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Editorial: (De)Colonial Entanglements with Religion

Fatima Seedat

Co-Editor

Published at a time when the world is bearing witness to the genocide of Palestinians after 75 years of Israeli occupation, the articles presented here may be read as part of an increasingly voluble conversation on the intersections of religion and coloniality. The contradictory operations of religion as both oppressive and liberatory are stark at this time; daily we witness generations of Palestinian families bombed to death in an instant, while lone survivors navigate loss by re-affirming their faith and confirming their religious convictions. We continually hear the occupation forces attempting to justify displacement, and the starvation of millions of Palestinians under occupation, as the only means to achieving their own religious goals. Contrary to colonial encounters of religion with social, economic and political subjugation articulated as a modernising enterprise in the past, the resistance to religious subjugation we are presently seeing is part of the decolonial turn which recognizes how the analytical category of religion functions simultaneously as a racial, gender and class category that aligns religion, authority and authenticity with whiteness, maleness and ideas of superiority that claim a higher degree of human-ness for some over others. Feminism and religion are easily positioned as naturally antithetical to one another when colonial discourses monopolize feminism for imperial and modernising purposes, rendering colonised communities culturally outmoded, and potentially so irrelevant as to warrant eradication. The works presented here are part of that broader conversation about religion in the hands of coloniality, how it works and un-works relationships of cruelty and care, oppression and liberation, solidarity, and enmity.

The first article is Noxolo Matele's, "Leave her Alone, She is telling the Truth", which departs from the premise that Christianity in African context is not neutral,

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> "its arrival in the name of civilization, also dispossessed Africans of their culture and religion… taught Africans subservience to Europeans and became a way by which to deny Africans expression of their unique culture and religious practices…[and] was seen by many to legitimize colonialism or even to participate in it"

Through her analysis of a play that fictionalizes the true story of three Rwandan convent high-school girls – Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire – whose only Vatican-approved Marian apparitions in Africa garnered widespread attention, Noxolo Matete offers an African feminist reading of Christian religious experience. Her contribution is in recognizing the contradictions and nuances of the experiences of young women of faith in the postcolonial, global South. Through an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018), set in 1981 at a convent high school in Kibeho, Rwanda, "partly through fact and partly through fiction", Matete shows how the play offers a decolonized reading of a Christian experience.

The different roles of the three girls simulate the Trinity of Christianity, and amongst them, one also emerges in the characteristic form of the subaltern "the female figure who shifts from 'historically muted subject' to agent". And so, Matele's aim is to help us 'see' how the play disrupts the

> "neat binaries of oppressive or liberatory. Traditional Christianity - a worldview rooted in Eurocentric, racist and patriarchal ideals and which situated African women as non-human - is reimagined in Hall's play, as it ceases to be the domain of the Church, Western empire or traditional patriarchal domination. Instead, presented in its ambiguities and complexities, Christianity as a religious structure and through the varied experiences of 'the Trinity', is powerfully reclaimed."

Matete's analysis prompts us to examine how their visitations also predict what was to be the Rwandan genocide a decade later, and further how the girls also shift from being believed and blessed and become accused of lying and pretense – the brutality of the vision is too much for the ecstatic religious experience.

In the next article, Princess Sibanda positions herself as a "radical feminist whose scholarly interests are in the study of the taboo" while also embracing the Christian parts of herself. She draws on the theoretical work of pathbreaking African feminist theologian Isabel Phiri whose work shows how "Africans experienced the gospel as a tool of colonialism, classism and exclusionism".

Her article "*Itai Amen Satani Abhoikane*: Killjoy Feminism In The Church" introduces the work of Chaplain Christabel Phiri (not to be mistaken for Isabel Phiri), a Zimbabwean preacher who "is reshaping theological discourse in Zimbabwe", and redefining the shorthand dichotomy too frequently set up between Christianity and feminism. She positions Chaplain Phiri amongst the "killjoys, the unfearful, problematic women (who) do not fit neatly within the packages of socio-political categories and norms" and who may therefore "craft a feminism that is situated in progressive Christianity". For Sibanda, Chaplain Phiri is already doing this; her analysis makes visible the possibilities of feminist praxis in church spaces as demonstrated through five of Chaplain Phiri's sermons, each of them a form of theological performance.

> "Phiri's feminism is a lived reality, it does not begin on the pulpit and end there. Phiri is a Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services Chaplain whose life story is one punctuated by "carrying six mountains on the back". She has experienced life as an orphan, a widow and a sex worker, suffered a mild stroke and has survived a brain tumour. Her life story is a recurring motif in her sermons as she draws on her personal story to profile her arduous life journey and how she persevered. Instead of portraying herself

> as a sacrosanct entity, Phiri brings her 'dirty linen' or 'sins' onto the pulpit."

Phiri's use of role play, strong language, her identity with morally questionable labels, the exuberance on stage and in the audience, and her use of dancehall songs collectively facilitate Sibanda's analysis of this nexus between killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies, which illustrates the complex liberatory potentials of feminist theology.

Drawing on the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Sibanda posits that African feminist theologies, such as those that arise from the preaching of Chaplain Phiri, "belong within the broader ambit of African liberation theologies".

Like Matete, Sibanda also engages the contradictions between theology founded on sanctity, purity, and holiness, and the 'choking' encounter of Africans with Christianity. The Church as location of performance, "holds the codes of conduct which specify which kind of bodies are eligible to inhabit and worship in it." Consequently, the church which "is constructed as a place of perennial joy and freedom unfortunately incubates violence for women too." What Chaplain Phiri offers instead is a theology that is "popular, participatory and troublesome. I would add, it is also disobedient and decolonial."

Sibanda and Matete both focus on women's expressions of faith; each shows the complex ways in which feminist and Christian ways of being come together, recognising both the inherent challenges and liberatory potentials, and Miranda Pillay continues this work too.

Pillay's article ""First Woman to…" Exceptionalism Discourse: Badge of Honour or Badgering Burden?" takes us further into the patriarchal challenge that religion presents when it 'tries' to include women. The ubiquitous practice of first-ism, in Pillay's view, enables "'the church' to continue "patriarchal attitudes, beliefs and practices". For "while the

presence of women in 'previously' male-dominated spaces calls for celebration, there's much need for commiseration." The badge "first woman to…" becomes a form of 'badgering' characterised by exceptionalism, and the valorization of women's capabilities are employed in the service of patriarchy rather than resistance to it.

Pillay focuses on Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel's ecclesiastical journey in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), who amongst other 'first' women, was "expected to take up leadership positions in 'previously' male dominated spaces with little, or no effort from the institution to transform its patriarchal culture." Thus, while first-ism is often couched in celebration, Pillay argues for an equal recognition of the travails that first-ism brings, arguing that commiseration is more in order than celebration, "to recognise the fact that women are burdened over and over again, generation after generation with the task of clearing weeds that cushion the patriarchal track of male privilege." Exceptionalism discourse, Pillay argues, "camouflages second-generation gender bias and upholds patriarchal normativity" or as Sarojini Nadar names it "palatable patriarchy." In response, Pillay explores the counter-cultural *virtue of unctuousness*, which "is the creative tension between resistance and endurance". For the latter she "points to the intentionality to resist the subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronising forms of gender bias". Pillay concludes with an argument for reflective solidarity "not as a social value in an abstract sense, but as an embodied ecclesial practice toward transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of 'the church'."

Shifting our focus from Christianity specifically, Nina Hoel explores various trends in the study of religion and feminist theory for tools and concepts that "trouble the dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture" and "tune-in religion storytelling (the study of religion) to the challenges of the Anthropocene."

Inspired by what she calls 'crochet methodology', derived from a Crochet Coral Reef Project at the Cape Town Aquarium, Hoel writes "Crochet Methodology: Thinking Creatively about and with the Study of Religion in

the Anthropocene". Her analysis comes to rest on ideas of kinship and the 'intimacy of strangers' to explore sympoesis – the collective processes of "making-with each other" that might enable a different approach to the study of religion and "the stuff of religion."

Examining how knowledge-making might arise from art, and in this way move away from the anthropocentric ways of knowing, Hoel envisions an approach to religion that acknowledges our entanglements with the material and the non-human. Recognizing how religion has always had a focus on the more-than-human, Hoel asks what such critique would look like if we moved away from human exceptionalism and if "more-than-human materialities featured more centrally." Hoel's provocations are well-placed, especially where the study of religion has become anthropocentric, leaving behind narratives that center the non-human and prioritise material aspects of religion over the spiritual, the transcendent and the ethereal. Feminist ways of knowing and knowledge-making have much to offer the encounter of religion with the anthropocene, the least of which would be the generational passage of non-normative knowledges of the material or natural world.

For Hoel, "feminist imaginings of kinship" and the "collaborative and co-creative efforts of collectives to storying religion", have the potential to keep troubling the power dynamics of the contemporary Anthropocene.

Genocide, generationality, entanglements of oppression and liberation, challenges to normative religiosities in the recognition of subaltern religious subjectivities and the struggles for authentic world-making that do not deny feminist agency – these are some of the threads that frame a decolonial feminist approach to religion. The articles here offer various inroads to these discussions, recognising the transgressive positionings of gender, race, class, and the geo-politics of being human, and other than human, in registers that are both pejorative and privileged. Once we recognise decolonial practice as the practice toward freedom, we are able to identify the very direct links between the works presented here and the

(im)possibility (yet perhaps also the necessity?) of Christmas celebrations in Palestine in December 2023.

Leave Her Alone, She Speaks the Truth: Alphonsine as a Spiritual Vessel of *Nyina Wa Jambo*[1] in Katori Hall's Play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*[2]

Noxolo Matete[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Noxolo Matete is a lecturer in the Drama and Performance Studies department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and an Early Career Mellon Scholar. Her primary research interest is the location of black women theatre practitioners within various intersecting identities including race, gender and class.

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ABSTRACT

Most feminist debates, including Western Feminism and postcolonial strands of feminism such as African Feminisms, place emphasis on religion – specifically Christianity – as an oppressive structure dominating women, and justifiably so. Within feminist and colonial discourses, however, Christianity occupies complex, ambiguous spaces. In considering Christianity's positioning within colonialism and feminism, an African feminist position should seek to recognize the contradictions inherent in Christianity and, by extension, facilitate the nuanced experiences women in postcolonial, global South contexts have with Christianity. While some women might find Christianity oppressive, others may find it deeply fulfilling and others still may experience these dichotomies simultaneously. This article presents an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018). Inspired by real-life events and centering Christianity (specifically Catholicism), Hall's play tells the story of three Rwandan convent high-school girls – Alphonsine, Anathalie, and Marie-Claire – whose Marian apparitions garnered widespread attention. Through a textual analysis of, primarily, Alphonsine, who reportedly had the first and most frequent visitations, Christianity is proffered as a site of concurrent oppression and liberation. This article does not engage in the specificities of Catholic doctrine, but rather offers a discussion of varied encounters with Christianity.

KEYWORDS
African Feminisms, Decolonial Feminism, Christianity, Textual Analysis, Katori Hall

1 A term in Rwanda's official language, Kinyarwanda, meaning 'Mother of the Word'.

2 A hardcopy version of the original 2015 published play was inaccessible. As such, this article references the electronic version published in 2018, edited by Roberta Uno. Roberta Uno, *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color : An Anthology*, (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: New York, 2018).

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Colonialism, Christianity, and African Women: An Introduction

Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal famously said, "All theatre is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them".[3] Theatre has an inherently political nature, as across contexts it continues to be visible as a platform for highlighting various pertinent issues and for the construction (and reading) of a myriad of identities. In this paper, I offer an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018), a play steeped in "religious ecstasy" that combines fact and fiction.[4] Set in 1981 at an all-girls convent high school in the remote Rwandan village of Kibeho and based on real-life events, Hall's two-act play tells the story of three young women who had frequent visitations of the Virgin Mary, or *Nyina wa Jambo*. The three women, Alphonsine Mumureke (16), whose name means "leave her alone, she speaks the truth", Anathalie Mukamazimpaka (20) denoting "one who settles arguments and brings peace" and Marie-Claire Mukangango (21) whose cultural name means "woman", experience spiritual inhabitations leading to their renaming as "the Trinity". Their divine encounters confound the school authority, comprising Father Tuyishime (the head priest), Sister Evangelique (the head nun), Bishop Gahamanyi (town bishop and head of the Butare Diocese), and the Italian investigative priest from the Holy See, the "miracles office" at the Vatican, Father Flavia. The frequent Marian apparitions, which throughout the play take place in contained dormitory rooms, culminate in a public vision where about 20 000 villagers gather at the Assumption of Mary Feast to experience a divine visitation first-hand. What follows are ominous voice-overs signaling bloodshed and death over Rwanda; a foreshadowing of the harrowing genocide that takes place 13 years after the first vision. In dramatizing three Rwandan girls' nuanced experiences of traditional Christianity, a religion embedded in ambiguous, complex spaces in colonial history, Hall offers a form of decolonized Christianity.

The introduction of Christianity to Africa was not a neutral entry, as its arrival in the name of civilization dispossessed Africans of their culture and religion.

3 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), ix.

4 Michael Billington, "Our Lady of Kibeho Review – Startling Story of a Heavenly 'Visitation'," *The Guardian* 2019.

As such, “it is difficult to separate colonialism from religion, especially Christianity”.[5] As much scholarship from sub-Saharan Africa asserts, European colonizers used Christianity to teach Africans subservience to Europeans and became a way by which to deny Africans expression of their unique culture and religious practices.[6] In *African, Christian, Feminist*, Teresia Hinga notes, “in many instances, the struggle against colonization was simultaneously against European Christianity, which was seen by many to legitimize colonialism or even to participate in it”.[7]

Christianity had a complex role during colonialism in Africa: “Christian missionaries achieved many things related to the development of African people”, including a commitment to health services and bringing “reading and writing” to the continent.[8] However, the education intended to “civilize” Africans instead conscientized oppressed Africans to fight for their liberation.[9] This outcome profoundly challenged colonialist attitudes towards Africans as a people unable to self-govern. Missionary churches also played complex roles during the struggle for independence. Given the tendency to undermine African culture and religion, missionary churches preached a Gospel message suited to the white man’s needs, excluding those of the black man.[10] In the case of Rwanda, the setting of Hall’s play, “the colonial Belgian government favoured Tutsis over Hutu because they thought Tutsi

5 Wendpanga Eric Segueda, "Imported Religions, Colonialism and the Situation of Women in Africa " in *Schriftenreihe Junges Afrikazentrum/ Young Africa Centre Series* (2015), 8.

6 Nokuzola Mndende, "African Religion and Religion Education" (University of Cape Town, 1994); Matsobane Jacob Manala, "The Impact of Christianity on Sub-Saharan Africa," (University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa 2013); C. N Mbalisi, N. J Obiakor, and C. A Okeke, "Colonialism: Nexus for Myriad Religious Contentions in Post-Colonial Igboland (an Historical Overview)," in *African Journals OnLine* (2015); Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016); Sibusiso Masondo, "Ironies of Christian Presence in Southern Africa," ibid.31 (2018).

7 Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), xviii.

8 Jean-Paul Niyigena, "Global Christianity in the Context of Africa Historical Point of View and Challenges," (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2022), 296.

9 Masondo, "Ironies of Christian Presence in Southern Africa."; Niyi Wariboko, "Colonialism, Christianity, And personhood," in *A Companion to African History*, ed. W. H; Ambler Worger, C. and Achebe, N (New Jersey, United States: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

10 M. L. Daneel, "Communication and Liberation in African Independent Churches," *Missionalia* 11, no. 2 (1983).

lips and noses resembled those of Europeans, [and, consequently] the missionary church took the Hutu side, designating Hutus the victims and underdogs".[11] Ironically, the Hutus would later become the perpetrators of one of history's bloodiest genocides. Indeed, missionary Christianity played a complicated role in dividing African societies across lines of race, gender and culture/ethnicity.

Tantamount to colonial oppression, but also advancements that have arguably developed the continent, Christianity in Africa continues to be fraught with tensions and complications. Through a gendered lens, we can modify the opening quote to submit it is a challenge to separate colonialism and religion, and their joint impact, on colonized African women, especially. The cultural and religious dispossession that came through Christianity had a compound effect on these women. In pre-colonial society:

> African women had greater respect, standing, and authority than previously assumed, and they were given a particular status, especially as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, potters, farmers, healers, and religious leaders. Seniority, life stage, family and ability – and not gender – determined status and authority in Africa prior to 1900.[12]

European Christianity clearly shifted this idea of African women as healers. In colonial Rwanda, Rwandans adopted European standards and embraced Catholicism leaving Rwandan women, who previously had authority as spiritual healers, with few opportunities to progress in these newly established communities of Christian faith.[13] In their African traditional spirituality, they would be able to perform miracles after spirits would inhabit them. Moreover, missionary Christianity had additional negative impacts on black women, whereby colonial institutions did not only recognize men more

11 Elin Diamond, "Reactivating the City: Kibeho, Black Lives Matter, and the Situationist Dérive," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 3 (2018): 357.

12 Christine Saidi, "Women in Precolonial Africa," in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias* (2020), 2.

13 Erin Jessee, "'There Are No Other Options?': Rwandan Gender Norms and Family Planning in Historical Perspective," *Medical History Journal* 64, no. 2 (2020): 229.

than women,[14] but additionally barred women from speaking for themselves during this period.[15] The black body was also integral to Europe's missionary enterprise, as "conversion of Black bodies was the fulfilment of the 'Christian duty' of conquering, colonising (invading) and converting",[16] with the weight of colonialism and missionary Christianity felt "on black women's pudenda".[17] Colonialism's reconstruction of African culture involved locating African womanhood at the intersection of race oppression, religious domination, gender discrimination, and sexual objectification.

Given the impact of Christian missionaries on black women, African feminists call for biblical interpretations and spiritual practices that lift the once colonized, African woman out of suppression as relates to race, gender, and class.[18] Indeed, "African women's theologies are committed to exposing the ideological base of Christianity that maintains and justifies the oppression of women",[19] as culture and religion continue to be sites of oppression in the lives of women in contemporary Africa.[20]

It comes as no surprise, then, that some African regions view Christianity as a western religion, since its introduction to the continent seemed to cooperate with other colonizing tools, including commerce, civilization and slavery. African and postcolonial feminist perspectives continue to refashion European Christianity, since "to a large extent, Africans experienced the Gospel as a tool of colonialism, racism, sexism, classism and exclusivism".[21] Nguhi summarizes Christianity's positionality in contemporary postcolonial

14 Funmilayo Idowu Agbaje, "Colonialism and Gender in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), np.

15 Olatundun Abosede Oderinde, "Bible and Women Identity in Post-Colonial Africa," *KIU Journal of Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2019).

16 Itumeleng D. Mothoagae, "The Colonial Matrix of Power: Image Ontology and the Question of Blackness," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2021): 5.

17 Wariboko, "Colonialism, Christianity, and Personhood."

18 Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, *Introductions in Feminist Theology* (United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

19 Isabel Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda*, no. 61 (2004): 21.

20 Urther Rwafa, "Culture and Religion as Sources of Gender Inequality: Rethinking Challenges Women Face in Contemporary Africa," *Journal of Literary Studies* 32, no. 1 (2016).

21 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium."

African contexts, noting that "among many African communities… the subordination of women was finally sealed through colonialism and Christianity".[22]

It is worthwhile at this point to consider the ways in which creative writers of the global South have addressed African women's encounters with Christianity in texts intended for performance on a stage (plays).

African Women and Christianity in the Global South: A Literary Landscape

Plays encompassing Christian themes from global South contexts, published from the 20th century onwards, often feature African women characters in settings situating Christianity uncomfortably and contentiously.

In the Zimbabwean context, two unpublished plays explore a convergence of Christianity and African traditional practices: Innocent Dube's *Africano-Americano* produced in 2002 and Daniel Maphosa's *Heaven's Diary* created in 2004.[23] Dube's play tells the story of Africano, a young African woman who marries a white American man (Americano) in a "white wedding" ceremony, in which her parents are absent. Her husband proceeds to have various extra-marital affairs and eventually stabs Africano to death. Africano's fate seems to support views held within African scholarship of Christianity's cultural and religious imperialism in African contexts.[24] Laiza, the lead female character in Maphosa's dramatic text, connects deeply with traditional African religion to the extent of taking on an irreverent attitude towards Christian faith.[25] In the Nigerian context, renowned dramatist Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, written in 1984, centres a female protagonist, Ona, who is strongly devoted to her Christian faith while her father, Cortuma, remains set in his traditional beliefs. Each character is

22 Wanjuri Nguhi, "Can We Imagine a Feminist Future within Religion?," (2021).

23 Nehemia Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 23, no. 1/2 (2010).

24 Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," 135.

25 Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," 143.

puzzled by the religious choice of the other.[26] *Lake God*, a play written in 1986 by prominent Cameroonian playwright Bole Butake, tells the story of a village under attack from supernatural forces because Fon, the village leader, abandons customary ways of worship, converts to a "new religion", and marries a Christian wife, Angela, whose presence in the village contributes to its eventual destruction.[27] Finally, in a South African setting, acclaimed writer Zakes Mda's 1996 play, *The Nun's Romantic Story,* narrates the story of Anna-Maria, a young Catholic nun who kills the General who commanded the soldiers responsible for raping her mother and killing her family years ago. Instead of displaying piety and love, as one might expect of a nun, Anna-Maria's actions seem driven by political motives.

Against the backdrop of Africa's complex relationship with Christianity, alongside nuanced literary representations of African women's experiences of Christianity in dramatic texts set in the global South, this article presents an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Through this lens, I endeavour not to omit Hall's subjectivity as an African American woman – after all as playwright, Hall translates her artistic vision into this narrative. The methodology section, therefore, includes her journey to creating the play. Since theatre refers to a "seeing place", this paper's focus is on examining the narrative Hall prompts us to "see" through an African feminist lens. In this play, Christianity is the domain of three African girls but also offered as a space for complex, non-binary experiences of a religion rooted in colonial legacies. Although this paper does not deal with spirit inhabitation in the context of traditional African spirituality, it addresses this in the context of orthodox Christian religion. As vessels of the divine, the three African schoolgirls access a Christianity removed from the colonial project, and coloniality at large, and, as such, represent a decolonized, revitalised image of African women's encounters with Christianity.

The vast framework of African feminisms, which include various labels like Womanism, inform this paper. I am particularly drawn to Amina Mama's ideas:

26 Kimi D. Johnson, "Prodigal Daughters: Postcolonial Women in Three Plays by Tess Onwueme" (Florida State University, 2008).

27 Dora N. Mbu, "Domination in Gender Relations: Implications for Peace and Conflict in Bole Butake's Lake God " *Islamic University Multidiscilpinary Journal* 5, no. 2 (2018).

> I have no problems with womanism but changing the terminology doesn't solve the problem of global domination. I choose to stick with the original term, insist that my own reality inform my application of it.[28]

I employ an African feminist lens for two primary reasons. First, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal movements including Black feminism, postcolonial feminism and African feminisms got their vigour precisely as politics responsive to a Western-centric feminism that fundamentally excluded black women, women of colour, and women in global South geographies. Second, the "feminism" aspect of African feminisms is semantically grounded in the decolonizing potential of feminist activity and reinforces the necessity of continuing the labour of constructing decolonial feminist frameworks. This decolonial perspective is important in framing my reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*.

Early Feminisms, African (decolonial) Feminisms and Christianity

The situation of religion (Christianity) has notably shifted trajectory due to feminist activity. During the early movement, "feminists drew on Christian understandings of the nature of God and humans to develop their case for the equal abilities of men and women".[29] Black and white women, although unequally positioned in the movement, found solidarity in Christianity. While Christianity "did provide space and support for many first-wave social reform efforts",[30] by the second wave, many feminist activists (black and white) "saw religion as colluding with other institutions" and "came to understand all forms of religion as oppressive".[31] Mary Daly's slogan seemed to encapsulate this anti-religious stance of early feminist activism: *since God is male, the male is God*.

28 Elaine Salo and Amina Mama, "Talking About Feminism in Africa," *Agenda* 50 (2001): 61.

29 Meredith Minister, "Religion and (Dis)Ability in Early Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2013): 6.

30 Laurel Zwissler, "Feminism and Religion: Intersections between Western Activism, Theology and Theory," *Religion Compass* 6/7 (2012): 356.

31 Zwissler, "Feminism and Religion: Intersections between Western Activism, Theology and Theory,", 356-57.

This pursuit of religious alternatives from the so-called second and third waves of feminism finds expression in postcolonial feminist discourse that seeks to strengthen community among women in the global South by recognizing the differences between them. In her seminal essay,[32] Chandra Mohanty confronts western Feminism for ascribing homogeneous categories of identity such as "Third World" women. Audre Lorde similarly argues that, "without community, there is no liberation".[33] That is, for women to truly be aligned against gender oppression, the larger feminist movement must recognize and facilitate the myriad differences between them. African feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reiterated this caution against the danger of a single story in her famous 2009 TedTalk.[34] As she challenges myopic representations that stereotype individuals and groups, Ngozi unashamedly implicates herself and draws attention to identities and experiences as diverse and intersectional.

As part of current feminist activity's impulse towards the multiplicity and diversity of women across various contexts, African feminisms, which rejects associations with Third Wave feminism, responds to the exclusionary philosophy undergirding the larger feminist movement.[35] African feminisms centre the experiences and concerns of women inside and outside the continent[36] and exist in numerous iterations, including Africana womanism,[37] Stiwanism,[38] Nego-feminism,[39] and others. African feminist scholars argue that precolonial African societies were not organized along hierarchies of

32 Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12(3) - 13(10) (1984).
33 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.
34 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal, July 2009, intellectual talk, 18:23, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
35 Ruvimbo Goredema, "African Feminism: The African Woman's Struggle for Identity," *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2010): 34.
36 Pumla Dineo Gqola, "Ufanele Uqavile: Blackwomen, Feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa," *Agenda* 50 (2001).
37 Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Routledge, 2019).
38 Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (Africa World Press, 1994).
39 Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture and Society* 29 (2004).

difference as understood and foreground in Western feminist discourse and that social identity markers, particularly race and gender, can carry different meanings within African contexts. For instance, prior to colonialism, races as we understand them did not exist[40] and gender hierarchies were absent.[41] Societies were structured according to seniority[42] or sex-based roles.[43] Moreover, while the first, second, and third waves defined Western feminism, three political epochs – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa – shaped African feminisms.[44]

Decolonial feminist thinking, which aligns to African feminisms, centres gender as a crucial component to understanding the oppression of colonized women. Maria Lugones argues the very term "colonized woman" is an oxymoronic "empty category", since the obvious outcome of the coloniality of gender is the complete dehumanization of the "colonized woman" who, in being less than human, cannot be categorised "woman".[45] For decolonial feminists, the colonial enterprise was most pernicious on the bodies of black women and women of colour. Colonized women's subjugation was realised at the nexus of sexism and racism primarily, among other oppressive structures of power. Essentially, decolonial feminism takes issue with a decolonizing agenda that neglects to centralize gender.

African and decolonial feminist scholars' shared goal is to validate and centre the experiences and concerns of black women and women of colour in/of global South contexts. With an underlying race and gender consciousness, African feminisms and decolonial feminisms emerged with distinctly postcolonial frameworks within the wider feminist movement. Through these perspectives, we therefore, cannot, one, disqualify

40 Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
41 Oyewumi, "The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses".
42 Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challege of African Epistemologies," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002).
43 Nkiru Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (SUNY Press, 2006).
44 Goredema, "African Feminism: The African Woman's Struggle for Identity," 35.
45 Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 745.

Christianity as a legitimate experience of African women, despite its complicated history and legacy; and two, cannot, by extension, speak of a single experience in Christianity where black womanhood in postcolonial African contexts is concerned. After all, in its aim to de-centre white, Eurocentric experiences and narratives, an African decolonial feminist lens should examine the diverse, multi-faceted stories and identities of women in "Third world" and global South contexts.

Methodology

This paper employs the qualitative methodology of textual analysis, focusing on the ways in which the plot, setting, characterization, dialogue, and stage directions collectively point to Christian encounters that are simultaneously oppressive and empowering to the three central African female figures, particularly Alphonsine. The dramatic text was read closely to unearth the ways in which Hall disrupts colonial discourses in relation to the protagonists' experiences. The text was organized thematically to foreground the nuanced nature of the three women's Christian experiences in a postcolonial setting. Hall's creation process to realizing the play is included here, not only as a way to foreground her subjectivity as playwright and contextualize the work, but additionally to highlight that the three Rwandan schoolgirls' Christian experiences she imagines dramatically, also took place in reality. This understanding prompts us towards African women's nuanced, complex, and powerful real-lived Christian encounters in postcolonial settings.

Between 1981 and 1989, three girls enrolled at Kibeho College, a convent high school for girls, had visions of *Nyina wa Jambo*, whose messages included the instruction to pray daily and, later, also an apocalyptic warning of terrible bloodshed that would break out in Rwanda. The young women – Alphonsine Mumureke, Anathalie Mukamazimpaka and Marie-Clare Mukangango – became known for the only Vatican-approved Marian apparition in Africa.[46]

A pilgrimage to Rwanda in 2009, and another the following year in search of the real-life visionaries, culminated in Hall's writing of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. About Rwanda, the playwright states:

46 "Dynamic Catholic: Marian Apparitions," https://www.dynamiccatholic.com/rosary/marian-apparitions.html.

> You are flooded with the horrors of the genocide to the point where you virtually become numb . . . There are literally a million tales that need to be told. There had been several movies and plays that addressed a certain parenthesis in Rwanda history . . . But I wanted to address a different parenthesis, a different door. I did not want to enter the gates of hell.[47]

After hearing from one of the parish priests about three village girls' darker visions that some have interpreted as being about the genocide, Hall narrates her epiphany:

> When he said that, chills went down my spine. This was the way in – my sneaky way to write a play about genocide without writing a play about genocide. I walked through the doors of heaven instead of the gates of hell.[48]

An ethnic war between the persecuted Tutsis and perpetrating Hutus lasting a hundred days, the Rwandan genocide, which saw the deaths of approximately one million people, is among the most gruesome in modern history. Hall's use of the religious metaphor "gates of hell" describes what has often been the entry point of many creative works into the atrocities of the genocide. By contrast, she wanted to enter the Rwandan civil war through "heaven's door", a metaphor that points to the Christian perspective she offers through the voices of Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire. While Hall's intention is narrating a tale about the genocide from an inspiring perspective, the various elements in the two-act play locate it as a work ideologically undergirded by African decolonial feminist thinking. She essentially locates these characters in a postcolonial African context that subverts African/European encounters of colonialism.

Africa Encounters the West

In the play's opening scene, we read that in Father Tuyishime's office hangs a "picture of the white Jesus on the wall looking down at them. With the

47 Lynn Nottage, "Katori Hall's Raptures of the Spirit in 'Our Lady of Kibeho'," *American Theatre* 2015.

48 Nottage, "Katori Hall's Raptures of the Spirit in 'Our Lady of Kibeho'."

bluest of eyes and the blondest of hair" (Act 1, Scene 1). Father Flavia seems to embody Jesus as his presence causes excitement amongst the village girls. Seeing the Italian priest for the first time and aware of his mission, Marie-Claire says: "Well, if it isn't the *muzungu*" (Act 2, Scene 2). Father Flavia is the foreigner, the *muzungu* (or *mzungu*), a term used in East African geographies to denote whiteness.[49] The only white character in the play, Father Flavia exemplifies the West's perceptions of and interactions with Africa, "looking down at them", like the picture on Father Tuyishime's wall:

> Father Tuyishime: Look at that view. They call it the Switzerland of Africa.
> Father Flavia: Who says that?
> Father Tuyishime: There is a saying in our country, Rwanda is so beautiful that even God goes on vacation here.
> Father Flavia: He might vacation in Rwanda, but always remember He lives in Rome.
>
> (Act 2, Scene 1)

Father Flavia seems to insinuate Africans are not inherently enlightened – a state afforded by orthodox religion. More significantly, his statement underscores Christianity's complicity in the colonial process. After all, "Western civilization, Christianity, commerce and colonization were believed to be inseparable".[50] Clarifying the reason for his visit – which is, at first, misunderstood by Father Tuyishime to be the validation of Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire (the Trinity) – Father Flavia continues in his pomposity:

> Father Flavia: I have travelled all over the world to suss out the truth of these happenings. Our Lady has shown Her face in Portugal. In Italy, quite naturally, even in the mountains of India, but never, ever in the jungles of Africa.
> Father Tuyishime: Well, this is not a jungle, Father.
> Father Flavia: I beg your pardon, father?

49 Michelle Christian and Assumpta Namaganda, "Good Mzungu? Whiteness and White Supremacy in Postcolonial Uganda," *Identities* 30, no. 2 (2023).

50 Nkomazana and Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900."

> Father Tuyishime: Rwanda is not the jungle.
> Father Flavia: Could have fooled me.
>
> (Act 2, Scene 1)

Shortly after their first encounter with Father Flavia, "the Trinity" become enraptured in a vision as they pray to *Nyina wa Jambo*. Determined to prove (or rather, disprove) the legitimacy of their visitations, Father Flavia pulls out a needle and quickly plunges it into Alphonsine's eye. Father Tuyishime runs to grab a hold of him:

> Father Tuyishime: You can plainly see that she is lost. Alphonsine is lost in the rapture –
> Father Flavia: The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith demands this for consideration. They must pass the medical tests.
> Father Tuyishime: This is what the Vatican calls a medical test?
> Father Flavia: This is only the beginning.
> Father Tuyishime: This is BARBARIC!
>
> (Act 2, Scene 2)

"When Africa alone is granted the label 'absurd spirituality and religiosity', it allows Western consciousness to position itself above these every-day absurdities, while maintaining its own absurd practices".[51] In defining Father Flavia's medical assessment as 'barbaric', Father Tuyishime highlights the West's double standards in its perceptions of Africa. The Vatican investigative priest fails to perceive the absurdity and, indeed, barbarism, of poking a needle into Alphonsine's eye. He, however, treats the girls' visions with suspicion, despite the fact that Alphonsine barely flinches as a needle enters her eye. Father Tuyishime demands an end be put to Father Flavia's search for "evidence". Dismissing Father Tuyishime's concerns, the Italian priest patronizingly responds: "For all I know, these girls have a high tolerance for pain" (Act 2, Scene 3).

In Act 2, Scene 5, Father Flavia has a transformative moment. As the girls listen to a radio announcement stating that thousands will travel to Kibeho

51 Rune Larsen and Stig Jensen, "The Imagined Africa of the West: A Critical Perspective on Western Imaginations of Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 47, no. 164 (2020): 327.

the next day to see "the Trinity", the trio become entranced in a vision. Upon entering the room, poised with a needle, Our Lady inhabits Anathalie and confronts the Father about his sense of superiority while also lovingly affirming him: "What, you don't recognize me? You don't believe my words would fall out of the lips of a little black girl? Her lips suit me well". To validate her presence to Father Flavia, Our Lady reveals through Anathalie personal details from his childhood that could only have been supernaturally disclosed. This revelation pierces the Father's unbelief:

> Father Flavia: "But why here? Why Rwanda, Mother Mary?"
> Anathalie (Our Lady): You weren't complaining when I flew to Brazil, I tell you that!
> Father Flavia: Forgive me. Forgive me.
> Anathalie (Our Lady): Luis, I have a message that is bigger than Rwanda. It is meant for the entire world. There is a sickness in the hearts of men. And these girls. They know it well. You know it well, too…
> Father Flavia: What do you mean?
> Anathalie (Our Lady): I know what happened to you, Luis. Forgive him, Luis, you are not alone in the belly of the whale.

The stage direction notes "Father Flavia falls to his knees with tears in his eyes" (Act 2, Scene 5).

In his embodiment of Jesus, Father Flavia seems to represent the gospel of European Christianity brought to Africa. By kneeling before Anathalie (as Our Mother), the initially maligned spirituality of the African "Other" is, not only recognized, but becomes the vehicle through which the white, western Father is liberated. This image becomes, additionally, disruptive given that the chosen oracle to humble the *muzungu* Father is a young, black girl from a remote African village.

Disrupting the Biblical Trinity

The Trinity is the male godhead and supreme authority in Christian doctrine revealing the nature of God as three distinct Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hall attributes this sacrosanct position to three African girls, described as "the Trinity", following visitations from The Virgin Mary. While Marie-Claire, the eldest and domineering member, seems to symbolize the

Father, Anathalie represents the Holy Spirit. She is the only character that the Virgin Mary inhabits. She represents the Church's holiness because of the "Spirit's inhabitation".[52] Indeed, Alphonsine evidently embodies Jesus, the Savior who died on a cross and a central deity in Christianity, highlighted in the text when Father Flavia's needle enters Alphonsine's sternum, which trickles blood like the body of Christ on a Cross" (Act 2, Scene 2).

By situating three African village schoolgirls as embodiments of the godhead – the very essence of Christian faith – Hall removes these characters from margin to centre.[53] In a postcolonial setting, Hall detaches the trio from the compound oppression of their intersecting identities, ascribing visibility and voice to a markedly erased positionality in colonial discourses. Furthermore, these characters upend colonized women's vilification in colonial processes, where "colonized females were understood in relation to Satan".[54] By attributing godship to three African schoolgirls, Hall seems to respond to what early feminists held up as their point of departure in resisting orthodox religion: "If God is male, the male is God". These characters seem to radically reframe this mantra as, "If God is female, the female is God". Alphonsine, the first and youngest of "the Trinity", stands out as a young girl of great religious conviction, as will be discussed in the following section.

Alphonsine: Burdened, yet Chosen

In a heated discussion between Father Tuyishime and Sister Evangelique in the play's opening, the head nun accuses Alphonsine of being a "liar" and of "blasphemy" for claiming to have seen the Virgin Mary. In response, Father Tuyishime seeks the truth while Alphonsine holds unwaveringly to her experience:

> Father Tuyishime: So are you telling the truth? About what you saw?
> Alphonsine: Yes.
> Father Tuyishime: Alphonsine, I think you *imagined* that.
> Alphonsine: No, no! I saw. I *saw!* Almost like I could touch Her, smell Her.

52 Johannes van Oort, "The Holy Spirit and the Early Church: Doctrine & Confession," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 67, no. 3 (2011): 171.
53 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
54 Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 745.

> Father Tuyishime: Well, maybe you were just…hot. Hallucinating!
> Alphonsine: No, Father, I was not hallucinating.
> . . .
> Alphonsine: I was not HOT. I am not lying. I promise. I only speak the truth.
>
> (Act 1, Scene 1)

Even after Anathalie joins Alphonsine in visitations from Our Lady, Alphonsine seems to make peace with the harsh consequences as Mother Mary's elect:

> Girl #2: It's Alphonsine who started it all. Tutsi Lying Through Her Teeth Alphonsine. My mother was right. They are all liars . . .
> . . .
> Alphonsine: *(she shrugs)*: The speaker of truth has no friends.
>
> (Act 1, Scene 8)

In a later scene, Marie-Claire, before completing "the Trinity", becomes jealous of the attention laid upon Alphonsine and Anathalie after a glorious sight where both girls were used by Our Lady to make the sun spin. Marie-Claire follows Sister Evangelique's instructions to burn the two girls when they next have a vision. Seemingly oblivious to the chaos around her as Marie-Claire burns her skin with a candle, Alphonsine speaks directly to the Virgin Mary: "I care not about this world. I only want to speak your truth" (Act 1, Scene 11).

Truth, as a theme in Hall's play, is front and centre in Alphonsine's Christian experience. Although a noble pursuit and one congruent with her name, Alphonsine's interactions with Father Tuyishime, her religious advisor and confidante, reveal the weight of responsibility she has to bear as a messenger of divinely-revealed truths:

> Father Tuyishime: What has made your heart so heavy, dear child?
> Alphonsine: I am trying to understand this, Father. This mantle that has been placed upon my head. I don't understand it, Father.
> Father Tuyishime: Neither do I.

> Alphonsine: I am just a dirt poor girl with no shoes, no friends, no father who has not read every word in that Bible and yet She chose me.
> Father Tuyishime: There are things beyond our control, my dear child.
>
> (Act 1, Scene 9)

A confession, starting with Alphonsine unburdening to Father Tuyishime, ends in a poignant moment where the Father admits some painful truths to the young girl. The Virgin Mary's revelation to Alphonsine that Father Tuyishime has not prayed in "8 years, 8 months and 2 days" since the brutal murder of his mother in a politically violent period in Rwanda in 1973, causes the Father to confront his waning faith. Alphonsine's spiritual gift brings about a positive, notable shift in Father Tuyishime's belief, as illustrated in the final scene of the play when the young girl shares: "You prayed last night. She told me" (Act 2, Scene 11).

Alphonsine's disquiet evidently stems from an awareness of her positionality. Her commitment to narrate divine revelations becomes significantly arduous as a young, black, and poor female in a society rife with ethnic bullying. Hall ascribes agency and visibility to a character who wrestles with the perpetual powerlessness and victimhood typically ascribed to women and girls in third world contexts. Even in her acutely marginalized social identity, Alphonsine's frequent Marian apparitions are not just burdensome. Describing the young girl's state during visitations, scene 3 of Act 1 reads:

> Alphonsine looks utterly at peace. Exuberant even. Stars stream from her eyes. She is somewhere else.
>
> A warm light begins to dance across Alphonsine and Anathalie's faces.

Alphonsine's spiritual visitations also instill a growing confidence to challenge Marie-Claire's harassment and Sister Evangelique's manipulation. In scene 3, Act 1, Marie-Claire and her group of drunken friends taunt Alphonsine and she retorts: "Do that again and I will slap you so hard your descendants will feel the sting!!" Two scenes later, Sister

Evangelique, spurred by jealousy of not being Mother Mary's chosen, hurls vitriol towards Alphonsine, which the young girl counters with confident composure:

> Sister Evangelique: . . . You little ingrate. You little witch! . . . I know you. I know your kind. You shake hands with the devil and use the same hand to make the sign of the cross . . .
> As Alphonsine begins staring at Sister Evangelique *the Sister begins to shake in fear. Actually. Visibly quake. There is a fire in Alphonsine's eyes that has not been there before. A blinding light…*
> Alphonsine: You do not scare me anymore.
>
> (Act 1, Scene 5)

In Alphonsine, Hall constructs a character who, while negotiating the tensions and discomfort of her marginalized positionality, emerges as postcolonial feminist scholar, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern – the female figure who shifts from "historically muted subject" to agent[55] – a state facilitated through her firm Christian faith. Despite this significant identity shift in Alphonsine, and, indeed, the entire Trinity, the schoolgirls must still navigate an oppressive Church structure.

The Trinity: Unseen and Unheard in Structures of Oppression

Located in a part of the world rendered silent by colonial processes, "the Trinity" speaks. Their marginalisation is perceptible, not just through Father Flavia who represents Western imperialism, but, also, through the multiple oppressions dominating their existence. Before she reveals her actions as motivated by jealousy, Sister Evangelique refutes the girls' visitations at every turn. Ironically, while being aware of patriarchy's negative impact, she is seemingly oblivious of how she has unwittingly become a product of it. The nun says to Marie-Claire, "I have seen many young girls start life with bright eyes only to have them swollen shut by the hand of a man . . . " (Act 1, Scene 7).

55 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader.*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 91.

In the character of Anathalie's father, Nkango, a patriarchal suppression existing along cultural and traditional lines is most glaring. After Anathalie's first encounter of Mother Mary, Nkango, described as a "big, hefty farmer" (Act 1, Scene 4), arrives with a belt, adamant on removing his daughter from the school. He says, "I should have never let you come. This was nonsense anyhow and all of this is proving me right. Your mother was always wrong. Book learning makes a girl go crazy . . . ".

In the wake of the Trinity's fame, further in the text Nkango disingenuously responds to a reporter at the scene of the Assumption of Mary Feast:

> Reporter: How does it feel to know your daughter Anathalie is a visionary?
> Nkango: It is not a surprise to me. Something told me that when she went to Kibeho College she was destined for greatness. That is why her mother and I worked so hard in the fields . . . She is a good girl.
>
> (Act 2, Scene 8)

Another figure of the Church, Bishop Gahamanyi represents religious dominance. In his effort to contain the rumours of visions, since the girls' "lies will only lead them down the path of perdition", the town bishop firmly addresses his church colleagues, Father Tuyishime and Sister Evangelique, stating "I don't care who is goading who and what and where and why. Get it under control or I will SHUT. IT. DOWN. This school will be closed . . ." (Act 1, Scene 6). Later in the play, however, Bishop Gahamanyi notably changes his mind as he considers commercial gains on the horizon:

> "If these girls get confirmed, and they *will* be confirmed Father Tuyishime, with or without your help, they will make a name for Rwanda, a name for this village".
>
> (Act 2, Scene 3)

In witnessing the continuing visitations, Sister Evangelique finally allows herself to see the girls. In a similar vein, only after recognizing his daughter's fame, Nkango suddenly celebrates Anathalie. Similarly, the town bishop's interest in the girls is in regard to the potential commodification of their gift. Indeed, the Church figures seem to see and accept the girls conditionally.

Father Flavia, Bishop Gahamanyi, Sister Evangelique, and Nkango jointly play an antagonistic role in the Trinity's expressions of faith. Before each of these characters are able to come to a point of accepting the unconventional, spellbinding happenings at the school, the girls continue to stand against the Church's opposition, by seeing and speaking.

The Trinity: The Girls who See and Speak

Events encapsulating dichotomous encounters with Christianity, take place in the final scene of Act 1, as well as in scene 8, Act 2. These scenes individually point to a representation of Christianity as both liberatory and oppressive, both empowering and frightening.

The final stage direction of Act 1 reads:

> *Marie-Claire looks up and she is bathed in Our Lady's light. Her body slackens. And she is hoisted far above the heads of everyone, joining Anathalie and Alphonsine in the sky. The trinity is now complete. The girls are screaming. They are scrambling. But someone or something has locked the door. They cannot get out. There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. They hang like clouds. Three big bangs occur. The bed Alphonsine floats above breaks in half. The bed Anathalie floats above breaks in half. The bed Marie-Claire floats above breaks in half.*
>
> (Act 1, Scene 11)

About her Rwandan pilgrimage, Hall shares:

> I kept on going back to what the priest said, "This is where their beds would break." It was a touchstone, an emotional talisman . . . It was an undeniable, indisputable, tangible physical fact that could not be disproven . . . Being so caught up in the rapture that your bed breaks? I knew that had to be in the play.

The image of beds breaking is, indeed, a striking one. Language like "screaming", "scrambling", and "bangs" denote a terrifying experience. Hall depicts a scene of girls seeking a way out of a glorious, yet frightening, experience, however, find no escape. While Hall constructs a fear-inducing

occurrence, it is also one saturated by a sense of thrill, adventure, and empowerment for a group of young, black girls in a Rwandan village school.

Act 2, scene 8 takes place on the day of pilgrimage when approximately 20 000 villagers gather to see "the Trinity" and the Mother Mary. The girls, finally, have Father Flavia's blessing and are likely to be confirmed as visionaries, pending the Vatican's final assessment of the proof gathered by the investigative priest. As the girls and villagers start singing, the sky darkens and "suddenly, a gush of tears start flowing from the girls' faces". As the Trinity plead with the Virgin Mary who has now appeared they start convulsing and vomiting. The girls begin to speak:

> The Trinity: The hills of Rwanda will run red with blood. The hills of Rwanda Will Run Red With Blood. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED WITH BLOOD. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED.

As time is stretched, these stage directions follow:

> *In the black, there are moans and screams. The crackle of burning of fire. The electric slice of a machete being drug across asphalt. Echoes. Echoes. A light pulses and we see shards of a vision. Visions of the unthinkable. The unseeable. The unvoiceable . . .*

In the following scene, ominous voice-overs signal imminent bloodshed and death:

> The Trinity (V.O): The hill of Rwanda will be littered with graves. The rivers will run red with the blood of babies. Sons will slaughter their fathers, husbands will rape their wives, babies will have their brains dashed out by mothers. We are in the end days…
> . . .
> The Trinity (V.O): Sorrow will sink Rwanda and the passion fruit that grows from our trees will bleed with the blood of the fallen. The hills of Rwanda will run red blood. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED BLOOD. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED WITH-

This disturbing vision, described by Father Flavia as "dangerously specific" (Act 2, scene 9) and, thus, one that should be heeded, sees the Church – here represented by the male heads, Father Tuyishime, Bishop Gahamanyi and Father Flavia – descend into disarray. In Father Tuyishime's office, the Trinity is motionless. While Alphonsine appears in the final scene, Anathalie and Marie-Claire do not appear after this in the play, perhaps denoting their deaths in the genocide. In the final exchange, Father Tuyishime loses all sense of control:

> Father Tuyishime: This is not real. They made it up.
> Father Flavia: We need you to settle yourself --
> Father Tuyishime: They have made it up.
> *Father Tuyishime shakes the motionless Anathalie*
> Father Tuyishime: Tell them that you made, that you *ALL* made it up –
> *Bishop Gahamanyi tries to grab Father Tuyishime.*
> Father Tuyishime: Tell them that you are lying.
> Bishop Gahamanyi: Father Tuyishime—
> Father Tuyishime: Please, Anathalie.
> Father Flavia: If you believed the initial visions why can't you believe this one.
> *Father Tuyishime turns around to Father Flavia.*
> Father Tuyishime: You SHUT UP! YOU SHUT UP!!!
> Father Flavia: Calm down Father.
> Father Tuyishime: No, there is not evil here in Rwanda. THIS is where God goes on vacation. THIS is the land of love, of milk and honey. Where I was born –
> Father Flavia: Calm down, Father –
> Father Tuyishime: Fix them! We have to fix them! Stop them for seeing these—these—these horrible things--
> Father Flavia: This is something we can't fix, Father --
> Father Tuyishime: Cure them! Things need to go back to normal, before, before.
> Father Flavia: Before what?
> Father Tuyishime: They are disrupting the order of things. Making everyone afraid –
> Father Flavia: They should be—
> Father Tuyishime: —Getting things out of order here—
> Father Flavia: But, Father—

> Father Tuyishime: The world is buckling, buckling beneath my-
> Father Flavia: But why wouldn't you want to hear what Mother Mary has to say?
> Father Tuyishime: BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE FATHER! I DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE THIS!!
>
> (Act 2, Scene 9)

Up until this point, the figures of Church authority manage to exercise control and contain the happenings at the convent school. However, the Trinity's startling vision of the genocide leads to a patriarchal Church structure unraveling from the powerful, elucidative, yet fear-provoking words of three black, village schoolgirls.

Conclusion

Katori Hall's *Our Lady of Kibeho* offers a counter-hegemonic narrative where the representation of traditional Christianity in global South dramatic texts is concerned. While Hall's play relates to other plays set in this region dealing with similar themes, in that it points to the complexities of Christian faith in African settings, her text takes an interesting departure in how it does not portray Christianity contending with African traditional belief systems. She, instead, presents orthodox Christianity as a complex site in which the three protagonists advocate their potent spiritual experiences. Through the Trinity's encounters, Hall decolonizes Christianity, first, by presenting it as a powerful force in the lives of three, young, black African girls and, second, by offering Christianity as a space in which the nuanced experiences of three Rwandan girls take place. Hall offers Christian encounters dislocated from neat binaries of oppressive or liberatory. Traditional Christianity – a worldview rooted in Eurocentric, racist and patriarchal ideals that situate African women as non-human – is reimagined in Hall's play. As such, it ceases to be the domain of the Church, Western empire, or traditional patriarchal domination. Instead, presented in its ambiguities and complexities, Christianity as a religious structure and through the varied experiences of the Trinity, is powerfully reclaimed in a postcolonial African setting through the spiritual inhabitations of three young African village girls.

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"*Itai Amen Satani Abhoikane*"[1]: Killjoy Feminism in the Church

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

On a typical Sunday afternoon, while roaming around the streets of TikTok, a social media application, my eyes landed on a video in which a female preacher was dancing vigorously on the pulpit. The comment section was abuzz with both words of admiration and notes of displeasure. It was clear in that moment that her theological pedagogy was unsettling for most. Yet, I found it intriguing. It is also on TikTok that I encountered the tagline, "*itai amen satani abhoekane*" [say amen and make satan bored]. I was sold on her disruptive use of language, the singing of secular music in church, and dancing with abandon on the pulpit. Her name is Chaplain Christabel Phiri, a woman who in my view is reshaping theological discourse in Zimbabwe. Beyond that, she redefines what it means to be Christian and troubles the dichotomy that exists around Christianity and feminisms. Drawing on Chaplain Christine Phiri as my case study, I reveal, in this paper, the possibilities of feminist praxis within the church space. I offer an analysis of five of her sermons, referred to here as theological performances, as well as other performance elements such as costume, gestures, conduct, and props, including language.

KEYWORDS
Chaplain Phiri; African feminisms; Decoloniality; Popular Participatory Performance; African feminist theology; Killjoy feminism.

> *kana dai papasina vakadzi vakaona kuti paneerror, vakadzi vangadai vasingaparidzi…panedzimwe protocol dzichatitadzisa kubudirira tichiti mukadzi ndewekungobereka nekunhingirika* [if there were no women who realised that there was an error, women would not be preaching today…certain protocol will deter us from succeeding, especially that women should just bear children and do things]. -Chaplain Phiri (2020).

Feminism is for Everybody, God is for us All!

Christianity as a religion occupies a controversial, yet significant, space in Africa. Largely, it has been constructed as a religion, an institution, arguably even, a lifestyle founded on sanctity, purity, and holiness. Meanwhile, our

1 Say Amen and make Satan bored.

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foremost encounter with it as Africans was a choking one. As Isabel Phiri[2] notes, "to a large extent, Africans experienced the gospel as a tool of colonialism, classism and exclusionism". Even now, I argue, Christianity largely postures as an exclusionary religion. The Church, both as a spatial site of Christianity and an institution, holds the codes of conduct that specify which kind of bodies are eligible to inhabit and worship in it. For this reason, queer people, who are largely considered *ihlazo*[3] [shameful] find it hard to belong. Paul Germond and Steve de Gruchy[4] explore this exclusion in *Aliens in the Household of God*. Amanda Hodgeson,[5] in her essay, *Can Queers Believe in God?,* ushers us into an autobiographical account of their push and pulls with their intersecting identities as Christian, feminist, and queer. Similarly, Koleka Putuma[6] in her poem, adapted into a play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers* engages with the ideas around navigating the complexities of queerness, the church and home.

Fundamentally, Christian doctrines as with other religions, overtly specify codes of conduct that detail how one should behave, dress, speak, and conduct themselves. Most of these rules and regulations control and regulate women as well as queer people. Specific Bible verses, such as Ephesians 5:22–24, are co-opted for the subjugation of women and queer people: "wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour". Solomon Ademiluka[7] acknowledges that, in literal terms, this verse "resonates with African patriarchal marital relationships in which authority is wielded by the husband". Within this framing, the designations are clear; women have no authority and queer people are non-existent.

2 Isabel Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium," *Agenda* 18, no. 61 (2004). 16

3 Zethu Matebeni, "Ihlazo: Pride and the politics of race and space in Johannesburg and Cape Town," *Critical African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2018).

4 Paul Germond and Steve De Gruchy, *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa* (New Africa Books, 1997).

5 Amanda Hodgeson, "Can black queer feminists believe in God?," *Routledge Handbook of queer African studies (2019).*

6 *Koleka Putuma, Collective amnesia* (Uhlanga, 2017).

7 Solomon O Ademiluka, "Patriarchy and marital disharmony amongst Nigerian Christians: Ephesians 5: 22–33 as a response," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021). 1

The Book of Genesis, itself, which marks the beginning of humanity according to Christian teachings, sets the precedence by constructing Eve as a product of Adam's flesh and his second other (Genesis 2:20–23). Furthermore, in Chapter 3, Eve goes on to lead Adam into sin and that narrative is often reiterated to emphasise the sinfulness and unreliability of women. Even though verses are subject to interpretation, the dominant view in Zimbabwe is that a real woman serves and occupies the position of the second other and that men can only be with women and vice-versa. Such biblical texts are used to substantiate women's position as inferior and that of queer people as unnatural, hence, the penchant for constant policing and checking. In other words, women are blamed for bringing wrath upon humanity via Eve and queer people blamed for societal ills and misfortune.[8] This would explain why most churches are led by men, as they are considered the "trusted heads". It is a well-established fact that some churches (in Zimbabwe) do not afford women space to preach or take up positions in the Church.[9] This also includes the so - called good woman who is cisgender, heterosexual, reserved, and polite. Moreso, the "problematic queer body.

In Zimbabwe, the church scene is prescriptive of how people of God should dress and behave. The regulations target women more.[10] There is, therefore, a legitimated form of patriarchal supremacy that reigns in the Church. Moreover, its sustenance sometimes involves notions of violence, whereby women who dare challenge notions of submission or scripts of being, for example, are punished. Sandra Ndebele, a Zimbabwean Afro-pop artist was censured from the Seventh day Adventist church on the premise that her artistic endeavours were not in line with the doctrine.[11] I, too, as an Adventist, am aware that the way I look, dress, and behave is not consistent with Adventist ideals. Although the Church has not censured me, society censors me and, by extension, my family. My father discouraged me from

8 Pauline Mateveke, "Zimbabwean Popular Cultural Expressions of Alternative Sexual Identities," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2022).

9 Terence Mupangwa and Sophia Chirongoma, "The challenges of being a female pastor: A case of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020).

10 Rekopantswe Mate, "Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe," *Africa* 72, no. 4 (2002).

11 Retracted for peer review

joining the traditional dance club because it was believed to be demonic. My mother constantly reminded me that pants were unacceptable and that my *bhibho* [box cut hairstyle] was inappropriate. The query, "What will the church elders think?" similarly had me indulging in forms of self-censorship. From a place of love, I refrained from the things that would embarrass or compromise my parents' dignity. However, over the years, I have had to find myself and become home to her in her fullness; I did traditional dance in University and wear my *bhibho* and pants proudly. This coming home to myself has also meant me changing churches to ones that are unbothered by or, at least, do not preach about my *bhibho*. Meanwhile Adventism remains a part of me, it is tied to my identity.

These are not isolated examples. There are several instances where women have been punished or ostracised for behaving outside the prescribed ways of being. Sylvia Tamale[12] reminds us that when the hen crows, the cocks become anxious, hence, the surveillance. Surveillance is, in itself, a form of violence.[13]

For these, and other reasons, the Christian religion has often been implicated in sexism and upholding patriarchal dominance. In spite of this violence, women make up the majority of Christians in the world,[14] more so in Africa where there is "papa frenzy".[15] The *Papa* phenomenon characterises the fast-growing Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa, "initiated by young, predominantly male charismatic leaders".[16] Manyonganise[17] attributes women's large followership to the numerous social, economic, religious, and political challenges they face in a patriarchal world. It then follows that the gospel of prosperity, joy, liberation, and

12 Sylvia Tamale, *When hens begin to crow: Gender and parliamentary politics in Uganda* (Routledge, 2018).
13 Michel Foucault, "panopticism" from" discipline & punish: The birth of the prison," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (2008).
14 Tony Walter, "Why are most churchgoers women," *Vox Evangelica* 20, no. 1 (1990).
15 Molly Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy," *The Bible and Violence in Africa*. Edited by Johannes Hunter and Joachim Kügler. Bamberg: University of Bamberg. (2016).
16 Ezra Chitando and Kudzai Biri, "Walter Magaya's Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries and Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe: a preliminary study with particular reference to ecumenism," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42, no. 2 (2016). 73
17 Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy."

emancipation is appealing to them. Yet, in reality, this space that is constructed as a place of perennial joy and freedom, unfortunately, incubates violence for women as well. Cases of sexual exploitation, including child mariages, is rampant in some Christian denominations.[18]

It is apparent, here, that women (African women in particular) have a complex relationship with Christianity. On one hand, it is their place of refuge, on the another, a site of oppression. The foregoing places Christianity at odds with feminist thinking and practice. According to Pinkie Mekgwe,[19] "Feminism, both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas, underlines the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life". Working towards this goal in a society that benefits from women's subordinate status is, nevertheless, not a neat process. It attracts backlash, shaming and more abuse. A number of African feminists who have dared to speak against cis-heteropatriarchal status quo in our socio-political fabric, the Church included, are labelled as wayward, problematic, unruly women, among other terms. One such feminist is Stella Nyanzi. Like Sissie, who through her squint, critiques Africa's relationship with Europe in her everyday encounters in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjo*y,[20] questions women who are considered "sister killjoys". The notion of the killjoys, the unfearful, problematic women who do not fit neatly within the packages of socio-political categories and norms is often ascribed to feminists.

In *The Promise of Happiness,*[21] Sara Ahmed extends Aidoo's cues in her conceptualisation of killjoy feminism:

> Feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising…Feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others;

18 Cornelius Dudzai, Kwashirai Zvokuomba, and Tarisai Gracious Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. (2023).

19 Pinkie Mekgwe, "Theorizing African feminism (s)," *African feminisms* 11 (2008).

20 Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy, or, Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*. (Longman, 1977).

21 Sara Ahmed, "Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness," *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (2010). 65

> she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, to meet over happiness.

In the context of this paper, happiness refers to the ideals of the promised land and everlasting joy. Those who disobey the Christian order and submissive principles of being God's children disturb the concept of happiness, joy, and peace that is espoused by Christianity. They are "undutiful daughters".[22] Given this, feminisms and Christianity have often been juxtaposed. Some feminists have abandoned the Church altogether because it is a space and site that not only excludes them but shames them. Likewise, some Christian women denounce feminism or dissociate themselves from the movement either because it is *too much*, or they are considered not feminist enough. But feminism is for everybody[23] and God is for us all.

As has been established through research, most women affiliate to Christianity[24] and this makes the Church a fertile ground for both feminist inquiry and intervention. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie proffers, "it is impossible to have a conversation about gender in Sub Saharan Africa without engaging with religion".[25] As a radical feminist whose scholarly interests are in the study of the taboo and embraces Christianity as a significant part of me, I argue that there is space for feminism and Christianity to co-exist. This argument is not new. It is the argument that makes up the crux of African women's theology, a movement that focuses on the liberative potential of Christianity in an African context and read from a woman's perspective.[26] In other words, African women theologians are committed to offering an alternative reading of Christianity and its relationship with women. In this way feminisms and Christianity become a co-existing possibility. In this paper, I demonstrate how this possibility is embodied by Christine Phiri, a Zimbabwean chaplain whose

22 Danai S Mupotsa, "Being/becoming an undutiful daughter: Thinking as a practice of freedom," in *Transforming teaching and learning in higher education: Towards a socially just pedagogy in a global context* (Springer, 2017).
23 Bell Hooks, *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics* (Pluto Press, 2000).
24 Manyonganise, "Zimbabweans and the Prophetic Frenzy."
25 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Not A Christian but an Agnostic. https://youtu.be/f_P8an8Ekv8?si=F5ASZUgep5fOdxsI. 2018. Accessed on 13 October, 2023.
26 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

interdenominational ministry has become popular in Zimbabwe and the region.

Conceptual and Methodological Choices

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ponders, in the same interview referred to in the earlier sections, how we can begin to craft a feminism that is situated in progressive Christianity. This paper draws on killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies to reveal the ways in which Chaplain Phiri has already begun that work. African feminist theologies belong within the broader ambit of African liberation theologies that seek to push back against western theology that disparaged African ways of knowing and relating to their God.[27] However, its tangent from other African liberation theologies is predicated on how the latter perpetuates problematic trajectories of patriarchal oppression by centring the Black African man while overlooking the Black African woman.[28] The theological frame is attributed to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989 to facilitate research, writing, and publication by a network of women interested in exploring the impact of religion and culture on women.[29]

As a political project, African feminist theologies "are committed to exposing the ideological base of Christianity that maintains and justifies the oppression of women".[30] Some theologians refuse to identify as feminist, hence the rise of another brand of theology on African women called African women's theologies. This mirrors the feminist /womanist debates in which some Black women dissociate themselves from the term "feminist" because of its associations with the West. For the purposes of this paper, I use the two interchangeably as I am most interested in using them as a frame or

27 Vincent Pascal Gucha, "Oduyoye, Amba Mercy. African Women's Theologies, Spirituality, and Healing: Theological Perspectives from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Transform: A Journal of Biblical, Theological and Practical Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition* 1, no. 1 (2022).

28 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "Black Theology and Insights from African Women's Theologies," *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022).

29 Teresia M Hinga, "African feminist theologies, the global village, and the imperative of solidarity across borders: The case of the circle of concerned African women theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002).

30 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium." 21

lens, of which they more or less share ideological objectives.[31] One of the core tenets of African feminist theologies is the inclusion of men in the vision of dismantling patriarchy as evil.[32]

Another key feature of African feminist theologies of relevance to this paper is the use of stories in theological teachings. According to Nadar, "story or narrative theology as a feature of African feminist theology situates storytelling as a legitimate method and source of theology".[33] These stories include sharing personal experiences and that of others to drive the message home. Indeed, Isabel Phiri[34] concurs that most of African women's theology has not been not written down, it is oral. This speaks to the other tenet of being context-specific: "African feminist theologies have sought to specify their localities and hence their theological methods based on their specific locations".[35]

I gravitate towards African feminist theologies because it "scrutinises existing truths"[36] and calls the church to account.[37] Thus, there is room for critique in the ways in which women are represented in the Bible versus how they are perceived and treated in the Church and community at large. In highlighting killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies, I am attempting to locate a formidable base upon which to launch a conversation about Chaplain Phiri's feminism in the church. As will be demonstrated in the paper, her theology is negotiated, accommodating, and radical, based on subjective experiences of being African, black, and woman. In doing so, she subjects the status quo to scrutiny and engages with storytelling as a medium.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a critical qualitative research methodology. According to Norman Denzin,[38] a critical qualitative enquiry is

31 Sarojini Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions* (2012).
32 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."
33 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 276
34 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."
35 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 276
36 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa." 277
37 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Christianity and African culture," *International Review of Mission* 84, no. 332-333 (1995).
38 Norman K Denzin, "Critical qualitative inquiry," *Qualitative inquiry* 23, no. 1 (2017).

one committed to exposing and critiquing the forms of inequality and discrimination that operate in daily life. I draw on a textual analysis of five YouTube texts in the form of sermons. Chaplain Phiri's content is mostly distributed and shared on TikTok, Facebook, and other social media spaces. The digital archive is quite critical in that the work transcends geographical and spatial boundaries. That, in itself, is a disruptive form. Data was gathered from the content, the ways in which these sermons are delivered, and the costume and props that she uses. The following sermons were sampled: *KuCorrector Error,*[39] *One Ari Ega,*[40] *Sunga Jombo Tiende,*[41] *Industrial Women* [Women of Steel],[42] and *What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men).*[43] A thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data.

Here is To Killing Joy: Findings and Analysis

It has been noted that theology is a male dominated space.[44] This presents a myriad of challenges for women who want to pursue theology, among them being the frustrations of not being ordained or how long it took to be placed.[45] Indeed, women usually play, or are assigned, supporting roles such as praise and worship and ushering, among other things. This is discouraging and frustrating for those who are keen on exploring their spiritual gifts as pastors, prophets, or elders. In Zimbabwe, for example, there are few women theologians leading ministries. Most of those that assume the position of pastor or apostle usually do so through marriage. By virtue of being a Pastor's wife, one also becomes a pastor or apostle. This, however,

39 Chrstine Phiri, "kuCorrector Eror " (13 December 2020, YouTube: Cross Before Crown TV, 18 September 2023), Sermon https://youtu.be/3o6Jgl9ssOg?si=rGhHwC896R7q8ARH.

40 Christine Phiri, "One Ari Ega " (14 July 2020, YouTube: Laycluse Creations, 03 September 2023), Sermon. https://youtu.be/3kgfWZFnVXc?si=7u5bRiVV1jEraYWm.

41 Christine Phiri, "Sunga Jombo Tiende," (16 July 2020, YouTube: Laycluse Creations, 18 September 2023), Sermon. https://youtu.be/l3_Ufw36Fvk?si=EZNHLGvo_DJIKlDG.

42 Christine Phiri, "Industrial Women (Women of Steel)," (26 July 2023, YouTube: Chaplain Phiri, 27 September 2023), Sermon. https://youtu.be/PDIXme7ukgE?si=yKlUylTPO1sMMV05.

43 Christine Phiri, "What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men)," (25 August 2023, YouTube: Chaplain Phiri, 25 September 2023), Sermon. https://youtu.be/g9vJd8Ev1Z0?si=qKo9wyYyHN2D-uZO.

44 Hinga, "African feminist theologies, the global village, and the imperative of solidarity across borders: The case of the circle of concerned African women theologians."

45 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

is always a supportive role, where a woman's credibility is only recognized when she is the other. Using AFM as a case study, Mupangwa and Chirongoma[46] document how female pastors in the church often noted that pastors' wives exercised power over ordained female pastors because of their proximity to male figures. In cases where both the wife and husband are pastors, the woman is expected to step down and allow the husband to lead the ministry.

The dearth of women in the Zimbabwean theological space also means that the gospel remains mostly male-centred. Moreover, the few women that thrive in those circumstances are those who live according to heteropatriarchal scripts. Respect is given to women theologians who promote domesticity, wifehood, and motherhood.[47] Christine Phiri defies these odds in many respects. Although she never referred to herself as a feminist, I position her as a killjoy feminist due to her embodiment of feminism in her theological practice. A biographical analysis, therefore, is an appropriate place to begin this discussion.

Phiri's feminism is a lived reality; it does not begin on the pulpit and end there. A Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services Chaplain, Phiri's life story is one punctuated by "carrying six mountains on the back".[48] The concept of six mountains on the back is coined by Leslie Ogundipe to refer to the multiple forms of oppression that weigh heavily on African women. Chaplain Phiri was an orphan, a widow, and a sex worker, suffered a mild stroke and survived a brain tumour.[49] Her life story is a recurring motif in her sermons, as she draws on her personal life to profile her arduous journey and how she persevered. Instead of portraying herself as a sacrosanct entity, Phiri brings her "dirty linen" or "sins" onto the pulpit. Indeed, Nadar[50] considers the use of personal accounts and lived experiences as a distinct feature of African feminist theologians. The intersectedness of Phiri's struggles, as a Black African woman and her encounters with God, reveal

46 Mupangwa and Chirongoma, "The challenges of being a female pastor: A case of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe."
47 Mate, "Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe."
48 M Ogundipe-Leslie, "Recreating ourselves: Gender issues for African women today," *School of Oriental and African Studies*, *University of London* 8 (1996).
49 Phiri, "One Ari Ega ".
50 Nadar, "Feminist theologies in Africa."

how significant it is to localise experiences and theologise African women's experiences from situated knowledges. That Phiri was a sex worker before quitting to pursue a career with the Zimbabwe Prison Services (ZPS) can be read in various ways. However, her decision to quit, and I use the term *decision* deliberately to emphasise that it was a conscious decision on her part to leave sex work because she had only resorted to it as a short-term survival strategy, is feminist agency. That agency limns feminist consciousness in the context of the dreams that she had for herself and the life she wanted to live. Yet again, Phiri does not neatly fit into the dichotomous framing of sex work as bad or good. Even though she left sex work, and often speaks against it, Phiri uses some of the performative aspects of the trade, such as song and dance, to enhance her sermons. This will be unpacked fully in the forthcoming sections.

It was while she was serving as a prison official that Phiri enrolled at the school of theology. For a former sex worker, to get into the theology school and become one of the prominent theologians in Zimbabwe is quite a feat. Phiri often recounts in her sermons that people, especially those who knew her from before, refused to take her seriously after she was born again. In a sermon, she reveals that the person who made her video viral did so with the intention of disparaging her for her decorum and demeanour on the pulpit. She, however, uses the story to show off God's grace and love for all.

Although she is now popular and gets invited across denominations in the region, she says she, nevertheless, gets a fair share of insults on social media and most are hurled by fellow pastors, males in particular. "*Manje ini ndiriChihera Handikendenge,*" [Because I am a Chihera I do not care] she says. *Chihera* is the name for a woman of the *Mhofu* (Eland) clan. They are known to be confident, assertive, commanding and controversial.[51] This qualifies Phiri as a feminist killjoy. Sometimes, "one is positioned as the killjoy by others due to presumed political beliefs or through being 'out of place' in the whiteness, the middle-classness, and the cissexist-ableist patriarchy of the academy".[52] Phiri kills the joy of the men who, for so long,

51 Ezra Chitando, Sophia Chirongoma, and Munyaradzi Nyakudya, "Introducing a Radical African Indigenous Feminist Principle: Chihera in Zimbabwe," in *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle* (Springer, 2023). 1

52 Órla Meadhbh Murray, "Feel the fear and killjoy anyway: Being a challenging feminist presence in precarious academia," *Feeling academic in the neoliberal university: Feminist flights, fights and failures* (2018).

have monopolised the theological space by grabbing a seat at their table and, while at it, disrupting theirs and carving her own theological etiquette.

In the following sections, I reveal in detail how Chaplain Phiri's theology mirrors/is killjoy feminism.

Embodying Killjoy Feminism in Church: Findings on Form

In reading and analysing Phiri's sermons on YouTube, oratory prowess, role play, music, dance, and language emerge as key features of her theological pedagogy. As an applied theatre practitioner, I am intrigued by the way she delivers her sermons. Particularly as it follows the trajectory of Popular Participatory Theatre (PPT), a form that is centred on the people, it promotes dialogue and makes use of popular modes of expression that are relatable to a given people.[53] Phiri's use of popular participatory methods on the pulpit makes her theology a distinct kind of killjoy feminist praxis.

A trademark feature of Phiri's theology is role-play. With role-play, as the term suggests, one plays the role of someone other than themselves. Phiri uses role-play as both an entertainment function and pedagogical approach. The pedagogical value of role-play as an active, playful and social activity is well recognised in various disciplines, including formal educational settings.[54] When Phiri tells stories on the pulpit it is similar to a-one-woman show where she embodies various characters. In all the sermons under study there is an element of role-play of some sort. Either she imitates someone she interacted with to stress a point or reimagines biblical accounts through role- play. In *kuCorrector Error*, she reimagines Mary's interactions with the Roman soldiers who were guarding Jesus' tomb: "When Mary asks *kuti mamuisepi* [where have you taken him], *vakati* [they said], 'listen Mary, it was uhm something that happened at midnight uhm there was darkness and then uhm…'". Based on the biblical passage in John 20:1–18, she gives it character and repackages it into an everyday story. This makes her sermons fun and relatable, akin to PPT where role-play and humour allow

53 Miranda Young-Jahangeer, "'Less than a dog': interrogating theatre for debate in Westville Female Correctional Centre, Durban South Africa," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 18, no. 2 (2013).

54 JD Adams and MS Mabusela, "Employing role-play in teaching and learning: A case of higher education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 27, no. 3 (2013).

for people to tackle and discuss very complex issues in a more palatable way.[55] Phiri uses the techniques to engage congregants and localise the gospel in relation to their everyday realities. Hence, a popular participatory theology.

Another defining feature of Phiri's theology is her oratorship. She has a deep voice that she uses as to knit together and tell stories that capture the imagination of her followers. The idea of using stories, both personal and otherwise, to preach is a common trait among African women theologians.[56] While there are concerns that African women's theology is mostly oral and not documented, I argue that storytelling and oral narratives are legitimate archives that form a significant part of African ways of being and communicating. Phiri's storytelling, however, is laced with other mediums that make it distinct and appealing. Language is one of them.

Itai ameni satani abhowekane translates to "say amen and make satan bored". This can be considered Phiri's tagline as it is repeated multiple times in her sermons. In the world of poetry, this would be called a refrain, that is, a word or phrase that gets repeated at specific intervals in a poem. Her tagline is an unlikely statement for a preacher. Often the language employed in church is very formal while Phiri uses slang, "a linguistic style that occupies an extreme position on the spectrum of formality… and is socially less acceptable".[57] Examples include terms like *bho here, mboko, ndiitirei mushe, mafesi angu,* phrases that form part of the "ghetto youths lingo". Ghetto youths is a popular term that refers to young people who live in the high-density suburbs referred to as the ghetto and are often "stereotyped and associated with idling at street corners and bridges and illicit behaviours such as smoking *mbanje* (marijuana)".[58]

Phiri even refers to some biblical figures as *mdara* Judah and *Mukoma* Balak. *Mudhara* and *mukoma* are colloquial shona terms often used by boys and men in reference to each other. Moreover, the title *One Ari Ega* (one

55 Young-Jahangeer, "'Less than a dog': interrogating theatre for debate in Westville Female Correctional Centre, Durban South Africa."

56 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

57 Aquilina Mawadza, "Harare Shona slang: A linguistic study," *Zambezia* 27, no. 1 (2000). 93

58 Doreen Rumbidzai Tivenga, "Contemporary Zimbabwean popular music in the context of adversities," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 55, no. 1 (2018). 135

who is alone) is street lingo derived from *mahwindi* (touts), who use the line to attract commuters who are rushing to their destinations. *Mahwindi* are generally considered people without a moral grounding. The language that she uses and its apparent associations with a group of people who would be considered "sinners" make Phiri's theological pedagogy a distinct yet inclusive one. It is for the people. She even refers to herself as "chappy", short for Chaplain, or Kiri, short for Christine. This reference disrupts the hierarchies often associated with pastors.

Song and dance are also a distinct characteristic of Phiri's theological pedagogy. With most preachers, song and dance is usually designated for the praise and worship team, Phiri, in contrast, is the protagonist. In the video referred to earlier, which brought her attention, Phiri was singing and dancing to a dancehall song, "*kanjiva*". An elderly woman singing to that song in the Zimbabwean context would generally raise the ire of many, let alone having an elderly woman preacher for singing and imitating the dance moves on a pulpit, which would have been considered abominable. It unsettled many, especially male pastors. But that is the kind of music she gravitates towards. I argue further that secular music is the trademark of her theological pedagogy and makes her teachings inclusive, context specific, relevant, and powerful. She sings a number of Zimdancehall songs and mimics the dancing style of ghetto youths. She volunteers that she perfected the art of dancing as part of her sex work exploits in beerhalls and clubs. Other secular songs she sings include those of Jah Prayzah and Alick Macheso, household names in Zimbabwe.

The choice of music Phiri sings and dances to is untypical of a preacher and would ordinarily be considered unholy and undignified, yet Chaplain uses it to win souls and render the gospel in a language that people can relate to. This is the aesthetic that makes her popular among Zimbabweans but also positions her an undisciplined woman among other preachers. She avers in the sermon, *Sunga Jombo Tiende* that:

> *Ndine mumwe mabati akanditi kana murimu Chipinda musasvetukasvetuka, kana murimuChipinda dzikamai, ndikati [breaks into song] "ini handikendenge kuti kuneChipinda, ini handikendenge". Mwari varikuti Mweya utsvene urikuti fambai, ndikanzi isu muchurch meduhamuparidzwi muchifambafamba dzikamai semunhu waMwari. Ndikati ndauya kuzokoromora* [One

> Pastor told me that while you are here at *Chipinda* you do not jump around, you need to be reserved and I said [in song] "I do not care that there is *Chipinda*". God the Holy Spirit is saying I need to move around and someone says in this church you do not fidget around while preaching, conduct yourself like God's person. I said, I am here to undo].

Phiri underscores her refusal to be policed and regulated by constructed doctrines. Performing all over the stage and extending to the auditorium remains a trademark of her theological pedagogy. Through this, she manages to break the fourth wall, a concept where the divide between audience and actors on stage is blurred/disrupted.[59] Typically, preachers use the banking method of teaching or preaching,[60] whereas Phiri affords space for interaction with the congregants. Sometimes the interactions take the form of call and response. For example, "*itai ameni satani abhoekane"* to which the people will respond, "amen'". If the response is not resounding, she will makes comments such as, "*ini vanhu vasina* vibe *ndowanzodisconnector navo*" [I tend to disconnect with people who do not have a vibe]. Call and response is a critical aspect of storytelling practices in most parts of Africa. When Phiri breaks the fourth wall and sings and dances to secular songs that are associated mostly with *ghetto youths* onto the pulpit, she disrupts rigidity, gatekeeping, monopolisation, and exclusionary practices within the church space. She engages in a killjoy feminist praxis that unsettles the sacredness of the pulpit.

Phiri is also very deliberate about what she wears and the objects she uses while on the pulpit. In the sermon, *Industrial Women (Women of Steel),* she can be seen wearing a worksuit, gumboots, and a helmet. This regalia is often worn by male labourers, specifically men who work in mines, farms, factories, and other related spaces. She in this instance uses the costume as a visual aid that frames her message on the need for women to take up space. The props in this case give the sermon profundity. Beyond that, her choice of costume and props exemplify her untypical pedagogy and how she transcends gender binaries that characterize Christian spaces.

59 Augusto Boal and Charles A McBride, "Theatre of the Oppressed," in *The improvisation studies reader* (Routledge, 2014).

60 Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)," *New York: Continuum* 356 (1996).

Speaking Killjoy Feminism in Church; Findings on Content

Apart from the form, a critical analysis of Phiri's sermons reveals how her content is etched in feminism. The feminist impulses of her theology can be seen in the titles of her sermons, themes, and sites in which she preaches. For example, *Industrial Women (Women of Steel)*, and *What Women Want in Marriage (Advice to Men)* both speak to a political project around agency and women. Women's amelioration from the woes of patriarchy in their various manifestations emerges as a central theme in the sermons under study, if not all of her sermons.

Phiri's major areas of focus are economic empowerment and socio-political agency. Phiri's content differs vastly from the orthodox Christian preaching that emphasises and promises prosperity and joy in heaven. What this kind of gospel does is to detach and distract African people from their realities of being stripped of their land, humanity, and dignity and have them focus on the promises of heaven. In contrast, her teachings focus on how people can be earthly relevant and prosperous emotionally, psychologically, and economically while preparing for heaven's blessings. *Industrial Women,* in particular, urges women to find their footing, self-identify and emancipate themselves in spite of their circumstances:

> *"woramba uchiti urinherera kusvika wane65*? *Wakarambwa* so what, *wakadadirwa* so what. Rise up and work" [you still want to refer to yourself as an orphan at 65? You got dumped/divorced so what? You got shamed so what? Rise up and work].

In the sermon *Simudza Jombo Tiende,* Phiri reiterates agency by stating that:

> *kana takurwa hondo hakudi chiroora kana kudzikama, mazambia haasi ekuhondo…kuhondo hakudzikamwe dzikamwe zvenhema..kuhondo hakupfekwe gogo kunopfekwa jomb*. [when we are at war, there is no space for playing reserved bride, wrapping cloths are not for war. At war there are no fake reservations, at war we do not wear high heeled shoes, we wear gumboots].

The English language does not bring out the potency of the words she uses here, so I will attempt to unpack. *Chiroora* is a ritual/ceremony of celebrating a new bride. But moreover, the ceremony serves as an orientation to a

system that designates how a married woman should dress, behave, and conduct themselves in the family they marry into. In terms of demeanour, a good bride is reserved, dresses 'decently', speaks with deep respect and calmness, but is also expected to be active with domestic chores. The script determines when you ought to exhibit calmness and when you need to be active. *Chiroora,* I argue, is an institution aimed at sustaining the patriarchal domination, hence, punctuated with such control and policing. In the context of this knowledge, Phiri's call to women to not play *chiroora* in the war trenches is one of defiance. The war trenches in the sermon may have been in reference to spiritual warfare at the hands of devil but it can also extend to the various wars that women face every day.

KuCorrector Error is another example where Phiri speaks of agency. As the title suggests, the sermon calls upon the congregants to correct errors. Using the example of Zelophehad's daughters, she reiterates in the sermon in question that women ought to follow the cues and resist, challenge, and rewrite traditions, rules, and norms that are used as instruments of oppression. She states in the sermon that:

> *Tinoda vasikana vakaita semadaughters of Zelophehad vanoti chokwadi vakadzi havasi vagari venhaka but Moses tauya takatofembekana, tauya takadhiniwa* [we want girls/women like the daughters of Zelophehad who say, yet it is true that women do not inherit estates but Moses we have come here, fed up, we are done!]
>
> *we want to inherit the land of our fathers. Kunyangwe zvisina kuitwa mumashure.* [even though it has never happened before, the daughters of Zelophehad realised there was an error.]]

Phiri, here, invokes Freire's transformative pedagogy that offers "men [women] the confidence and the strength to confront those dangers instead of surrendering their sense of self through submission to the decisions of others".[61]

Phiri is also bold and unapologetic towards men of cloth who use their influence and power to harass women. In her article, "'He Told Me that My

61 Freire, "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)." 33

Waist and Private Parts Have Been Ravaged by Demons': Sexual Exploitation for female Church Members by 'Prophets' in Nigeria", Chima Agazue[62] captures this pandemic quite aptly. When "men of God" package exploitation as prophecy, it becomes difficult for people to call it out or name it what it is. As a result, pastors can abuse people without consequences. Phiri is courageous, however. She names and shames them. In *One Ari Ega*, she unequivocally states that, "*Mkoma Gumbura vakashandisa theology dzavo kuwomaniser vanhu. Dai Mwari vakubetserai mukashandisa influence yenyu* for the Kingdom of God" [Brother Gumbura used his theology to womanise (sic) people. May God bless you so you use your influence for the Kingdom of God]. Gumbura is the founder of Robert Martin Gumbura (RMG) Independent End Time Message Church in Zimbabwe who was convicted of raping four women from his church.[63]

Women as Protagonists

I argued in the previous sections that Phiri's theology is a form of popular, participatory performance. In her performance(s), women are the protagonists. This is untypical in a religious space where patriarchal theology reigns. Men like Abraham, Solomon, Moses, and Paul have always been the major proponents of the Christian religion. Even Jesus Christ experiences the world in human form as a male. Phiri, however, refers often to Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, Mary, Esther, and ten virgins among other women in the Bible in most of her sermons, including herself and the women she has encountered in her life journey. Phiri's references to her story and that of female biblical characters is the kind of feminist reading of the Bible that African feminist theology aspires to.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, while Phiri 's gospel appeals to many, women form part of her target audience. She has an apparent bias towards women, especially single mothers and widows, perhaps because she is one and understands the unique challenges that they face. Indeed, she is often invited to women's conferences, kitchen parties, and other fora that are

62 Chima Agazue, "" He Told Me that My Waist and Private Parts Have Been Ravaged by Demons:" Sexual Exploitation of Female Church Members by" Prophets" in Nigeria," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 1, no. 1 (2016).

63 Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro, "Discoursing women, Christianity and security: The framing of women in the Gumbura case in Zimbabwean media," *Agenda* 30, no. 3 (2016).

inhabited by women. However, even in instances where Phiri preaches in a church where everyone convenes, women remain her priority.

An Inclusive Theology

That Chaplain Phiri centres women in her theology does not mean she is anti-men. She advocates for healthy marriages and partnerships between men and women in line with African feminist theologies. A good case in point is the sermon *What Women Want* (Advice to Men). The main thrust of her sermon is to educate men about what women expect from them. I recall Audre Lorde's[64] compelling critique on how the oppressed are often given the labour of educating those who oppress them. But Phiri's theology has also prompted me to rethink and question, whose duty is it then to educate?

In the sermon, Phiri draws on Ephesians 5:25–29 as her theoretical frame to emphasize how men should love and respect their women, be romantic, and participate in childcare among other themes:

> *Kiss iyaya vanoidawo chero vachembera. Kungopotawo uchimhuvhiringa vhiringa uchimuconfuser. Ari pachoto ipapo ingoti mcwaa wonzi imi itai semurume mukuru asi anenge atofara ka. Haikona kuti vaonero rudo mumatv* [these kisses they also want them even if they are married, get used to confusing your person with romance, while she is cooking just go mcwaaa and you will hear her say behave but she would have liked it].

What she does through humour is to engage in a deep political project that presents an alternative perspective to the "what women should do to please their husbands" rhetoric. Additionally, she speaks openly about romance, specifically kissing, which is part of a broader topic that is shrouded in secrecy or demonised in Zimbabwean society, generally,[65] and church spaces, in particular. In that same sermon, Phiri symbolically brings the group of men and women into conversation by disrupting the Church's spatial protocol. The Zion set up divides between men and women; the two

64 Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (Crossing Press, 2012).

65 Molly Manyonganise, "HIV-Positive Women Virgins: The Complexities of Discourse on Issues of Sex and Sexuality in Zimbabwe," *Research on Gender and Sexuality in Africa* (2017).

never sit together. Yet, while preaching, she negotiates the boundary crossing by saying, "*nditendereiwo muranda waMwari ndiswedere kuvarume*" [allow me servant of God to draw closer to the men] (which she does before they grant her permission anyway). Phiri, again, plays the Chihera archetype who, "while radical, does not intend to create a society independent of men".[66]

A Disobedient Theology: Closing Remarks.

A couple of questions and curiosities informed this paper. If religious spaces like the Church are the repository of heteropatriarchal scripts of being, should they not be the very fertile spaces for feminist inquiry and intervention? If so, how can feminism breathe, live, and manifest in religious spaces that are often constructed as unbreathable for women? I drew on Chaplain Christine Phiri's theological practice to answer some of these questions. What emerges from the discussion above is that Phiri is a disruptor whose theological practice lends itself to the vast and heterogenous African Christianity movement. By an African Christian movement, I am referring to a Christianity whose practice is premised on our own experiences and unique encounters with God.

The form of her theological practice mirrors our everyday aesthetic and cultural expressions such as singing, dancing, and role play. Most importantly, she taps into the digital landscape, making the gospel more accessible beyond the geographical divide. In that way, the fourth wall/divide that often exists between the preachers and congregants is disrupted. It becomes a collaborative theology that is inclusive of everyone.

The content of her sermons, too, which I analysed in the paper, challenges us to think/rethink, learn, unlearn, and "correct errors" that continue to oppress African women. Isabel Phiri emphasizes that, "a way forward for theologies of Southern Africa is to take the current context into theological reflection)".[67] Chaplain Christine Phiri's gospel seems to be on course with this vision that Isabel Phiri laid in 2004. Her gospel focuses on the socio-

66 Excellent Chireshe, "The Chihera Mystique in Selected Writings by African Women Theologians," in *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle* (Springer, 2023). 287

67 Phiri, "African women's theologies in the new millennium."

political issues affecting people in present day Zimbabwe, and southern Africa by extension. Such issues include gender-based violence, poverty, and unemployment, among others. It is a context-specific gospel that also speaks to the needs of those that occupy the margins. This is witnessed in her song choices and dance moves that are culturally relevant and popular among the ghetto youths, widows, and prison inmates, among others.

As I conclude this paper, I am convinced that if African women continue to be exposed to the gospel from the perspective of African women like Chaplain Phiri then the feminist goal of acknowledging women's full humanity is possible (inevitable, even). Her theology as demonstrated throughout the paper is popular, participatory and troublesome. I would add, it is disobedient and decolonial.[68] At the risk of being overambitious, I believe that in the same ways the *Papa* phenomenon has captured African women, a *mama* phenomenon has potential to influence healthier patterns of being in the Church and Phiri is an exemplar of this possibility. She shapes discourse around African theology by challenging us to complexify our understandings about it and its nuances. Moreover, she redirects us to the potential that the pulpit has in fighting patriarchy. Perhaps then, the pulpit may just be a fertile site that sets alight an alternative feminist agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa that is lethal enough to dismantle patriarchy.

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68 Walter D Mignolo, "Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom," *Theory, culture & society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009).

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"First Woman to…" Exceptionalism Discourse: Badge of Honour or Badgering Burden?

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

"First women to…" labels define the ways in which women leaders are characterized as "exceptional". As already pointed out by some feminist scholars, exceptionalism discourse valorizes women's achievements to the benefit of institutions and their patriarchal culture. While such valorization might enhance gender representation in spaces previously reserved for men, it also commodifies women's capabilities. This, I argue, calls for resisting the subtle, less visible, often unintentional, and sometimes patronizing forms of discrimination that sustain the patriarchal culture of institutions such as "the church". Many feminist theologians have repeatedly named "the cultural-political power at work in our world as patriarchy". Questions about the relationship between patriarchal institutional culture and the legitimate presence of women leaders are central to the argument presented here. The case of South African feminist theologian, Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel, is used to illustrate the relentless task women face of having to challenge pervasive gender-bias in the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. I then explore the plausibility of *reflective solidarity* as a theo-ethical concept and its potential to transform the patriarchal institutional culture of the church.

KEYWORDS
exceptionalism discourse, patriarchal institutional culture, reflective solidarity, church, feminist, second-generation gender bias

Introductory remarks

Feminist theologians, in particular the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,* have over many decades explained how the exclusion of women from leadership is justified by male supremacy in colonial, apartheid, and patriarchal contexts in Africa.[1] For example, the democratic values

1 See, for example, Ruth Meena, *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues* (Harare: SAPPHO Publishing House, 1992); Ofelia Ortega, *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1992), 195; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God" (Ghana: Sam-Woode Ltd, 1997); Seageng Tsikang and Dinah Lefakane, *Women in South Africa: From the heart – an anthology* (Johannesburg: Seriti sa Sechaba Publishers, 1988); Cheryl Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip

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enshrined in the *Constitution of South Africa* resulted in a legislative framework for the "empowerment of women and gender equality".[2] However, while this has "allowed" many South African women into leadership positions in the church, the mere presence of women leaders in positions previously reserved for men does not automatically transform the patriarchal institutional culture of "the church".[3]

Patriarchal institutional culture, as used here, refers to the essence and course of action shaped and motivated by ideas, beliefs, and practices that justify male privilege, superiority, and dominance. It is within the institutional culture of the church that the "dominant scale of patriarchal values remains" and within which women have to navigate their leadership.[4] This is particularly the case in "the church" where patriarchal attitudes, beliefs, and practices keep women leaders on a normative, patriarchal, beaten-track. Thus, while the presence of women in "previously" male-dominated spaces should be celebrated, there is also a great need for commiseration. Indeed, questions about the relationship between patriarchal institutional culture and the legitimate presence of women leaders continue to be an important aspect of social justice research. One such question is whether the "first woman to…" badge might also be a badgering burden for women in light of exceptionalism discourse that valorizes women's capabilities to the benefit

Publishers, 1990); Denise Ackermann, Jonathan Draper and Emma Mashini, *Women Hold up half the sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg:Cluster Publications, 1991); Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman. Hantie Kotzé, and Judy Tobler, *Claiming our footprints: South African women reflect on context, identity and spirituality* (Stellenbosch: Milano, 2000); Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

2 See https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/b50-2013womenempowermentgenderequality06nov2013.pdf, accessed 5 August, 2023). Also see Chapter 2 "Bill of Rights" accessed August 5, 2023, https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/saconstitution-web-eng-02.pdf.

3 I use "the church" here, with an understanding of the "variety of manifestation of 'the church'". See Pillay 2008, 172 Re-visioning stigma: A socio-rhetorical reading of Luke 10:25-37 in the context of HIV and AIDS in South Africa , https://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/2242, accessed 1 September 2023.

4 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993) 6. Also see, Miranda Pillay, "Women, Priests and Patriarchal Ecclesial Spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'Interruption' as a Transformative Rhetorical Strategy". *HTS Theological Studies*, 76 no 1(2020), a5820. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5820.

of patriarchal institutions. This is a question that surfaced for me at the occasion of the *Fourth Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel Memorial Lecture,* which I delivered at the University of Stellenbosch on 11 August, 2023.[5]

There is no doubt that the pioneering leadership of Plaatjies Van Huffel's many "first woman to…" achievements have paved the way for other women leaders. When using "women" as a category, I do so with an awareness that it does not mean "all women". This would be an exclusionary and discriminatory way of constructing "an alleged universality of women".[6] And, as Phiri, Govinden and Nadar warn "We certainly need to avoid the danger of homogenizing 'the African woman'".[7] The fact that "women" as a category does not represent a homogeneous group is particularly true in South African contexts where some women benefit from white privilege, while women of color carry double, sometimes triple, the burden of having to "carve out more and more spaces for themselves and others to come".[8]

It is not my intension to trivialize the exceptional accomplishments of women like Plaatjies Van Huffel as "the first woman to…". On the contrary, she and many women in South Africa are amongst those who "have moved into the academy, assumed religious leadership, and claimed their religious agency and heritage".[9] However, the reality for many women, particularly South

5 Pillay, 2023. Keynote address, "Trailblazing women – Off the patriarchal beaten track" 2023. This paper contains some of the ideas and arguments made in the keynote address at the Fourth Memorial Lecture to commemorate the life and work of Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel.
In South Africa, August is celebrated as Women's Month to commemorate the agency of women who marched against the pass laws in apartheid South Africa. The women's march of 9 August 1956 is said to be a remarkable event in the history of the country. But sadly, almost seven decades later, and almost thirty years into democracy, marching continues with placards conveying despair #AmINext; frustration #EnoughIsEnough and hope #IAmNotNext. While the #MeToo placard conveys a message of solidarity, it is also a stark reminder that skewed gender relations remain a reality despite gender-equity policies.

6 Susanne Kappeler, *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour* (New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University, 1995), 21.

7 *Her-Stories* (2002), 9.

8 Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 170 (2021) 7-18.

9 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2011) 4.

African women of color, is that they have to navigate their leadership and exercise their agency along patriarchal beaten paths, where, albeit somewhat faded, white privilege signposts remain.[10] Thus, I agree with Schüssler Fiorenza who argues that discourses on gender [representation] ought to take into account how discourses like exceptionalism, for example, "have shaped religion and how religion has engendered and authorized prejudices against women".[11]

As an "exceptional" woman leader in the church and academia, Plaatjies Van Huffel carried many "first woman to…" badges in her lifetime before passing away on 19 May, 2020. Her leadership is recognized by her colleagues in academia and the church as visionary, participative, and transformative.[12] Thyssen and Davis highlight that Plaatjies Van Huffel was hailed as "the first of firsts".[13] Using her-story[14] as a case study, my argument centers around the lived-reality of women who are expected to take up leadership positions in "previously" male-dominated spaces with little, or no effort from the institution to transform its patriarchal culture.[15] This

10 "Women of color" refers to that the South African racial classification, namely Black, Colored, Indian, Asian.

11 Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, "Between Movement and Academy: Feminist Biblical Studies". In *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. 2014) 1-20.

12 For example, in response to her passing, the World Council of Churches states that Plaatjies van Huffel was known as a transformative church leader in sub-Saharan Africa. Her significance was not only rooted in her leadership positions, her many theological publications, and her lecturing status but could also be found in her active participation in processes to transform society (Statement by the Word Council of Churches, 21 May 2020). https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-mourns-passing-of-rev-prof-dr-mary-anne-plaatjies-van-huffel, accessed 31 July 2023. Plaatjies van Huffel served on World Council of Churches as President representing the continent of Africa from 2013 until her death on 19 May 2020.

13 Thyssen, Ashwin and Davis, Sheurl "In Search of the Public Theologian: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel's Womanist Public Engagement" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47/2, 1-17.

14 Her-story is a term I borrow from Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devakarsham Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

15 See, Miranda Pillay, "Women, Priests and Patriarchal Ecclesial Spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'Interruption' as a Transformative Rhetorical Strategy". *HTS Theological Studies*, 76 no 1(2020), a5820. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5820.

observation is based on the premise that leadership is, historically, constructed around patriarchal normativity and shaped by the ideology of male supremacy.

The main argument made in this paper is that exceptionalism discourse inherent in "first woman to…" badge of honor rhetoric must come under scrutiny considering the dominant scale of patriarchal values. This, I argue, is because exceptionalism discourse camouflages second-generation gender bias and upholds patriarchal normativity. To this end, after describing what being intentional about resisting second-generation gender bias might entail, I explore the *virtue of unctuousness* as a countercultural virtue in the patriarchal institutional culture of "the church". In the final section of the paper, I explore the idea of reflective solidarity and consider its potential as a conceptual tool to transform patriarchal institutional cultures. But first, I turn to the experiences of Plaatjies Van Huffel as a case study.

"First woman to…": Plaatjies Van Huffel – A case in point

As previously mentioned, Plaatjies Van Huffel is one of many South African women to carry a "first woman to…" badge.[16] Her research, teaching, and community engagements are grounded in her lived experiences as a woman of color born, raised, and educated during the height of apartheid.[17] Much of her research is framed within the social, economic and political realities of apartheid and its complex ramifications in a democratic South African society.[18] Plaatjies Van Huffel's lived experiences, as a woman of color in

16 See for example Christina Landman, "Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel: "A First Voice on Gender Equity in South Africa" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47 no 2 (2021) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358024456, accessed August 5, 2023; Reggie W. Nel, 2021. "A Woman of Voice: Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel (15 December 1959–19 May 2020)" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47 no 2 (2021) https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/9824, accessed August 5, 2023.

17 Selaelo Thias Kgatla, "Born into a World of Hostility and Contradiction: The Role of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel in URCSA". 2021 https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/8296/4708, accessed August 4. 2023.

18 See for example Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel and Dino Seloana, "About the empowerment of women in the church in post-apartheid South Africa: a post-structural approach" In *From Our Side: Emerging Perspectives on Development and Ethics* Steve De Gruchy, . Nico Koopman and Sytse. Strijbos eds. (Unisa Press, 2008); Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel "The institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations: from

patriarchal normative contexts, reveal that confronting racial and gender biases is a relentlessly ongoing task. This is especially the case where women are expected – if not required – to stay on the androcentric paths dictated by the church's institutional culture of patriarchy.

Plaatjies Van Huffel's trailblazing journey through the ecclesial ranks of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)[19] is recorded by, amongst others, Charles Flaendorp in 2014 and by Selaelo Kgatla and Willie Zeze respectively, in 2021.[20] Flaendorp, who wrote about Plaatjies Van Huffel before her death in May 2020, concludes that her ecclesial advancement was one of merit and not "tokenism". While the obvious intension is to illuminate Plaatjies Van Huffel's leadership capabilities it may also, in my view at least, be seen as an attempt to defend the credibility of the institutions concerned.[21] In a more recent publication, *Thin space: tussen hemel en harde grond*, compiled by Elna Mouton, Frederick Marais also recounts some of Plaatjies Van Huffel's "first woman to…" achievements noting that, "she was the first female pastor to be ordained in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA)".[22] In his account of events, Kgatla also registers the frustration and despair Plaatjies Van Huffel encountered as a woman leader in the church, much of which Plaatjies Van

docile recipients to agents of change" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37 no 1 (2011a) 105-119 9; Control, secede, vested rights and ecclesiastical property (2011b) *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae,* 37 no 2 (2011b) 173-188; "Patriarchy as empire: a theological reflection" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37 – Supplement, (2011c) 259-270; "Toward a Theology of Hospitality: Statelessness as Gender Discrimination as a Challenge to Just Hospitality" *The Ecumenical Review* 71 no 4 (2019) 516-529.

19 On 14 April 1994, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) was established through the union of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Zeze 2021:1).

20 Charles Flaendorp "The life and times of professor Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel: a transformative church leader in Sub-Saharan Africa" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40, Supplement (2014) 53-63.
Selaelo Thias Kgatla, Born into a World of Hostility and Contradiction: The Role of Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel in URCSA. (2021) accessed August 4, 2023. https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/article/view/8296/4708.

21 Though, I also agree with Thyssen and Davis (2021:2) who see the value of Flaendorp's contribution in drawing "together various foci present in Plaatjies-Van Huffel's work" which range from her" role as minister and church leader to being an iconic figure in the ecumenical world" (2021:2).

22 See Elna Mouton,ed. *Tussen hemel en harde grond*. (Wellington, South Africa: Clairvaux Writer's House, 2023) 134.

Huffel herself boldly declares almost a decade earlier.[23] Ironically, in 2020, a year before Plaatjies Van Huffel's death, she recounts the challenges by stating, "As the first ordained woman, feminist scholar in URCSA, the author [Plaatjies Van Huffel] has felt on more than one occasion the full brunt on overt and covert forms of gender insensitivity in URCSA".[24]

As Kgatla points out, it was only "after a long wait" that Plaatjies Van Huffel was "allowed" to be ordained and appointed to the leadership of URCSA where she became the first woman minister of the Word in URCSA.[25] Plaatjies Van Huffel laments herself that her first experience as ordained minister was one of rejection as she was "not allowed" to perform her ministerial functions as pastor.[26] Her presence as a woman leader in that particular male dominated ecclesial space was not recognized as legitimate by many congregants who, not only refused her services but, also, left to join another congregation headed by a male minister. Plaatjies Van Huffel was also the first woman Moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa when she was elected in 2012. However, as noted by Kgatla, the fact that Plaatjies Van Huffel was not elected for a second term, was a "humiliating experience" for her.[27] Another milestone on Plaatjies Van Huffel's trailblazing journey is that she was the first woman to serve as *Actuarius* of URCSA Cape Synod.[28]

The four male authors mentioned above set out to honour and acknowledge Plaatjies Van Huffel's "first woman to…" achievements with implicit praise for her courage and resilience. However, it is done without the necessary "reflexive practice" regarding their male-privilege, compliance, and

23 In "Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies-Van Huffel: A First Voice on Gender Equity in South Africa" Landman (2021) also indicates that Plaatjies van Huffel's journey was marked with frustration and disappointment.

24 Plaatjies Van Huffel, Mary-Anne. 2019. "A History of Gender Insensitivity in URCSA". *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45 (3), p.3. https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/6250. Accessed 5 December 2023.

25 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 1-8; Zeze, "What Does Mary-Anne." 1.

26 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 1-8

27 Kgatla, "Born into a World." 9-10.

28 See Landman (2021) 6. Landman also mentions that Plaatjies van Huffel was also the first black woman to be promoted to full professor at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (Landman 2021:3; https://www.remembr.com/en/revprof.mary-anne.plaatjiesvanhuffel, accessed 4 August 2023).

complicity within ecclesial and academic patriarchal institutional cultures.[29] As Dottolo and Tillery argue, "A more careful understanding of systems of power, institutional privilege and marginalization, and the social symbols that communicate status and hierarchy, are necessary.[30] By ignoring reflexive practice, they aggravate the "inequalities of the tridimensional phenomenon of race/class/gender oppression".[31] Zeze sees the carving out of leadership for women as the responsibility of women. In a 2021 article titled *What does Mary-Anne Elizabeth Plaatjies Van Huffel Have to say to Silent Partners of the Reformed World?* Zeze largely uses Plaatjies van Huffel's published work verbatim. This, together with extensive quotations and posts from Plaatjies Van Huffel's Facebook Page, Zeze concludes that, "[T]though she [Mary-Anne] is deceased, she is still speaking to Reformed women in the Reformed world".[32]

In an attempt to account for this statement, Zeze cites Hebrews 11:4 as a source,[33] arguing that, Plaatjies Van Huffel, "even though she is dead" has something to say to "her silent partners", who, according to Zeze, are the "women of the Reformed world".[34] He writes about women and questions their "silence", oblivious to the fact that women are explicitly and implicitly silenced by the patriarchal normative institutional culture of the church. To be oblivious to the lived reality of women leaders in male-dominated spaces is to be compliant in upholding and justifying the systemic and structural institutional culture of patriarchal normativity.[35] Such oblivion also mirrors second-generation gender bias pervasive in patriarchal cultures of institutions and organizations. Second-generation gender bias is the "more subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronizing

29 What is lacking here is a reflexive use of power in a network of relative power relations.

30 Dottolo, L. Andrea and Sarah M. Tillery, M. Sarah, "Reflexivity and research: Feminist interventions and their practical implications" In *Reflexivity and international relations: Positionality, critique, and practice*, J.L. Amoreaux and B.J. Steele,eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123-141.

31 Katie Cannon *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 39.

32 Zeze, "What Does Mary-Anne." 10.

33 By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead (Hebrews 11:4).

34 Zeze, "What Does Mary-Anne." 10.

35 See Elaine Graham, "Different forms of feminist ethics" in *Feminist Ethics: Perspectives, problems, and possibilities*, eds Carl-Henric Grenholm and Normunds Kamergrauzis (Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 2003) 15-30.

forms of discrimination".[36] It includes what Nadar calls "palatable patriarchy".[37] In contrast, first-generation gender bias is the more intentional and blatant form of discrimination and oppression against women and those who do not identify with heteronormative gender binaries.[38]

Exceptionalism discourse: On debunking Badge of Honor rhetoric

It is not my intention to invoke the biblical concept of exceptionalism as "chosen people summoned to perform God's will in the world".[39] Neither do I use the term as it is understood in narratives of nationalist exceptionalism.[40] Instead, "exceptionalism" is conceptually used here and marked as a patronizing prop that camouflages institutional complicity in efforts to uphold patriarchal normativity. As a discursive practice, exceptionalism discourse

36 Second generation gender bias stands in the shadow of the so-called 'grand narrative' of patriarchy that "reifies ideological thinking into an absolute and phallocentric representation of reality". (Graham, "Feminist Ethics," 29). An illustration of second-generation gender bias is that women leaders are "othered" in patriarchal normative cultures where leadership is understood to be assertively masculine in the sense of exercising 'power over' others. Thus, when women leaders steer towards collaborative, collective, co-creative leadership they are not recognised as 'real' leaders. Yet, on the other hand, when women leaders do act assertively, it is likely that they will be perceived as aggressive and bossy. Because second-generation gender-bias may be seen (if not defended) as being unconscious, oblivious-, even natural behaviour, there is a greater need to push forward against patriarchal pushback.

37 Sarojini Nadar, (2009). "Palatable Patriarchy and Violence Against WO/MEN in South Africa ". *Scriptura* 102, (2009), 551-561.

38 See Helisse Levine, Maria J. D'Agostino, and Meghna Sabharwal, "Making the case for addressing second-generation gender bias in public" (2022) 259, accessed September 4, 2023, (cuny.edu) who use a three-level barrier classification to examine leadership impediments" women face in the workplace.

39 See Walter Brueggemann's, "The Hard Work of Exceptionalism" in *Church Anew*, 13 July 2022, accessed September 1, 2023. https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/hard-work-of-exceptionalism.

40 Such as the current American exceptionalism discourse of which there is an extensive body of research. There has also been a 360-degree shift in American exceptionalism discourse – from the grand narrative of America as uniquely democratic – an exemplar to the rest of the world; to conclusions that America has passed its time as a hegemon; to "let's make America great again" rhetoric. See Caroline O'Conner, "The Rhetoric of Exceptionalism: Enduring Cultural Frames of American Exceptionalism", *The Public Purpose Journal*, Vol. XX, (2022), accessed September, 2 2023, https://thepublicpurpose.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Connor-2022-The-Rhetoric-of-Exceptionalism.pdf.

has "major ideologically-based effects" that reproduce unequal power relations in patriarchal institutional cultures.[41]

In the article "Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon", Nadar and Robertson argue that women "way-makers" come with a "price-tag", which gives Black women both a badge of honor and also a prize of great burden.[42] Trailblazers in their own right, Nadar and Roberston, stand on the shoulders of other "way-maker" women, with perspective to see the "responsibility and obligation that comes with being a pioneer". They poignantly state that "the first black woman to…" narrative constructs a discourse of exceptionalism and Black excellence.[43] Moreover, they argue that exceptionalism discourse obscures and precludes the accountability that the structures that prevented women from occupying leadership spaces must bear.

Citing Tinyiko Maluleke, Nadar and Robertson, echo the warning that the label tagged onto black women leaders as "the first to be appointed to leadership positions" is "mischievously elevated into becoming the biggest portion of the truth" while obscuring the fact that:

> They are not the first Black women capable of leading great institutions. They are among the first to be allowed to. For hundreds of years, many capable Black women were denied the conditions and not given the opportunity to lead, by the racist and patriarchal forces who blocked, crushed and often killed them.[44]

41 See Anna-Maija Lämsä Teppo Sintonen, "A Discursive Approach to Understanding Women Leaders in Working Life," *Journal of Business Ethics* 34 no, 3 (2001) 255-267. She also reminds us that discourse produces "sets of concepts such as ideas, categories, theories and so on, through which we understand the world and relate it to one another, and which are culturally and historically situated" (2001:257).

42 See Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021) 7-18

43 Recognition, Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance," 10-12.

44 28 See Tinyiko Maluleke, "Celebrate black female leaders," Sunday Independent, November 15, 2020, https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-sunday-independent/20201115/281732682019409; cf. Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance," 10.

Furthermore, Nadar and Robertson point out that exceptionalism discourse is also individualized as an award to black women who are creative, courageous and resilient. They argue that exceptionalism discourse of black women's excellence holds worthy the achievements of those women whose values and determination emerged because of their struggle with oppression, thus, valorizing the ability to "overcome".[45] As my discussion on Plaatjies Van Huffel's experiences reveal, the responsibility to overcome is put on women who are experiencing a life of struggle in the patriarchal institutional culture of the church where second-generation gender bias is camouflaged by exceptionalism discourse.

On resisting second-generation gender-bias

"I realized soon after my arrival that I would not only bring the gospel to these people, but that I also would have to deal with stereotyping and conservatism in an environment of poverty."[46]

The comment above was made by Plaatjies Van Huffel in 2012, during an interview on *Radio Sonder Grense*, a national radio station. She was responding to a question about her experiences as the "first woman minister of the Word" in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. In reflecting on that interview, Plaatjies Van Huffel points out that gender stereotypes are so deeply entrenched in the patriarchal social structures of the church that they continue to uphold views about women that would ensure their "compliance" with good Christian values.[47] In this regard I find Katie Cannon's idea of unctuousness as a virtue helpful in resisting second-generation gender bias.[48]

Initially, I found Cannon's idea surprising and rather confusing, especially when I saw that "unctuousness" has many negative connotations such as being backhanded, double-dealing, hypocritical, insincere, two-faced,

45 Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance," 12.

46 https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-mourns-passing-of-rev-prof-dr-mary-anne-plaatjies-van-huffel, accessed 10 August 2023.

47 Plaatjies-van Huffel, "Patriarchy as Empire: A Theological Reflection" *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (2011) 259-270.

48 Katie Geneva Cannon, 'Unctuousness as a virtue' is the subject of chapter seven of *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. (New York: Continuum.1995) 77-90.

fraudulent, and pharisaic. How then could unctuousness be a virtue? Upon further investigation I saw that alternative "words related to being *unctuous* mean being uninhibited, unrestrained and disarming".[49] That is when the proverbial penny dropped.[50] It is precisely the idea of what is expected as normal, good, Christian behavior that has to come under scrutiny as it serves second-generation gender bias.

From Cannon's reflections on the life and writings of Zora Neale Hurston, she espouses "unctuousness as a virtue", saying of Hurston that:

> In both her life and work Hurston embodied a sensitized candor in relation to the subtle, invisible ethos as well as the expressed moral values emanating from within the cultural institutions in the Black community. As a Black woman artist, subjected to the violence of Whites, of male superiority, and of poverty, Zora Hurston offered an especially concrete frame of reference for understanding the Black woman as a moral agent.[51]

According to Cannon, Hurston understood suffering imposed by dominant cultures, "not as a moral norm or as a desirable ethical quality, [as so often espoused in Christian circles] but rather as a typical state of affairs" that results from the prevailing dominant ethos.[52] In essence, unctuousness as a virtue is the creative tension between resistance and endurance. Thus, following Cannon's take on unctuousness, I argue that endurance to expose and resist second-generation gender bias is necessary as women take up leadership positions and claim their agency in "previously" male-dominated spaces. Thus endurance, as an ethical principle of the virtue of unctuousness, does not mean passive acceptance but, rather, points to the

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See Merriam Webster, "Unctuousness," https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/unctuous; https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/unctuous

50 Much of what I write here on the subject unctuousness is published in: "The Virtue of Unctuousness? Toward the Moral Agency of Women in Patriarchal Normative Contexts" (Pillay 2021:74-92). I've also used the idea in the keynote address I delivered at the Fourth Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel Memorial Lecture held at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University on 11 August 2023.

51 Cannon. "Katie's Cannon," 91; cf. Pillay, "Unctuousness," 84.

52 Cannon, "Katie's Canon," 78-79; cf. Pillay, "Unctuousness," 84-85.

intentionality of resisting the subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronizing, forms of gender bias.

However, resistance through endurance must, at some point, also carry the possibility of transforming patriarchal institutional cultures. To this end, I will explore reflective solidarity as a plausible theo-ethical concept.

Reflective solidarity: Toward transforming patriarchal ecclesial spaces?

As observed from the Plaatjies Van Huffel case, women leaders who are celebrated as "first woman to …" accomplish this or that achievement, step into "previously" male dominated institutions with the burden of having the legitimacy of their presence questioned. This reality calls into question the grand narrative of patriarchy that "reifies ideological thinking into an absolute and phallocentric representation of reality".[53] It is generally the case where politics of identity is regarded as being of "no consequence"[54] and when concerns about policies, power, and practices that uphold gender stereotypes are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.[55] This is an argument often bolstered by discourses on Christian *unity* based on a false sense of solidarity.[56]

53 Graham, "Feminist Ethics," 29.

54 See Clarice Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation" *Semeia* 47 (1989) 105-135.

55 A typical example, in my experience is that, when appeals for gender inclusive liturgical language are dismissed with unreflective reference to Galatians 3:28. While this observation might sound anecdotal, it is true that cherry-picked verses like the Galatians text are often times used without reflexivity on who says what to whom to what effect in the ancient text and contemporary contexts. In my view this leads to a false sense of unity lays claim to the value of solidarity within a community such as 'the church'.

56 The concept 'solidarity' has its origin in Roman Law which "involved the group liability for joint debtors" in "Solidarity Theory and Practice: An Introduction" in *Solidarity: Theory and Practice*, eds Arto Laitinen and Anne Birgitta Pessi (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014) 1-29. accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/10321300/Solidarity_Theory_and_Practice_An_Introduction?email_work_card=view-paper.

While solidarity is generally understood to signal the "willingness of individuals to come together to serve and promote collective interests",[57] it is also true that the notion of *solidarity* is (ab)used to uphold unjust social relationships. As Laitinen argues "norms of solidarity are possible which do not manifest equal respect of personhood, autonomy, freedom or egalitarian justice, and which embody patterns of domination, oppression, disrespect and misrecognition".[58]

Male headship-theology, for example, signals "a kind of unequal solidarity"[59] that justifies and maintains positional power. Thus, when South African feminist theologian, Denise Ackermann, urges men to join women in their struggle against patriarchal violence because "it's about the humanity of men as much as it is about the humanity of women", [60] it calls into question the complicity and collusion of men within patriarchal institutional cultures. It also calls for reflexivity on male privileges in patriarchal normative church spaces and places. It calls for solidarity that harks back to the origin of the word as it relates to "group liability"[61] and mutual recognition.[62] In this regard, I find the notion of *reflective solidarity* a helpful theo-ethical concept to challenge second-generation gender bias.

Reflective solidarity goes beyond the rhetoric of inclusion. It speaks to the legitimate power of the presence of diverse bodies. Jodi Dean defines reflective solidarity as "the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship".[63] She argues that mutual recognition is a precondition for reflective solidarity and explains that a communicative understanding of "we" "enables us to think of difference differently". As such, Dean says reflective

57 See Ruut Ter Meulen, *Solidarity, justice, and recognition of the other*, 2016. DOI: 10.1007/s11017-016-9387-3, accessed September 5, 2023. While the argument made by Ter Meulen is for solidarity as a core value underpinning health and welfare systems, I find it resonates with the argument for reflective solidarity that goes beyond altruism and reciprocity but invokes concepts of justice and just relationships. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5167774/.

58 Laitinen, "Solidarity Theory," 127.

59 Laitinen, "Solidarity Theory," 127.

60 Klein, "In Conversation"" 61; cf. Pillay and Jacobsen, "Remembering Tutu's liberation".

61 Laitinen, "Solidarity Theory," 1

62 Laitinen, "Solidarity Theory".

63 Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after identity politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 3.

solidarity may serve as a bridge to overcome "competing dualisms of us/them, male/female, white/black, straight/gay, public/private". Dean additionally espouses reflective solidarity as a theoretical concept to move "out of the 'we' of identity politics". However, I argue that a shift away from identity politics ought not to ignore the politics of identity and difference, precisely because the "we" in "the church" does not refer to a homogeneous group. Thus, I argue that, with reflexivity[64] on the part of both men and women, the notion of *reflective solidarity* could be a conduit for rethinking the value of solidarity not as a social value in an abstract sense, but as an embodied ecclesial practice toward transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of "the church".

Concluding Remarks

Marking "first woman to…" achievements is an important and necessary sign of recognition and celebration. However, often the celebration valorizes women's achievements to the benefit of the patriarchal culture of institutions. Thus, pausing to celebrate should also call for a pause to commiserate, to mourn, to be upset, to be sorrowful, to be disturbed, and to ask, "How many more "first woman to…" badges will it take before such "bragging rights" claimed by the church, for example, are seen as a badgering burden placed on women?

While the aim of "first woman to…" discourse may be to celebrate the leadership milestones by marking the achievement of women, the patriarchal institutional culture of the church remains a millstone for women in leadership positions previously reserved for men. To commiserate is, in a sense, to recognize the fact that women are burdened over and over again, generation after generation, with the task of clearing weeds that cushion the patriarchal track of male privilege.

64 Andrea L. Dottolo and Sarah M. Tillery, explain that "reflexivity is not only reflection" but a practice that necessitates and analysis of power and a self-awareness of positions of power and privilege. While their argument is aimed at the positionality in the context of research, the idea that, "more careful understanding of systems of power, institutional privilege and marginalization, and the social symbols that communicate status and hierarchy" are equally necessary in my argument for solidarity. See their chapter "Reflexivity and research: Feminist interventions and their practical implications" in *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, critique, and Practice*, eds J.L. Amoreaux and B.J. Steele (New York: Routledge, 2015) 123-141.

In this paper I have argued for debunking of "the first woman to…" exceptionalism discourse as it perpetuates patriarchal ideals. While this is not a new or novel argument, references made here to Plaatjies Van Huffel's case serve to illustrate the argument that being 'awarded' a "first woman to…" badge of honor may also be a badgering burden. Therefore, I suggest that pushing forward against patriarchal pushback, which is greatly evident in second-generation gender bias, calls for a virtue of unctuousness that holds in creative tension endurance and resistance in challenging and transforming the pervasive institutional culture of patriarchy in "the church". Considering the theological value of "solidarity", I suggest that reflective solidarity may be a plausible response in a move towards transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. As a theo-ethical concept, it could direct Christian women and men to reflect on their positionality and complicity in upholding the patriarchal institutional culture of the church. Reflective solidarity is not merely about "inclusion" but, rather, involves recognizing the legitimate presence of "othered" bodies, while also lending itself to challenging heteronormativity implicit in patriarchal institutional culture of the church.

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Crochet Methodology: Thinking Creatively about and with the Study of Religion in the Anthropocene

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

What stories of religion matter in the age of the Anthropocene? This paper begins by situating the *Abundance Crochet Coral Reef*, an installation of crocheted coralline landscapes exhibited at the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town, as a methodological motif and enactment to think creatively about and with the study of religion in the Anthropocene. Journeying through the current trends in various fields in the study of religion that are responsive to Anthropocene concerns, I argue that there is a growing body of scholarly work that troubles the dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture that have informed, and indeed, dominated, conceptualizations about religion and the study of religion. Finally, I turn to feminist theory to continue to in-tune religion storytelling (the study of religion) to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Drawing inspiration from the *Abundance Crochet Coral Reef*, I explore the concept of kinship to open creative vistas for methodological enrichment in the study of religion.

KEYWORDS
Anthropocene, the study of religion, crochet methodology, feminist theory, kinship

Introducing Crochet Methodology as Relevant for the Study of Religion[1]

A few weeks ago, I visited the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town. As expected, my two children wanted to reunite with Sally the Seal and Bruce the Shark, two fluffy characters in the Two Oceans Aquarium series of educational puppet shows. Then, we were off to the popular Touch Pool, an

1 Parts of certain sections in this article (ecofeminism and feminist theory in the Anthropocene) have been prepared in slightly revised versions for a book chapter in Norwegian entitled “Feminisme i Antropocen” (English: “Feminism in the Anthropocene”) to be published as part of the anthology *Antropocen. Menneskets tidsalder* (English: *The Anthropocene. The Age of Humans*), edited by Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Dag O. Hessen (Oslo: Res Publica, forthcoming January 2024), 131-149.

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interactive exhibit where visitors can get their hands wet (literally) to experience and feel the textures of anemones, kelp, and starfish. But, "hey, mommy, come! What's on that wall?" my six year old exclaims, forgetting all about the kelp in his hand. There, between the Touch Pool and the Penguin Exhibit, I see a mesmerizing display of colors. "Are those corals? Are they real?" We move closer.

The installation, entitled *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef*, was developed by the Woodstock Art Reef Project (WARP). Having curated the Cape Town Satellite Reef in 2010, as part of the worldwide eco-art project, the *Crochet Coral Reef*, *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* found a new home at the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town.[2] The installation is an entangled collection of crocheted coralline landscapes, hand-made by hundreds of local South Africans, primarily women. As an eco-art project, *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* draws attention to the severe damage to coral reefs around the world. Looking at the installation, the entire left side of the crochet coral reef is made by crocheting nuances and intricate gradations of white. The white coralline landscape demonstrates the phenomenon of coral bleaching, the process by which corals lose their effervescent colors and become white. The visuality of coral bleaching that the installation cultivates brings to mind, what radical evolutionary theoretician and cellular biologist, Lynn Margulis, termed, "the intimacy of strangers", namely, the fundamental evolutionary practice of becoming-with each other.[3] For the corals experiencing environmental stress, such as an increase in oceanic temperature and pollution, it is the loss of or, rather, the dissolution of the symbiotic condition (the cessation of multi-species entanglements) that causes the bleaching. Corals fade and turn white as they expel the microscopic algae that live within their tissue and give them color. Without the other, we do not survive.

2 The Crochet Coral Reef Project, initiated by the twin sisters Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim of the Institute for Figuring in Los Angeles, USA, is an eco-art response to climate change. Blending crocheted yarn with plastic trash, the installations draw on "mathematics, marine biology, feminist art practices, and craft to produce large-scale coralline landscapes". After its inception at the Institute for Figuring, a number of "satellite reefs" emerged all over the world, among them the Satellite Reef in Cape Town in 2010. See, Institute for Figuring, "Crochet Coral Reef". Accessed October 30, 2023. https://crochetcoralreef.org/about/theproject/.

3 See, Lynn Margulis, *Symbolic Planet. A New Look at Evolution* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1998).

The right side of the installation displays a healthy coralline landscape. Here, the vibrancy and vitality of the corals emerge in all their colorful livelihoods. Healthy sympoiesis, the "making-with" each other, illuminates multi-species entanglements and co-dependence.[4] Becoming-with each other, we flourish through "the intimacy of strangers".

Figure 1: *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef*, Two Oceans Aquarium, Cape Town, curated by Dr. Dylan McGarry in collaboration with the Woodstock Art Reef Project. Photo ©Nina Hoel 2023.

Using crochet as the primary aesthetic technique, the eco-art installation renders visible the use of traditional crafts in environmental activism. Traditional crafts practices are informed by situated knowledges, wherein locality/location is central. Traditional craft practices commonly arise from locally sourced material and/or recovery of materials, as well as ethical modes of production and recycling, practices that intriguingly also speak to

4 For a more thorough engagement with the notion of sympoiesis (making-with), see Donna Haraway, particularly chapter three titled "Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble" in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

global sustainability goals.[5] *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* embodies collaborative and entangled relations in the co-creation of intricate coralline landscapes. The ecological assemblage it projects extends an aesthetic invitation to visitors of the Two Oceans Aquarium to attend to the world through the process of worlding. That is, a way of being in the world that is attentive to our active and embodied engagement with materiality, a way of being that unsettles bodily boundedness, a way of being that troubles and makes porous the constructed boundaries between human-nature and nature-culture, and, instead, labors the connected and entangled nature of being and becoming-with other bodies.[6]

What does the eco-art-activism of crocheted coralline landscapes have to do with religion or the study of religion? I posit that *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* represents a rich methodological motif and enactment to think creatively about and with the study of religion in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene denotes our current geological era of anthropogenic ecological disruption. However, there are good reasons to be critical about the universal and universalizing story of the human (Anthropos) that the concept of the Anthropocene conveys. A troubling concept in itself of locating humans at the center of being and belonging, it simultaneously erases histories of social inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, the concept of the Anthropocene highlights the extractivist modes that arguably mark (all) human cultures. My use of the concept of the Anthropocene in this article is reflective of feminist and decolonial critiques that maintain that particular configurations of gender, race and class – transported and

5 For an intriguing discussion (and case study) on the relationships between traditional crafts and sustainability, see A. Bardhan and A. Bhattacharya, A., "Role of Traditional Crafts in Sustainable Development and Building Community Resilience: Case Stories from India," *Culture. Society. Economy. Politics*, 2, no. 1 (2022): 38-50. https://doi.org/10.2478/csep-2022-0004.

6 For scholarly engagements on worlding, I find particularly useful perspectives and thinking emerging from feminist new materialism. See, amongst others, Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Peta Hinton and Iris van der Tuin, "Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism," *Women: A Cultural Review* 25.1 (2014); Vicky Kirby, *Quantum Anthropology: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); and, Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, "Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporality," *Hypathia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 29.3 (2014): 558-575.

transposed through imperialism, colonialism, racism, capitalist interests, and traditional forms of masculinity (patriarchy) – played a major role in creating *this* Anthropocene. Foregrounding indigenous knowledges and practices, feminist and decolonial scholarly work offers important correctives to the universalizing, human-centered and extractivist politics of the Anthropocene.[7] Importantly, through their poignant critique of a universalizing anthropocentrism, feminist and decolonial scholars have crafted post-qualitative methodologies, reflective of feminist post-humanist and new materialist insights, which do much to destabilize anthropocentric and extractivist methodologies.

Methodology as a concept and approach suggests a way of understanding the world. Yet, on the one hand, methodology too, has been wrapped up in Enlightenment traditions that have taught us certain (and, indeed, correct) ways of knowledge making.[8] Post-qualitative methodologies, on the other hand, invite us and challenge us to understand and *think with* the world differently. Foregrounding embodiment and entanglement as characteristic of any knowledge-making activity, post-qualitative methodologies shift our attention away from anthropocentric research objectives towards knowledge-making practices that takes seriously the relationalities between human and more-than-human materialities. Using crafts as a central

7 For excellent scholarly discussions and critiques pertaining to the concept Anthropocene, see, Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Jason Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016); Anna Tsing, "Earth Stalked by Man," *Cambridge Anthropology* 34.1 (2016): 2-16; and T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2007). For scholarly work that foregrounds indigenous knowledges and practices in relation to the Anthropocene and anthropogenic ecological disruption, see, Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Daniel R. Wildcat, *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2009); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

8 An invocation that recalls Donna Haraway's idiomatic "God's eye view from nowhere", which, arguably, undergirded and dominated the application of scientific methodologies. Haraway, of course, critiqued this position and suggested, instead, that all knowledge is situated, located, and partial. See Donna Haraway "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14(3) (1988): 575-599.

component in sculpting new methodologies is one way in which alternative knowledge-making finds expression.[9] My positing of *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* as a methodological motif and enactment, then, emerges from this post-qualitative turn of using arts and crafts as central for knowledge-making. *Thinking with* the collaborative eco-art-activism of *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef*, opens up a creative nexus of worlding in the Anthropocene that can inform and reorient our scholarly gaze. *Thinking with* enables modes of thinking and practices that creatively explore the value of arts and crafts in knowledge making about religion, and, moreover, challenges us to *think differently* about religion and "the stuff of religion" in the Anthropocene.[10] *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* as a methodological motif and enactment, what I will call *crochet methodology*, projects a material aesthetic, embodying the sympoiesis that births an expansive and entangled understanding of the world and of being. That is, being as modes of connection, being as co-being and co-becoming. Crochet methodology, I argue, offers the study of religion a creative and critical materialist response to inherited notions of human exceptionalism, atomistic legacies, and Enlightenment hierarchies that continue to ghost religious discourses and phenomena (and/or scholars' interpretive understandings of them), and continue to sustain the making of *this* Anthropocene.

I contend that the study of religion has much to say about and to the Anthropocene. I also contend that the Anthropocene requires us, scholars of religion, to think creatively about the stories we wish to tell about religion. What stories of religion matter in the age of the Anthropocene?

Scholars of religion are deeply invested in the telling of stories: stories about religion. In our scholarly conceptualizations of religion, that is, what religion is, what religion does and what purpose it serves, and in our storying about

9 For excellent examples of methodologies where craft is central to knowledge-making, see Tania Pérez-Bustos and Andrea Bello-Tocancipá, "Thinking Methodologies with Textiles, Thinking Textiles as Methodologies in the Context of Transitional Justice," *Qualitative Research*, Nov 30 2023, OnlineFirst, 1-21; in South Africa, see, Puleng Segalo, "Embroidered Voices: Exposing Hidden Trauma Stories of Apartheid," *TEXTILE*, 21.2 (2023): 422-434; and "Using Cotton, Needles and Threads to Break the Women's Silence: Embroideries as a Decolonising Framework," *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20.3 (2016): 246-260.

10 I borrow the phrase, "the stuff of religion" from David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 2 and 79.

religion, we do, however, tend to move within methodologies and frameworks that are deeply anthropocentric. That is, our attention, our focus of study, our stories about religion, often centers on the human. We study religion by examining what people believe and what people do, through ritual enactment and practices. We study how religion is meaningful for people, how religion is navigated, and how religion is used, adapted, reconfigured, challenged, and renewed.

Through our extensive focus on humans, we often replicate and continue to perpetuate divisions and dualistic/hierarchical understandings of being, that is, between nature/culture, human/nature, human/animal, subject/object, and so on.[11] Of course, saying that scholars of religion often tell stories about humans is not to say that folks within the study of religion have not developed concepts and engaged in studies that involve the more-than-human. On the contrary, I argue that a focus on the more-than-human has always been a central feature of religious studies storytelling. Scholars of religion are invested in exploring creation narratives, mythologies, the workings of the divine, Gods and Goddesses, spirit beings and spirit worlds, and so on. Nevertheless, cosmological and ontological explorations are still, more often than not, about humans. It is about how *we* came into being, and how *we* make sense of *our* being in the world.

Much work has already been done in the study of religion that foregrounds the various ways in which imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, capitalism, and traditional forms of masculinity (patriarchy) have informed religion and the study of religion.[12] Yet, such work has primarily been concerned with documenting and, rightly, critiquing the history of

11 See, for example, Lori G. Beaman and Lauren Strumos, "Toward Equality: Including Non-Human Animals in Studies of Lived Religion and Nonreligion," *Social Compass*, 2023: 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686231170993.

12 On religion and imperialism/colonialism, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 1996) and *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); On religion and feminist perspectives, see the classical Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); for more recent scholarly work that also engages in issues of queerphobia, transphobia, and racism see, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and, of course, *African Journal of Gender and Religion.*

constructing religious hierarchies, hierarchies of human beings including the gendered and racialized norms that continue to be perpetuated in and through religious discourses, by religious communities and individual religious persons. What would such critical work look like if more-than-human materialities featured more centrally? Storying into the entanglements of human and more-than-human relationalities, into human-nature entwinement, nature-culture permeability, and multi-species intimacy, I posit, is central to telling stories about religion that matter in the Anthropocene.

In keeping with *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* as a methodological motif and enactment, I argue that approaching religion and telling stories about religion with crochet methodology reorients the study of religion away from human exceptionalism and Enlightenment hierarchies towards a process of worlding the study of religion as a critical response to/in the Anthropocene.

Before I venture into feminist theory to further elaborate on perspectives and concepts that I consider useful for thinking creatively about and with the study of religion in the Anthropocene, I journey through current trends in a selection of fields in the study of religion that are responsive to Anthropocene concerns in different ways.

The Study of Religion in the Anthropocene: Some Critical Turns

Undoubtedly, there exists a vast and growing body of scholarly work that troubles the constructed dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture that have informed and, indeed, dominated conceptualizations about religion and the study of religion.[13] Connectedly, research fields within the study of religion that are responsive to or engage with environmental challenges are well established and growing.[14] Most

13 For an article that traces the history and outlines central dimensions of the field of "religion and ecology", while also troubling the dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture, see, Nina Hoel and Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, "Transforming Feminisms: Religion, Women and Ecology," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 24.2 (2011): 5-16.

14 This section should not be read as an exhaustive account of what is happening in the study of religion in terms of trends in the field. Notions like the "animal turn" and the

notably, I would argue, is what some scholars have termed "the religious turn to ecology".[15] In part, the religious turn to ecology was a response to Lynn White's publication, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis", in the renowned journal *Science* in 1967.[16] In the article, White argues that Western Christianity, in particular, is a major cause of the global climate crisis. White's charge gave rise to heated debates in the study of religion and theology, about the role of religion in perpetuating dualistic worldviews and hierarchies (particularly that of human/nature) and the anthropocentrism/human exceptionalism that undergirds religious discourses. The theological project of "greening religion", that is, making religion more environmentally friendly (e.g. by ways of reinterpreting sacred texts, ritual creativity, the founding of green churches and mosques, and the like) took off.

Many theologians joined the green choir and stressed the need to recover the view of "this sacred earth" as foundational for environmental action and being in the world.[17] Moreover, scholars within various theological disciplines poignantly drew attention to relationships of domination and exploitation, such as colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy as having detrimental effects on the environment. That is, such relationships of domination and exploitation solidify dualistic and hierarchical relations (like human/nature) that inform and normalize (theological) conceptualizations of, in this instance, nature as *Other*. Conceptualizations of nature as Other and the (hu)man exceptionalism that have permeated theological discourses, theologians argued, have shaped the ways in which we, (hu)mans, have

"material turn" in the study of religion, not covered in this article, also do much to unsettle inherited dualisms. The trends engaged in this article are not watertight containers. Rather, they inform each other, and are co-evolving and interdisciplinary, drawing on multiple intersecting methodological and theoretical frameworks.

15 See, Catherine M. Tucker and Adrian J. Ivakhiv, "Intersections of Nature, Science, and Religion: An Introduction", in *Nature, Science, and Religion: Intersections Shaping Society and the Environment* (Santa Fe, N.M.: SAR Press, 2012).

16 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155(3767): 1203-1207.

17 See, for example, Roger S. Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1976); and the anthology, by by David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Grounds* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001).

related to everything else.[18] Theologians took to task theological anthropology, creation narratives and sacred texts as one way to deconstruct and reconstruct theology through an environmental lens. For many theologians, the recovery of historical (and mythical) figures who embodied different ways of being, that is, ways of being that were not characterized by and through relationships of domination and exploitation, became important. Foregrounding figures like Saint Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, and the Prophet Muhammed – although all human (!) – did the work of positing figures whose being in the world was characterized by a humble relationality to their surrounding environments.[19]

Theological work, at least in its early articulations, was concerned with deconstruction to make way for reconstructive and responsive eco-theologies. Scholars were invested in looking anew at theological ethics to expand the field of ethics to include environmental concerns.[20] Such endeavors found more practical expressions through the publication of "how-to" manuals and guides aimed at religious communities and leaders and, for lack of a better description, "self-help" handbooks aimed at individual believers who wished to become green, religious practitioners.[21]

Scholarly networks, like the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology (founded by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim), the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School, and the International Society for the

18 See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

19 On Saint Francis of Assisi, see, for example, Hendrik Viviers, "The Second Christ, Saint Francis of Assisi and Ecological Consciousness," *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (2014): 1-9; on Hildegard of Bingen, see, for example, Michael Marder, *Green Mass: The Ecological Theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021); on the Prophet Muhammed, see, for example, Heba Hasan, "Islam and Ecological Sustainability: An Exploration into Prophet's Perspective on Environment," *Social Science Journal for Advanced Research* 2.6 (2022): 9-14.

20 See, for example, Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013) and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

21 One example is Ibrahim Abdul-Matin's publication of *GreenDeen: What Islam Teaches About Protecting the Planet* (San Francisco, CA.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), which gives the reader information and advice on how to go about greening a mosque. Another example is Ellen Teague's *Becoming a Green Christian* (Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 2009).

Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC), primarily motivated by Bron Taylor and the academic milieu connected to the Graduate Programme in Religion and Nature at the University of Florida, resulted in the establishment of the field of "religion and ecology", alternatively "religion and nature", as a vibrant sub-discipline within the study of religion. ISSRNC, in particular, broadened the scope of scholarly engagement by positioning itself as an intersectional and interdisciplinary society, extending invitations not only to scholars of religion and theology but also to cultural anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, ethicists, and scholars in the life sciences. The scholarly networks named here produced a great number of publications and inspired the establishment of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (up until 2007 named *Ecotheology*), housed by ISSRNC. Returning to, what I posit as, the need to trouble the dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture in the study of religion, I believe that scholarly networks like the ISSRNC and the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, in particular, provide critical perspectives to studying religion, broadly understood, through its relationality and co-becoming with everything else. That is, the ways in which religion, as discourse and materiality, is never a stable or fixed category but unfolds and co-becomes through its relationality with people, societies, and environments, categories that are, also, always continuously intertwined, changing, and co-becoming. On the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* website, the description states that the journal explores "the complex relationships among human beings, their diverse 'religions' and the earth's living systems, while providing a venue for analysis and debate over what constitutes an ethically appropriate relationship between our own species and the environments we inhabit".[22] Such a focus does, indeed, trouble human exceptionalism by positing, as a key node, a much more complex and entangled lifeworld.

Of course, although the field of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and ecology can be said to be an integral part of the established field "religion and ecology", I believe it is important to foreground networks and scholarship on ATR and ecology to illustrate the dynamic ways in which environmental concerns are central to the study of religion on the African continent. Notably,

22 See, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, https://journal.equinoxpub.com/JSRNC. Accessed October 30, 2023.

the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), a scholarly network that focuses on the study of religion in Africa, has, through their biannual conferences, been increasingly attentive to environmental concerns. In 2014, I was lucky to be on the program committee for the 6th African Association for the Study of Religions Conference in Africa held in Cape Town. The theme for the conference was "Religion, Ecology, and the Environment in Africa and the African Diaspora". Following on the theme "Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development" of the 4th AASR conference in Ile-Ife, Nigeria in 2009, the AASR wished to "underscore its commitment to the growing environmental crisis and the impact it has on all areas of life and society in Africa and the African Diaspora".[23] In 2023, the 9th African Association for the Study of Religions Conference in Africa, held at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, included four panels as well as a number of individual papers that engaged with the theme of African ecologies and religion/eco-spiritualities. The contributions covered a broad range of topics, from literary and soundscape eco-poetics to case studies of religious responses to the environmental crisis and eco-spirituality as conservational praxis. Many contributors raised critical questions concerning the challenge of monoculturalization, an effect of colonial and imperial expansion on ecological knowledges, and the role of African traditional religion in preserving such knowledges. Contributions spoke to the politics of location and situated knowledges and visited historical and contemporary archives of religious eco-practices. Moreover, many papers troubled the tendency to romanticize African traditional religions' eco-affirming cosmologies by illustrating the various ways in which certain practices (for example, ritual sacrifice), negatively affect local ecologies.[24]

The contributions engaging with the theme of African ecologies and religion, under the banner of the AASR, are reflective of the growing interest and central importance of environmental matters in the study of religion on the African continent. Additionally, scholarship on ATR and ecology is critical for worlding the study of religion for, at least, the following four reasons:

23 African Association for the Study of Religions Conference in Africa, conference program Cape Town 2014, https://www.a-asr.org/. Accessed October 30, 2023.

24 African Association for the Study of Religions Conference in Africa, conference program Nairobi 2023, https://www.a-asr.org/. Accessed October 30, 2023.

(1) The field of ATR and ecology frequently talks back to the paradigm of "world religions" embedded in the study of religion, and, certainly in its early stages, the presence of the "world religions" paradigm in the field of "religion and ecology";[25]
(2) it offers poignant critiques of imperialism and colonialisms *in conversation* with concerns of traditional religions and the environment;
(3) as a field it is responsive to an environmental crisis that is happening (we are in it, as opposed to a crisis that is perceived to be coming); and
(4) ATR and ecology offers complex cosmologies and entanglements of relationships that involve deities, spirit beings, ancestors, humans, animals, and nature/environments.

This is not to say that these webs of relationships are perceived or projected to exist in harmony by romanticizing African worldviews for their inherent nature and more-than-human-affirming qualities. Rather, the complexity of cosmologies and entanglements of relationships offer possibilities for methodologies that unsettle the dualisms and hierarchies (e.g. human/nature) that dominate conceptualizations of religion and the study of religion. Interestingly, as we currently witness a turn to indigenous knowledges as critical sources of ecological knowledge (also from the sciences), we are reminded of the complicated ways in which knowledge travels and the parochial ways in which knowledges are validated as "scientific" or "true". The field of ATR and ecology is well positioned to trouble the romanticizing and exploitative efforts of knowledge-making along downtrodden imperial and colonial trade routes.

25 An illustrious example is the ambitious nine-volume Harvard book series, *Religions of the World and Ecology* (emerging from the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School). Here African Traditional Religion is represented in the anthology entitled *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* (2001) in one chapter (out of 26 chapters) that features the story of "the sacred egg" in West Africa. Suffice to say, the turn to indigeneity and indigenous knowledges was not exactly booming in early 2000s' scholarship on religion and ecology. See, John Grim (ed.), *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by the Harvard Press for the Centre for the Study of World Religions, 2001).

Another field in the study of religion that is similarly well-positioned to offer perspectives and concepts that disrupt and rupture normative, hegemonic, and essentializing conceptions of being and becoming is that of feminist studies in religion. Feminist scholars of religion have widely documented past and present forms of erasure, marginalization, and silencing of women's knowledges and voices. As such, feminist scholarship challenges us to be critical of our epistemological truths by making us conscious of our *situated* knowledges, our location and positioning in the world.

Feminist thinking has, over many years, problematized the relationship between humans and nature, not the least within the field of ecofeminism with its particular attention to the "logic of domination" that speaks to the parallel domination of humans over nature and men over women.[26] In short, although quite simplistically, ecofeminist thinking has engaged the splitting apart, the tear between humans and nature that through the philosophical, theological, and scientific discourses of the Enlightenment period became normalized. According to ecofeminist thinking, the concept of dualism has informed much western thinking and philosophizing about the human. Dualism, understood as a separation or splitting apart of a unit, is often traced back to René Descartes (1596-1650), who contemplated the distinction between the body and the mind (something both Plato and Aristotle did in similar ways before him). The Cartesian separation of the human did not only imply a distinction between two equal parts, the body, and the mind, but introduced a hierarchy wherein the body was inferior to the mind. The mind was the location of reason and rationality, the place where the human as a subject came into being. The body, on the other hand, became the object of the mind, a passive materiality without agency. The body became transformed into uncultivated and uncontrollable nature that needed to be disciplined. The mind represented culture. The mind represented the enlightened, civilized, and agentival subject.[27]

Ecofeminist readings of Cartesian dualism have led to the identification and problematization of a number of other dualisms that, arguably, are similarly

26 See, Karen Warren, *Ecological Ecofeminism* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey, "Transforming Feminisms: Religion, Women and Ecology," 5–16.

27 For an excellent and sophisticated engagement with the concept of dualism, see Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), particularly chapter two, "Dualism: the Logic of Colonisation", 41–68.

premised on the mind/body dualism. One of them is that of human/nature in western philosophical and scientific tradition. The dualism implies that the human is conceptualized as both *outside* and *above* nature. The human is the ruler of nature. Nature is inferior. Nature is not-human, not-culture. Nature stands in opposition to the mind, to reason, to the rational and civilized human. Nature is irrational, it has no reason. Nature is wild and rebellious and must naturally be disciplined and subjugated.[28]

In her landmark publication, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood argues that the human/nature dualism stimulated the West's brutal treatment of nature. Plumwood contends that dualisms such as this modelled the western modern political world. Nature, as a concept during the Enlightenment period, did not only concern non-humans but also extended to different groups of humans and human practices perceived to be uncivilized or animalistic. That is, gender, race, and ethnic differences determined the degree of humanness. Some groups of people were perceived to be closer to nature than others and, as such, were considered naturally inferior to the human who came into being through the logic of reason and rationality. The dualism of human/nature contained in this way several other separations: culture/nature, reason/nature, reason/materiality, subject/object, civilized/primitive, production/reproduction, master/slave, and man/woman. All similarly maintained a hierarchy where one category was considered superior.[29]

From an ecofeminist vantage point, these dualisms, or separations, did not merely operate conceptually under the umbrella of a western philosophical tradition. The dualisms became realities, they became materialized and enfleshed through the development of imperialist and colonial projects. Nature and humans were subjugated. Nature and some groups of humans were managed and constituted resources that could be exploited.

The association between woman and nature, or woman *as* nature, has long and deep-rooted traditions. In *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*

28 See Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 41–68; and Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey, "Transforming Feminisms: Religion, Women and Ecology," 5–16.

29 See Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 43, for a detailed list of "contrasting pairs".

(1996), Carolyn Merchant engages with the various ways in which woman *as* nature has been symbolized through historical-mythological characters such as Gaia, Eve, and Isis.[30] Using Eve as an example, Merchant notes that Eve, as a virgin in the Biblical universe, symbolized innocence and "untouched nature" on the one hand. As a fallen woman, on the other hand, she symbolized a "barren desert". Eve, as a mother, symbolized a "planted garden…a ripened, fruitful world".[31] While the Fall (that Eve was blamed for) transformed the Garden of Eden into a depleted wasteland. Adam and Eve were evicted from the garden, God appointed man to be the ruler of woman. The man was the guardian of reason. The woman was irrational, a temptress driven by bodily desires. Eve, the temptress, symbolized the sinful human. She caused the human expulsion from paradisiacal existence to earth-boundedness.

The Garden necessarily needed to be re-created, Carolyn Merchant argues.[32] The Christian tradition (with its connections to imperialist and colonial projects), together with science, capitalism, and technology, can be read from an ecofeminist standpoint as a story about re-creating the Garden of Eden on earth. In this story, the earth must be improved, the soil must be cultivated, wilderness must be de-wilded and ploughed, and deserts must be watered.[33] In this story a woman knows her place as inferior to the man. She must also be de-wilded, ploughed, impregnated, and give birth to the children of the patriarch that belong to him as his property.

The feminization of earth and nature is not necessarily archaic or out-of-sync with contemporary society, as many may think. We find similar symbols and illustrations in popular culture as well as throughout political discourses. In

30 Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1996).
31 See, Merchant, *Earthcare*, xvi.
32 Merchant, *Earthcare*, xvi.
33 Jack Halberstam's book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, invites us to journey through an alternative history of sexuality, a history where wildness has been inscribed onto queer bodies. Although, perhaps, centrally presenting an original critique of the modern liberal subject, Halberstam innovatively demonstrates the various ways in which wildness as knowing and being destabilizes boundedness and predictability. Thinking with Halberstam's 'wild thinking' as it pertains to imperial, colonial and Christian imaginings of a new Garden, offers us alternative and transgressive insights on the wild and wilderness. See, Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).

2009, the UN established the International Mother Earth Day (22 April) to remind the world population that the earth gives us life and sustenance. In Cape Town earlier this year (2023), International Mother Earth Day was marked, amongst other events and performances, by the My CITI bus service, which proudly proclaimed "eco-warrior status" and drove around the inner city carrying the slogan: "Take the bus – Mother Nature will love you for it."

Figure 2: My CITI bus celebrating International Mother Earth Day 22 April 2023. Photo ©Nina Hoel 2023

Ecofeminist thinking and theorizing has done much to raise awareness in the study of religion and theology about the place of nature and of women. In so doing, ecofeminists have simultaneously rendered visible the entangled forms of oppression at work under the auspices of the logic of domination. Ecofeminist theologians, such as Heather Eaton and Ivone

Gebara, have presented radical, theological, earth-centered-approaches where dualisms and hierarchical religious categories are destabilized and eschewed in favor of cosmologies that speak to vibrant networks of complexly embodied relationships between humans and the more-than human.[34] Foregrounding embodiment, ecofeminists' rich reconceptualizations of theology importantly contribute to processes of worlding religion. Imagining cosmologies, not as a "given" but, rather, as emerging and co-evolving, ecofeminists present us with fruitful understandings of entangled life-worlds and being.

Feminist Theory in the Anthropocene: Crocheting Methodological Openings for the Study of Religion

Why look to feminist theory and crochet methodology when so much interesting work pertaining to religion and the environment already exists in the study of religion? As the previous section shows, there has been a growing interest in environmental issues within the study of religion, and much work has already been done on broadening the units of analysis to include materiality, relationality, locatedness, and human interdependence with more-than-human concerns. While I maintain that there exists a richness within the study of religion that bodes well for religion scholarship to tell stories about religion that are responsive to Anthropocene concerns, I also contend that there is much to learn methodologically about ways of approaching more-than-human relationalities in religion by looking to feminist theory.

In her chapter "The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges", feminist philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz, beautifully and engagingly probes the various ways in which feminist theory holds the potential to generate concepts that "enable us to surround ourselves with the possibilities for being otherwise".[35] Relatedly, Donna Haraway, drawing

34 See, Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005) and Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

35 Elisabeth Grosz, "The Future of Feminist Theory: Dreams for New Knowledges," in H. Gunkel, C. Nigianni, and F. Soderback (eds), *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2012), 13–22 (quotation pp.13–14).

on social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work, writes in *Staying with the Trouble* that "[i]t matters what stories make worlds, and what worlds make stories".[36] Feminist theorizing in the Anthropocene often starts with stories and, in many ways, feminism in the Anthropocene is about telling stories and re-telling stories to contribute to the project of worlding, that is, making worlds that can hold deeply entangled lives. I turn to feminist theory to continue pushing our reimagining of methodologies in religion, and to in-tune and responsibly attune our storytelling about religion to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Just as the material aesthetic of *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* births and extends an expansive and entangled understanding of the world and of being bodies enfolded within one another, feminist theorizing in the Anthropocene foregrounds bodily entanglements. That is, entanglements between humans and environments, between humans and the more-than-human, *and* entanglements between pasts and presents, and the possibilities these entanglements offer for worlding. Feminist theorizing attends to bodily materiality in a way that connects it to environmental concerns. Through the lenses of feminist posthumanism and hydrofeminism, bodily materiality and the environment are not separate; they are entangled, embodied, and evolve through mutual conditioning.[37] At the same time, as noted when introducing the concept of the Anthropocene in the introduction of this article, the Anthropocene is not a singular narrative about human entanglements with the geological. The Anthropocene, read through feminist lenses, reminds us that our common/shared human history is not the history

36 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 12.

37 For excellent scholarship on feminist posthumanism, see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) and Stacey Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); for hydrofeminist perspectives and connected scholarly works that innovatively thinks with water and oceans for environmental justice, see, Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) and "Hydrofeminism: Or, on Becoming a Body of Water," in H. Gunkel, C. Nigianni, and F. Soderback (eds.), *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2012), 85–99; for emerging scholarship that thinks with oceans in relation to higher education in South Africa, see, Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer (eds.), *CriSTaL* (Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning) Special Issue: *Thinking with Ocean/s for Reconceptualising Scholarship in Higher Education*, 11, 2 (2023). DOI:10.14426/cristal.v11iSI2.722.

of everybody. As also widely documented by feminist scholars in religion, many groups of humans were deliberately excluded, marginalized and de-humanized. If anything, the Anthropocene – the age of humans – is brutally *in*human.

Feminist theorizing in the Anthropocene is, thus, also about problematizing the universal and universalizing story of the Anthropocene. That is, that humans (as a species) have changed the planet for the worse. The Anthropocene as an Age, then, runs the risk of re-universalizing the human and human relationships with the more-than-human. For feminism then, it is important that such a conflation, or *thinning*, of the narrative is challenged by foregrounding the various ways in which imperialism, colonialism, racism, capitalist interests, and traditional forms of masculinity (patriarchy) are deeply intertwined in the making of *this* Anthropocene.[38] Feminist thinking in the Anthropocene is about illuminating these tangles, the human-centered discourses that have modelled and continue to model human relations with the more-than-human.

The contemporary climate challenges make it necessary to consider humans as a species. Not because the human species is what unites us (that would be the universal story), but because our very existence is conditioned through our coexistence/co-becoming/becoming with the more-than-human. We, too, embody "the intimacy of strangers". Feminist theorizing in the Anthropocene is about turning the gaze outwards, away from our limited understandings of ourselves, so that we can develop ways of thinking, ways of being with, becoming *with* the more-than-human, and think new forms of kinship, making kin across species distinctions. Becoming with is, quite simply, about the recognition that we, I, or the more-than-human are a result of several complex and entangled relations and intimacies. To be, is to be *in relation*, all the time. Relationality with the more-than-human is the starting point or, more precisely, a *continuity* that makes it possible to know anything about anything at all.

38 See Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

The relational has, in feminist thinking, been given a central space in the theorization and conceptualization of the body. When it comes to the human body, it does not necessarily stop at the surface: the skin. With cultural theorist and hydrofeminist, Astrida Neimanis, we might conceive of ourselves as "bodies of water", connected through "webs of physical intimacy and fluid exchange".[39] Expansive conceptualizations of the human body perforate bodily membranes that sustain environmental disconnect; this outer layer of skin that is me, the demarcation that separates me from everything else, my boundedness is an illusion. What is the human body, *really*, if not part of everything else? The body emerges from, is shaped through, and shares kinship and genealogy with other biological material and abiotic factors (like electricity, light, and temperature). We gestate, ingest, and digest our surrounding environments through the food and liquid we devour. Our bodies leak. We are penetrable. We have microplastics in our blood, heavy metal in our liver, and particulate matter in our lungs. Our bodies are hybrids, cyborgs, its materiality fragmented. Some of us have pacemakers to survive, hip prosthesis to walk, or veneers to make our teeth look pretty.

The relational plasticity of the human body and its entanglements with the more-than-human entered feminist theorizing from the mid-1980s with Donna Haraway's theorization of the cyborg (cybernetic organism), a hybridization of a living being and machine.[40] The figuration of the cyborg troubled and opened the rigid separation between skin and metal, between the human body and machine. Although Haraway's conceptualization of the cyborg emerged through her contemplation of destructive materialities, such as modern warfare and weapons production, the cyborg as a figuration was intended to weave together fantasy and material reality. In this way, the cyborg embodies an enmeshment of the imagined and the real that pushes us to confront and destabilize the dualisms that inform our being in the world.

39 Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism," 85, and Mark McMenamin and Dianna McMenamin, *Hypersea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 15, quoted in Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism", 86.

40 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Socialist Review*, 80 (1985): 65–108.

On the basis that the cyborg complicates the ontological separation between human and machine, Haraway argues that the cyborg as a metaphor hold the potential to dissolve dualisms like man/woman, technology/nature, and life/non-life.[41] The materiality of the cyborg, as a fragmented and complexly composed body, introduced new ways to theorize the relational, the entangled, and the hybrid. In this sense, the cyborg functions as one of (potentially) many metaphors, a thinking tool, that contributes to the feminist project of thinking new forms of kinship in the Anthropocene. Kinship in this way is not only about acknowledging humans as being part of relations with the more-than-human or that the relations we are part of condition life and death. Kinship is also about cultivating an expanded understanding of responsibilities and commitments. We have many examples of forms of kinship that expand conceptions of the nuclear family or the family tree, for example, perhaps particularly associated with various indigenous populations whose understandings of kinship include kinship with the land, with animals and the environment more broadly, and with connected responsibilities and duties, in addition to other humans, both living and the living-dead (or ancestors).[42]

Of course, we cannot become kin or share kinship with everything or everyone. Through our bodies and our positioning in the world, we are situated in time, in space, in matter. We are already part of several different networks that are earthbound, placebound, and timebound. Kinship thought of in this way can include companion species such as a domestic animal or other animal-beings. Indeed, kinship can emerge with the apple tree that was planted when my grandfather passed away, or with the pine tree at the end of the road that in a memory resound the pecking of a woodpecker, or the mussels along the shore that tore into my feet, or the mountain of trash that, for millions of people, is livelihood and home. Kinship is then not only about life, but also about death; the expulsion of the "stranger" that sustains us. In feminist thinking about kinship, the story about the human is refocused to become a story about being, living and dying with companion-species, and with more-than-human materialities.

41 Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs".

42 The field of African Traditional Religion and ecology engaged earlier in this article contains rich theorizations of kinship in connection with environmental concerns.

Crocheting the Study of Religion

How can we do religious studies in a more multi-species way? How can we reconfigure and expand/stretch our methodologies and our concepts so as to take the more-than-human *more* seriously? How do we go about doing this in ways that de-center human exceptionalism and the philosophical and scientific discourses that inform our thinking about religion? This article has proposed *The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef* as a methodological motif and enactment to think creatively with and about the study of religion in the Anthropocene. My imagining of crochet methodology is meant as an aesthetic illustration of the possibilities for thinking (and being) otherwise, an opening to think-with and meditate more-than-human relationalities; a call to partake in responsive scholarship in this age of the Anthropocene. Crochet methodology, I argue, can push us to shift our point of entry from engaging human concerns to that of the entangled concerns with the more-than-human. By positing a methodological motif and enactment that vividly projects becoming-with as foundational for all that is, I hope to encourage scholars of religion to tell stories about religion that are attentive to the complexity and messiness of religious life-worlds. Partaking in processes of worlding religion is to be attentive to religion as a relational and embodied "category". Religion is never fixed, but unfolds and co-becomes with people, societies, and environments. Religion, too, it can be argued, exists only through the "intimacy of strangers" that co-create, embody, and animate local environments.

The Abundance Crochet Coral Reef as a methodological motif and enactment, draws our attention to kinship, being, and becoming with each other. It draws our attention to the process of sympoiesis. In this article, I have engaged feminist conceptualizations of kinship to illustrate potential sites and possibilities for multi-species thinking. Such imaginings of embodied relationalities do much to de-center human exceptionalism and provide figurative resources for scholars in religion to delve into the rich archives of religious cosmologies, cartographies, and aesthetics. Indeed, feminist imaginings of kinship are arguably echoed in the field of ecofeminism and religion and ecology, and perhaps, in particular, in the field of African Traditional Religion and ecology. With crochet methodology, I believe in the collaborative and co-creative efforts of knowledge collectives to storying religion in ways that increasingly trouble the power relations that continue to sustain *this* Anthropocene.

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