

Editorial: Black Women's Radical Religious Epistemologies in Mahogany and Steeped Towers

CL Nash¹

Carol Marie Webster²

Geeta Patel³

Guest Editors

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Introduction

The landscape of religious scholarship has often been characterized as one dominated by perspectives that marginalize the voices of minority

¹ Dr. CL Nash, a womanist theologian and ethicist, contributes to Pan-Africanism and gender by connecting the religious scholarship of women across the African Diaspora. She directs the Misogynoir to Mishpat Research Network and is a visiting scholar at the University of Edinburgh where she interrogates religious nationalism, historical inflection points in Western Christianity, and its impact on Black, African-descended people. Institutional Affiliation: University of Edinburgh
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8693-0070>

² Dr. Carol Marie Webster is an artist, womanist, social scientist, and creative entrepreneur whose work focuses on African Diaspora/Black Atlantic women and their communities in the building of a more just and equitable world. Institutional Affiliation: Emerson College
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9362-8176>

³ Professor Geeta Patel is an interdisciplinary scholar, poet/translator, curator, and writer-activist, with degrees in three sciences, philosophy, and South Asian Studies, who composes academic/popular pieces on the conundrums posed by melding gender, nation/state/colonialism, sexuality, finance, science, media, political economy, religion and aesthetics together, and translates from Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, and Braj. Institutional Affiliation: University of Virginia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3099-7094>

groups, particularly Black, African-descended women. While the term Black may be expanded to include people who are not African descended in the United Kingdom (UK), the American usage centers on those who are African-descended and share a socio-political location. In this issue, we are using a Pan-African definition of “Black” to reference people whose ancestors are indigenous to the African Continent.⁴

In response to anti-Black exclusionary politics within religious scholarship, the Misogynoir to Mishpat (M2M) Research Network was established to create a safe space for amplifying the religious knowledge production of African-descended women. Since the M2M Research Network was initiated in the UK, the term “African-descended” has been adopted to provide a clearer and unambiguous focus. Throughout this issue, the terms “Black” and “African-descended” are used interchangeably.

Turning to the M2M network as the inspiration and grounding for this special issue of the journal permits us to delve into Black women’s non-traditional or “radical” religious epistemologies, exploring how these epistemologies challenge and transform traditional religious scholarship.

The term “radical”, in this context, refers to the fundamental and transformative ways in which Black women engage with and reinterpret religious traditions. It is the notion of the radical as transformative that has

⁴ See “Pan-Africanism”, [South African History Online](https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/pan-africanism#:~:text=In%20its%20narrowest%20interpretation%2C%20Pan,deserves%20notice%20and%20even%20celebration), last edited July 16, 2021, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/pan-africanism#:~:text=In%20its%20narrowest%20interpretation%2C%20Pan,deserves%20notice%20and%20even%20celebration>, and also the “History of Pan Africanist Intellectuals,” in Peter Kuryla, “Pan-Africanism,” *Britannica*, last edited July 17, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism>. Both highlight the Pan-African movement that began with Martin Delaney and Alexander Crummel (both African Americans) and Edward Blyden (a West Indian). While it is true that White people also live on the African continent, the goal here is to explore the knowledge production of those whose ancestors were indigenous to the African Continent. Our goal is to recognize and amplify knowledge production, which is often called into question, not based solely on geography, but also through the definition of “Black” imposed by western societies in the form of a binary analysis based on a Black-White dichotomy.

spurred this issue into existence. "Mahogany and Steeped Towers" symbolize the intersection of African heritage ("Mahogany") and established religious institutions ("Steeped Towers"). This special issue highlights the communal faith contexts in which Black women navigate their religious identities and how these contexts foster innovative and liberating theological perspectives.

According to the [American Academy of Arts and Sciences](#), ethnic and minority groups in the United States (US) make up roughly 9.6% of those earning PhDs in religious scholarship, yet they are hired for only about 1% of professor or lecturer positions. A 2020 analysis by *Inside Higher Education* revealed that institutions largely fail to achieve faculty diversity reflective of their student bodies, with 57% receiving failing grades for Black faculty representation.⁵ According to *Inside Higher Education*

When researchers compared Black and Latino faculty representation against student enrollment in 2020, some 57 percent of institutions got F's for Black faculty diversity. Nearly 80 percent failed on Latino faculty diversity. This part of the analysis worked as follows: if an institution had, say, a student population that was 10 percent Black and a faculty body that was 10 percent Black, the institution would be scored 100. The lower the score, the bigger the discrepancy between student and faculty representation.⁶

Despite the long history and contributions of Womanist Theology and Ethics, Black women remain underrepresented in academic positions, both in the US and the UK. For example, it was not until recently that the

⁵ Colleen Flaherty, "[Faculties So White](#)", *Inside Higher Education*, last edited December 1, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/02/report-finds-faculty-diversity-isnt-meeting-student-needs>.

⁶ Flaherty, "Faculties".

University of Edinburgh appointed its first Black woman theology professor, Selina Stone, starting in autumn 2024.⁷

Historical and Theoretical Context

Black women's religious practices have a rich history shaped by the legacies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,⁸ colonialism and migration to escape genocide, violence against ethnic communities, forced translocation to ensure compliant labor, femicide, and epistemicide. The challenges to epistemicide puts the issue into conversation with philosopher, Michel Foucault, regarding what he would call "subjugated knowledges",⁹ which are important for the resulting ongoing struggle for liberation. These religious practices are rooted in communal faith traditions that emphasize collective resilience and spiritual empowerment. Womanist Theology, which emerged in the late 20th century, provides a critical framework for understanding the intersectional identities of Black women.¹⁰

⁷ This is a brand-new appointment. At the time of this publication, the University of Edinburgh has not made an official announcement, but the news was informally shared by Stone and members of the faculty at New College. It is a historic appointment of a womanist theologian and an African-descended woman in the study of religion.

⁸ We will reference the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the "Slave Trade". We are using the definition of the Slave Trade provided in Thomas Lewis in "The Transatlantic Slave Trade", [Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade), last edited June 17, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade>. The article argues that the Slave Trade existed from 1501 to 1867, whereby, 13 million African people were kidnapped and extracted by force and severed from their land, culture, and families. Despite current scholarly assessments of probable numbers, some experts maintain that the number was closer to 30-40 million. See Hilary M. Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd, *Trading Souls: Europe's Transatlantic Trade in Africans* (Kingston/Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2007).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7. Foucault states that subjugated knowledges refer "to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity". Thus, the contributions in this issue propose and formulate answers to the challenge laid out by Foucault.

¹⁰ The pioneers of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics are Katie Cannon, Delores Williams and Jacquelyn Grant. Delores Williams is credited with the first published use of the word within religious scholarship in 1987. The term "womanish", widely used within African American culture, was the foundation for Alice Walker's term, "womanist".

It integrates postcolonial theory and critical race theory to address the compounded oppressions faced by Black women in religious contexts.

The current academic literature on Black women's religious epistemologies reveals significant gaps. While there is considerable work on Black theology and feminist theology, the unique contributions of Black women's religious perspectives are often overlooked. This special issue aims to fill this gap by foregrounding the voices and experiences of Black women scholars and practitioners.

Womanist scholarship has provided, and continues to provide, a road map for understanding how women might engender understandings of the Divine by seeing God as relevant to and present within their intersectional identities. By using a hermeneutical lens where they grapple with both race/ethnicity and gender, womanism provided a framework for understanding intersectionality in religion throughout the world. Yet, womanism is a decidedly Black, African-descended endeavor. It is decidedly so because it is possible for scholastic allies, who are larger in number, to use womanist discourse to re-center their own perspectives. By creating a space that is set aside for Black women to "breathe", we create possibilities for their scholarship and varied forms of religious leadership, to provide evidence of God's own breath within us, God's ruach.¹¹

Theme and Scope of the Issue

The essays in this issue explore the diverse ways in which Black women's religious epistemologies challenge conventional theological narratives. From the African spiritualities of Nigeria and Jamaica to the anti-colonial

Alice Walker coined the term in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983).

¹¹ The word "ruach" first appears in Genesis 1:2, "...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters". For more information on the term, "ruach", read Hope Bolinger, "What is the Meaning of the Hebrew Word Ruach", *Christianity Today*, last updated Oct. 14, 2021, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-the-meaning-of-the-hebrew-word-ruach.html#:~:text=If%20we%20understand%20the%20>

politics of Senegal, Sudan, and South Africa, the contributors offer a rich tapestry of perspectives highlighting the radical nature of Black women's religious knowledge production. Weaving an eclectic spectrum of spiritual practices and beliefs, these essays offer the basis of radical religious epistemologies that enable Black women living under a range of circumstances, in several regions of the world, to find a pathway through the virulence they inhabit within their everyday lives.

What is important to note is that the scholars in this journal issue do not focus solely on women living with the long aftermath of histories of violence emerging out of trans-Atlantic slavery. Rather, to broaden our scope, we have included scholars who speak about women who encounter enormous discrimination, sometimes from groups who ought to have provided them a spiritual home in the places where they came for refuge. Such women often fled violence from various African countries only to settle into racist social and political economies. Or women that have had to traverse Black on Black xenophobia or sexism in societies still beset by the residue of colonialism. The virulence these women face often stems from racism, sexism, and classism, as well as fervor against their specific religious convictions. Despite these challenges, the particularities of their faith-based epistemes provide them with solace, praxes, and insights. These gifts grant them the means, grace, and strength to thrive. In each article the authors, thus, attend carefully to the ways that Black women use a plethora of religious traditions to resist the violence and discrimination they face so that they can reclaim their identities. These scholars braid together elements of African heritage and contemporary social justice movements. Their work demonstrates the transformative power of religion in creating spaces of liberation and empowerment for marginalized communities.

"Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics"

Ameena Al-Rasheed's essay "Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics" investigates the transformation of Sudanese women's identities in the

Diaspora,¹² focusing on their religious practices in West Yorkshire, UK. This essay delves into the interplay between ideologies in new spaces and the identities of Sudanese women as Muslims and African-Arab immigrants, affected by the challenges women face in a world that has entirely different expectations around gender, religion, and race. Al-Rasheed argues that identities are in constant negotiation between the shifting and changing traditions of the homeland and those of the host society. In the process, Al-Rasheed provides an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam, highlighting Sudanese Sufi Islam's role in maintaining cultural traditions amidst the other Islamic discourses that have predominated in the UK.

By tuning into the nexus where rights, representations, and history come together, the essay sheds light on Sudanese women's perspectives and struggles in the diasporic spaces they inhabit. By exploring the interplay of Africanism, Arabism, and Muslimness/Sufism in their lives, the essay contributes a more nuanced understanding of African Muslim identities through their religious performativities. In the context of West Yorkshire, the encounter between African Sufi Islam and mainstream Islam, in which mosques are configured through particular Middle Eastern/Arab and South Asian lineages, creates unique challenges and opportunities for Sudanese women. Al-Rasheed explores how Sudanese Sufi-Muslim women negotiate their religious and cultural identities in spaces dominated by more these more conservative and masculinist interpretations of Islam. When analyses of women in Islam focus on spaces such as these more conservative ones, their authors have often portrayed women as victims, which then does not allow space for women to lead more radical lives in the context of their religiosity. As Al-Rasheed suggests in her contribution

¹² The terms "the Diaspora" and the "African Diaspora" are used interchangeably as this issue specifically explores the connections between gender, religion, and the African Diaspora, broadly.

Muslim women have often been implicitly characterized as victims of their own culture and religion, and the transformations in their lives are often overlooked or misunderstood when seen solely in terms of Islam. Such perspective undermines women's sound resistance. Cases of women's significant contributions in uprisings against strict religious rules, in Sudan and in Iran are just a few cases in point.

To counter restrictive representations of Muslim women, Al-Rasheed argues that greater attention ought to be paid to spaces, histories, and practices where women are empowered to create strength and value. Al-Rasheed further underscores the significant role of Sufi Islam, rooted in very particular African traditions that have a wider latitude for including women practitioners, lineages, and teachers. In providing a more inclusive and flexible religious framework, these forms of Sufi Islam enable Sudanese women to challenge and navigate the limitations imposed by more purist Islamic practices. Al-Rashid's critical examination of how Sudanese women's religious practices are shaped by and respond specifically to Muslim Diasporas located in the UK then offers readers insights into how to analyze similar Diasporas in the US and in Europe.

Al-Rasheed's essay also probes the assumptions about the radical nature of Black women's religious epistemologies, particularly within the framework of Sufi Islam. By highlighting Sudanese women in the Diaspora, the essay confronts the frequently monolithic representations of Muslim women's experiences that have hitherto often sidelined African women who also understand themselves as Arab. The essay changes what we know about the diverse and complex ways in which religion is lived and practiced. These particularities highlight the intersection of race, gender, and religion, nation, multiple Diasporas in the lives of Sudanese women and give us a unique perspective on the radicality of Black women's religious epistemologies.¹³

¹³ The term "intersectionality", coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, identifies the multiple forms of identity that are navigated today. These might include, gender, race/ethnicity, religion,

Furthermore, this essay showcases the way these Sudanese women engage with and transform their religious traditions in response to their diasporic experiences. In the process it brings out several transecting tensions and conflicts, such as those with Black communities that have assumptions about Islam and who are not particularly cognizant of Afro-Arab communities. Others include the conflict with feminist scholars of Islam whose research concentrating on the more patrilineal Sunni Muslim theologies that predominate in the UK is thus not particularly attentive to Sufi lineages that provide enormous latitude for women. Yet another strand encompasses racist White¹⁴ communities that are entirely uninformed about the subtleties of womanist Sufi Afro-Arab heritage.

Al-Rasheed's essay makes a significant contribution to understanding communal faith practices among African Muslim women. By focusing on the lived experiences of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire, the essay brings to the fore the ways in which communal faith practices are maintained by carrying on and nurturing older lineages that were held in the hands of these women, how their practices are transformed in the context of challenges thrown at them by non-Black Muslim communities from other Muslim regions, and thus negotiated in particular diasporic contexts to provide women with newly revitalized strength and resilience. The study of Sufi Islam, with its emphasis on communal and inclusive customs, provides a valuable framework for understanding how African Muslim women create and sustain their religious communities in the face of

neurodivergence, and other forms of identity. See Kimberle Crenshaw, "[Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color](#)", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299.

¹⁴ While Black is often capitalized to denote a socio-political location, White is often lowercase. This implies that minoritized groups function within a race and bring a hermeneutical lens that is shaped by race. Yet, by writing "White" in lowercase, it ignores the socio-political power structure assigned to this group. In addition, the lowercase "w" in White also implies neutrality within racial hierarchies. Our approach follows such scholarly groups as [The MacArthur Foundation](#), historian [Nell Irvin Painter](#), and, also, the National Association of Black Journalists.

external challenges. Thus, the essay provides readers valuable insights on the importance of communal faith practices in sustaining cultural identity and providing support and solidarity for African Muslim women in the Diaspora.

Indeed, Al-Rasheed's essay stands out in its approach to decolonizing Western discourses on Islam and Muslim identities. Unlike other essays that may focus on broader theoretical frameworks or more homogeneous representations of Muslim experiences, Al-Rasheed's work provides a nuanced and detailed analysis of a specific community. In the process, it offers a counterpoint to dominant Western discourses that often homogenize Muslim identities and practices, and, in doing so, also homogenize forms of sexism and racism that fold all Black and African communities into each other and evade the complexity of what it means to be Arab and Black. By focusing on the specific context of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire, the essay contributes to a more inclusive and decolonized understanding of Islamic and Muslim identities, providing us an indispensable sightline that recognizes and values the diverse experiences and perspectives of African-Arab Muslim women.

Al-Rasheed's essay fills a significant gap in the literature on African Muslim Diasporas. The experiences of Sudanese women in the Diaspora, particularly in relation to their religious practices, are under-researched and often overlooked in existing studies. By adding detailed and context-specific analyses, Al-Rasheed's essay provides a valuable in-depth perspective on the literature on African Muslim Diasporas. It brings to view the unique trials and opportunities faced by Sudanese women as they navigate their identities and religious practices in diasporic contexts. The essay also contributes to broader discussions on race, gender, and religion, providing insights that are relevant to scholars and practitioners working in the fields of Diaspora studies, religious studies, and gender studies.

Al-Rasheed's engagement with Womanist Theology provides a critical framework for understanding the religious epistemologies of Sudanese women in the Diaspora. Womanist Theology, with its emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of Black women, offers essential sightlines into the ways that Sudanese women bring their religion, culture, region, and locale together. Al-Rasheed's analysis asks us to attend, carefully and rigorously, to the agency and resilience of African Muslim women, querying many prevailing narratives and analyses that often portray them as simply passive or entirely oppressed. By incorporating Womanist Theology, the essay provides a more inclusive and empowering framework for grappling with the religious practices and identities of Sudanese women in the Diaspora. Al-Rasheed demonstrates how Sudanese women navigate their intersecting identities, using their womanist religious practices to assert their agency and challenge the limitations imposed by both what had sometimes transpired at home (where the long lineage of woman-centered faith practices, under pressure from non-Sudanese Muslim communities, occasionally gave way to more masculinist ones) and host societies. This intersectional analysis provides a deeper understanding of how race, gender, and religion interact to shape not just the experiences and identities of African Muslim women in the Diaspora, but, also, their forms of resistance.

This essay contributes to this special issue by bringing what is radical to bear on the question of faith through Sudanese stories. African women's radical epistemologies, powerful and dynamic though undervalued and unacknowledged by western societies such as the UK, fuel the radical faith of Sudanese women navigating the Diaspora, praying in mosques and churches alike, and honoring their relationship to their religious tradition.

"Ọbja by Igbo Spelling: Affirming the Value of After God is Dibja"

Moving onto the exploration of African spiritual practices under slavery, Claudette Anderson's essay, "[Obeah] Ọbja by Igbo Spelling: Affirming the Value of After God is Dibja", invigorates the centrality of Africana religious

traditions. It reexamines the often misunderstood, devalorized practice of Obeah and redefines it in a positive light. Anderson's piece not only celebrates the historical and cultural significance of Oḃija but also accentuates its role in countering the negative perceptions that have long plagued African spiritual practices. Anderson uses the framework of John Umeh's scholarship on Igbo faith communities to articulate an authentic Igbo cosmological understanding that positions Oḃija as a legitimate and invaluable spiritual tradition.¹⁵

Anderson's essay is significant and relevant, standing as a robust riposte to the marginalization of African spirituality brought to Jamaica by Igbo captives enslaved by the British. It highlights how Oḃija, often vilified as a form of witchcraft or malevolence, is rooted in a rich tradition of healing and spiritual wisdom. By giving us a view of Oḃija through an Igbo lens, the essay dismantles Eurocentric misconceptions and affirms the intrinsic worth of African religious practices. Crucial in restoring dignity and respect to African spiritualities that have been undermined by colonial narratives, the essay also offers us another form of reclamation. It centers Igbo faith in the context of Jamaica where the focus has primarily been on Coromantee/Akan from the Gold Coast of Africa, research which has overshadowed the legacy, lineages and strong spirituality of the 250,000 Igbo transported to Jamaica.

The essay's take on Oḃija underscores its role as an occult spiritual practice that is both healing and empowering, for which Umeh's work, "After God is Dibija", is instrumental. He presents Oḃija not merely as a set of rituals but as an embodiment of divine knowledge and wisdom; a sacred science that animates practice and life and marries philosophy, cosmology, literature, music, poetry, technology, and metaphysics. It is a form of complete embodied learning that brings practitioners into a complex harmonic, musical, and sensory balance with all the dimensions of the

¹⁵ John Anenechukwu Umeh, *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area* (Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co. 1999).

universe—the natural, cosmic and human in all their manifestations. Umeh's portrayal of the female Dibia at the heart of its praxis reclaims the space for women in spiritual leadership, challenging patriarchal structures within religious contexts. These articulations have profound implications for communal and faith-based practices, encouraging a more holistic understanding of spirituality that includes gender inclusivity and the recognition of female Dibiahood.

When compared to other essays on the theme of decolonizing religious discourses, Anderson's work is particularly radical. It does not merely critique colonial disavowal or denigrations of African spirituality, but actively works to reconstruct and reclaim indigenous embodied, somatic, expert practices of knowing and knowledge by unambiguously taking on epistemicide. In one exemplary instance in her essay, Anderson says

When our children ask, “what is *Qbja*?” we can now answer with confidence that it is the intellectual tradition of our continental forebears, our very own system of knowledge. When our children ask, “what is *Qbja*?” we can teach them that before enslavement and epistemicide the correct question would be, “who is *Qbja*?”. We can affirm for them that *Qbja* is a chosen one who, with knowledge of both positive and negative medicine, practices one or the other.

Anderson's framework also connects with and bolsters other theological approaches, such as Linda Thomas's exploration of womanist epistemology. Thomas indicates, for example, that Womanist Theology's reconstructed knowledge advances “a new epistemology of holistic survival and liberation, a more intentional understanding of reconstructed knowledge processes”.¹⁶ To that process of reconstruction, Anderson demonstrates that reconstruction must also be accompanied by or done

¹⁶ Linda Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm”, *Crosscurrents* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1998/1999): 488–499.

through recovery, the means by which one can return to that which was stripped away in the knowledge that exists in *Ọbija*.

Other essays in this issue might address similar themes, but Anderson's use of Umeh's work provides a concrete and delicately explicit framework for understanding the intellectual and spiritual depth of *Ọbija* as well as providing future practitioners with a guide and, thus, a venue for recovery. Her descriptions of recovery in these forms, position her essay as pivotal to a much broader conversation about decolonizing religion.

Anderson's exploration of female Dibiahood that gives "birth to being female and free" connects directly to the metaphor of "Mahogany and Steeped Towers". This metaphor symbolizes the strength and resilience of African traditions (mahogany) against the oppressive structures of religious colonialism (steeped towers). The acknowledgment of female Dibiahood, which incorporates holistic living, is constantly in motion. It incessantly journeys and mystically aligns with this metaphor, showcasing how African spiritual practices can withstand and transcend colonial oppression. The inclusion of women as central figures in these practices challenges the male-dominated narratives often associated with religious authority.

The essay's description of recovery also emphasizes the way *Ọbija* functions as a radical faith tradition that empowers communities in the present. It argues that the practice of *Ọbija*, far from being a relic of the past, is a dynamic and evolving healing, mystical tradition that offers practical and spiritual solutions to contemporary issues. This aspect of the essay highlights the relevance of *Ọbija* in today's world, suggesting that it can play a significant role in community healing and empowerment. By presenting *Ọbija* as a living tradition, Anderson reinforces its value and potential for future generations.

Moreover, the essay fills significant gaps in the literature on African religious identities and practices. While much has been written about African spiritualities, the specific focus on *Ọbija* and its redefinition through

an Igbo perspective is less common. Anderson's work, guided by Umeh's scholarship, provides a nuanced angle that is often missing in mainstream discussions on the topic. By doing so, it not only enriches academic conversations but also serves as a vital resource for those within the African Diaspora seeking to reconnect with their spiritual heritage.

Furthermore, Anderson's essay can be read alongside other works on empowerment and resistance through religious practices. For instance, it echoes essays that explore how religious beliefs and practices have been used to resist a variety of colonial and neocolonial oppressions. Anderson's specific focus on *Ọbija* and the Igbo cosmology, however, provides a unique perspective, emphasizing the intellectual and spiritual living resilience of African traditions and strengthening her contribution to an understanding of the multifaceted roles of religion in social and political resistance.

Anderson's essay significantly contributes to the literature on the role of Black women in anti-colonial movements through a profound exploration of African spiritual traditions that celebrates their ongoing viability and relevance. By examining the intersection of gender and spirituality, it sheds light on the often-overlooked contributions of women in these struggles. Reframing the portrayal of female *Dibjahood* in the Anglophone Caribbean as one of the first Black women's radical faith lineages confronts the power and inheritance traditionally held by men. It also highlights the indispensable role of women in guiding, maintaining, and advancing spiritual and cultural traditions, reclaiming the space for female spiritual leadership. This recognition is crucial in rewriting the narratives of anti-colonial resistance to include the voices and experiences of Black women. Indeed, the essay fills a critical gap in the literature and contributes to the broader discourse on the gendered forms that decolonizing religious practices should take.

"Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith on the 'Woman Who Was More Than a Man'"

Shandon C. Klein's essay, "Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the 'Woman Who Was More Than a Man'", investigates the life and legacy of Aline Sitoë Diatta, a revolutionary figure in the Diola community of Senegal. Aline Sitoë Diatta is celebrated as "La femme qui était plus qu'un homme" ("the woman who was more than a man"), symbolizing her extraordinary role in resisting French colonial rule. Klein's essay employs womanist theological ethics and quare theory to explore the moral and ethical foundations of Diatta's resistance, highlighting the empowering influence of the Diola indigenous faith tradition, known as the Awasena path to Diatta. Through her analysis of the African short film "À La Recherche Aline", Klein illustrates how Diatta's embodiment of an ethic of resistance and control offers a profound commentary on the intersection of religion, gender, and anti-colonialism.

Klein's essay exemplifies the radical nature of indigenous faith traditions and communal empowerment, underscoring the transformative power of religion in mobilizing resistance against oppressive forces. Through Aline Sitoë Diatta's story, the essay illustrates how the Diola faith tradition provided a framework for moral and ethical formation that empowered Diatta to lead her community to defy colonial authority. Diatta's story is a testament to the strength and resilience of African (mahogany) indigenous practices in preserving cultural identity and fostering communal solidarity in the face of external pressures from the steeped towers where colonial authority resides.

Klein's analysis of Diatta's use of an ethic of resistance and control resonates with other scholarly works that examine empowerment and resistance through religious practices. For example, both Katie G.

Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*¹⁷ and Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness*¹⁸ emphasize the importance of developing ethical frameworks that sustain and defend personhood against dehumanizing forces. Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson's quare theory provides a lens for understanding how marginalized communities navigate and resist oppression through embodied practices and cultural performances.¹⁹

Klein's essay makes a significant contribution to understanding the role of Black women in anti-colonial movements by illuminating how indigenous faith traditions as practices can serve as powerful catalysts for social change. Diatta's leadership, underpinned by her spiritual beliefs, upends the prevalent narratives that often marginalize the contributions of Black women in historical and contemporary struggles for liberation. This focus on Diatta's religious and cultural context provides a nuanced understanding of how faith can inspire and sustain resistance against systemic injustices. By filling a gap in the literature on the interplay between theology and social resistance, Klein's essay enriches the academic discourse on African religious leadership. It offers a critical examination of how indigenous theological frameworks not only support, but actively promote the agency and resilience of Black women. This is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions about the role of religion in social justice movements where the contributions of Black women are frequently overlooked or underappreciated.

By introducing Diatta's life through film, a vivid and accessible medium, the essay shows the enduring legacy of her resistance. The film's depiction of Diatta's spiritual journey and her confrontation with colonial authorities illustrates the practical applications of the ethical principles discussed in the essay. This connection between theoretical analysis and visual

¹⁷ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' studies or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother", *Text and Performativity Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (5 Nov 2010): 1–25.

storytelling enriches the reader's comprehension of the complex dynamics at play in Diatta's resistance.

Klein's essay is a compelling narrative that mobilizes contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as *queer theory*, to show us how to grapple with historical analyses. In so doing, Klein offers readers a deep and situated description of the indispensable role of Black women's religious epistemologies in anti-colonial resistance. By locating Diatta's story within the broader context of African religious traditions, the essay underscores the ongoing relevance of these practices in fostering communal empowerment and challenging oppressive systems. This work not only enhances our understanding of Aline Sitoë Diatta's impact, but further invites exploration of the rich tapestry of Black women's contributions to religious and social movements across the African Diaspora.

"On/Unstained White Dress(es)...: Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets"

Anna Kasafi Perkins's essay, "On/Unstained White Dress(es)...: Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets", interrogates the symbolic significance of the "white dress" in the poetry of Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Trinidad/Canada), and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica). The central theme of the essay is the concept of purity represented by and through the white dress worn by Afro-Caribbean girls during religious ceremonies, such as baptism, communion, and confirmation. This essay explores the paradox of how these dresses, typically symbols of innocence and holiness, simultaneously highlight the perceived impurity and danger associated with Afro-Caribbean female bodies who enter sacred spaces. By examining the works of three Caribbean poets, Perkins reveals the nuanced interplay between purity, race, and gender that helps shed light on the broader implications of "sacred misogynoir". She says that the article

explores the experience of “sacred misogynoir”, that is, the double discrimination faced by Black women for being both Black and female, in the religious sphere, as expressed in Rahim, Philip and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Christianity was violently or forcibly imposed in the Caribbean and among its legacies is a “holy misogyny”, upon which such sacred misogynoir is premised; it highlights the seemingly inevitable misogyny in Western Christianity, which has removed women from sacred significance while imposing discriminating purity customs.

"Sacred misogynoir" is a term that encapsulates the dual oppression faced by Black women within religious and scholarly contexts, oppressions that were a result of their being both Black and female. This concept, first introduced by Moya Bailey, grapples with wide-ranging forms of anti-Black misogyny.²⁰ The point where racism and sexism come together is pivotal to understanding the complex layers of religious and racial oppression that have historically marginalized Afro-Caribbean women, even in Black church spaces. Perkins argues that the imposition of Christianity in the Caribbean has perpetuated a form of "holy misogyny" that systematically devalues the Afro-Caribbean female body. This devaluation is vividly depicted through the poets' deployment of the white dress as a metaphor/symbol that brings white, the colour of purity together with expectations that curtail and oppress Black women. It is also a literal garment worn by women at the precise moments (baptism, communion, confirmation) when they are brought more fully into their religious community. This juxtaposition, or folding together of the literal and the metaphoric, enables the author to bring more subtle theoretical readings of the lyrical descriptions to accentuate the poignant virulence of the paradox.

²⁰ “Misogynoir” means “hatred of Black women” for more information, see Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Perkins's exploration of the poets' strategies for reclaiming and revaluing the Afro-Caribbean illustrates the way Rahim, Philip, and Ferland use their literary voices to challenge and subvert the oppressive connotations of the white dress. For instance, Ferland's poem "Ave Maria" juxtaposes the contrast embedded in the image of a Black girl in a white dress against the sacredness of the altar, revealing the inherent contradictions and tensions between purity and racial identity. Similarly, Rahim's "First Communion Day" captures the internal conflict of a young girl who feels fraudulent in her white dress, underscoring the pervasive guilt and shame imposed by purity culture. When comparing this essay to other works that revolve around themes of purity, gender, and religious oppression, Perkins's analysis stands out for its focus on both the Afro-Caribbean context and her use of poetry to explore these themes.

The discourse around purity culture resonates across the Diaspora to challenge contemporary arguments on the ways that women's bodies and reproductive rights are assessed at the nexus of purity and disenfranchisement. For African Americans, many of these discussions also resonate with the historical aftermath borne by enslaved Black women. For example, Womanist Theologian CL Nash engages this issue when speaking about Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Nash's analysis explores Jacobs as an example of a 19th Century Black woman who was enslaved yet provided significant contributions to the discourses of race, gender, and religion. Specifically, Nash explores the "purity culture" of the Cult of True Womanhood through the contributions of Jacobs. She states

Jacobs walked a careful tight rope between being both the theologian and practitioner of the faith. Black Christian women in Jacobs's time desired sexual purity, but most were acutely aware that their bodies could be violated with full impunity by any White man. In this environment, Jacobs advocated for herself as a Christian woman while simultaneously critiquing

a Christian culture that forced her to give up the sexual purity she desired and fight for an agency she believed necessary.²¹

Perkins builds on this discourse by examining the way the struggle between purity culture and “sacred misogynoir” is also applicable to a wider Pan-African context. Perkins’s work aligns with and expands on existing scholarship on the somatic narratives of Jamaican Catholic women by highlighting how these bodily practices serve as forms of resistance and affirmation. In bringing to the fore the unique experiences of Afro-Caribbean women, whose bodies have been simultaneously subjected to racial and gendered scrutiny, Perkins adds a valuable perspective to the many studies that have primarily addressed purity culture within Western Christianity.

This essay’s contribution to both literary and religious studies, therefore, is manifold. It reframes Afro-Caribbean female experiences by placing them in sacred spaces, offering a critical perspective on how religious rituals and symbols can be both oppressive and empowering. It uses poetry, rather than just ethnographic, narrative, or fictional evidence, to give us a subtly configured, multi-layered understanding of how Afro-Caribbean women navigate the identities that arise while being bound by the expectations of religious purity. By reclaiming and revaluing both the literal and symbolic worth of the white dress, these poets not only critique the historical and ongoing oppression but also celebrate the resilience and agency of Afro-Caribbean women.

Perkins addresses a significant gap in the literature on the intersection of religion, race, and gender in the Caribbean context. Her essay underscores the importance of considering the embodied communal contexts and

²¹ CL Nash, “[How Harriet Jacobs Reclaimed the Broken Body: Black Suffering, Black Redemption](https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/how-harriet-jacobs-reclaimed-broken-body-Black-suffering/)”. *Mutuality Magazine*, published July 5, 2021, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/how-harriet-jacobs-reclaimed-broken-body-Black-suffering/>.

lyrical, somatic cultural forms that shape Afro-Caribbean, Christian women's religious experiences in Jamaica. It augments Claudette Anderson's Igbo perspective to give readers a fuller picture of how different groups of Jamaican women resist and transform oppressive religious practices, offering new insights into the dynamic interplay between theology, culture, and identity.

"On/Unstained White Dress(es)..." by Anna Kasafi Perkins is, thus, a pivotal work that enriches our understanding of Afro-Caribbean female purity in sacred spaces. Her meticulous analysis of the poetry of Rahim, Philip, and Ferland, speaks to the profound implications of "sacred misogynoir" and poets' strategies for reclaiming and affirming Afro-Caribbean female bodies and selves. Not only does this essay contribute to literary and religious studies, but also, calls for a re-examination of the cultural and religious narratives that shape the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women.

"Doing Church Differently: Crafting a Church Using the Circle's Theologizing Methodologies in a Xenophobic and Gendered Context"

Lastly, Clementine Nishimwe's essay, "Doing Church Differently: Crafting a Church Using the Circle's Theologizing Methodologies in a Xenophobic and Gendered Context", examines how the innovative methodologies of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter The Circle) addresses xenophobia and gender-based marginalization within church settings. The Circle, founded in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, emphasizes communal storytelling, active listening, and engagement with African women's experiences. Turning to ethnography, Nishimwe applies these principles to the xenophobic and gendered context of migration into South Africa, specifically focusing on African migrant women congregants at St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC).

The essay argues that employing Circle methodologies allows for conditions where migrant women have the space to speak about their

experiences of marginalization and violence. Such experiences, which can denude women of their social and religious being, can help the church design strategies for supporting victims by shaping how cultural diversity is handled within the church. She shows us the way through the words of Mercy A. Oduyoye who explicitly states that theology must be culturally sensitive and foster “intentional dialogue” that is not only intended to exchange information, but, also, to actively transform relationships through dialogue.

Nishimwe underscores how these methodologies of “intentional dialogue” can promote sisterhood among migrant women and between migrant and host-community women. In so doing, women who have migrated to South Africa from Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Cameroon, Botswana, and Lesotho can finally come to the church to find community, support, and solace.

Nishimwe explores how Circle methodologies can be employed to interrogate traditional concepts of the Eucharist. Though the Christian church widely practices the Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper) as a church sacrament, its religious signification is often narrated through soteriological (salvific) language. Sayings such as “he thought enough to die for you, won't you live for him?” are repeated in churches throughout the world. Participation in the ritual is commonly seen as liberatory or as evidence to worshippers that Christ breaks the chains of sin and death. This becomes the *raison d'être* for many Christians. However, one aspect of this sacrament is regularly overlooked: the deeply somatic registers of the Eucharist. Early in her article, Nishimwe speaks about the sensory aspects of the Eucharist, including the sharing of food, smells/incense, and narratives, to explore and examine the experiences of African women migrating within Africa. It also examines the potential of the Circle in nurturing a more vibrant and inclusive church.

Nishimwe focuses on the separation that migrant women are forced to navigate through Black-on-Black xenophobia, the difficulties they face at

work, the many forms that women's labor might assume, and how the range of encounters results in a plethora of sensory responses to circumstances that confront those women in the church. In highlighting the tangible routes to worship that counter these responses, Nishimwe shows us how these routes go on to provide hospitality. This strategy offsets the xenophobia and challenging differences that migrant women confront in their everyday lives.

Nishimwe's work fills a sizeable gap in various strands of the scholarship on African and Black women by focusing on the intersection of faith, gender, and migration within Africa rather than from, or even to Africa and the struggles African women face during that migration (some of which are the result of the dearth of understanding from their South African sisters, others from the arduous and alienating conditions of their labor). These areas are often overlooked in traditional Eucharistic articles.²² This is particularly significant because very few articles on Afro-centric religious practices take on the sensitive work of how to speak directly to the complicated topic of addressing struggles *between* Black communities, focusing instead on the more readily available discussions on violence that is directed *at* Black communities.

This essay highlights how Circle methodologies can transform xenophobic environments and where women can also transmute daily challenges into more nurturing ones. By incorporating the Eucharist and bringing stories to life through essential sensory features like sharing food, scent, and sound these environments become truly supportive. Through what the Eucharist can offer when brought into Circle methodologies, Nishimwe shows us how Circle methodologies can subversively transform each context in which women's everyday habits are usually devalued. These methods also address situations where, despite the promise of community, xenophobia

²² Traditional texts dealing with the Eucharist include Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2001).

in the church environment proves harmful. Circle methodologies turn these contexts into culturally diverse encounters where every woman is cherished because of her differences and not in spite of them. Through this type of transformation, women can learn from, embrace, and build supportive communities with one another. In other words, employing Circle methodologies can produce a much more vibrant, communal, and nurturing religious sharing between differently positioned Black-African communities who have come together in migration.

Circle methodologies offer a way for the church to create spaces for solidarity and healing in deeply xenophobic contexts that tend to separate and degrade “foreigners”. This approach allows women to bring elements from their homes in other countries by fostering communal sensory experiences. In doing so, it provides the potential for profound transformations in every partaking community through dignity and respect.

Conclusion

This special issue is a timely intervention into Black women’s religious epistemologies. It brings together a diverse range of contributors who explore and expand both the meaning of Blackness and its transnational sites. The issue examines how communities are shaped by various forms of travel, including slavery, forced relocation, and migration to build new lives, and how these experiences influence past and present faith practices in new places. Additionally, it delves into what faith and religion might simultaneously entail and restrict, covering Sudanese Sufi Islam, the Diola indigenous faith tradition (Awasena path), Q̄bja, and various forms of Christianity. The articles in this issue address a variety of conundrums women’s communities face, focusing on religious practices, minoritized communities, and the subsequent responses by religious practitioners that allow for renewal.

There are still significant gaps in the published literature regarding the contributions of Black women as religious scholars, particularly regarding knowledge production. This special issue fills in those gaps by featuring

contributions from a wide variety of Black women scholars, activists, and practitioners. Each author changes how readers might grapple with Black womanist religious epistemes and praxes, beliefs, and lives.

To appreciate the significance of this special issue, it is worth considering a few upcoming and past special issues on the topic. The call for the upcoming "African Voices in Contemporary and Historical Theology" in the journal *Religion*, which is seeking articles for January 2025, inadvertently uses citations that prioritize a Christian-focused theology, prioritizing African male authors. Though the intention to centralize African voices is a worthy aim, this goal is undercut by what it cannot quite attend to in the citations that follow the call, that is, the missing voices of women authors or women practitioners.

Recent issues of the *Journal of Africana Religions (JAR)*, while interesting and valuable, rarely cover the extraordinary bricolage we have brought together in this issue, and none seem to hone down on women as their topic of a whole issue. Even the 2021 special issue of the *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, "Religion and Spirituality in the African Diaspora", the closest to our special issue in the width of its treatment of faith, region, and the registers of what Blackness might encompass, falls short of our range. Rather, it remains within the parameters of Pentecostalism, African Muslims, Nigerian Christians (rather mainstream and sans women), music, and psychological wellbeing.²³

When articles in this issue of *JAR* broach Whiteness and institutional racism, they rarely pay heed to something as necessary as "sacred misogynoir", the interwoven oppression faced by Black women within religious and scholarly contexts that brings together the ways in which

²³ Victor Counted, Ibrahim Abraham, "Introduction to Religion and Spirituality in the African Diaspora", *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 34, no. 3 (2021), last modified January 4, 2022, <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/OLDJASR/article/view/43897>

racism and sexism come into play in tandem. In this, otherwise, very useful *JAR* issue where Black communities are emplaced in Malaysia and China, addressing the nuances of gendered racism in non-White contexts would have proven very fruitful.

Indeed, “Black Women’s Radical Religious Epistemologies in Mahogany and Steeped Towers” stands out in its complexity and scope. In the subtle degrees of its gradations of Blackness and womanness, the array of faiths and regions, and the multidisciplinary approaches of the authors (ethnography, scholarly writing, oral narratives, stories, film, and poetry), this issue displays an exemplary instance of the Misogynoir to Mishpat (M2M) Research Network. As an initiative that breaks new ground through a deep commitment to challenging oppressive structures and reclaiming agency within and through religious spaces, forms of worship, collectivity, and practice, our special issue is M2M at its heart. It does not assimilate African-descended women into existing paradigms, but, rather, celebrates and elevates the radical, disruptive, and non-traditional usage of religious understandings and African cosmologies. Rooted in the recognition of the unique challenges faced by a wide range and swath of Black women, our issue endeavors to explore the edges and remnants of what constitute social, political, and economic hegemonies and forms of ordering power, where marginalized voices have historically been relegated.

At its core, the M2M Research Network embraces the self-expression of African-descended women as inherently valuable that gives us theoretical and practical teachings and lessons. M2M acknowledges the radical potential of these teachings when engaging with what might be considered both canonical and noncanonical, whether these show up as texts, songs, healing, film, practices of worship, dress, or any genre of embodied experiences. By re-centering their own wisdom and epistemologies, our authors, and the women they speak about, transcend the confines of the past and the labels of “tradition” and “traditional”. They bring the past and present into a radical dialogue, forging paths to liberation where few existed before.

Within the context of a Pan-African religious understanding, in tune with the goals of the M2M Research Network, writings such as these requires embracing and finding resonance in the work of scholars exploring radical religious epistemologies. Through their essays, the scholars in this issue foreground the religious epistemologies of the women they write about, navigating the complexities of identity, resistance, and reclamation. They weave together the multicolored threads and musical phrases of African spiritualities and anti-colonial politics to craft narratives of liberation, freedom, and empowerment. They write about and from Nigeria and Jamaica (Claudette Anderson), Sudan and West Yorkshire, UK (Ameena Al-Rasheed), Senegal and USA (Shandon C Klein), South Africa (Clementine Nishimwe), and Trinidad, Canada, and Jamaica (Anna Kasafi Perkins). Pan-African religious studies often overlook gendered perspectives, or womanism. Moreover, engagements with gendered studies often depict images of women who uphold masculinist authority uncritically through their performances of belief. This shortchanges faith/religion by focusing on one lineage, abbreviating Blackness to one trajectory. We, in this issue, have expanded this ambit and scope to bring readers a much more profound rendezvous with faith, gender, and race/ethnicity in the Global South.

Next Steps

This introductory essay effectively sets the stage for how to initiate a comprehensive exploration of Black women's radical religious epistemologies. There are several ways to build upon the existing research that this introduction and issue bring to the fore. Though they expand the research on underrepresented groups, there is yet scope for additional scholarship to include a wider range of voices and experiences of Black women's religious epistemologies. Much of current scholarship is very western-centered, under the guise of being "Christian". Yet, even with African-descended women who encounter Christian theology, as we see in the contribution of Perkins and the historical contribution of Harriet Jacobs, contesting western perspectives not only represents a gap in scholarship,

but also provides cultural opportunities to take issue with the violence directed against Black women's bodies. Further scholarship should aim to include a wider range of voices and experiences within Black women's religious epistemologies, such as collaborative research projects that bring together scholars from diverse backgrounds to explore intersectional perspectives.

In addition, this work provides guidelines that suggest opportunities for longitudinal studies to track the impact of Womanist Theology and Black women's religious practices over time. These studies could provide deeper insights into how these practices evolve and continue to influence religious scholarship and community practices.

Furthermore, this work encourages interdisciplinary research that bridges the study of religion with other fields such as literary and film studies, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. This can help to develop a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted experiences of Black women in religious contexts. In addition, while reaching across academic disciplines, this provides scope for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the divide between the Academy and faith-based or community practitioners.

Engaging with the communities directly affected by the matters discussed in this special issue can provide direction on how to organize conferences, workshops, and public lectures that facilitate dialogue between scholars and practitioners, ensuring that academic insights are grounded in lived experiences.

Because Black, African-descended women are often overlooked in religious scholarship, this work can, and should, be used to provide policy advocacy to communities to enable them to encourage, campaign for and endorse institutional changes in academic and religious institutions in order to directly address the underrepresentation of Black women. This can include policy recommendations for improving faculty diversity, creating

support networks for Black women scholars, and promoting inclusive practices within religious communities.

Finally, this work can be further developed through varied forms of publication and dissemination that engage the findings of this special issue. This could include mainstream media, academic journals, and online platforms to raise awareness and stimulate expanded scholarly and public engagements with the themes explored in the issue.

The issue's thematic focus on the intersection of African heritage and established religious institutions provides a rich tapestry of scholarly work that showcases the resilience and agency of Black women. By highlighting the transformative power of religion in their lives, this introductory essay, itself, not only fills significant gaps in the literature but also calls for a (re)evaluation of existing academic paradigms.

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