

Introduction: Setting the Stage for an Analysis of *God's Fierce Whimsy*

Identifying the Argument

What happens when seven scholars sit down face-to-face and commit to do theology collaboratively with their differences on the table? Are their differences minimized? Championed? Moreover, what is their method for such a task? Do they end up following old systems of constructing theology? Or do they forge a new methodological path? These are the questions I will take up in this book. Specifically, this work is a critical investigation of *God's Fierce Whimsy*—a challenging and innovative text written and published in the 1980s by a group of seven women who identified themselves as the Mud Flower Collective.¹ This collective of scholars included two black women, a Hispanic woman living in the United States, and four white women; all of these women brought distinct perspectives and experiences not only concerning race and ethnicity but also class and sexuality.² An examination of the collective's writing is elucidating in that it underscores a particular moment of recent theological history. Yet such an examination is more than mere historical illumination. A deeper exploration of the text reveals that

the work is a compelling demonstration of both a unique theological method and also resistance to the matrix of injustices that inform the histories, relationships, and experiences of the collective. Thus my argument in this project is as follows: an analysis of *God's Fierce Whimsy* challenges contemporary theologians to revise how they understand and do theology in light of difference and differential access to power.

To restate the obvious, *God's Fierce Whimsy* is a book written by women. For this reason, the text is most often engaged by those affirming a women-centered approach to theology—womanists, *mujerista* scholars, white feminists, and so on. While these conversations about the work in the wake of its publication are rich and important, it is a travesty that the book has not received a wider reading. The members of the Mud Flower Collective enact a theological method that is remarkable and innovative. It is a method that takes into account the relational and the ethical. It is a method that is fundamentally dialogic in nature.

As theology becomes increasingly rich and varied in a globalized world, attention to dialogue in theological method becomes more and more important. This cannot be a pursuit only for those interested in contextuality, diversity, difference, and the like. Rather, it needs to be an integral dimension of theological method in general. When I initially set out to focus my dissertation on *God's Fierce Whimsy*, I did not assume I would be writing a text on theological method. Yet that is exactly what has happened. The methodological questions *God's Fierce Whimsy* raises are, I submit, ethical in nature. In many ways, in the pages that follow I am exploring conversations regarding the ethics of doing theology. How do we do theology responsibly in light of our own context? What does responsible scholarship look like as we collaborate with and also disagree with

others? How do we do theology responsibly in light of differing views, experiences, and assumptions? While *God's Fierce Whimsy* should not be taken as a manual to answer such questions, the work of the Mud Flower Collective is a remarkable example. It is an illustration of the difficulty and beauty of a dialogic approach to collaborative theological work.

Mapping the Project

Due to the distinctiveness of *God's Fierce Whimsy*, my intention in this work is to gain a better sense of the text by exploring it from a variety of angles. Each chapter in this project addresses the aforementioned argument in a different way, contributing something essential to the argument by adopting a distinct but complementary angle of viewing and analysis. In chapter 1 I locate the work of the Mud Flower Collective in history—identifying its place in the waves of feminism in the academy in North America. I also take up the question of naming and specifically delineate my usage of terminology in this project. Additionally, in this initial chapter I spend significant time identifying my own methodological approach to the text *God's Fierce Whimsy*. In particular, I adopt and adapt the methodological convictions of contemporary dialogic theorists Rob Anderson and Kenneth Cissna. The theoretical approach that they take is inherently dialogic and amenable to a variety of sources and modes of analysis. Due to the unique nature of the text *God's Fierce Whimsy*—and specifically in light of its multi-authorship and its containment of multiple genres—the method that Anderson and Cissna suggest is advantageous for the analysis at hand.

The second chapter of this project includes a survey of how *God's Fierce Whimsy* has been received and analyzed in published literature. Here I consider both the perceptions of the text that have

emerged—namely that it has attained “classic status” in the minds of some—as well as the dearth of substantive engagement with the text in published sources. In this chapter I begin with a consideration of the four reviews that have been published on *God’s Fierce Whimsy*. Subsequently, I assess how both Robert Banks and David Kelsey have understood the importance and impact of *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, specifically in regard to theological education. The last portion of this chapter is a consideration of Sarah Coakley’s discussion of the content and method of *God’s Fierce Whimsy*. As it relates to the argument at hand, this chapter—in discerning what has and has not been written about this text—highlights accurate and inaccurate assessments of *God’s Fierce Whimsy*, thereby further identifying how the text itself serves as a literary exemplification that can challenge theological method today.

The third chapter of this project entails a careful examination of methodological features present in *God’s Fierce Whimsy*. Aligning with the argument of the overall project, in this chapter I carefully consider how the members of the collective do theology collaboratively in light of their points of commonality, their divergent experiences of racism, sexism, and classism, and their present understandings of justice and injustice in theological education and the academy. I begin by retrieving important theoretical insights and impulses from two seminal philosophers of dialogue, Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin. Each of these theorists has articulated modes and qualities of dialogue that in turn prove helpful in identifying dialogic features within the work of the Mud Flower Collective. With this theoretical foundation in place, in this chapter I delineate four characteristics of *God’s Fierce Whimsy* that suggest conduciveness to dialogue. These characteristics, I submit, contribute to the remarkable nature of *God’s Fierce Whimsy*. With a

persisting awareness of the disparate experiences and definitions of injustice among the members of the collective, the writing of the members demonstrates a radically different way of doing theology that departs from the individualistic modes of theological activity that are normative in Western (North American and European) academia.

With this textual analysis in place, the purpose of chapter 4 is to gain an understanding of how the Mud Flower Collective, in the present, understands *God's Fierce Whimsy*. Using the content gained from interviews with the members of the collective, in this chapter I address a number of themes raised and discussed by the members. In particular, I consider both the initial circumstances that led the women to participate in the collective and the impact that this participation had on them. I also underscore which themes addressed in *God's Fierce Whimsy* still hold importance for the members today. Finally, I put the question of significance to the members of the collective—specifically asking them whether they believe the collaborative work and writing they did over twenty-five years ago is still important today. Their responses to this question conclude this fourth chapter.

The last chapter of this work focuses on the implications of the argument I am making. Drawing on the insights gained from the various vantage points of study assumed in the previous chapters, here I address which themes are of particular enduring relevance for theological reflection today. With an emphasis on contextuality and pedagogy, I attend to the themes of dialogue and story in considering the ongoing importance of the work of the Mud Flower Collective. Moreover, with an awareness that much has been written since the publication of *God's Fierce Whimsy*, in this last chapter I bring into the conversation the work of contemporary theorists working in poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and contemporary feminist theory.

Yet before proceeding to develop my argument in these five chapters as I have outlined here, it is important to preface my project with attention to my own experiences and presuppositions. To retell and reflect upon the personal experiences of others without both identifying my own experiences and signaling how they inform my analysis would leave this work deficient. In other words, to write into this book the stories of the Mud Flower Collective without taking the risk of writing my own story into this text is problematic. In light of this conviction, in the remainder of this introduction I will consider themes in my own history that uniquely shape my approach to the work of the Mud Flower Collective.

Naming the Influence of the Reflexive

In recent decades within many academic disciplines there has been a call for a shift away from a positivistic approach to research and toward an approach in which the presuppositions, experiences, prejudices, and cultural assumptions of the researcher are identified as contributing factors to the analysis at hand. While in chapter 5 of this work I will discuss the relevance of *God's Fierce Whimsy* to my own teaching and scholarship, authorial reflexivity—that is, conscious recognition of the autobiographical elements that inform my research—is also an essential starting point for this project.³ In what follows I will reflexively underscore a few autobiographical moments that are pertinent to the subject matter of this work. I will begin by considering selected formative experiences that have shaped my understanding of race and gender. I will also identify some of the significant moments that led to the choosing of *God's Fierce Whimsy* as the focus of this project.

A Reflexive Turn to Race and Ethnicity

Perhaps two of the biggest situational factors in my earliest years that impacted the development of my perceptions of race and ethnicity are my parents' commitment to evangelicalism, which entailed an upbringing in a variety of conservative churches, and my father's career in academia, which led to a number of moves around the Midwest in the first twelve years of my life. These two influences converged in the parachurch ministries my parents led for international students—most of whom were pursuing graduate degrees at U.S. academic institutions—and their families. My experiences that accompanied my parents' ministries deeply informed my perspectives of race and ethnicity, and in retrospect I am aware that at an early age I held implicit views that people of color were highly intelligent—in the Western sense of the word—and originated from other parts of the world. My parents welcomed people into our home from a variety of countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia for fellowship, dinners, and Bible studies. As a child, diversity was present in my life, and yet at the same time, I developed a close association between whiteness and the United States. The vast majority of people of color I met and knew had home-cultures in other parts of the world to which they would return, thus reinforcing a sense of otherness and a lack of early awareness of systemic racism in the United States. The enduring challenge for me therefore has been one of unlearning and relearning—unlearning the flawed assumption that racism is not deeply woven in the fabric of this country and subsequently relearning these histories by which I have been shaped and from which I have benefited—a privilege that also exists as a loss.⁴

For the last several years, this ongoing journey of understanding my own racial identity in the wider history of my community and country of origin has stretched me in a variety of ways. As is pertinent

to this work, I will highlight one instance in particular on this journey, which eventually led me to an encounter with the text *God's Fierce Whimsy*. While I was pursuing my Master of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary, after a particularly compelling classroom conversation about race, a fellow white student encouraged me to read the text *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* by Thandeka.⁵ The book was radically transformative for me and provided me a vocabulary to begin to talk about whiteness, my own racialized history, and racial identity. Yet initially it was a text that, for me, required slowness. Each chapter needed space to breathe, and thus chapter-by-chapter—sometimes violently and sometimes gently—I was challenged to think about race and racism in new ways. Not only was the book in and of itself beneficial, I was at a juncture in my life where I was being encouraged by others to really see and understand racism in myself and in the institutions with which I was affiliated.

My interaction with Thandeka's work, as well as the subsequent conversations I had about this text, signaled a turning point in how I understood myself in relationship to racism. It was a moment of unlearning and relearning. The moment challenged me to begin to reflect on my experiences as a child mentioned above. This moment also pushed me to read more widely and deeply than I had previously done on the relationship between theology and racism.⁶ It was in this season of reading widely and deeply that I first encountered the text *God's Fierce Whimsy*.

A Reflexive Turn to Gender and Evangelicalism

Perhaps similar to other white women who grew up in middle-class homes in the United States, sexism was a reality I was able to articulate long before I was able to name other forms of systemic

prejudice and suppression. Growing up in predominantly white nondenominational and Southern Baptist churches, from an early age I was acutely aware of what men were doing and women were not doing in churches—namely leading. Moreover, with a home life in which I lived with a mother, father, and older brother, I tacitly held a view of equality among genders in my childhood. In my formative years of Sunday school education, I remember being incredibly disappointed there was not both a male and a female savior. In my undergraduate education, Christology was something that drew me in as this question of the maleness (and masculinity) of Christ persisted.⁷

While my graduate education opened up to me alternative understandings of women in ministry and feminist theologies, there were still many moments marked by gender injustice—be that encountering sexist assumptions, witnessing sexist acts, or experiencing the realities of systemic sexism. On one occasion at the seminary, after delivering a presentation that was met with a particularly hostile reception, I met Katie Cannon. Although Cannon was on campus for an entirely different event than the one at which I had presented, encountering her in passing was probably one of the most fortuitous and significant moments in my doctoral program. The marked contrast between the hostility of the conference from which I had come and the hospitality with which Cannon met me was truly remarkable. My conversation with Cannon over breakfast confirmed for me my decision to continue writing my dissertation on the Mud Flower Collective, despite the mounting disapproval from others concerning my choice to pursue a dissertation centered on feminist theologies.

As I continue this project focused on *God's Fierce Whimsy*, I complicatedly remain linked to this world of evangelicalism in which sexism (and racism) is alive and well. Perhaps the deepest textual

resonance I have found in navigating my experiences in the evangelical world is a book written by Nicola Hoggard Creegan and Christine D. Pohl titled *Living on the Boundaries: Evangelical Women, Feminism and the Theological Academy*.⁸ Their purpose in this text is to explore the interstitial space between worlds that seem contradictory—namely the worlds of feminism and evangelicalism.⁹ With the intention of providing “a fuller picture of life on the boundary,” Creegan and Pohl take a narrative approach in their text, naming and describing the experiences of women who are navigating these boundaries of feminism and evangelicalism in the theological academy.¹⁰ Their conclusion, which ultimately affirms an overlapping of worlds that thereby claims a site for evangelical feminism, does reveal a certain ambivalence with which I deeply resonate. They write,

Our conversations with the many women we have met along the way have left us both encouraged and troubled. We were deeply moved by the numerous accounts of hope and grace from women living not only on boundaries between maps, but often on larger culturally and religiously defined “fault lines.” We also heard many agonizing stories; sometimes these issues break a woman apart.¹¹

This tension, between encouragement and pain, remains with me. I am on faculty at an evangelical institution, and in this capacity I regularly read papers written by female students arguing against women in ministry. On multiple occasions I have been asked to defend my place as a woman teaching in the classroom, and frequently I have had to manage sexist attitudes and comments directed toward me by male students and male colleagues.

Yet, despite such realities I do find moments of hope and possibility, moments in which feminism and evangelicalism are naturally wedded in both my teaching and scholarship. Perhaps this has been most acutely evident in my teaching and research in

Cambodia that focus on gender justice. With the encouragement of the institution at which I teach and in light of my own research interests, work experiences, and relationships, I developed an undergraduate course that focuses on justice and human trafficking in Cambodia.

Of course, the important question to ask here is: Why Cambodia? There are individuals trafficked in Minnesota and New Jersey in the communities to which I am geographically linked. Why the need to travel halfway around the world to fight this problem? The initial impetus for my work in Cambodia was my growing awareness through research and conversation of the scope of human trafficking in and through this Southeast Asian country. The initial reason I traveled to Cambodia was because of a relationship—specifically, an established partnership that exists between a colleague in Minnesota and a university in Cambodia. By invitation I went to Cambodia, and in so doing I forged deeper and more significant connections to others in the country. Yet undeniably—even though I am hopeful in light of collaborative advocacy for justice here—racism, neocolonialism, and other prejudices and inequities inscribe my very presence in Cambodia. Thus, as I work in Southeast Asia against injustice, I am aware that my presence—as well as the general presence of expatriates—is a troubling one that requires constant examination. One example of an important site of examination will suffice here—specifically concerning the privilege of travel.

Traveling to Cambodia is of immense benefit to myself—both personally and professionally. Moreover, it is the enactment of privilege. The opportunity to experience (of one's own volition) a country and culture other than one's own (while one's safety is generally not under threat) is perhaps one of the biggest privileges in our world today. Yet, of course, like all privileges, it is an advantage experienced by few. bell hooks rightly problematizes this privilege