Editorial: Naming, Embodiment, and the Ethics of Seeing in Dangerous Times

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The importance of rigorous, critical engagements with race, gender, culture, and identity has never been as urgent as it is in the present moment. Across multiple global sites, most visibly though not exclusively in the United States, we are witnessing the tightening of ideological orthodoxies, the erosion of hard-won feminist and antiracist gains, and the re-legitimation of religious narratives that thrive on ideas of supremacy and domination. It is a dangerous time to do critical scholarship thus making the work all the more necessary. In such moments, journals such as ours' continue to hold intellectual and ethical space for the slow, difficult, and often costly work of refusing the comforts of non-involvement and abstraction.

It is therefore with some measure of pride and gratitude that I present this issue of the journal. This editorial marks the final one I will write as editor, as I hand over the editorial stewardship of the journal into the capable hands of Fatima Seedat and Megan Robertson. I will return to this transition later. For now, I am pleased to present the current issue of the journal, which in many ways reflects textured conversations about naming, embodiment, visibility, agency, violence, and interpretation in contexts shaped by coloniality, patriarchy, and contested religious authority. The issue before us reflects not only the vitality of current scholarship, but also the long intellectual memory of this journal, which has consistently foregrounded feminist and decolonial approaches to religion in Africa and its diasporas.

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In an article I co-authored with Isabel Phiri about twenty years ago, in another iteration of this very journal, we grappled explicitly with the politics of nomenclature in African women's theologies.[1] We argued then that naming our scholarly positions is a profoundly political and epistemological act. It is therefore, deeply affirming to see how this discourse has been taken up, extended, and complicated in the present issue, particularly through the first article by Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein: *Can African Women be Womanists?* In this article, Oredein returns to questions of naming, identity, and methodological location. Rather than rehearsing well-worn debates, Oredein probes the tensions and possibilities that emerge when African women's theologies and womanist traditions are placed in sustained dialogue. By foregrounding context and self-naming, she resists both the flattening of difference and the fragmentation that forecloses solidarity.

Oredein's intervention is especially resonant in the South African context, where Steve Biko's articulation of Blackness[2] as a political and ethical category continues to shape debates about belonging and liberation. For those of us, like myself, who identify as politically Black while inhabiting complex cultural or ethnic identities, such as South African Indians, Oredein's insistence on nuance is not merely theoretical but deeply lived. Her work invites further engagements with Blackness that are attentive to history, location, and power, without surrendering the possibility of feminist coalition.

This concern with lived experience and embodied meaning is taken up and given material depth in Marike Blok-Sijtsma's exploration of church uniforms among Reformed women in Zambia. In a context marked by male-dominated ecclesial authority, the uniform is conceptualised as a

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1 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," Journal of Constructive Theology 12 (2), 2006: 5–23.

2 "Being black is not a matter of pigmentation-being black is a reflection of a mental attitude." Biko, Bantu Stephen. (2004 [1978]). *I Write What I Like.* Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 52.

complex theological object through which women negotiate vocation, holiness, discipline, protection, and spiritual struggle. Blok-Sijtsma demonstrates that theological meaning is generated not primarily through formal doctrine, but through ritual practice, informal liturgies, and collective interpretation. The uniform, therefore, functions simultaneously as symbol and practice, shaping women's religious subjectivities in ways that are deeply communal and intensely personal.

Blok-Sijtsma's contribution further unsettles feminist assumptions that too readily position women's religious practices as either resistant or oppressive. Her analysis aligns with broader feminist interventions that have challenged liberal feminist understandings of agency. As Saba Mahmood has persuasively argued, practices often interpreted through the lens of submission or constraint may, within particular moral and religious worlds, constitute meaningful forms of ethical self-fashioning rather than evidence of false consciousness or passivity.[3] Read in this light, Blok-Sijtsma's work models a feminist hermeneutic that takes religious women seriously on their own terms, attending carefully to how agency and piety are lived and negotiated rather than presumed.

Questions of religious dress, visibility, and authority are taken up differently in the article by Mohamed Ndaro, Hassan Ndzovu, and Eunice Kamaara, which examines Muslim women filmmakers in Kenya. Here, popular culture becomes a critical site of analysis. Through film, Muslim women contest elite religious interpretations, expose contradictions surrounding veiling, education, and gender roles, and articulate alternative religious imaginaries that might otherwise remain marginalised. The article demonstrates how film functions not merely as representation but as a form of religious discourse in its own right.

Read in conversation with Blok-Sijtsma's analysis of the church uniform, this article highlights how religious dress can operate both as a site of

[3] Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

communal stabilisation and as a catalyst for disruption, depending on context, medium, and audience. While the uniform consolidates belonging within a particular ecclesial community, film opens religious meanings to public scrutiny and debate. Together, these articles underscore the importance of attending to medium and form when analysing women's religious self-representation.

Miranda Pillay's decolonial feminist reading of Acts 8:26–40 brings these concerns into the terrain of biblical interpretation. By centring the Ethiopian eunuch as a knowing, questioning, and agentive subject, Pillay challenges longstanding hermeneutical traditions that have rendered this figure instrumental to imperial narratives of conversion and expansion. Her reading exposes how racialised, sexually ambiguous, and foreign bodies have been historically domesticated within biblical interpretation, and insists that scripture itself must be read as a contested site of power.

Pillay's work resonates strongly with the broader concerns of this issue by demonstrating how interpretive habits shape ethical vision. By reading from the perspective of the othered body, she opens possibilities for reimagining belonging and agency within both biblical texts and contemporary faith communities. Her contribution underscores the stakes of decolonial feminist interpretation in contexts where scripture continues to be mobilised to exclude and marginalise.

Finally, these interpretive and ethical questions find their most unsettling articulation in Thandi Gamedze's analysis of selective violence-blindness in scripture and society. Taking the biblical figure of Hagar in Genesis 16 as her central interpretive lens, Gamedze exposes how violence against marginalised bodies is repeatedly rendered invisible through dominant hermeneutical frameworks. Hagar, an enslaved African woman whose body is subjected to sexual, reproductive, and social control, is frequently read in ways that minimise or normalise the violence she endures. Gamedze demonstrates how such readings are symptomatic of a broader theological logic that determines what forms of violence are seen, named, and grieved, and which are obscured, justified, or ignored. She argues that

the interpretive practices that enable the "unseeing" of violence in the story of Hagar also make possible the "unseeing," and even theological legitimisation, of violence in the world. In this way, the article draws a sobering line of continuity between biblical interpretation and present-day structures of domination, including apartheid, settler colonialism, and genocide.

Gamedze's intervention functions as an ethical reckoning for the issue as a whole. It refuses the comfort of neutrality and challenges readers to interrogate the ways in which their own interpretive habits and theological investments may participate in selective violence-blindness.

The issue concludes with a review of my book, *Gender, Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther*. I receive this engagement with gratitude, particularly for the care with which it situates the book within wider feminist and decolonial theological debates. In many ways, it marks a fitting close to my time as editor.

I began my journey with this journal nearly two decades ago, first as a journal assistant, then as co-editor, and finally as editor. To hand over the journal now is both an ending and a continuation. With Fatima Seedat and Megan Robertson as co-editors, the journal remains in deeply capable and feminist hands. At a time when critical gender and religion scholarship is increasingly under threat, this continuity matters, because feminist sisterhood is sustained not only by shared ideas, but by shared labour, trust, and hope.