

# Can African Women be Womanists?

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## SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

Alice Walker's definition of a womanist anchors itself in Black feminist identity, but what if different women experience the modifier "Black" in distinct ways? Using narrative theological and womanist religious methodology to center African feminist, African women's theological, and womanist religious voices, this article treats the modifier "Black" as an inflection point that identifies the theological categories and foci from and about which African-descended women speak. It encourages African and African American women to be attentive to why nomenclature and contextuality are important markers of the other's theological and ethical viewpoint.

## KEYWORDS

African women's theology; Womanist theology and ethics; African feminism; Black identity; Womanism; Nomenclature; Contextuality

## Introduction

African women have historically had a problem with naming.<sup>1</sup> In pursuing the work of right representation concerning their cultures, traditions, and religious ideals, they have had to navigate names and labels including "African" and "feminist".<sup>2</sup> Within the designation "Christian", however, the

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<sup>1</sup> Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), xviii-xix. Teresia Hinga notes "African women are...confronted by the dualistic anthropology implicit in European Christianity. This dualism appears in at least two forms: first, the gender dualism that pits men against women as opposites in a hierarchy in which women are subordinated to men, and second the anthropology that defines the human person as a binary of body and soul/spirit and subordinates the somatic dimension of human experience to the pneumatic and psychic dimensions".

<sup>2</sup> Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist*, xvi. Hinga notes that the "African feminist theologians in the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians" have made it their mission to write women "back into history" to "reorient history in the direction that would enhance rather than subvert human and other forms of flourishing".

naming dilemma can be parsed further. What does one call an African woman who is Christian? The direction of this inquiry, and more, descend from practices of how Christian-identifying groups talk to and about each other. This talking about another, I suggest, points to a kind of theological literacy and cultural recognition. This inquiry of what Africans and African Americans are called and by whom, a cultural conundrum with deep tension to be sure,<sup>3</sup> is lacking in Christian theological and ethical discourse. What one group calls the other, matters and, further, what one group *wants* to be called is also of great theological and ethical importance. One then wonders what processes are operating within the assertions made or interactions incurred in the naming practices occurring between both groups?

This article examines this tension. Honouring the approach of narrative theological and womanist methodology as foundational for their respective nomenclative postures, I broadly question the relationship between African women's theology and womanist theology and ethics<sup>4</sup> through the modifier "Black". Who is that descriptor holding? What is happening in calling, or not calling, one's religious framework or findings "Black"? What are the implications for the identity of others in calling one's self and one's work "Black" or not? And what can be learned from such descriptions and distinctions?

In this article, I interrogate the identity named or assumed that drives descriptions of African-descended women's experiences and ways of knowing in religious discourse. Foregrounding their experiential and narrative accounts of themselves, I ultimately argue that context bears the greatest weight in how African women's theological and womanist religious voices are determining their identity and naming themselves. Further, this context specifies what womanism can mean for both groups.

The specifics of Black identity, an identifier that has "room" to hold all modes of African-descended persons and perspectives, are particularized to accommodate and honour the unique histories and stories from which Black

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<sup>3</sup> Michael C. Thornton and Robert J. Taylor, "Black American Perceptions of Black Africans," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11, no. 2 (1988): 140; Thornton and Taylor argue that Black American attitudes toward Africans lack a "conceptual understanding of the relationship".

<sup>4</sup> The terms used here for womanist theology and ethics are not distinct but work in tandem.

African-descended women's thought comes. Understanding this, alerts one to the range of African diasporic voices present within Christian discourse, from which the discourse as a whole should and could learn. Indeed, it allows space for womanism to mean what its inhabitants and their stories need it to mean. That is to say that, if they want, African women *can* be womanist; it depends on their self-naming practice.

## Methodology

This paper's methodology relies on reflective approaches used by African feminists, African women theologians, and womanist theologians and ethicists to articulate their social locations and theological standpoints, namely a narrative theological approach and womanist methodology.

Narrative theological method is critical to understanding the nature of African women's theology. In some iterations, narrative theology is defined as a postliberal account of doing theology associated with theological thought-figures, such as the works of Hans Frei and Stanley Hauerwas. This theological posture aims to position followers of the faith "rightly" through appropriate hermeneutical relationship to scriptural narratives.<sup>5</sup> Frei's focus is more on the biblical text and "emphasizes how readers ought to stay close to the details of the biblical narratives". This varies from Hauerwas's approach that centers "the role of those who read the biblical narratives, in terms of how meaning is made through interpretation and practical reasoning".<sup>6</sup> The narrative approach, however, is not only a theological tool. Christian ethicists, such as David Gushee, also articulate a narrative theological ethic as crucial and much needed. In Gushee's opinion, one's

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<sup>5</sup> Jacob L. Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues: Humility, Patience, Prudence*. 1st ed. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Goodson, *Narrative Theology*, 15-16 and 48. Interestingly, even across a number of texts around "narrative theology", the discourse is not uniform. Narrative theology, for some, is more aligned with the contextual narrative elements of doing theology. Theologian N.T. Wright and theologian and ethicist Russell P. Johnson both explore narrative theology without defining it within post-liberalist discourse. Instead, they narrate "narrative theology" as connected to one's story and explain how this narrative informs one's theologizing. (See N.T. Wright, "Israel's Scriptures in Paul's Narrative Theology" *Theology (Norwich)* 115, no. 5 (2012): 323-29 and Russell P. Johnson, "The Arc of the Moral Universe: Narrative Theology and Constructive Critique," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 43, no. 2 (2023): 331-47.

story generates certain rules and principles about their moral pathway.<sup>7</sup> Though varying in degree and field in these Western-centered accounts, narrative theology and narrative approach ultimately focus on people and discerning the best theological interpretation and ethical practice.

Narrative theology can also be understood in a more contextual manner, as a form of theologizing that centers one's experience and story as an inductive means of exploring questions of faith and practice.<sup>8</sup> For many, one's story is important to their religious purview. This would be true for African women.<sup>9</sup> Accustomed to the importance of oral culture, stories, and storytelling as a type of resource in itself, African women regard social location to be of deep theological importance. Narrative theology in this article, then, involves placing the scriptural text and moral values of Christianity in conversation with one's social and cultural narrative, that is one's respective story.<sup>10</sup> This approach privileges African women's perspectives and their interpretive conclusions as it relates to, their visibility and voice, African culture, and Christian tradition. Such engagements with storytelling, including through oral tradition, myth, and folktales, and the use

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<sup>7</sup> Glen Harold Stassen and David P Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Baron, "The Future of Black Theology of Liberation: Narrative as Epistemological Resource," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (2024): 1-2. Explaining the impact the notion of "theology of story", Eugene Baron notes how missiologist and theologian David Jacobus Bosch argues "multiple avenues of probing the truth are necessary...not only through 'language' (for which 'truth' cannot be verified in absolute terms), but inclusive of 'non-conceptual forms of theologising'...This is where 'narrative theology' and 'theology of story' become equally important as epistemological and theological resources". Interestingly, Baron also notes that it is through such theological figures as Bosch that "Story forms are then made intelligent and credible".

<sup>9</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introduction African Women's Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 9. African women's theologian founder, Mercy Amba Oduyoye notes, "[t]he particular theologies of African women express aspects of global and African Christian theologies from the vantage point of women's experiences and locations".

<sup>10</sup> James H. Cone, "The Story Context of Black Theology," *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.) 32, no.2 (1975): 145. Father of Black liberation theology, James Cone notes "The form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story, and its content is liberation". Though this article, in essence, questions and troubles the notion of "Black", the emphasis that African-descended persons prioritize their own stories and experiences in their theological process/ing is critical to note as true for persons of various African descent.

of literature, position narrative account as a type of viable text.<sup>11</sup> African women's theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye asserts, in her essay "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?", that African women use "storytelling as a method of interpretation" with "the goal of countering patriarchal and colonizing interpretation".<sup>12</sup> This approach practices both narrative theology in its traditional form and African women's emphasis on narrative as critical to theological interpretation. The story of scripture meets the story of these women. Overall, when it comes to narrative theology, one is encouraged to pay attention to the theological lessons found in one's story. In this article, narrative theology grounds the notion of self-naming as critical to African women's articulation – of self, of theology, and more.

The second methodology important to name is womanist methodology. Womanism, "a worldview and not just a theory or an ideology"<sup>13</sup> that is "intently and unapologetically spiritual",<sup>14</sup> also employs narrative emphasis. Womanist methodology *primarily* privileges accounts of African American women's interactions with social practice, religious tradition, and cultural formation.

I say "primarily" here because, according to linguistic founder Alice Walker, a womanist is "a black feminist or feminist of color".<sup>15</sup> Theorist Layli Maparyan names womanists "Black women and other women of color" thinking it in concert with Walker's, Cleonora Hudson Weems's, and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's notions of "womanist".<sup>16</sup> Womanism's definition depends on those defining it. For example, worth noting is the way African American womanism initially had international appeal. Nigerian literary critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's experiential and African-women's-literary-inspired classification of womanism resonates with the terminology she encountered when reading Alice Walker. In her 1985 article,

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<sup>11</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?" in *Faith and Feminism: Ecumenical Essays*, eds. B. Diane Lipsett and Phyllis Trible, 227-228 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 1st ed., (New York: Routledge, 2012), 66.

<sup>14</sup> Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. 1st ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

<sup>16</sup> Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 41.

"Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English", Ogunyemi defines womanism in the following way:

"Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels".<sup>17</sup>

Ogunyemi's exploration of womanism is equally reliant upon African and African American women's experience and literature. Her understanding of womanism is dialogical between both communities. However, a few years later (in 1996-1997) Ogunyemi changes her tune. According to Maparyan, Ogunyemi's emphasis on African culture's importance of having children and the religious stance against lesbianism stood over and against Walker's assertion of womanism. Ogunyemi continued to develop her understanding of "African womanism" centering African women's cultural experiences and values; in this she crafts a language of a womanism attentive to *wo/man palava* or Ifa tradition-inclusive understanding of Black African women's experience towards ultimate human healing.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Black women naming their own truths, as well as larger truths (about culture, society, religion, etc.), is crucial to fortifying a womanist account.<sup>19</sup> In this vein, its offshoot, womanist theological and ethical

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<sup>17</sup> Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1), 1985: 63-80, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 55-58.

<sup>19</sup> Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 56-57. Ogunyemi's turn from "Black womanism" to "African womanism" is such an example of this particularity. Of chief importance to Ogunyemi's account of womanism is not overlooking "African peculiarities."

discourse, as defined in the United States<sup>20</sup> heavily relies on five umbrella concepts, or tenets, under which their ideas might be categorized: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, critical engagement, and appropriation and reciprocity.<sup>21</sup> In the religious sphere, these tenets provide a categorical location from which to discern womanist evaluation and critique, as well as womanist constructive proposals.

Both narrative theological method and womanist methodology point to the hermeneutical standpoints that these communities of women have adopted and formed due to their social, cultural, and religious positioning. Both approaches attend to and give space for Black African-descended women's voices to name their realities.

## The Dialogical Participants

I have used the terminology "African women's theology" as well as "womanist theology and ethics" here, but what are they? What are the dialogical perspectives in this analysis?

## African Women's Theology

African women's theology is the Christian theological perspective that stems from women of the continent of Africa and their mode of feminist engagement with their contextual realities.<sup>22</sup> It looks at both Christian theology's areas of growth and African theology's missed opportunities to make room for African women to speak to and about both Christian and African theology. It is characterized by, contesting Western standpoints, especially white feminism's universalizing claims, challenging African male theology's marginalizing practices through women's activism, and formulating new methods to speak back to the African context on behalf of

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<sup>20</sup> Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3. Womanist Stacey Floyd-Thomas notes that "womanist theological reflection created frames of thinking and ways of being that took Black women being agents of their own destiny as the norm". And they did so by interrogating religious themes, ideas, paradigms, and cultural staples they had inherited in their respective religious settings. In holding these together, they ventured to explore their own thoughts and sounds.

<sup>21</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Oduoye, *Introduction African Women's Theology*, 22-23. African women's theology borne from women who extract meaning from history, tradition, narrative, and expression.

the oppressed.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, African women's theology puts its confluence of womanhood and African identity in full view through its own theological language and emphases.<sup>24</sup> It proudly involves African culture and questions in its theological priorities.

Key to remember here is the continental emphasis. African women's theology is for women from and on the continent of Africa. The late Kenyan theologian Teresia Hinga offers the following comment on the women of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians using the term "African" in naming themselves:

The women... seem to have been careful to include the term 'Africa' in their self-designation, drawing attention to two aspects of their project... First, they insisted that the cultural context from which they speak and to which they speak is itself distinct from other cultural contexts, particularly the Western one, and that this distinct cultural context shapes their theological agenda significantly. Second, they pointed to their distinct history as Africans, a history which has been irrevocably marked by colonialism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "Introduction: Treating Softly but Firmly," In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), xi. African women's theology lays claim to identity of being Third World as a means of illuminating the contours of their oppressions including, but not limited to, economic, political, and religio-cultural affairs. It refutes Western discourses that assume to speak for the whole of humanity, especially white feminist theological discourse that claims to speak to women's universal issues. African women's theology also pushes back against African male theological and ethical voices who brazenly speak for the entire African population. It believes that women's and men's social and cultural positions yield different interpretive lenses, thus, all parties must be heard from to provide the most accurate account of such. Neither white Western women or Black men can speak for African women.

<sup>25</sup> See Teresia Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa," in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, edited by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 37.

## **Womanist Theology and Ethics**

Womanist theology and ethics emerged in the United States during the 1980s out of a concern for the situation of Black women in light of social, cultural, economic, and religious oppression. It provided ethical, hermeneutical, and theological avenues through which Black women could resist harmful ideologies and practices.

Womanist theology and ethics is a thought tradition and praxis formed to address external and internal oppressions practiced within white feminist and Black theological discourses. Both perspectives, womanism argues, are oblivious to the intersectional identity and subsequently the dilemmas of Black women in the United States<sup>26</sup>

While deconstructing systematic issues is one of its strengths, womanist discourse is also constructive as it looks to forgotten and empowering stories and accounts of women to build underexplored frameworks that center Black women's contributions to religious study and practice.

Additionally, essential to consider is womanist theology and ethic's localized and global reach. African American's intersectional standpoint includes "African" and "American" as distinctive identities both of which inform their theological and ethical approaches.

## **The Dilemma of Blackness**

### **Parsing Out Blackness: What Does it Mean?**

Both African and African American women experience similar issues relating to what power and influence their voices and accounts have within their respective contexts. Thus, the creative initiative of formulating one's own voice and sound within religious discourse is a natural one. How each group labels themselves, their work, and what they choose to call their discourse is interrogated further below to see what identity claims are being made and what overall insights emerge.

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<sup>26</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, 2. Floyd-Thomas writes, "[w]hat characterizes womanist discourse is that Black women are engaged in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos".

Where does the nomenclature “Black” fit into this discussion? I argue that within womanist Christian expression, it is assumed and subsuming. Within African women’s theological discourse, it is simultaneously visible yet invisible.<sup>27</sup> How I am considering “Black” identity and, subsequently, “Blackness” is via its conceptual use to signal the ontological opposite of white identity. African identity as “Black” was constructed to identify people as “not white” and “not European”. It was further concretized within Christian theological discourse by hermeneutical traditions that sought to argue that the slavery of Africans was connected to the curse of Ham in Christian scripture.<sup>28</sup> African identity as Black identity was positioned as the foil to white and European identity.<sup>29</sup> Thus, “Black” as a descriptor has direct linkage to those who identify both as continentally African and diasporically African. Following this narrative, “Black” and “African” can almost function synonymously.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ogunyemi, “Womanism”, 68. Ogunyemi defines Black loosely through its apophatic relationship to white identity. She writes, “The common black heritage of subjugation by whites, both directly and by the introjection of white values and mores, has determined the nature of modern black life, which S. E. Ogude rightly recognizes as a living tradition of suffering and humiliation”.

<sup>28</sup> See Tom Meisenhelder, “African Bodies: ‘Othering’ the African in Precolonial Europe,” *Race, Gender, and Class* 10, no. 3, (2003): 100-113.

<sup>29</sup> See Victor Anderson, “Introduction”; “Epilogue,” in *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 13; 161. Though he is speaking from a place of African American’s agency and history, Victor Anderson conception of Blackness can be useful here. He argues that Black identity is the creation of whiteness. This lends credibility to the colonial origins in which non-white persons, particularly people of African descent, must respond to, or at the very least, respond to the category to which they are assigned.

<sup>30</sup> Though I explore its use in this article, I clarify here that, on the one hand, the modifier “Black” is indicative of categorical and nomenclative violence leveled against peoples with historically less influence and power. Using the descriptor “Black” served, and continues to serve, as a means of essentializing and overdetermining identity. I argue that the modifier “African” can work in the same way. It is critical to examine how and where the terminology is working as a universalizing or particularizing force or tool. On the other hand, “Black”, and subsequently “African”, as nomenclature has constructive use by those who choose to inhabit it in this way. It is not only a psycho-social artifact of whiteness’s making, but rather a radical self-naming agent from its African-continental-descended, melanated inhabitants.

### **Subsuming “Blackness” in Womanist Discourse**

Within seminal womanist theological and ethical work, such as Emilie Townes’s *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* and M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom*, the usage of the “Black” modifier bends in interesting directions. Theo-ethicist Townes’ critical work, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, acknowledges the spectrum of African-based identities and cultures as connected to the profile of womanist religious thought. Concerning the intra-communal task of religious discourse, she writes,

If I do this task well, I will realize the ways in which Black life is not my life alone, but a compendium of conscious and unconscious coalitions with others whose lives are not lived solely in the Black face of United States life.<sup>31</sup>

For Townes, the particular requires as much room in religious discourse as the universal. She recognizes and appreciates the range of Black folk surviving, whether in African, South American, or Caribbean contexts, and honors their specificity. They are the Black community she is aware of and has, in a way, descended from and from whom she is learning.

However, as we burrow further into this brilliant work, there is a turn: “Black” identity is understood primarily from the United States context. Moving in a different direction from the tone previously set, Townes describes the image-violence done to African American women and to the Black community. The narrative, that once held a global picture of Blackness, focuses in on the particularity of African American women’s experience and history as “Black”. The universal thus melts into the particular.

Nevertheless, Townes does not let go of the global representatives of Black identity. Indeed, her acknowledgment of Chinua Achebe, June Jordan, and others is indicative of this. What we can take away from this, however, is the prominent role that context plays in African American women talking about “Blackness”.

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<sup>31</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

Townes is helping the reader understand the reality that African Americans exist as both African-descended and historically “American”. For womanists, African identity is womanist identity as much as it is associated specifically with continental African women’s identity. Womanist discourse actively wrestles with, and works to include, this reality even if it fleshes it out to illumine the details of African American women’s history.

Womanist theologian Copeland organizes her argument of a racialized theological anthropology in a similar manner in *Enfleshing Freedom*. After asking questions about what marks one’s identity as “Black”, she classifies it as being assigned a marginalizing narrative of being on the wrong side of the Black-white binary.

Interestingly, she then goes on to illustrate questions of Black identity and Christianity through the lens of slavery in the United States. This again is movement from the universal to the particular whereby Copeland recognizes the umbrella of Black identity but also expresses her work through the Black American or African American context.<sup>32</sup>

When examining the initial framings of identity in womanist theological and ethical texts, the frameworks function and where identity modifiers are at work become apparent. Within both Townes and Copeland’s texts, “Black” as portraiture simultaneously includes African continental and African diasporic identity. Intriguingly, in some instances, the diasporic identity acts as the strongest marker and subsumes “African” cultural identification. In other words, sometimes womanism heeds African continental lineage to a point. Eventually, the delineation “Black is African-descended” becomes “Black is African American”. Africa is not silenced here, but it is turned to a different frequency.

For African American womanists, then, “Black” is synonymous with African-descended, meaning that it can also become descriptive of a certain branch of Black identity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 19-22.

<sup>33</sup> Womanist theology purports that women’s experiences provide the foundation from which to build pedagogical statutes. Black women’s stories become what womanist ethicist,

## Womanist Recognition

A question emerges for womanist religious discourse given the nomenclative claims they appear to make around Black identity: Is African women's theology, *womanist*? In its points of contact and contrast, universal similarities and particular details, can African women fit into the narrative created by and primarily assigned to African American women?

I assert "Yes!", in part *because of* womanist methodology and its constitution. Womanist methodology creates room for diasporic and continental Black women to name their truths and name the truth. The womanist tenet of critical engagement creates the most solid ground on which cross-cultural conversations can occur and build, for it is founded upon listening, mutual dialogue, and forging constructive ways forward.<sup>34</sup>

Womanist theologian Delores Williams presents a strong case and example of critical engagement with African sources and ideas in her groundbreaking work, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*.<sup>35</sup> In

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Melanie Harris, calls "valid epistemologies, constructing liberating theologies and ethical worldviews, and giving attention to quality of life issues for Black women across the African diaspora". (see Melanie L. Harris, "Womanist Humanism," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, 211-225 (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 212).

<sup>34</sup> Ogunyemi, "Womanism", 74. I say "in part" because womanism has varied origins as Ogunyemi's work notes. In her earliest work with "womanism", Ogunyemi is one voice who can be classified as employing "critical engagement". In her article, she not only builds her definition of "womanism" by placing African and African American women's literature and its themes in conversation but thinks them co-partners in crafting social and cultural opportunities for Black women's thriving. Using an African conception of kinship, she asserts, "womanists explore past and present connections between black America and black Africa. Like amiable co-wives with invisible husbands, they work together for the good of their people". As noted earlier, though her tune changes, the conceptions of women's self-naming and culturally honorific practices towards the wellness of the whole undergird Walker's and her own version of womanism.

<sup>35</sup> Williams examines where African American womanist analytical discourse converses with other liberationist modes of theology and ethics in what M. Shawn Copeland calls, "critical cognitive praxis". (See M. Shawn Copeland, "A Thinking Margin: The Womanist Movement as Critical Cognitive Praxis," from *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in*

discourse mainly geared towards African American women, Williams acknowledges the complexity of Black and African-descended foundations in African American women's work. She intentionally names Afrocentric biblical tradition as critical to the formation of African American culture.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, Williams lobbies for African women's contributions to have space in African American women's thought processes around issues both groups of women face, such as motherhood.<sup>37</sup> She even mentions African women's theologian creator, Mercy Oduyoye as a valuable contributor to African theological thought.<sup>38</sup>

In Williams's work, the voices and analytical contributions of African women make their way into, or at the very least are named as, informing womanist analytical method. She directly acknowledges that African women's theological and biblical analysis is the lineage, the intellectual, and cultural tradition from which African American analytical practice comes.

Williams's care and thoroughness in her critical engagement, in her naming how African women's thought has impacted her own thought as an African American woman, allows for an avenue through which African women's theology can be argued as womanist; the lineage of identities is there. Womanist theology and ethics fortifying its arguments in this way makes a strong case for the inclusion of African women's theological work as being part of its fold. Womanist theology and ethics has always been African.

In critically engaging African religious history and African women theologians' context and ideas, Williams presents a rigorous demonstration of taking the "African" designation in her identity seriously. In holding both the "African" and "American" aspects of her identity together, her conception of "Black" identity appears holistic and total. Her work shows that womanist religious discourse has *always been* African discourse.

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*Religion and Society*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 227).

<sup>36</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 189.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 189-193.

### Womanist Misrecognition

Surprisingly, Williams is not exempt from, in some instances, subsuming African identity into African American identity. Some aspects of her analysis are murky when it comes to acknowledging African women's distinctive stories and accounts. Williams's interpretive moves around Hagar presents one such example.

Hermeneutically, in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Hagar's Africanness is recognized in some capacities and not in others. How Williams reads Hagar's body, story, and experience, for the most part, is hermeneutically made to align more with African American women's social and religious experiences than to *African* women's accounts of violence that they may have suffered.

Williams's research is impeccable. She explains and explores how the full extent of Hagar's personhood, including her religio-cultural contexts, can play a role in how she can potentially be understood. In Hagar's identity and experience, Williams helps the reader understand the interconnectedness of both African and African American women's experiences. Hagar is recognized as distinctly African and Williams makes brilliant ties of Hagar's story to the slave history of the United States. This is, ultimately, a demonstration of sound hermeneutical connection, but if considered contextually, it is also a missed interpretive opportunity.

Williams misses the chance to interrogate the current status of African women on the continent as it might parallel the social conditions of Hagar. She states, "Genesis 16:1-6 illustrates what the history of many African-American women taught them long ago; that is, the slave woman's story is and unavoidably has been shaped by the problems and desires of her owners".<sup>39</sup> Hagar's story is made to align with the stories of African American women instead of the African women with whom her story could be closely associated. In some cases, African women experience similar violations to that of Hagar, but this is not fully brought forth (for example, house girl and house boy culture).

While Williams's approach makes hermeneutical sense in drawing ties to slave identity because of her context, her interpretive move misses the

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.

opportunity to read the narrative and its implications in a more culturally contextual manner. Hagar's story is about an African woman in a slave position to a wealthier family. Situationally, what potentially aligns or parallels, here, is the tangible and dangerous problem some African girls and women endure who serve as house girls in the homes of wealthier families. Their stories are ones where they lack freedom and they battle the demands and moods of the wealthy wife. Their accounts include moments where the husband of the family sometimes violates them against their will.<sup>40</sup> This begs the (rhetorical) question: what are the cultural connections missed when context overrides context?

Instead of drawing ties to the domestic enslaving of cultural norms and practices in various African cultures, we receive a type of departure in *Sisters in the Wilderness*. The text is read outside of and away from the context in which it might most readily apply so that it may be read for a different context. Indeed, it is apparent that Williams's identity, context, and, particularly, her personhood focuses her interpretation and analytical objectives.<sup>41</sup>

To reiterate, this distinction is not wrong, it is merely telling. As Ghanaian gender scholar, Abena Busia, reminds us, every story that we hear comes from a storyteller.<sup>42</sup> We look for our own stories in the stories of others. What becomes a turning point is whether we also let others' stories remain (at least in part) their own stories. It is a difficult thing to do, but in doing so, we employ strong hermeneutical practices that bring the world and the experiences within it into better focus.

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<sup>40</sup> See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Questions for Ada*. I argue that some of the best places to hear these accounts are in African women's literature and poetry, which are valuable texts and primary sources to African women's theology.

<sup>41</sup> Williams has a particular hermeneutical objective for liberation for women of African and slave descent in the United States. Ultimately, her audience are those who, like her, have descended from a people with particular historic accounts and, thus, must recognize the impact that African culture has and continues to have on African American women's analytical voice.

<sup>42</sup> Abena Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron: On Sisterhood, History and Politics of Location," in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, edited by Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, 257-268 (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 259.

## African Women and Continental Commitment

“Black” identity is both a visible and invisible detail in African women’s discourse. African women’s theology is primarily concerned with the affairs of women on the continent. Hinga reinforces this point, stating “African women insist that the right to speak for themselves is a necessary condition for their emancipation and must be respected by all”.<sup>43</sup> Oduyoye describes African women’s theology as “theologies that reflect women’s heritage of participation in Africa’s colonial and missionary history”.<sup>44</sup>

Alongside other African women, Oduyoye is most interested in telling the stories of continental African women who are invisibilized within their respective contexts. Her focus is mainly cultural with inherent social and religious dynamics therein. What aspect of social and religious culture practiced in their communities do African women have to address and resist in their theological work?

However, despite not being mentioned extensively, Black identity is found in African women’s theology, even if in small measure. African women’s theology stems from African theology that emerged in tandem with Black theology in the United States.<sup>45</sup> In her text, *Hearing and Knowing*, Oduyoye calls Black theology “another type of African Christian theology”.<sup>46</sup> Across her work, she also mentions that African women “share the intricate politico-economic traumas of the First World”.<sup>47</sup>

On a small scale, Black identity and connection to African American women are working in the background of African women’s theology, especially given the scholastic and teaching background of some of its most pronounced

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<sup>43</sup> See Teresia Hinga, “Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa,” in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, edited by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 38.

<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflection on Christianity in Africa* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 4

<sup>47</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 75.

voices.<sup>48</sup> The particularity of African women's thought does not leave a great deal of room to integrate ideas of the universal, that is ideas connected to a larger Black identity, into its work. We can conclude that there is space for a "Black" and "African" parallel, though small.<sup>49</sup>

African women's theology and African feminism help us see that African continental women primarily identify themselves as "African" as opposed to "Black" because of what their context told them they were. In "In Search of Chains Without Iron: On Sisterhood, History and Politics of Location", Busia offers numerous narrative accounts to illumine her experiences with the racial category, "Black". As an African woman, her awareness of her Black identity came to light only when she geographically relocated to the West, specifically the United States. The notion of Black identity, for her as an African woman, came with a greater understanding of the ontological stakes of being of a certain race and occupying a particular body in the United States.<sup>50</sup> Through those moments and encounters she became "race conscious".<sup>51</sup> Lived experience outside of the African continent, and specifically within the United States, alerted her to the racial categorization of Blackness that others had long dealt with before her.

Nigerian sociologist of religion, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, notes the distinctions that Africans make when it comes to Black identity. She argues that "Blackness" as racial identity is tied to African American's history and culture, rather than existing as a shared ontological connection of people with dark skin. For her it is not a common practice to assume African and African-American identity under the same umbrella. For African women, sameness is found in common experience rather than in nomenclature. It is not racial aesthetic that creates alliances between women groups, but colonial

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<sup>48</sup> In African women's theology, can the particular be universalized? Oduyoye believes that the interplay of both are "critical to the understanding of Africa as they are to the understanding of African sources" (See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 18).

<sup>49</sup> There is room to consider how African American women's stories coexist alongside African women's stories. This opening is quite small, however, and Oduyoye's dominant message is clear: African women's theology is primarily concerned with African women's life within their continental context. The "African" modifier holds the most weight in the label with which African women choose to identify.

<sup>50</sup> Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron", 261.

<sup>51</sup> Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron", 262.

history.<sup>52</sup> Both groups wear the identities they do because of colonialism's consequences. What someone calls themselves or calls another, whether in specificity or under an ontological umbrella, may not be universally received.<sup>53</sup>

Given this natural pushback, a question comes the fore: why do Africans, and in this case African women, not think of themselves as "Black" but "African"?<sup>54</sup> Given historical and colonial naming practices, can they be so easily separated? African studies scholar, Filomina Chioma Steady, reminds us that most Black women in the diaspora descend from continental African women who were brought as slaves to the new world.<sup>55</sup> Racial characterization is completely intertwined with how people groups are viewed in the world.

While Busia and Oyěwùmí argue a similar position of initially not understanding themselves as "Black" because of being from their respective African contexts, one cannot help but acknowledge the details of the other's claims. For Busia, once educated on the racial realities of life in the United States, she came to identify herself as Black. Though she does not have the historical connection to slavery in her lineage, in expanding her United States interlocutors and their cultural frames, she came to understand herself differently and in light of (and perhaps because of) her capacity to learn and hold the identity of other African diasporic persons.

Oyěwùmí's claim about colonial consequences is key to unpacking what is happening in her identity analysis. Her problem with the racial category of Blackness has to do with whether it applies to how African women think about themselves based on their experiences *on the continent*. But the

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<sup>52</sup> Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color "Black" from *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, edited. By Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 2003), 162.

<sup>53</sup> Oyěwùmí, "Alice in Motherland", 176.

<sup>54</sup> Filomina Chioma Steady, "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996). Sierra Leonian Professor of Africana Studies, Filomina Chioma Steady, considers African identity synonymous with Black identity. She uses them interchangeably.

<sup>55</sup> Steady, "African Feminism", 8.

conversation extends beyond fine geographic lines and specific cultural bounds and forces us to consider terminology's historical use.<sup>56</sup>

African women are included as "Black" by other African-descended women. This suggests a significant insight into inclusionary praxis. Though intra-continently "Black" designation does not connect specifically with some African women, if expanded inter-continently or globally or diasporically, African women's identity can include more and varied descriptors of African-descended women.

Additionally concerning is the problem of naming. This is, to Oyěwùmí's point, the result of colonialism. As alluded to earlier, no one has truly gotten to name themselves.<sup>57</sup> Both designations of "African" as well as "Black" are consequences of colonial and radicalized categories of naming.<sup>58</sup> What allows some African women to not know they are "Black" but assume the designation "African" to be a category of naming free from narratives of domination and colonialism is, to Busia's point, missing the revelation that comes in being in community as well as understanding African diasporic ties.

Recognizing the breadth of African women's voice is a critical concept of African women's theology. If attentive to it, African women's theology can see where its descendants, both those conceptually and geographically, reach, for they are African women's sisters, too. Community in this sense, promotes a methodology that widens and is, thus, more comprehensive. It encourages African thought to be more diasporic and more inclusive of

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<sup>56</sup> African women speaking to or about African culture might not have much use for the nomenclature of "Blackness", but this does not seem to be the case for how African women and women of African descent talk about African women.

<sup>57</sup> Conceptually, a strong case can be made that the modifiers "Black" and "African" are two sides of the same coin. Given the reality of the myth of self-naming, this can encourage an expansion of African women's theological thought.

<sup>58</sup> 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "African Women, Culture and Another Development," in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, edited by Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 108. In exploring the role of African women in the economic aftermath of colonialism Molara Ogundipe Leslie reminds us that slavery, the slave trade, and the pillaging of the land for profitable crops are all interconnected. They all have the same origins in colonial action.

African-descended voices that historically, instead of immediately, come from the African continent.<sup>59</sup>

The point I tease out is as follows: terminologies of distinction do not denote as much of an ontological difference as one might think. The thread that is running through this distinction and debate is self-naming. But even in practices of self-naming, one cannot shake the designations that have been historically assigned to certain peoples. Most everyone is subjected to a kind of “external epistemology”. If “Black” and “African” point towards the same thing, that is “African-descended”, it can then be argued that the labeling of “African” is just as much an identity claim for womanists as it is for African women.

What we can learn from African women’s self-focus is that their discourse is by and for themselves; where these attachment fissures involve the totalizing claim of African identity divorced from any *other* conceptions of African-ness. The challenge for African women’s thought and theology is to be open to widening the boundaries in which “Blackness” is considered an identity descriptor.

Here, I must name a distinction. To be clear, African continental women *are* African. They have certain cultures, histories, languages, and experiences that constitute a certain way of being in the world that is theirs. But given the world and its language and terminology, African women are also “Black”. In the same way, African American women, in being both “African” and “American”, occupy identities that are distinctly “African” and fall under the category of “Black American” personhood.

What poses a potential danger is if *neither group* acknowledges the complexity and unique stories of the other. African continental women cannot brush over the fact that African American women have African customs passed down into their culture, but have also created a new mode of being due to the historical circumstances, traumas, and violences done to them. African women must not shrink down African American women’s

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<sup>59</sup> How African women talk about themselves considering their cultures may not employ “Black” categorization, but once expanded extra-continentially, “African” and “Black” designation are closer together than initially thought and, in some instances, synonymous.

stories, experiences, or even methodologies to solely suit the telling of their own stories.

The same applies to African American women. In acknowledging the cultures and peoples from which they descend, they must be careful to give African women room to carry and translate their own stories. They must allow for African women to see their distinct identities attributed to themselves rather than seeing their stories utilized as a catalyst for African American self-analysis or interpretation. Both groups must grant each other room to claim their particular identities while also understanding how deeply they are interconnected.

The complexity of self-naming for both groups and the intentional and missed claiming of another alerts people to the language they employ in theological and ethical study. What is assumed about one's name and perspective? The questions that surface from such inquiries attune one to the fact that they do not know the stories of groups who also contribute ideas to the traditions of thought from which Christians teach and learn.

## Conclusion

Asking about descriptors, modifiers, and nomenclature encourages Christians to widen their practices of visibility and better comprehend the people groups, cultures, and linguistic gaps their theological premises tend to fill in about others.

What constitutes womanist methodology mirrors the values of what can be deemed African women's narrative theology. Indeed, what primarily distinguishes them is context. The place from which these respective parties are speaking is of literal importance. But the commonalities are also too strong to ignore. In examining African women's and African American women's self-naming and ways of knowing, one should turn an inquisitive ear towards their own ways of knowing. How does one *know* "Black" identity? And further, have they listened well enough to every detail in another's telling and sharing their own identity to claim certain understanding?

Womanist theology and ethics creates and tells its own narrative, one rich with "African" and "Black" categorical distinctions. Womanist heritage is of great importance. Historically, being of slave descent has had a massive impact in how womanist theology and ethics considers itself, its starting

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points, and its telos. It holds this heritage *and* a continental African genealogy.

What Black identity looks like for African women will differ from what it looks like for African American women. While womanists look back and around to acknowledge the heritage from which their thought-life comes, African women would do well to look around and out into the diaspora to see where else manifestations of their stories might exist, and to see in which direction African women's theology, as a mode of "Black" theology, is going. In seeing each other well, both communities of women will better learn themselves.

African women's theology, as well as womanist theology and ethics, aim to teach us something about the world in which we all live. They are co-conspirators in the full liberation of Black women. When they dialogue, they can both carry the stories of each other, and can do so in a way that honors the rich history of each.<sup>60</sup>

Can African women be womanists? Given the intricacies and intertwining of history and nomenclature, the answer is "yes".

The next set of questions from "Black" women is already among us, coming from liminal African voices: Africans who exist between African continental and African American identity. They, too, are providing critical insights into how Black theology, and theology as a whole, can be done more broadly. They draw our attention to how immigrant and diasporic standpoints and identities yield something theologically distinctive. As we can see, theological margins can be generative. They are the places furthest from rigid centers and closest to new and dynamic spaces and worlds. They see the entirety of the world and signal other ways of being. Journeying theologically in this direction is the future.

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<sup>60</sup> When considering the identity politics of Blackness, a distinctive formulaic claim can be made around African and African American women: "All womanists are Black women, *and* all Black women are womanists", for this Black feminist identity aims to acknowledge, engage, and expand the scope of Black identity.

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