difference also must be seen as critically important work. One cannot simply speak about difference apart from attending to the injustices that shape and inform the experiences of such difference.

Thus the very process of authoring *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, as evident in the text itself, serves as an important resource not only for discourse within and between various feminist theologies but in the wider theological guild as well. The prioritizing of a place for dialogue in the Mud Flower Collective’s methodology makes their writing both relevant and unique. The text showcases an approach to theologizing that allows both a corporate voice and the voices of the individual

authors to be heard throughout the work. Their process is characterized by mutuality, and at the same time it is embedded with disagreement, unforeseen conclusions, joy, unresolved tensions, and pain. It is in this dialogic approach that the group is able to honestly and deeply wrestle with the persisting presence of the multilayered systems of injustice they fight but in which they also participate. As the future of theology is embraced and created, the insights and conversations within *God's Fierce Whimsy* can truly serve as guideposts to those in the academy and ecclesial communities.⁹

This, in essence, is the guiding impulse of this project. The diverse women of the Mud Flower Collective place a challenge before those doing theology in the present and future. Such a challenge requires understanding first, and thus this claim of relevance will be buttressed in the following pages by a critical and careful analysis of *God's Fierce Whimsy*. My initial task here is exploratory and descriptive in nature, with the intention of learning from the difficult yet fruitful work that the Mud Flower Collective undertook over twenty-five years ago. Subsequently I will address the question of applicability. Yet before proceeding with this analysis, two matters of prolegomena must be addressed. First, I will briefly consider issues regarding terminology usage in this project. Second, I will discuss the methodological approach I am adopting in this work.

The Power and Problems of Naming

Before engaging in an analysis of *God's Fierce Whimsy*, it is of benefit to discuss how I am using feminist terminology in this project. Undeniably, feminist theology, as a label, is problematic and carries with it a complicated history.¹⁰ Within second-wave feminism in the theological guild in North America, theology done from a feminist vantage point often was understood monolithically. As white women

initially were allowed into seminaries and theological graduate schools, they began to critique the sexism deeply embedded in these institutions—noting in particular that their experiences and methodological impulses had not been adequately incorporated into theological reflections and formulations. From a marginalized place, these women sought to level such a critique in reference to and directed toward the patriarchal center. Thus “women’s experience” was not foremost understood in light of its diversity but rather in contrast to men’s experience. In orienting itself to the center, this feminist-informed critique was unable to see that, to a profound extent, it existed and participated in the center by benefiting from other unjust frameworks (e.g., racism) that also informed the structure of the theological academy. As these second-wave feminist theologians initiated this compelling corrective in North America, many of them—although not all—failed to recognize the complexity of the task they had adopted for themselves. The delineations of feminist theology that emerged were cast in white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual terms. With this attempt to move toward and critically participate in the theological conversation at the center, there was also the problematic reinforcement of the marginalization of others.

With the growing awareness of the complexity and breadth of women’s experience (as well as subsequently developed, disparate theoretical approaches to such experience), no longer could “feminist theology” be understood to solely describe this early strand of theological reflection. The question thus arose as to how these different women-centered theologies should be identified. Should “feminist theology” be understood as an umbrella term to describe the variety of perspectives and theories that have developed in what has been understood as the third wave of scholarship? Undeniably such an umbrellaed employment carries difficulties. Its usage is foremost

problematic because of this history aforementioned, with its initial employment almost exclusively referring to the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Ergo, to now suggest that this term includes the breadth of women's experiences and social locations implies that it is the terminology of the center, previously embraced and defined by these early women, that thereby defines the margins. Such usage undermines mutuality, and therefore the power—and specifically the power of naming—still lies with the historically privileged. Related then, in light of the early, narrow usage of the term “feminist theology,” white women can continue to self-describe themselves with this term without ever having to acknowledge how their own race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social location impact their work.

At the same time, language has limits, and there are difficulties in any attempt to identify another readily available or ideal term that can function as a categorical descriptor for theologies that uniquely recognize, incorporate, and consider the realities of women's experiences. In this project I have chosen to pluralize the early identifier of this category of work, and by doing so—that is, by using “feminist theologies”—I am hoping to point to a plurality within this guild. Admittedly, this is not a perfect solution to the aforementioned problems, and thus to some extent, the difficulties surrounding nomenclature remain. This matter is connected to questions regarding the very future of feminist theologies—a discussion I will return to in the final chapter of this work.¹¹

Before continuing to a discussion of method, one final aspect of naming must be considered. After the publication of *God's Fierce Whimsy*, Katie Cannon¹² and Delores Williams¹³ began to identify their work as womanist, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz¹⁴ started to employ the term *mujerista* to describe her work. Throughout my project here I use both of these terms to refer to the work of these

three women—even though womanist and *mujerista* are not used in the text *God's Fierce Whimsy*. My primary reason for applying such terminology centers on the power and privilege of naming. As Isasi-Díaz describes, “To name oneself is one of the most powerful acts any human person can do. A name provides identification as well as being a conceptual framework, a point of reference, a mental construct used in thinking, understanding, and relating to persons, ideas, movements.”¹⁵

While the usage of the terms “mujerista” and “womanist” in describing these women’s work in *God's Fierce Whimsy* risks reading something back into the text that was not originally there, it is evident that—as members of the Mud Flower Collective—these women were already employing conceptual frameworks that embody *mujerista* and womanist impulses, concerns, experiences, and realities. These frameworks may be nascent, but as will be discussed below, they indeed exist in the text. This is seen, for example, in Isasi-Díaz’s commentary on the white influence on the very nature of the writing project that is *God's Fierce Whimsy*. She notes: “It’s painful to read through this book from the perspective of Hispanic culture and see the marginality and tokenism of my presence. But I also feel that you other six have taken me seriously, struggling with me, listening to me, helping create a place in theological education in which I have been able for the first time, in relation to either white or black women, to struggle with what it means to be Hispanic and female and Roman Catholic and a liberation theologian and still not go crazy” (197–98). Even in this comment that highlights the intellectual struggle Isasi-Díaz experienced, there is a seed evident—that is, a hint of a nascent theology in the process of forming.¹⁶ As may be known, not all African American or Hispanic scholars who focus on the experiences of women self-identify as womanist¹⁷ or *mujerista*.¹⁸ Yet when referring to the work of Katie Cannon, Delores Williams,

and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, in light of their own self-identifications, I will use these particular terms.

A Meta-Dialogic (Anti-)Method

For two reasons in particular, determining the methodological framework by which to explore *God's Fierce Whimsy* has proven to be a somewhat difficult endeavor. First, there is a diversity of experiences and approaches among members of the Mud Flower Collective. Thus championing one methodology as primary over another results in a privileging of certain experiences and approaches over others—a privileging that seems to exacerbate some of the problems of systemic hierarchy the collective is attempting to reveal and dismantle. Any method utilized here needs to underscore and uphold the differences represented in the text instead of monolithically flatten them. Second, in my initial explorations of the text, and in light of the variety in content and genre therein, it has become evident that certain methods bear more relevance and provide more clarity at particular moments in the text than other methods do. In consideration of the text as a whole, there exists no singular methodological key that brings an incisive clarity to the multifarious parts making up the work.

In light of these complexities, in the critical analysis that follows, I will be adopting a method that champions flexibility and prioritizes what rhetoricians Kenneth Cissna and Rob Anderson identify as an “emergent dialogic sensitivity.”¹⁹ Drawing on Gadamerian, Buberian, and Bakhtinian impulses, Cissna and Anderson assert that carefully constructed methods, at times, can unhelpfully function as restrictive templates that skew instead of elucidate the subject matter under consideration. While a critical examination of a text in which emergent dialogic sensitivity is adopted must include established theoretical motifs and tools, such an endeavor is primarily understood