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Critical Convergences

Toward a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics

A postcolonial inflection of a womanist hermeneutics is necessary to analyze the figure of the woman Babylon because this combined interpretive lens helps to highlight the dual aspects of her identity as both a slavewoman *and* as an empress/imperial city. To be sure, both womanist and postcolonial interpretations of Revelation have previously been done by other scholars. To the best of my knowledge, however, no one has yet engaged in a *combination* of these two lenses, which is the task of this book.

Although the interests of these two approaches have overlapped—womanist concerns have included issues of empire, and postcolonial concerns have included countering structures that oppress racial, ethnic women—I still find it necessary to combine the trajectories of these two lenses in a more self-conscious, systematic fashion. They complement each other well, each filling in the gaps where the other is found lacking. A womanist hermeneutics helps

to position the experience of African American women as a starting point for biblical interpretation and offers ways to name that experience, while postcolonial theory provides a vocabulary that helps identify the various, interlocking structures of domination and the psychological states caused by them.

For my approach to Revelation, I appeal to postcolonial theory, specifically the work of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, and to African American thought, through the work of black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois. In particular, I employ two of their terms: Bhabha's notion of *ambivalence*—the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from a particular object or person, which exists within a single individual, not least in the colonial or postcolonial arena—and Du Bois's notion of the *veil*—a metaphorical covering that hinders and prohibits African Americans from seeing themselves as they truly are. My reason for doing so is because together, the meanings of their terms capture my experience as an African American when I engage the text of the woman Babylon. They call to mind both the negative impact of capitalist systems on oppressed peoples, as well as one's ability to strategically comport oneself to those very same systems in order to survive, and in some cases, to excel.

It is important to note that I did not say that Bhabha and Du Bois's terms help to capture my experience as an African American *woman*. Although the work of Bhabha and Du Bois are foundational to the way in which I read Revelation, something is missing. Neither of these two intellectuals discusses the implications of what it means to be colonized, to be racially discriminated against, or how to endure such oppression, *as a woman*. My point is not to suggest a lacuna in their respective work, although a discussion of the possible reasons for such an omission is quite tempting. Their terminology thus only helps to capture my experience as I encounter the woman Babylon *in part*. Once I bring their work into critical dialogue with womanist

thought—which has the experiences of black women at the *start* of any biblical exploration, the interests and love of black women at its *core*, and the liberation and advancement of black women as the *result* of its work—then and only then, do I begin to comprehend that experience *in full*.

By complementing womanist biblical inquiry with postcolonial theory, my aim is to build upon and extend their distinctive trajectories in an effort to posit a hermeneutics of ambi*veil*ence—a combination of both Du Bois's notion of the veil and Bhabha's notion of ambivalence. However, before explicating this new term, and in an effort to fully and concisely articulate why and how I see these two trajectories working together, it is important to discuss them separately. I will begin with womanist theology and biblical hermeneutics, as this is the foundation of my analysis—following the womanist protocol of beginning with black women's experience. I will present a broad overview of womanist biblical interpretation by examining the origins of womanist thought, its appropriation by African American female scholars in theology, ethics, and biblical studies, and begin to explore the prospect of developing a womanist approach to the text of Revelation based on my analysis.[1]

Womanist Theology and Biblical Hermeneutics

> The twentieth century will be ushered out by a prophecy similar to the one by which it was introduced. In the preface to his famous book of 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour line . . ." The

1. It is necessary that I include the work of womanist theologians and ethicists in my discussion of womanist *biblical* hermeneutics because womanist work is not categorized according to academic disciplines. What is important to note is that the ways in which these women discuss the implications of their work in the lives of African American women in church and society correspond to the aims of womanist biblical scholarship.

> problem of the twentieth-first century is the problem of the color line, the gender line, and the class line.
>
> —*Katie Geneva Cannon*[2]

Womanism emerged in the 1980s not only "in response to sexism in black liberation theology and racism in the feminist movement,"[3] but also "independently out of women's culture and experience."[4] Although womanism recognized the contribution of black liberation theology's analysis of historical and political systems of oppression and feminist theology's analysis of sexist oppression, the fact of the matter is that the concerns of the black woman in both theologies remained an afterthought. "In the '60s and '70s, besides ignoring the African diaspora, the overwhelming majority of black male liberation scholars and white feminist scholars failed to address the spiritual and social reality of black women in the continental United States."[5]

2. Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 25, emphasis added, citing W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Library of America, 1969), xi.
3. Wilda Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach to Biblical Studies," *Encounter* 67 (2006): 393.
4. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 160. Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant notes that "the possibly irreparable nature of the tension between White women and Black women necessitates a completely different word to describe the liberative efforts of Black women: 'womanist'" ("Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," in *African-American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore [Durham: Duke University Press, 1989], 212–13). Grant also includes the tension between black men and black women in this assertion. Womanist thought helps black women not only fill in the gap between black theology and feminist theology, but also "challenges Black male and White feminist theologians to be more inclusive in their understanding of freedom and equality, liberation and wholeness" (Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 160–61).
5. Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach," 393. Delores S. Williams also notes that womanist theology has an "organic relation" both to black liberation theology and feminist theologies, connecting them at vital points: however, "the distinct and sometimes hostile differences that exist between them are precipitated, in part, by the maladies afflicting community life in America—sexism, racism, and classism" (*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993], 178). "Feminist theologies" is plural in order to reflect the various strands of feminist theology: Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, Anglo-American, etc.

Black women suffered from "double jeopardy"—African American women's experience with racism and sexism—and needed a theology that reflected their entire being, one that only they could express.[6] However, the creation of a space that African American women could call their own, and the task of maintaining their whole identities, did not involve a definite isolation from white feminists or black theologians, but rather became more and more solidified through their interaction. African American theologian James Cone notes that as black feminist theology began to emerge, black women were not only in dialogue with other minority women, both in the United States and in places such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but also white feminists.[7] For example, Cone notes that black women were able to build upon, and particularize some of white feminists' beliefs and values, such as their resistance to gender inequality, and their "terminology . . . in response to women's subordination, such as patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism."[8] Thus, womanist hermeneutics should not be read as "wholly other and ideologically distinct from other forms of feminist discourse."[9] Before turning to a discussion of

6. James Cone, "Black Theology, Black Churches, and Black Women," in *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*, eds. Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), 410.
7. Ibid., 418. Interestingly, in Cone's list of the black women seminarians and professors who began to develop a black feminist theology, he includes those who today are identified as womanists: Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (ibid., 417). Hebrew biblical scholar Wilda Gafney notes that the shift from these women identifying themselves as black feminists to womanists occurred over time. "Early African American feminists, later womanists, disenchanted with the white supremacist ideologies perpetuated by the feminist movement soon began to question its methodologies and motivations" ("A Black Feminist Approach," 395). This conflict resulted in various identifiable differentiations between the two groups. "One clear point of demarcation from the feminist movement in general and from feminist theology in particular: a deep valuation of ancestral, nonacademic, oral discourses, knowledge and coping skills. Another point of departure is the relationship that womanist theologians have with the institutional church—they are more likely to critique it from within, rather than from a distance" (ibid., 395–96).
8. Cone, "Black Theology, Black Churches," 411.
9. Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach," 396.

contemporary womanist hermeneutics, however, let us reflect on the roots of womanist discourse.

Wilda Gafney reminds us that the "task of negotiating the intersection of gender and ethnicity within the context of the divine-human encounter," was being performed by women of color well before the twentieth century.[10] Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Jarena Lee, Harriet Tubman, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett insisted on "being recognized as the sole legitimate arbitrators of their knowledge and experiences," and advocated strongly for the right of black women to articulate their whole identity, "without being forced to choose between being a woman and being of African descent."[11]

Sojourner Truth, the self-given name of African American abolitionist and women's rights activist Isabella Baumfree, addressed the issue of male superiority and privilege based on the manhood of Christ in her famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851). Her famous argument against this claim is that Christ came from God *and a woman*. "Man had nothing to do with him."[12] Anna Julia Cooper, a spokeswoman for the feminist and suffrage movements, believed that "black women were created equal in intelligence to women and men of all races, and employed her religious belief and education to interpret the social message of the bible."[13] In

10. Ibid. Renita Weems notes that "Anglo women like Margaret Fuller (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century* [New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845]) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (*The Woman's Bible* [New York: European Publishing Company, 1895–1898]) were not the only women in the nineteenth century thinking, writing, and strategizing on behalf of women" ("Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2: *1980–1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993], 219).
11. Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach," 393.
12. James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 236. See also Hertha Pauli, *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth* (New York: Camelot/Avon, 1962), 177.
13. Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scripture," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1: *A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 42. In Baker-

her essay, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," Cooper argues that based on the ideals that Christ gave to be comprehended by civilization, black women were to be given equal education and economic opportunities.[14] Karen Baker-Fletcher, in her article, "Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scripture," compares the biblical hermeneutics of both women, and powerfully argues that "age, class, literacy, and region of origin" were irrelevant in determining the effectiveness and potency of black women who were adamant in their fight for equal rights.[15] Although Cooper has been described as "a black woman intellectual and Truth as an illiterate, itinerant preacher," Baker-Fletcher states that both were "highly intelligent, self-possessed, and irrepressible black feminists and social reformers, who publically challenged whites who questioned their humanity because they were black, and whites and blacks who questioned their authority to speak because they were women."[16]

Added to this list of nineteenth-century black women who advocated for women's rights are itinerant preacher and autobiographer Jarena Lee, African American abolitionist Harriet Tubman, and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Lee, whose preaching ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was blocked for eight years, argued that it should not be thought of as "impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach, seeing

Fletcher's *A Singing Something*, she notes, however, that "Cooper's concept of a God of freedom and equality whose spirit is within humankind," must be extended to include the notion of human complicity. African Americans help to perpetuate their own oppression "through practices such as classism, political apathy, and intra-community violence" (175). Still, much is to be learned from Cooper's social ethic of equality and freedom for all peoples.

14. Anna Julia Cooper, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," in *A Voice from the South*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9–47.
15. Baker-Fletcher, "Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth," 41.
16. Ibid., 41, 49.

the Savior died for the woman as well as the man."[17] Harriet Tubman, the "Moses" of her people because she helped more than three hundred slaves attain freedom, attended "several women's suffrage conventions and became involved in the National Federation of Afro-American Women."[18] Ida B. Wells-Barnett individually led a campaign against lynching and was involved in the "work of black club women."[19] Baker-Fletcher asserts that "the voices of the silenced have the power to challenge and the potential to change social patterns that are racist, sexist, heterosexist, or ethnocentric."[20] All of the aforementioned nineteenth-century women recognized the power of voice, and advocated unyieldingly for the right for black women to assert their full humanity. Clearly, this is why many black women scholars view them as protowomanists.[21]

Some of the twentieth-century African American women outside the fields of theology and biblical studies who have been critical contributors to the womanist discourse are Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis (to name a few). Alice Walker provides a definition of the term *womanist* in her 1980 essay "Coming Apart," stating that it "encompasses 'feminist' [which she equated with a white women's movement] . . . , means *instinctively* pro-woman . . . , and has a strong root in Black women's culture."[22] Gafney expounds, "Womanists were 'pro-women,' which meant that

17. Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee: A Colored Lady Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1836), 129. Reprinted in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing 1760–1837* (Boston: Beacon, 1971). This text is Lee's self-recorded story of her conversion and call to preach.
18. Cone, "Black Theology, Black Churches," 409.
19. Ibid.
20. Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 181–82.
21. Baker Fletcher notes that although the term *black feminist* is probably the more accurate term to use to describe these historical black women, since *womanist* is a contemporary term, "they share something in common with contemporary womanist interpretations of reality," that is, "their historical and traditional values, ideas, self-understanding, and social outlook" (ibid., 154–55).
22. Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 100, emphasis original.

womanist discourse was intentionally antiracist, anticlassicist, antielitist, antiheterosexist, and antidiscriminatory in every particularity."[23] A fuller definition of *womanist* is found in Walker's, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*,[24] and includes four parts:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." 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 universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

23. Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach," 393–94.
24. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 1983). In this work, Walker establishes womanist thought and practice by appealing to the words and actions of historical African American women.

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.[25]

The usage of the term *womanist*, however, goes beyond Walker's definition. In a roundtable discussion on the topic of "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," which focused on the development, variations, and "potential impact of womanist theological scholarship upon the life of the academy, the church, and the community," Christian ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders argues that womanists have subjected Walker's definition to their "own editing and interpretation," and wonders whether their appropriation and adaptation has "misconstrued the womanist concept and its meaning."[26] Sanders argues that Walker's original definition of the term "'womanist' carries the connotation of black *lesbian*, and in the second [in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*] it denotes black *feminist*, a designation that includes women who love women and those who love men."[27] In both instances, Walker "names the experience of audacious black women with a word that acknowledges their sensibilities and traditions in ways that the words *lesbian* and *feminist* do not."[28] Perhaps womanists gravitated to Walker's "celebration

25. Ibid., xi–xii, emphasis original. The comparison of womanist to feminist as purple to lavender "expresses in vivid terms the conclusion that womanist has a deeper and fuller meaning than feminist" (Cheryl J. Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *JFSR* 5, no. 2 [1989]: 84).
26. Sanders, "Christian Ethics," 85, 111. The various perspectives presented about what *womanist* means suggested to Sanders that "we are far from uniform even in some of our basic assumptions" (ibid., 112). This is not to be viewed as a problem, however, but rather serves as an indication of the need for further dialogue, or, perhaps, it may simply reflect the multiplicity of African American female experience.
27. Ibid., 84–85, emphasis original. Sanders states that Walker's original use of *womanist* is found in Walker's review of Rebecca Jackson's *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson (1795–1871), Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), *Black Scholar* 12 (1981): 64–67.

of the black woman's freedom to choose her own labels," because language and the power of naming is viewed as an act of autonomy, resistance, and self-love.[29] Employed as a symbol of African American experience, "womanist" has been adopted to "point to the richness and complexity of being black and female in a society that tends to devalue both Blackness and womanhood."[30]

bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins, does not take on the term *womanist*, but rather self-identifies as feminist. She is, nevertheless, included here, because her work overlaps with, and speaks to, womanist concerns. In her 1981 work *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, she analyzes the black female experience and our "relationship to society as a whole by examining both the politics of racism and sexism from a feminist perspective."[31] hooks furthers feminist dialogue by asserting that the feminist movement must be broadened to include issues of race, sex, and class as its starting point. "If women want a feminist revolution, then we must assume responsibility for drawing women together in political solidarity, by eliminating all the forces that divide women."[32] She concludes that the black woman's "struggle for liberation has significance *only* if it takes place *within* a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people."[33]

Employing Walker's definition of *womanist*, ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon was the "first [theological] scholar to articulate a specifically womanist theology."[34] In her 1995 work, *Katie's Canon: Womanism*

28. Sanders, "Christian Ethics," 85, emphasis original.
29. Ibid., 85.
30. Kelly Delaine Brown Douglas, "Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship to Black Theology," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*, 290.
31. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981), 13.
32. Ibid., 157.
33. Ibid., 13, emphasis added.
34. Gafney, "A Black Feminist Approach," 394. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Renita Weems are referred to as the "initial triumvirate" of womanist scholars (Monica A. Coleman, "Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist?" *JFSR* 22, no. 1 [2006]: 93).