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Physical Address:
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice
University of the Western Cape
Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535
Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 21 959 2383
E-mail: dtc@uwc.ac.za / ajgr@uwc.ac.za

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

Sarojini Nadar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can African Women be Womanists?

Oluwatomisin Olayinka Oredein[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Oluwatomisin Oredein is the Assistant Dean for Strategic Initiatives and Theological Imagination and an Associate Professor in Black Religious Traditions, Constructive Theology and Ethics at Brite Divinity School.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
[i]Brite Divinity School
o.oredein@tcu.edu

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6431-6053

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ABSTRACT

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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11 Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 7.

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

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

14 Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 69.

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

16 Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 41.

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

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

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

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

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

18 Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 55-58.

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

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

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

The Dialogical Participants

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

African Women's Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Womanist Theology and Ethics

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

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

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

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

The Dilemma of Blackness

Parsing Out Blackness: What Does it Mean?

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

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

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

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

28 See Tom Meisenhelder, "African Bodies: 'Othering' the African in Precolonial Europe," *Race, Gender, and Class* 10, no. 3, (2003): 100-113.

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

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

Subsuming "Blackness" in Womanist Discourse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For African American womanists, then, "Black" is synonymous with African-descended, meaning that it can also become descriptive of a certain branch of Black identity.[33]

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

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

Womanist Recognition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

37 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 190.

38 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 189-193.

Womanist Misrecognition

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

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

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

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

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

[39] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.

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

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

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

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

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

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

African Women and Continental Commitment

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

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

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

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

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

44 Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 24.

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

46 Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

50 Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron", 261.

51 Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron", 262.

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

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

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

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

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

53 Oyěwùmí, "Alice in Motherland", 176.

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

55 Steady, "African Feminism", 8.

conversation extends beyond fine geographic lines and specific cultural bounds and forces us to consider terminology's historical use.[56]

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

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

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

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

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

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

African-descended voices that historically, instead of immediately, come from the African continent.[59]

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

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

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

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

[59] How African women talk about themselves considering their cultures may not employ "Black" categorization, but once expanded extra-continentally, "African" and "Black" designation are closer together than initially thought and, in some instances, synonymous.

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Wearing Christ: A Lived Theology of the Uniform among Reformed Women in Zambia

Marike Blok-Sijtsma[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Marike Blok-Sijtsma, lecturer in Practical Theology, taught at Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia (2018-2023). Currently, she is lecturing at VIAA - Christian University for Applied Sciences and pursuing a PhD at Utrecht University (both in the Netherlands).

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
[i]Utrecht University
marike.blok.s@gmail.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1484-4215

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ABSTRACT

Members of African ecclesiastical women's organisations can be recognised by a special uniform they wear during meetings, Christian holidays, and designated Sundays. This uniform, and its wearing, can be considered a kind of religious practice that carries theological meaning. Often, this practice reflects a lived theology shaped by women's everyday life experiences, rather than a formalised theology. This article teases out women's lived theology of the uniform based on empirical research (observations, interviews, focus groups) from one women's fellowship, the Chigwirizano cha Azimai of the Reformed Church in Zambia. The article illustrates how the uniform is not simply a symbol of membership but, rather, a significant embodiment of the faith and religious identity of the members of the women's fellowship. It represents the core doctrines of the Christian faith, a commitment to a holy lifestyle, and a divine calling to be a light in a dark world. It also reminds the wearers to stand firm in a world full of socio-economic challenges, patriarchy, and spiritual warfare. For some, it acts as a shield, protecting them against temptation and evil powers.

KEYWORDS: women's fellowship, lived theology, religious dress, uniform, Reformed Church in Zambia, African women's theology

Introduction

A uniform is a distinctive characteristic of ecclesiastical women's organisations in Southern and Eastern Africa.[1] The phrase "I started to wear the uniform" is synonymous with "I became a member of the women's fellowship". Women wear the uniform during fellowship meetings, Christian

[1] Beverley Haddad, "The Manyano Movement in South Africa: Site of Struggle, Survival, and Resistance," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 18, no. 61 (2004): 11; Phoebe Faith Chifungo, "Women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod: A Practical Theological Study of Their Leadership Roles," (Stellenbosch University, 2014), 47, http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/96112; Lihle Ngcobozi, "Lizalise Idinga Lakho [Honour Thy Promise]: The Methodist Church Women's Manyano, the Bifurcated Public Sphere, Divine Strength, Ubufazi and Motherhood in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (Rhodes University, 2017), 2; Beth Ann Williams, "Mainline Churches: Networks of Belonging in Postindependence Kenya and Tanzania," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 48, no. 3 (2018): 272.

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holidays, and designated Sundays, sitting together in the front pews. The uniformed women are considered the backbone of the church and are, usually, very active in pastoral care, evangelism, and fundraising. This study focuses on the members of one women's fellowship, the *Chigwirizano cha Azimai* (henceforth CcA) of the Reformed Church in Zambia (henceforth RCZ), one of the mainline protestant churches in Zambia.[2] Each congregation within the RCZ has a local women's fellowship chaired by the pastor's wife. These fellowships are interconnected at the regional and national levels.

During my fieldwork, it became evident that the uniform is not a colonial or missional remnant, although the modest design may suggest so, but, rather, a meaningful garment for the CcA members in the 21st century. While initially puzzled, I realised that the uniform is a dress that expresses and embodies various beliefs and convictions. Wearing the uniform is a profoundly religious practice, as is evidenced by the statement of one of the members of the CcA, *amai* Chisomo: "When you are in your uniform, some of us feel just happy. You feel as if you are moving with Jesus just next to you."[3]

This article explores the theological meaning contemporary CcA members ascribe to the uniform. How do they perceive the meaning of the uniform's design and colours? Which metaphors do they use to describe it? How do

[2] This research is part of a PhD study at Utrecht University about the Women's Fellowship of the Reformed Church in Zambia. I conducted my fieldwork between 2019 and 2023, while I was a lecturer at Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia, an institution owned by the Reformed Church in Zambia. The Reformed Church in Zambia was born out of mission work by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. The RCZ became an independent church in 1966. Currently, it consists of 17 presbyteries, 200 congregations, and approximately 1,000,000 members. The women's fellowship has just under 40,000 members. For a brief history of the RCZ see: Gideon van der Watt and Mariette Odendaal, *A Family of Reformed Churches in Africa. Remarkable Stories of God's Grace*, second edition (CLF Publishers, 2022), 76-84.

[3] *Amai* Chisomo, participant of Focus Group 4, Shalom (24 September 2021). *Amai* is the standard way to address an adult woman. Chisomo is a fictive name. To protect the anonymity of the informants, all names of persons and congregations are anonymised. For this article, I refer to my data by indicating the type of meeting (individual interview, focus group or gathering), the name of the congregation and the date of the interview, focus group, or gathering. If necessary, I mention the position of the interviewee. Most of the participants were women; if not, the sex is indicated.

they perceive wearing the uniform? Using the uniform as a lens, this article maps aspects of the *lived theology* of members of the CcA in Zambia. Insight into the lived theology of CcA members provides a better understanding of how these women live their faith, search for meaning, and what role being a CcA member plays in all this.

The article is structured as follows: First, it discusses the methodology and data collection methods. To situate the experiences and stories, it then briefly pays attention to the origins of the practice of church uniforms in the early 20th century in southern Africa. Subsequently, it analyses the theological themes emerging from the data acquired during fieldwork. Through an inductive analytical process of the data, three main thematic theological clusters emerge that shed light on how the uniform expresses a lived theology: women consider the uniform to be 1) a representation of their faith and a holy lifestyle, 2) a reminder of their vocation, and 3) an embodiment of spiritual power.

Methodology

This article is part of an ongoing larger empirical research project on the significance of women's fellowships in present-day African Christianity, specifically focusing on the meaning of membership for women. In other articles, I argue that the uniform is more than just a significant identity marker and symbol of belonging for CcA members. It signifies women's commitment to Christ and leading a holy life. As such, the uniform mirrors gender ideals and moral standards as propagated by the RCZ.[4]

In this article, I study the uniform within the *lived theology* framework. Lived theology is an interdisciplinary approach that makes use of the social sciences as well as theology. Sociologists of religion, such as Nancy Ammerman and Meredith McGuire, introduced the study of *lived religion* to

[4] Marike Blok-Sijtsma, "Cash, Cooking and Cleaning. The Contribution of the Women's Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia." In *Ecclesiology in Africa*, edited by David K. Ngaruiya and Rodney L. Reed (Langham Global Library, 2024), 303–323; Marike Blok-Sijtsma, "Work done for God": The Role of the Women's Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia," *Exchange* 54, no. 3 (2025): 248-276. Forthcoming: Marike Blok-Sijtsma, "Why this Uniform? The Significance of the Uniform for Members of the Women's Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia," *Studies in World Christianity* (University Press).

draw attention to the religious practices of ordinary people rather than confining the study of religion to doctrinal or cognitive ideas as defined by theologians or institutions.[5] Their research concentrates on how people at home and in the streets, embedded in specific contexts, experience and bring "alive" beliefs and convictions.[6] Lived religion and lived theology are contested terms that are sometimes used interchangeably.[7] I opt for lived theology for this article, which I consider a sub-category of lived religion, as I analyse the data from a theological point of view. Based on the theory of lived religion/theology, I postulate that the way CcA members perceive and interpret the uniform reveals something about their experience of God in their daily lives. As Helen Cameron states, "practices participated in and observed are themselves bearers of theology" and "a proper 'articulation' of theological conviction and insight".[8] Within the scope of this article, three characteristics of the lived theology framework are taken into consideration: 1) Lived theology is performative and it takes place within the everyday practices of religious life; 2) Lived theology is complex and multi-layered and is about thought and action where people may attribute different meanings to and interpret the same practices differently; and 3) lived theology is not

5 Meredith McGuire, "Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance", in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 187–200; Nancy T. Ammerman, "Rethinking Religion: Toward a Practice Approach," *American Journal of Sociology* 126, no. 1 (2020): 6–51, https://doi.org/10.1086/709779.

6 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Social Practices and Cultural Contexts: Frameworks for the Study of Spirituality," in *Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power*, ed. Brian Steensland, Jaime Kucinskas, and Anna Sun (Oxford University Press, 2022), 35–36, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197565001.003.0002.

7 Social scientists and practical theologians apply the adjective "Lived" as in "Lived religion", "Lived theology" or "Lived faith". Definitions overlap since the social sciences have rediscovered religion as a crucial factor in the lives of people in and outside institutions, and theology has broadened its scope from the study of doctrine to the empirical study of "experiences, beliefs, values and practices which take place in all spheres of life as long as they relate to notions of sacredness or transcendence in some way" (cited from Henk de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices*, (Brill, 2020), 106. For an overview and development of definitions, see Roest, 100-106 and Ammerman, "Rethinking Religion," 9-11. Others refer to theology or theologies located in everyday life as ordinary, non-academic, informal, narrative, or oral theology, in contrast to formal or written theology.

8 Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2010), 51.

coherent or systematic but, rather, an individual's lived theology may consist of contradicting or conflicting perspectives.[9]

By focusing on the lived theology of the uniform, I attempt to capture and make heard a marginalized voice that is not often part of the dominant narrative on Christianity in Africa. Religious and cultural systems usually ignore and marginalize the "unspoken" voices of women, even though women comprise approximately 70% of church membership in churches all over Africa.[10] By contrast, African Women Theologians, organised in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, consider women's voices, stories, and experiences primary resources for theology and knowledge.[11] Women, such as the CcA members, do not write or articulate a theology but "live and practice" a theology in "everyday experiences and activities", as the late Kenyan theologian, Anne Nasimuyu Wasiki, states.[12] Though Circle members do not use the term lived theology, the framework seems consistent with the methodology of the Circle members, who call attention to faith experiences in the everyday lives of African women and consider this a source of theology. Zambian Circle members also encourage Zambian women "to research and write about their own stories and experiences and those of other women that have not been told for long".[13]

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9 Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 65-66.

10 H. Jurgens Hendriks, "Churches, Seminaries and Gender Statistics," in *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew?: Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa*, ed. Elna Mouton et al. (AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, 2012), 27; L. J. Joziasse, "Women's Faith Seeking Life: Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches," (Utrecht University, 2020, PhD dissertation), 18, http://hdl.handle.net/1874/398494; Lilian Cheelo Siwila, "Introduction: African Women Speak out in the Face of Empire," in *Chikamoneka!: Gender and Empire in Religion and Public Life,* ed. Lilian Cheelo Siwila, Sylvia Mukuka and Nelly Mwale (Mzuni Press, 2022), 20.

11 Beverley Haddad, "African Women's Theologies of Survival: Intersecting Faith, Feminisms, and Development." (University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2000, PhD dissertation), 4–5; Siwila, "African Women Speak out in the Face of Empire," 31.

12 Anne Nasimiyu Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, 2nd ed. (Acton Publishers, 1998), 130.

13 Siwila, "African Women Speak out in the Face of Empire," 14.

Uncovering this lived theology requires close observations and careful listening. Fieldwork was conducted in Zambia between 2019 and 2023 for this research project. Three local fellowships that were part of local congregations belonging to the same presbytery of the Reformed Church of Zambia were selected: Shalom (an urban congregation), Fountain (peri-urban), and Vineyard (rural). Various methods used to gather information included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participatory observations. Ordinary members, leaders, and pastors' wives participated in the focus groups and interviews. I attended meetings at all levels and informally interacted with many women during breaks, meals, and in the corridors. To gather information on the official view on the uniform, as declared in the documents of the RCZ, I consulted *Buku la Zinchito*, the handbook of the CcA, and the constitution of the RCZ, both of which include regulations and prescriptions concerning the uniform.[14] Two male pastors were also interviewed, who, at different times, held the position of *actuarius*, the liaison between the Synod Executive Committee (the national board of the RCZ) and the national board of the CcA.[15] During the analytical stage, information, and my interpretation of the data, was cross-checked with informants via WhatsApp. Moreover, to ensure that the data had been interpreted within the cultural beddings, Associate Professor, Dr. Lukas R. K. Soko, a former Zambian colleague at Justo Mwale University, read and commented on the draft of this article. Ethical guidelines for human-centred research at Utrecht University were observed throughout this fieldwork.

[14] Reformed Church in Zambia, *Buku La Zinchito Za Chigwirizano Cha Azimai*, (2015); Reformed Church in Zambia, *The Constitution, by-Laws and Procedures of the Reformed Church in Zambia* (2013).

[15] According to the RZC constitution, the actuarius is "the person appointed to be the chief whip and interpreter of the RCZ Constitution, By-Laws and Procedures". Reformed Church in Zambia, The Constitution, by-laws and procedures of the Reformed Church in Zambia, art. 47.c. The task of the actuarius is, among other things, to support and provide guidance to the CcA and determine if their decisions are in line with the overall constitution of the church.

The historical setting of the Chigwirizano cha Azimai and its uniform

The Dutch Reformed Church from Orange Freestate (South Africa) initiated mission work in the eastern part of Zambia in 1896. The RCZ, including the CcA, emerged from these missionary endeavours. As part of the mission work, missionary wives and single female missionaries organised special activities for women, mainly at the local level around the mission station. They taught sewing and literacy classes in line with the domestic ideal they promoted, that of a good Christian woman caring for her family.[16] In the 1940s, missionary wives started to organise work among women in a more structured way and connected the local groups to a national movement named *Chigwirizano cha Azimai*.[17] Initially, the members of the CcA did not wear a uniform, nor was this customary among the missionary wives or the fellowship members in the Dutch Reformed Church. When the first indigenous RCZ pastor's wives came across this practice among members

16 J. M. Cronjé, *Vroue met nardusparfuum: die aandeel van die vrou in die sendingwerk van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, 1st edition (NG Kerkboekhandel Transvaal, 1984), 134-36.

17 Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia: The Scope for African Leadership and Initiative in the History of a Zambian Mission Church* (Wever, 1982), 187. *Chigwirizano cha Azimai* literally means the "women's guild or alliance". It refers to the *Vrouwebond* in the Dutch Reformed church in South Africa, and the Mothers' Union within the Anglican church.

of African women's church organisations in South Africa and Malawi, they made a case for introducing the uniform in the CcA.[18] In Zambia, the missionary wives were initially reluctant to promote the "unnecessary" uniform because they feared it would make the members proud and create division between the CcA members and other female church members.[19] However, after persistence from the Zambian members who felt it important to don the uniform, they complied, and in the 1950s, the uniform became common practice. Since then, the modest design and colours of the uniform, consisting of a long black skirt, a white blouse with long sleeves, a belt and a round collar, a black headscarf and black shoes, have not changed. The uniform also includes a badge pinned on the blouse, though not all members wear it.[20]

Literature on African women's fellowships has drawn attention to the uniform of women's fellowships as a dress full of meaning. According to Deborah Gaitskell in her historical study of Women's Fellowships in South Africa, the origin of the design and colours of the uniform is not completely clear. She hypothesises that a military-style may have influenced the design and colours of the uniform in South/ern Africa in the early twentieth century.[21] Despite there being no indications that the design and colours were initially intended to be symbolic, Gaitskell mentions that as early as 1925, Methodist Manyano members in South Africa began attributing meaning to the colours of their uniform, seemingly epitomising core aspects of the Christian faith: black representing sin, red denoting the blood of Jesus, and white referring to holiness and purity.

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18 Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission Church,* 187.

19 Verstraelen-Gilhuis, *From Dutch Mission Church,* 250.

20 Reformed Church in Zambia, The Constitution, by-laws and procedures of the Reformed Church in Zambia, 82.6; Reformed Church in Zambia, *Buku La Zinchito Za Chigwirizano Cha Azimai*, 9. Only the national synod meeting of the RCZ (the church's highest authority) may change these prescriptions.

21 Deborah Gaitskell, "Female Mission Initiatives: Black and White Women in Three Witwatersrand Churches, 1903-1939". (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 1981), 216-220, https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00033856

Other historical studies on women's fellowships (*manyano*) in South Africa and Zimbabwe provide similar explanations of the colours.[22] In a 2017, study of a Methodist women's fellowship in Zimbabwe, Martin Mujinga states that the colours and all the different parts of the uniform (belt, buttons, etc.) carry symbolic meaning for Zimbabwean *Manyano* members.[23] A recent study by Lihle Ngcobozi on the Methodist *Manyano* in South Africa corroborates this assertation that the uniform carries theological significance. She cites a *Manyano* member who states that, "[t]he *Manyano* uniform is red, black, and white. And because everything we do is spiritual, every part of the uniform has a spiritual meaning, it's not just a play-thing", and subsequently gave a detailed explanation of all the colours and pieces of the uniform.[24] Beverley Haddad, who studied the Anglican women's fellowship Mother's Union in South Africa, found that the uniform is one of the "expressions of subjugated *survival* theologies" and "infused with God's power, it brings hope and comfort and healing in the face of illness".[25]

The lived theology of the uniform for the members of the CcA

During fieldwork, it was apparent that the uniform was also important for the Zambian women who participated in this research, where it contributed to feelings of unity and belonging and filled the women with pride. Members were observed handling the uniform with great care, ensuring that it was always spotless and carefully ironed. Women never wore the uniform while completing household chores and protected it against dust and dirt, by wrapping a *chitenge* (cotton-coloured wrap) with the logo of the RCZ over it when necessary. Informants often mentioned that being buried in the uniform was one of the membership privileges. Some informants used

22 Farai David Muzorewa, "Through Prayer to Action. The Rukwadzano Women of Rhodesia," in *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*, eds. T. Ranger and J. Weller (Heinemann, 1975), 261; Marja Hinfelaar, *Respectable and Responsible Women: Methodist and Roman Catholic Women's Organisations in Harare, Zimbabwe* (Boekencentrum, 2001), 53; Claire Cooke, "Capping Power? Clothing and the Female Body in African Methodist Episcopal Mission Photographs," *Mission Studies* 31, no. 3 (2014): 433, https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341359.

23 Martin Mujinga, *The Historical Development of Methodism a North-South Paradigm* (Connexial Bookshop, 2017), 131-32.

24 Ngcobozi, "The Methodist Church Women's Manyano", 86.

25 Haddad, "African Women's Theologies of Survival", 282.

religious terminology and metaphors to describe their uniform, such as "armour of God" and "light in the darkness." Moreover, during meetings, uniforms and their rules and regulations were a recurring topic. CcA leaders, that is the pastors' wives, repeatedly emphasised the importance of the uniform and the associated behaviour and commitment.

Based on the fieldwork, it was concluded that analysing the practises and meaning attributed to the uniform would reveal aspects of how the CcA members experience their faith in their daily lives. In other words, the uniform represents their theology. The following sections elaborate on this theology and successively unfold the three theological themes of the uniform as: 1) a representation of faith and a holy lifestyle, 2) a reminder of vocation, and 3) an embodiment of spiritual power.

"And now I am a holy person."

The uniform is a visible identity marker, distinguishing the CcA members from other female church members and marking them in society as RCZ members. However, to the CcA members, the uniform is more than just a symbol of belonging to the CcA; it is an external signifier and a mirror of an inner conviction and a corresponding lifestyle transformation. Ss a pastor's wife expressed it, the uniform signifies someone giving her life to Christ.[26] National board leaders stated that the uniform indicates that a woman "wears Christ" (Galatians 3.27) or "has Christ in her" (Colossians 1.27).[27] In the various focus groups, the CcA members affirmed that wearing the uniform represented the faith of a CcA member and underlines who she is: "a God-fearing woman in Christ",[28] a "woman of God",[29] and "a holy person".[30]

To most CcA members, the uniform's colours, black and white, symbolise this transformation. The white blouse colour is seen as referring to purity or holiness, justification or purification by Christ (a central Reformed doctrine), forgiveness of sins, and the transformation into a "holy person"

[26] Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).
[27] Focus Group 14, national leaders CcA (19 November 2022).
[28] Focus group 3, Shalom (4 September 2021).
[29] Focus group 11, Vineyard (26 August 2022).
[30] Focus group 10, Vineyard (26 August 2022).

(sanctification).[31] The black colour of the skirts, shoes, and scarf refers to human beings' sinful nature. Informants stated that this interpretation was part of the teaching they received before joining the CcA.[32] Remarkably, the CcA handbook and the RCZ constitution do not ascribe any specific meaning to the uniform's colours and design.

Nevertheless, one of the pastors' wives who participated in the research explained the colours in this manner during a meeting, and claimed that the design of the uniform illustrates how this transformation concerns all aspects of life:

> The uniform covers the whole body because the Holy Spirit is not only in the heart but lives in us and is related to our entire lives. The headscarf tells that you need to think as a Christian. The skirt and the black shoes teach that you cannot just walk everywhere.[33]

For many informants, wearing the uniform is a deliberate religious practice. In interviews, they linked wearing the uniform to ethics and emphasised that *wearing* it denotes striving for sanctification. In the informants' interpretation, this commitment to leading a holy life first and foremost means adherence to rules and moral standards, as promised on the day they joined the CcA. During a special ritual, called the blousing ceremony, aspiring candidates for membership vow to pray, read the bible, attend the meetings, take up their Christian duties, obey the leaders of the church, show others the way to salvation, and abstain from alcohol and all practices that contradict the word of God.[34] By doing so, they are considered "good mothers and wives", that is, examples of good behaviour, modesty, and integrity. Moreover, they are held responsible for transmitting moral norms and values to the next generation of women. This may relate specifically to the African context

31 Weekly Meeting, Fountain (18 February 2022). Confirmed in WhatsApp conversations (25 May 2024 and 8 June 2024).

32 Weekly Meeting, Fountain (18 February 2022). Confirmed in WhatsApp conversations (25 May 2024 and 8 June 2024).

33 Weekly Meeting, Fountain (18 February 2022).

34 Reformed Church in Zambia, *Buku La Zinchito Za Chigwirizano Cha Azimai*, 105.

where women are often seen as custodians of beliefs and acceptable behaviours.[35]

Following the "blousing" ceremony, CcA members are also expected to pay prescribed weekly and monthly contributions. Additionally, all members must renew their vows annually during a special renewal ceremony. Moreover, during meetings, the message that donning the uniform means a conscious and continuous commitment to live out these vows was regularly repeated.[36]

From the interviews, it is evident that joining the CcA and wearing the uniform is a deliberate and well-considered choice. Indeed, several informants emphasised that one had to take time "to be ready" for that step. After all, women who wear the uniform promise to live up to the norms, abide by the rules, live according to the prescribed moral standards, and contribute financially to the fellowship.[37] Most women take this promise very seriously, and they should do so because for those who fall short of their promise, the local board (in case of financial arrears in contributing) or the church council (in case of suspension) may deprive them of the privilege of wearing the uniform. A pastor's wife explained:

> Because, with the uniform, you identify yourself to say, "I have chosen to be a Christian, and I will live like this". If you live against what is agreed, we put a question mark and say: "You are not fit to be part of us".[38]

These requirements make some women reluctant to join the CcA. A pastor's wife explained that even female church members who regularly attend the CcA meetings hesitate to be bloused: "They feel that they will get a lot of responsibilities. (*They think:*) 'When I stand and make a vow for God, and

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35 Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "Religion, Spirituality and Being a Woman in Africa: Gender Construction Within the African Religio-Cultural Experiences," *Agenda* 18, no. 61 (2004): 72, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2004.9676045.

36 Regional meeting (22 May 2021), Monthly meeting, Shalom (8 January 2022).

37 Phoebe Faith Chifungo, "Women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod: A Practical Theological Study of Their Leadership Roles" (PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2014), 50, http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/96112. Chifungo describes similar strict rules in the women's fellowship in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP).

38 Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).

then I do not fulfil it, then maybe I am sinning against God".[39] This line of reasoning is the logical consequence of the strong emphasis on obedience to God and the leaders. The same pastor's wife clarified: "If we agree as women to do so and you do the opposite of what we agreed on, already, God will look at you as a very rebellious person".[40] Indeed, other informants agreed that if a woman was not ready to change her lifestyle, it was better to refrain from joining the CcA: "Other women are still living the old sinful life, they are drunkards. They feel, 'should I join the WF? I still drink, they will find me drinking in my uniform, it is better that I stay away from the CcA'".[41]

For some informants, the uniform functions as a moral corrective, encouraging and reminding them to do the right thing. An informant stated that, "[w]hen I wear this uniform, it makes me live a holy life. Even when I want to sin, I ask myself, I am wearing this uniform, so I have to live a non-sinful life".[42] A member in Fountain explained: "Even me myself, when I wear this uniform, I know that uhuh that spirit (*emphasises*), I can feel that spirit in me that wearing this uniform, I should behave, I should not do this or that",[43] suggesting that for some the uniform itself is imbued with power, and reminds and gives strength to adopt a holy lifestyle and also to relate well to others:

> Even if you want to insult the children, if you want to insult anyone, with your uniform, you calm down. If somebody has insulted you or used bad language to you, bad words, you can't reiterate [these words], you feel bad. No, I am a woman of God, I cannot reiterate what this person is saying. Let me pray for him or her so that they realise what they just said is not good.[44]

The uniform is seen as proof of commitment and one that women need to live up to continuously, not only in the eyes of other people, but also in the eyes of God. The religious significance of the uniform becomes most evident on the day of death, as an active member of the CcA will be buried in her

39 Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).
40 Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).
41 Focus Group 11, Vineyard local leaders (26 August 2022).
42 Focus group 10, Vineyard local leaders (26 August 2022).
43 Focus group 9, Fountain local leaders (22 April 2022).
44 Focus group 4, Shalom (24 September 2021).

uniform, which all informants considered of great importance. The denial of the privilege by the leadership means that, in one way or another, a woman was not sufficiently obedient and, according to a pastor's wife, will raise questions at the gate of heaven. God might ask the recently deceased woman: "Why are you not in your uniform?".[45] Consequently, for an informant in Vineyard, the uniform, inferred access to heaven, acting as proof of good behaviour. Responding to why the uniform was essential to her, she testified: "Myself I feel…I feel…if God comes today, I can enter the kingdom of God".[46]

Other informants were concerned that too much value was being attached to the uniform: "It is not the uniform that makes you a Christian. The heart is the one who decides".[47] The CcA handbook also cautions that wearing the uniform does not guarantee salvation and eternal life: "In these clothes, there is no justice or salvation. We are saved by our faith in Jesus Christ, and therefore, the uniform does not lead to pride but to humbleness".[48] This was also the concern of a male pastor who was part of the national RCZ leadership. He suggested that the strong emphasis on obedience and fulfilling obligations as a precondition for the uniform hindered understanding of the concept of grace, an essential doctrine within the Reformed Theology.[49] However, during meetings, leaders constantly reminded the members to follow the rules, be obedient, and pay the subscriptions as a prerequisite for wearing the uniform. This created the impression that wearing the uniform represented the continuous process of sanctification rather than symbolising justification.

To conclude, for the women of the CcA, the uniform, in which they were clothed when they joined the CcA during the so-called "blousing ceremony" symbolises "wearing Christ" and acts as an embodiment of their faith and religious identity. The black and white colours remind them of key aspects of Christian theology: justification and sanctification. Consequently, the women are tasked with living a holy life, abiding by the rules and living according to engendered moral standards. On the one hand, being allowed

45 Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).
46 Focus group 10, Vineyard (26 August 2022).
47 Focus group 1, Shalom (21 May 2021).
48 Reformed Church in Zambia, Buku La Zinchito Za Chigwirizano Cha Azimai, 11.
49 Interview 12 national leader RCZ, male (18 July 2022).

to wear the uniform serves as proof that the women are willing to live such a holy life as long as they abide by the CcA rules. On the other hand, the uniform is a constant, tangible reminder to the women to live a holy life, requiring continuous sanctification and internal change.

Wherever I go, I have to shine in this world.

To the informants, wearing the uniform not only signified a conscious and continuous commitment to lead a holy life, but also exemplified the commitment of CcA members to being a light to the world, in and beyond the church's walls. The notion of light in the darkness is a central theme in the RCZ. Indeed, the phrase "*Kuunika mudima*" (light in the darkness) is the RCZ's motto and part of the official church logo. The motto also appears on the badge that the CcA members pin on the white blouse.

According to an informant, the design of the uniform, the white blouse between the black skirt and headscarf, conveys that message as well: "It [the uniform] talks about light in darkness [*kuunika mudima*]. This is what it represents".[50] After one of the meetings, a group of women sitting together in their white blouses (literally, a bright spot in the pews) pointed to themselves: "Look, so we are light in the darkness".[51] Another informant stated that the uniform means "we give light when there is no light in the dark".[52] The black represents a world full of challenges, particularly for women. Life is uncertain, and many informants shared their concerns about high poverty levels, unemployment, and sickness.[53] Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively influenced business activities, leading to income loss. Many informants struggled to send their (grand)children to school. Yet, despite this, they were committed to sharing their time and meagre resources with the CcA, the RCZ, and the community. Amidst these challenges, CcA members strove to embody the light of Christ. In an interview with the national board of the CcA, one of them explained, "[w]hen someone has Christ in them, they will shine, so the uniform is symbolic of

50 Focus group 3, Shalom (4 September 2021).

51 Weekly Meeting, Shalom (23 April 2021)

52 Interview 6 Fountain (12 June 2022).

53 Most women in Zambian society are economically and socially disadvantaged in comparison to men. See: N. Moyo, "Revisiting Economic Justice. An Examination of Dignity of Women in a Zambian Context," in *Living with Dignity. African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, ed. Elna Mouton et al. (African Sun Media, 2015), 179-90.

that belief that now they will be able to shine like a star, to be the light for the world".[54]

With the firm conviction that they have a divine vocation to be the light, the CcA members would participate in the church's diaconal, educative and fundraising activities.[55] Informants also mentioned dedicating their time and resources to beautifying the church, cleaning, and hospitality such as visiting the sick, all considered typical female tasks within the church.[56] They perceive these activities as serving God and, therefore, meaningful religious practices. Several other studies point to women's fellowships as the backbone of the church because of their involvement in such activities, despite being minimally represented in leadership positions.[57]

The CcA members also aspired to spread the light to the community and the world, like "a house built on the top of a mountain".[58] Both collectively and individually, they are involved in diaconal and missional tasks through charity and evangelism. An older woman in one of the compounds elaborated on how being a light in the world becomes tangible in daily life. She related to how the uniform shows "the greatness of God" and indicates that the wearer has "a humble and merciful heart". As such, people in the communities approach the members with requests for help or support. She continued, "Here, in our community, we have many people, including old people and orphans. Some have no place to sleep. But when you have the uniform, these people come to you: '*Amai,* do you have some food?'".[59] Moreover, in one of the focus groups, the women stressed that people in their neighbourhood understood the uniform to be an indicator of someone's willingness to "do good deeds".[60] Similarly, the uniform also creates

54 Focus Group 14 - National leaders CcA (19 November 2022).

55 Focus group 3, Shalom (4 September 2021) and focus group 7, Fountain (12 February 2022).

56 Focus group 9, Fountain local leaders (22 April 2022).

57 Esther Mombo, "The Ordination of Women in Africa: A Historical Perspective", in *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 125; Isabel A. Phiri and Chammah Kaunda, "Gender", in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 388-389.

58 Interview 3, Shalom, pastor's wife (12 January 2021).

59 Focus group 8, Fountain (18 February 2022).

60 Focus Group 3, Shalom (4 September 2021).

opportunities for evangelism, as one informant stated: "I will explain (*the uniform*) to those who are asking, and that could also be an opportunity for me to say, 'Come and worship'. I value the uniform".[61]

While the vocation to serve, to be the light, in the church and the community is a personal one, it is, first and foremost, a communal responsibility. The local board of Shalom articulated this communal aspect by stating, "We are chosen by God to work for him".[62] Members are expecting to always be ready to do that work. Therefore, they are advised not to put the uniform in a laundry basket but to wash and iron it directly after activity to ensure that it is clean, "if anything happens".[63] To accomplish this work, the women need one another, regardless of position or socio-economic background: "You can't tell from the uniform whether someone holds a position or not. The uniform is for all the same".[64] Moreover, a pastor's wife stated that wearing the same uniform "helps to serve God with your friends".[65]

For the CcA members, the uniform represents the theology that, as Christian women, they are called to work for God and bring light into the darkness. In line with Ngcobozi's observations about women's fellowship members in South Africa, the CcA members acknowledge that all their work is important and that their contribution serves to help the church to survive.[66] The uniform, which is the same for all women, expresses that they have, both individually and collectively, practical, diaconal, and missional responsibilities in the church and the world around them. The uniform also symbolises that they do not have to accomplish these tasks alone, but rather, they do so with each other and with and for God. Their work and sacrifices at home, in the church, and in the community, which are mostly not highly regarded, are responses to this divine vocation. Knowing that all this work is a form of service to God elevates their daily lives and hardships.

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61 Interview 11, CcA member and social scientist (18 June 2022).

62 Focus group 2, Shalom, local board (11 June 2021).

63 Interview 1, Shalom, local leader (3 September 2021), interview 12, national leader RCZ, male (18 July 2022), WhatsApp conversation (8 June 2024).

64 Interestingly, seating arrangements divide the women according to status and position. Pastor's wives are always seated in front or on the stage. Women with a higher rank in the organisation also seated in the front. In some other women's organisations, leaders will wear a uniform with distinctive markers identifying them as leaders.

65 Weekly Meeting – Fountain (18 February 2022).

66 Ngcobozi, "The Methodist Church Women's Manyano", 81.

The uniform strengthens and empowers you

Lastly, according to some informants, the uniform provides strength and power to the wearer. National board members explained that wearing the uniform is seen as a "spiritual thing you cannot walk away from".[67] Rituals[68] around the uniform also corroborates this, such as the blousing ceremony during which women are dressed in the uniform and underscores that wearing the uniform is a long-life commitment, just like a marriage. As a ring symbolises marital commitment, the uniform is the visible marker of the women's commitment to Christ, the church, and the community:

> It is not a piece of cloth that I can put on in my own time. But I should follow the rules and, also, if I want to stop [wearing the uniform], just as people witnessed and came and some people had to dress me [during the blousing ceremony], I also have to stick to it. That is not something I can just stop when I want to.[69]

Because of this status, the uniform requires special treatment. Women handle the uniform carefully and ensure it is always ready to wear. They do not wear it during house chores and protect it against dust and dirt. It is also inappropriate to put on someone else's uniform or the uniform of another church just to see how it looks. This is also signalled by Ngcobozi, who states that this special treatment points to the sacredness of the uniform.[70]

For some informants, the uniform signified the proximity of divine presence. One informant in Shalom testified, "When you are moving [it is] like you are with Jesus, Jesus is just following you. That is how you feel sometimes".[71] An informant in Vineyard shared that when she is in her uniform,

> I feel like I am meeting the angels; I am in fellowship with the angels, and even when I am prompted to sin, something stops me because

67 Focus Group 14, national leaders CcA (19 November 2022).

68 A pastor's wife dresses a new candidate the day she joins the CcA during a ceremony called the 'blousing.'

69 Focus Group 14, national leaders CcA (19 November 2022).

70 Ngcobozi, 'The Methodist Church Women's Manyano', 89.

71 Focus group 4 Shalom (24 September 2021).

> I am holy. And even when I put it, I feel good, and I feel comfortable.[72]

Some informants stated that they experienced a rupture with the past when they became a CcA member and were "being bloused". They shared how in the past, they had felt attacked by evil powers but that this was no longer the case: "Before I joined the CcA, I was oppressed by demons and evil powers who stopped me from praying and singing. Now, I am able to preach and I am able to pray free".[73] Some informants referred explicitly to the uniform as an object that played a role in this change:

> This uniform helps me in many ways because before I was bloused, I used to meet a lot of temptations. But when I was bloused, and I heard the word, and I learnt in the CcA, these temptations are not coming the way they came before.[74]

Women often characterised life as spiritual warfare where supernatural powers, whether positive or negative, are perceived as a reality. For some, the uniform visualisation of God being on their side. For others, it invoked a certain protective power in the battle against temptations, relapses into sin, and attacks of evil powers. A pastor's wife, referring to Ephesians 6.13, compared the uniform to the armour of God claiming "you need to have something that protects you".[75] Others compared the uniform to a military dress. Just as soldiers wear a uniform during combat, the CcA members wear their uniform during their spiritual warfare.[76]

Several informants shared their marital problems, about men who drink or do not support the family. One informant testified that the uniform helped her in such a situation:

> Sometimes, when you put on this uniform, and you have some conflict with your husband, it tells you to be strong. I need to be

72 Focus group 10 Vineyard local leaders (26 August 2022).
73 Focus group 10 Vineyard local leaders (26 August 2022).
74 Focus group 10 Vineyard local leaders (26 August 2022).
75 Weekly Meeting Fountain (18 February 2022).
76 Focus group 11 Vineyard (26 August 2022).

> strong, and the uniform encourages you. When you respond, you have to be sure that you respond according to the Bible.[77]

In this case, the uniform does not protect against difficult situations or violence but provides the power of endurance, particularly in marriage. Female subordination to the man as head of the family is regularly part of teachings during CcA meetings and is also part of the cultural vocabulary during marriage preparations.[78] Lilian Siwila confirms that in Zambia's culture, the patriarchy, religion, mission, and colonial influence were tools used to silence and subjugate women.[79] Heleen Joziasse, in her study on lived Christologies among Kenyan women, also states that faith strengthens women to respect and submit to their husbands rather than liberate them from a violent or abusive marriage.[80]

Though the CcA members articulated the meaning of the uniform in different ways, wearing the uniform is an experience of the presence of the transcendent that creates feelings of joy, security, happiness, and encouragement. This is in line with Beverley Haddad's findings in her study on the Anglican Mothers' Union in South Africa. She found that women attribute supernatural powers to the uniform, which, in their perception, helps them stay alive in the harsh reality and struggle of their daily lives.[81] A male RCZ church leader suggested that some women need a tangible object to experience Jesus' presence and, as such, ascribe a protective power to the uniform. However, he considered this thinking as indicative of the influence of African traditional religion. He stated that more teaching is needed to eradicate this misconception because, according to him, it is not in line with

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77 Focus group 8 Fountain (18 February 2022).

78 Rachel Nyagondwe Fiedler, *Coming of Age. A Christianized Initiation among Women in Southern Malawi*, 25 (Assemblies of God Press, 2005), 138; William Zulu and Henry Mbaya, Some Missiological Imperatives of the Christianisation of Cinamwali as Cilangizo in the Reformed Church in , *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42, no. 3 (2016): 182.

79 Siwila, African Women Speak out in the Face of Empire, 13.

80 Joziasse, Women's Faith Seeking, 145. Cf. Chifungo, Women in the CCAP Nkhoma, 59. She narrates that, during a conference, she advised women to take care of themselves to be attractive to their (unfaithful) husbands. See also: Rachel Nyagondwe Fiedler, *African Feminist Hermeneutics. An Evangelical Reflection*, Mzuni Books 18 (Mzuni Press, 2016), 139-140.

81 Haddad, "African Women's Theologies of Survival", 281-82.

the Reformed doctrine.[82] This might also explain why some informants were reluctant to assign meaning to the uniform, except for indicating RCZ membership, and stated that ascribing power was only a practice in other churches.[83]

Nevertheless, other practices reinforce the idea of the uniform as an object imbued with power. New candidates sometimes approach their pastor the day before they enter the CcA to request to pray for the uniform. During one blousing ceremony, a pastor's wife put her hands on the uniforms just before she dressed the new candidates. While doing so, she prayed, "Let these clothes be covered by the blood of Jesus".[84] According to Samuel Olarewaju, prayers that appeal to the protective power of Jesus' blood attempt to address the constant quest for protection against demonic powers among believers. Indeed, the blood of Jesus is considered to be a powerful protection against all kinds of dangers and evil. Many believe that objects used in daily life, such as the uniform, when "covered in Jesus' blood", may avert these evil powers and protect the wearer against demonic and personal attacks.[85]

To sum up, despite its various perceptions, the lived theology of the uniform proves that CcA members long for divine presence, protection, and support. For some, the uniform only symbolises this divine presence, while for others, it is an "object imbued with power" that seemingly provide protection, the power to resist temptation or evil forces, and the power to endure difficult situations. Though this seems in conflict with the official theology of the RCZ, it underlines that the CcA members experience God as the One who is at their side amidst socio-economic challenges, the realities of a patriarchal system, and spiritual warfare.

Conclusion

In a patriarchal society like Zambia and a church like the RCZ, where the leadership is heavily male-dominated, the uniform is the tangible object for

82 Interview 12, National church leader, male (18 July 2022).

83 WhatsApp conversation (30 March 2024).

84 Monthly Meeting, Fountain (11 March 2022). Some women also approach the pastor the day before the blousing, requesting to pray for the uniform.

85 Samuel Olarewaju, "The Efficacy of Prayer in the Blood of Christ in Contemporary African Christianity", *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2003): 32.

CcA members that makes their presence and contribution visible. Wearing the uniform is a religious practice. Ordinary members and pastors' wives in leadership positions at all levels appropriate the meaning of the uniform in various, and sometimes contested, ways. The lived theology of the uniform reveals that the uniform is a meaningful dress that plays a role in the everyday religious experience of the CcA members and is an important embodiment of their faith and vocation. The meaning of the uniform is multi-layered: it is simultaneously about the colours and the wearing itself.; it conveys a message to the wearer and those who perceive it; and it is a symbol and has its own power. For some women, the uniform's colours symbolise the doctrines at the heart of the RCZ, a Reformed church, that of justification, sanctification, and the calling to be a light in the darkness. By wearing the uniform, these women embody these central dogmas of the church. They have made them their own, and they dedicate themselves to this by living exemplary lives as mothers of the church, contributing their time and money and helping people when called upon. This is not easy as sanctification is a continuous struggle, but putting on the uniform is a constant reminder for these women of their promises and their commitment to live those promises. How complicated it is to promise to live a holy life and be a light in the world is evident in some informal rituals that emerged around the uniform, such as praying to be covered with the blood of Christ. To resist temptations, relapses into sin, and the attacks of evil powers, some women see the uniform as a garment that protects them from evil powers. In contrast, others see it as a symbolic armour to go to war against them. Others still experience the uniform as a symbol of Christ's nearness, giving them hope and joy amid challenges and problems.

Wearing the uniform is, therefore, much more than a sign of belonging to the CcA. It is a religious practice that expresses a *lived theology*. This theology is not formalised or consistent but relevant and powerful in the lives of women who try to stand firm as *Azimai cha Chigwirizano* (Mothers of the Fellowship). The uniform symbolises how these women try to live and defend their faith in a world where this is not easy. The uniform confirms that they do not have to do it alone but, rather, with each other and with God on their side.

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Alternative Expressions of Islam Through Islamic Film Video: Muslim Women Filmmakers Countering Social Exclusion in Kenya

Mohamed Ndaro[i], Hassan Ndzovu[ii] and Eunice Kamaara[iii]

SHORT BIO

[i]Mohamed Ndaro is a postgraduate candidate in the Department of Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Theology at Moi University, Kenya.
[ii]Hassan Ndzovu is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Moi University, Kenya. Ndzovu's research interests, focused on Islam in Africa, revolve around religion and politics/law, Islamist movements, religious based conflict, religious authority within the Islamic tradition, religion and sexuality, and witchcraft among African societies.
[iii]Eunice Kamaara is Professor of Religion at Moi University, Kenya. Kamaara's research interests centre on Gender, Youth, Sexuality, Health, Spirituality, Ethics, Character, and Religion.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
[i]Moi University of Eldoret, Kenya
mohamedndaro@gmail.com

[ii]Moi University, Kenya
ndzovu.hassan@mu.ac.ke

[iii]Moi University, Kenya
ekamaara@gmail.com

ORCID
[i]https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3015-361X
[ii]https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7312-2469
[iii]https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2233-5365

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways in which Muslim actors in film video in Kenya make interpretations and reinterpretations of Islamic positions on gender roles, veiling, and women's education. The foundational discourse on gender roles, women's education, and veiling is contained in primary sources like the Qur'an and hadith. Muslim scholars articulate this discourse in mosque sermons and madrassa teachings. In the side lines of these official spaces are Muslim actors and filmmakers who use popular cultural forms to articulate re-interpretations of Islam and present their experiences in non-establishment environments. This article examines how Muslim women actors in Kenya use film video to challenge the double-marginal position of women in Islam and Muslims in Kenya. By performative processes of scriptwriting, acting, directing, and production, Muslim women performers in film video display various responses to contemporary issues. Using film video as a medium, they contribute to continuing discourses on gender roles, women's education, and veiling. This article argues that the dynamic response by Muslim actors reinterprets norms and traditional positions as articulated by elites and religious authority figures. Methodologically, the empirical material is based on a literature review, one-on-one interviews, and close context analysis. This is juxtaposed with a critical reading of Utata, an amateur film video produced by Muslim filmmakers in Kenya. The film's narrative describes and critiques Muslim's conventional practises and positions. Utata highlights the complex challenges facing Muslims, pointing out that responses to questions around gender roles, women's education, and veiling are, at times, multiple and varied. The stories told by interviewees indicate how Muslim women actors both support and confront male-centred discourses. The article makes use of Western theory, such as Bourdieu on cultural production and also feminist critiques on patriarchy in Islam. It is argued that Muslim women actors engage in a process of reinterpretation of Islamic positions, thereby challenging Muslim women's double marginalization. Such reinterpretation creates avenues for women actors to contribute to popular Muslim discourses.

KEYWORDS
Gender; Film video; Agency; Representation; Social inclusion; Kenya

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Introduction

Marginalization is often defined as a process of social exclusion in which individuals or groups are relegated to the fringes of society and being denied economic, political, and symbolic power.[1] Essentially, the marginalised lack power, participation, and integration into a group or territory.[2] The concept of symbolic marginalisation derives from the work of Pierre Bourdieu on how dominant groups exert power through norms, language, and values.[3] This leads to the marginalisation of cultures and identities that are outside of the dominant groups.[4] In this article, I argue that Muslim women in Kenya are marginalised through the imposition of dominant male-centric discourses and religious interpretations. Kenya's constitution (2010) makes a distinction between marginalised *communities* and marginalised *groups*. Women, as a whole, are identified as a marginalised *group*.[5] The categorisation of women as a marginalised group derives from the many legal, economic, political, and social impediments that stand in the way of women's attempts to improve their human condition. In Kenya, women experience marginalisation across various sectors, including legal frameworks,[6] economic participation,[7] political representation,[8] and social norms.[9] This marginalisation is further compounded by factors like poverty, existence in rural locations, and cultural beliefs. Inequalities, disparities, and marginalisation in Kenya vary across

1 Raghubir Chand, Etienne Nel and Stanko Pelc. *Societies, Social Inequalities and Marginalisation*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

2 Matthias Bernt and Laura Colini. "Exclusion, Marginalisation and Peripheralisation: Conceptual concerns in the study of urban inequalities." Working Paper. (Erkner, Leibniz: Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning, 2013).

3 Pierre Bourdieu. *Language and Symbolic Power*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

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7 Prasad, et al. *Kenya Economic Update: Special Focus on Women's Economic Empowerment*. (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2024).

8 Eija Ranta. "Intersecting inequalities in women's political inclusion in Kenya," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 26, no. 4 (2014). 881-902

9 Young, *Challenges*, 7

the regions and successive governments have not equalised development by allocating resources fairly.[10]

Muslim women in Kenya exist disempowered under Islamic patriarchies. They are also double-disadvantaged by being part of a religious community seen as a minority in Kenya's religious mosaic.[11] Hassan Juma Ndzovu argues that Muslims in Kenya exist as a demographic, religious, and political minority.[12] Ethnic, racial, and theological divisions among Kenya's Muslims, Ndzovu contends, compound their engagement with the state, resulting in a relationship that is complex and problematic. In film work, this marginalisation is reflected in the lack of finances, poor representation, and lack of recognition. An instance of this double marginal status was seen at the third edition of the Women in Film Awards (WIFA) held at the Kenya National Theatre in 2022, where 22 award categories were listed, none of which went to a Muslim woman. Susan Gitimu, the WIFA Awards director, pointed out that this was not a result of systemic bias, but due to low entrance of works by Muslim filmmakers.[13] The Kenyan public space has been described as a male arena, with state power and political authority being male-dominated activities.[14] The voices of the poor, refugees, women, sex workers, and the queer cannot be heard under existing patriarchies. To illustrate the marginalisation of Muslim women from public spaces, Kai Kresse explores the public setting of the informal "*baraza*" where adult males gather for social interactions.[15] Kresse demonstrates the capacity for these informal meeting points to act as spaces for debate, discussion, to check up on colleagues, catch up on the day's events, and meaning-making. Being essentially male social spaces, these settings are, nevertheless, out of reach for Muslim women. This article argues that such spatial organisation justifies the consideration of Muslim women in Kenya as existing in a state of double

10 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. *Regional Disparities and Marginalisation in Kenya*. (Nairobi: Elite PrePress Ltd, 2012).

11 Kai Kresse, "Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double periphery," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S)* (2009): S76-S94

12 Hassan Juma Ndzovu. "Kenyan Muslims Minority Status: Theological Divisions, Ethno-Religious Competition and Ambiguous Relations with the State'," *Islamic Africa* 12, no. 2 (2021): 240-259

13 Personal communication. 15.07.2025

14 Grace Musila. "Phallocracies and Gynocratic Transgressions: Gender, State Power and Kenyan Public Life," *Africa Insight* 39, no. 1 (2009): 39-57

15 Kai Kresse. *Philosophising in Mombasa: Knowledge, Islam and Intellectual Practise on the Swahili Coast*. (London: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

marginalisation. Excluded by patriarchal structures from public spaces, Muslim women turn to popular cultural spaces as a countermeasure to their social exclusion and make their contribution to religious discourse. Our central question thus arises: how do Kenyan filmmakers use film video as alternative space to articulate Muslim identity and critique religious elites and dominant religious discourses. The empirical material is gathered through literature reviews, one-on-one interviews, and close textual analysis. This is juxtaposed with a close reading of *Utata*, an amateur film video produced by Muslim filmmakers in Kenya. In what follows, we explore how Muslim women in Kenya turn to film video work to challenge male-centred discourses, find spaces for self-expression, and upset social exclusion by patriarchal hierarchies that both marginalize women and stifle their self-expression.

Women filmmakers remediating meaning and confronting social exclusion through film video

Muslim women actors are part of the movement that have turned to popular cultural spaces, like film work, to offer social critiques and articulate their interpretation of Islam as a lived tradition.[16] Arguably, the creative work (thinking, imagining) of Kenyan women is silenced by Kenya's patriarchal structures, but the productive effort of Kenyan women (in writing, in filmmaking) cannot be ignored. Through an analysis of Kenya's popular literature works, Vincent Odhiambo Oduor, Jairus Omuteche, and David W. Yenjela conclude that popular culture in Kenya depicts social and financial power as being entirely in the hands of men.[17] The cultural norms of men are structurally imposed on society leading to the suppression of alternative norms and viewpoints, including the viewpoints of women. This article proposes that the entry of Kenyan women into film work can be read as an affront to male-dominated knowledge spaces. This affront is often met with patriarchal backlash, which in turn increases the oppression of women.[18]

16 Mwenda Ntarangwi. "Social media and youth popular culture in Kenya can counter political exploitation," (*LSE Research Online*, 3 Sept. 2020). https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2020

17 Vincent Odhiambo Oduor, Jairus Omuteche, and David W. Yenjela. "Popular Culture, Contemporary trends and Social identities in Kenyan Youth fiction," *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2002): 48-62

18 Marie E. Berry, Yolande Bouka, and Marilyn Muthoni Kamuru. "Implementing Inclusion: Gender Quotas, Inequality, and Backlash in Kenya" *Politics and Gender* 17, no. 4 (2020): 640-664

Despite of these challenges, Jane Munene, of the Kenya National Film Association, and Njeri Karago, of the Kenya Film and Television Professionals Association, have been working to raise the profile of women in Kenyan film and television work.[19] Their work is an attempt to confront exclusion to instil authentic self-representation by taking control of public discourse through film work.

While not strictly tied to giving a chronology of women's filmmaking in Kenya, we note the regard for Jane Murago-Munene as being the first woman filmmaker in Kenya, with her debut documentary coming out in 1979.[20] Murago-Munene is celebrated alongside other women filmmakers such as Dommie Yambo-Odotte and Wanjiru Kinyanjui.[21] Notably, the first woman filmmaker recognised as having directed the first feature film is Anne Mungai, whose *Saikati* came out in 1992. Her debut, however, was *Wekesa at Crossroads*, a 60-minute docudrama produced in 1986.[22] Muslim women, however, have not made their presence felt in Kenya's filmmaking industry, although their participation in radio has given them a chance to be heard by many.[23] In contemporary times and with the growth of Kenya's homegrown film video industry, Kenyan Muslim women have begun participating actively as filmmakers, confronting stereotypes by producing films with themes tied to children's rights, women's liberation, and questions of identity.[24] The deployment of such themes is an attempt to use film work to display and critique dominant male-centred views and overturn women's invisibility. According to Laura Grillo, Adriaan van L Klinken, and Hassan Ndzovu, religious meanings are not only revealed through sermons in formal spaces, but are also mediated through ritual, the arts, and multimedia performances.[25] This article, thus, contributes to the emerging body of research on the interrelations between contemporary media technology and

19 Duncan Miriri. "Women drive film industry in Kenya," (*Women's eNews*, September 21, 2004).

20 Nicodemus Okioma and John Mugubi. "Filmmaking in Kenya: The Voyage," *International Journal of Music and Performing Arts* 3, no. 1 (2015): 46-61

21 Robin Steedman. *Creative Hustling: Women Making and Distributing Film from Nairobi*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023).

22 Okioma and Mugubi, "Filmmaking in Kenya: The Voyage", 2015

23 Esha Faki Mwinyihaji. "Kenyan Muslim Women in Media and Politics: Fighting for Legitimacy," *Global Journal of Human Social Sciences* 12, no. 9 (2012): 39-42

24 Duncan Miriri, "Women drive film industry in Kenya," 2024

25 Laura S. Grillo, Adriaan van Klinken and Hassan Ndzovu. *Religions in Contemporary Africa: An Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2019). 221

meaning making in religious spaces. More particularly, this article opens the path to a more detailed exploration of Islamic film video and its confluence with leisure, entertainment, knowledge transmission, and religious authority in Muslim societies. To lay the ground for these arguments, this article begins by discussing popular culture and the use of film video to provide alternative meanings. The intervention of this article addresses two questions: first, how do Muslims engage with Islamic discourse through film video, and second, what alternative expressions are put forward as Muslim women actors articulate their interpretations of gender roles, women's education, and the practise of veiling in contemporary Kenyan society. The film analysed is titled *Utata*, produced in 2017 by Okoa Talent Producers. The film brings to the fore popular debates about gender, highlighting issues around Muslim women's education and the place of the hijab in contemporary urban environments.

Film video and Popular Engagement with Islamic Discourses

Popular culture consists of the non-formal and non-institutional spaces where non-elites find creative expression and artistic productivity,[26] and derives from people's lived experiences. In Muslim communities, formal and institutional practises like mosque sermonizing, public preaching, madrassa teaching, prayer leading, and Islamic propagation (*da'wah*) play an important role in the public sphere, even though these practises are exceedingly male-controlled.[27] These practises are aided by social media spaces like Twitter and YouTube. Andrew Eisenberg illustrates how popular cultural spaces contribute toward Islamic discourse through expression, communication, and interaction.[28] Eisenberg shows how Muslim youth in Mombasa appropriate Hip-hop to argue out their cultural opposition to a predominantly Christian post-colonial state that stereotypes them as "a conceptual as well as physical periphery for post-colonial Kenya".[29] As a response to symbolic marginalisation, Muslim youth in Mombasa use Hip-hop performatively to

[26] Karin Bieber. *A History of African Popular Culture*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[27] Musa Ibrahim. "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women and Islamic Discourses on Television Screens," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 37, (2018): 101-119

[28] Andrew J. Eisenberg. "Hip-hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast'," *Africa* 82, no. 4 (2012): 556

[29] Eisenberg, "Hip-hop and Cultural Citizenship ", 556

express their alienation from the postcolonial Kenyan state, as well as to stake their place within a transnational Muslim identity.[30]

The focus of this article is on film video and how Muslim women instrumentalise it to articulate their understanding of Islam, thereby challenging the male-centric interpretations that exclude women's experiences. According to Uchenna Onozulike, film videos are "movies or motion pictures produced mainly in the video format while adhering to particular cinematic values or conventions".[31] Unlike conventional films that are shot on celluloid, film videos are shot straight on video and marketed on VHS, VCD, or DVD disks.[32] These products are mass produced and intended for the public, "readily available for rental by household consumers and for public screening in make-shift video-halls" in many urban centres.[33] In Kenya, the rise of the film video industry has allowed non-formally recognised filmmakers to contribute to artistic production.[34] Arguably, Muslim women actors have come forth in the film video industry to stake their claim on the public sphere and articulate their experience of Islam as a living tradition within the Islamic film videos. Without doubt, within Muslim societies, Islamic film video contests dominant elitist interpretations of male *ulama*.[35] In this way, film video facilitates the engagement of non-elite Muslims in reflecting, commenting, and responding to current local and global Islamic discourses. Thus, Islamic film video increases public engagement with Islamic discourse.

Muslim actors simultaneously use film video for self-expression and countering negative self-representation and stereotyping. The starting point for culture is in the recognition of its role in facilitating expression, communication, and interaction. Ali Mazrui proposes culture as the coordinating complex of human affairs. In this way, culture assumes a role

30 Kara Moskowitz. "'There was no Change': Kenyan Women, Temporality, and Decolonization,". *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 3 (2023): 267-285

31 Uchenna Onozulike. "Nollywood: The influence of the Nigerian movie industry on African culture," *The Journal of Human Communication* 10, no. 2 (2007): 232

32 James Odhiambo Ogone. "Remediating Orality: The Cultural Domestication of Video Technology in Kenya," *Critical Arts* 29, no. 4 (2015): 479-495

33 Solomon Waliaula. ''Active audiences of Nollywood Video-films: An experience with a Bukusu audience community in Chwele market of Western Kenya''. *Journal of African Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2014): 72

34 Ogone, ''Remediating Orality", 480

35 Ibrahim. "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women," 2018

as the invisible architect of human interactions. Islamic film videos are cultural texts as well as cultural discourse.[36] As texts, they symbolize meaning. Indeed, an analysis of film video can lead to an appreciation of the film text's meaning. Further, film video provides an opportunity for continual reinterpretation of Muslims negotiating Islam as a living tradition. In this way, film video is part of Muslims' cultural discourse. Islamic film video allows Muslim producers to contest traditional power structures and amplify their voices. The creativity of Muslim producers and actors expands the scope of use of film video from entertainment to debates on what it means to be Muslim, weighing in to influence how Muslims express their everyday lived experience of Islam at the face of scholarly interpretations of Islam from scholars and other religious elites. In a fun and entertaining way, film video has become a site where debates over religious authority and religious interpretation occur.

Therefore, film video engages Muslims in their everyday settings, and it is these "normal" settings that both embody and express how Muslim actors make meaning of their realities. Throughout Africa, television is part of the media through which Muslim women redefine their religious life, participate in public interpretation of Islam, and engage '*ulama* on discourses about Islam. Muslim women actors use the screen environment to find avenues for authentic self-expression and participate in reconstructing what it means to be a Muslim woman. In this sense, Musa Ibrahim shows Nigerian Hausa Muslim women outside of the '*ulama* class utilising television screens to "express alternative viewpoints that seek to redefine their religious life, but also engage with specialist '*ulama* on some practises established through male-dominated discourses about Islam and everyday life".[37] Consequently, religious learning, knowledge transmission, and cultural critique are embedded in non-institutional forms of expression, such as poetry, popular music, social media, and film video.[38]

[36] Ali Mazrui. *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective*. (New York: The Free Press, 1976).

[37] Ibrahim, "Contemporary 'Non-Ulama' Hausa Women", 101

[38] Grillo, Klinken, and Ndzovu, *Religions in Contemporary Africa*, 221

In Kenya, improvements in infrastructures of communication and the passing of the 2010 constitution expanded spaces for free expression.[39] There were, after 2010, stronger opportunities for Kenyans to express themselves, access information, participate in public discourse, and hold power to account. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) strengthened protections for journalists, media houses, and the public.[40] It guaranteed access to information (chapter 35), a major step since access to information laws did not previously exist as constitutional provisions.[41] It also offered protection of media from prior restraint.[42] Before the enactment of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the use of draconian laws such as the Chief's Authority Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Public Security Act, and a host of sedition laws allowed the arrest of journalists, seizure of newspapers, and censorship in the name of public order.[43] It is in this regard that the Constitution of Kenya (2010) is seen to have transformed Kenya by explicitly guaranteeing freedom of expression, independent media, and access to information, rights that had been severely restricted by government control, censorship laws, and an institutionalised harassment of journalists.[44] The remaining section of this work presents an analysis of *Utata* (2017), part of the productions that are a result of these expanded media freedoms, and show Muslim women actors creating alternative interpretations of veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education.

39 Rachael Diang'a. "Themes in Kenyan Cinema: Seasons and Reasons," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4, (2017): 1-11, also see George Ogola. "Popular Culture, Politics, and the Kenyan News Media," in *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa,* edited by Herman Wasserman, 123-136 (London: Routledge, 2011).

40 Kim Caesar. "Balancing the Right to Privacy and Media Freedom in Light of Public Interest." *SSRN Electronic Journal,* (2024). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.5266981

41 Edwin O. Abuya. "Promoting Transparency: Courts and Operationalization of the Right of Access to Information in Kenya," *Common Law World Review* 46, no. 2 (2017): 112-139

42 Moses Sichach. "History of Media in Kenya: Legal and Ethical Implications," SSRN Electronic Journal (January 30, 2024). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4710087

43 Philip Onguny. "The Politics of Impunity and the Shifting of the Media Landscape in Kenya," *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* 7, no. 1 (2021): 61-78

44 Samuel Muthami Wanjiru and Daniel Muthee Wambui. "An Assessment of Critical Issues in Access to Information: A Systematic Literature Review with Special Reference to Kenya," *International Journal of Research and Scholarly Communication* 5, no. 1 (2022): 23-46

Utata Film Video: Gender Roles, and Muslim Women's Education

Ogone posits that Africans have domesticated video production, allowing more people to participate in shaping contemporary discourses.[45] The production of cheap and easy-to-use film videos and their circulation in informal spaces allow marginal artists to participate in the pursuit of creative freedoms. *Utata* was produced in Kenya in 2017 and is the work of largely unknown, marginal artists from the coastal region. The scriptwriting is by budding filmmakers Salim Hassan Mwagoyo and Dickson Dio and was produced and edited by Samir Alfan Kelly of Okoa Talent Producers. A Swahili word, *Utata* references complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. As a title for the film, *Utata* hints at a myriad of complex challenges facing Muslims, including complexities arising from multiple interpretations of the foundational textual sources in Islam.

The issue of parity between genders is mentioned in several chapters of the Qur'an. For example, the idea that men and women exist complementary to each other is mentioned in Surah *Al-Imran* (The House of Imran) and Surah *An-Nisa'* (The Women). Surah *Al-Imran* (Q.3:195) mentions "I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female-you are equal to one another".[46] This verse can be read together with Surah *An-Nisa'* (Q.4:124) that states "As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter paradise without the slightest injustice".[47] Juxtaposed, these two verses bestow equal status to men and women regarding spiritual worth, human dignity, and accountability before God.[48] The social roles of men and women, however, are complementary to establish harmony.[49] The ambiguities and ironies inherent in popular interpretations of scripture are dramatized in *Utata*, to which we shall now turn.

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45 James Odhiambo Ogone, ''Remediating Orality: The Cultural Domestication of Video Technology in Kenya'', 2015

46 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. *The Holy Qur'aan (Arabic text, English translation, Roman transliteration)*. (Lahore: Qudrat Ullah Co., 2011).

47 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan (Arabic text, English translation, Roman transliteration),* 2011

48 Abdullah Ibn Abbas. *Tafsir ibn Abbas* (trans). Mokrane Guezzou. (ed). Yousef Meri. (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007). p. 81

49 Abdullah Ibn Abbas, *Tafsir ibn Abbas,* 2007, 104

The plot of *Utata* involves Maalim Shariff, a single parent, raising three daughters (Halima, Mariam, and Aziza). A conservative and respected religious figure and elder in his community, Maalim Shariff endeavours to raise his daughters into modest young Muslim women. It is debatable whether he does this to protect his daughters' honour and chastity from the seemingly wayward young men of the cosmopolitan urban environment to protect his own integrity and standing in the community. The daughters receive both secular and religious education, in preparation for their role as mothers and productive citizens. Their various actions and decisions throughout the film demonstrate how complex society is and give voice to the myriad responses individual Muslims are likely to deploy in the attempt to make relevant their daily experiences. The daughters' actions and decisions at times support traditional patriarchal structures of their society yet at other times, their choices challenge these structures, showing the daughters' attempt at authentic self-expression. Mariam is the first-born daughter while Aziza is the third-born. Mariam responds to Sajjad, a suitor who has expressed interest in courting Aziza with the words "*si unajua utaratibu wetu*" (Surely, you know the customary procedure?) (*Utata* 00:19:48). By referencing "customary procedure", Mariam demonstrates the weight of tradition. Her actions as a young Muslim woman are proscribed by long-established norms. While she cannot make decisions regarding her sister's courtship and marriage but refers the suitor to her father, Mariam advises the suitor to visit Maalim Shariff rather than waylay Aziza on the streets. To guard her sister against what are seen as corrupting influences, she further asks the suitor "*Sasa wataka kumuoa au wataka mwende vichochoroni*?" (Are you intent on marriage or do you just want to play her around?) (*Utata* 00:20:05). Mariam's reference to customary procedures and her insistence on the suitor's engagement with the father demonstrates a set of actions and decisions that support the patriarchy and the structures of tradition. In addition to demonstrating and critiquing patriarchy, *Utata* also hints at Muslim producers contesting dominant societal norms and challenging Muslim women's ascribed marginality, and it is to an exploration of these entanglements that we now turn.

Following Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll, we approach gender as,

> an institutionalised system of social practises for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and

> organising social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference.[50]

Gender includes a cultural dimension, one that is linked to relations of power.[51] On the question of gender, *Utata* presents the idea that Muslim societies in Kenya are culturally complex and that contemporary Muslim families deploy alternative responses to confront what they perceive as unfair cultural norms that subdue and suppress women. In responding to the challenges of parenting in an urban environment, *Utata* shows Muslim families contesting the prevailing norms on the role of women, positioning Muslim women as both central and important. This article observes that, like Muslim women elsewhere, Kenyan Muslim women aspire to raise themselves to higher levels of self-understanding to achieve their potential and humanness outside of the confines of dominant patriarchies. By contesting dominant norms, Muslim women actors are challenging their marginal status within Islam as well as the broader marginal status as Muslims in a Christian majority state. Ultimately, *Utata* presents gender relations in Kenyan Muslim societies as dynamic, reflecting a community grappling with modernity, tradition, and the continuing quest for authentic self-expression.

In *Utata*, Mama Sajjad challenges local Muslims cultural patterns that disapprove of her meeting Maalim Shariff to initiate marriage negotiations for Sajjad and Aziza. Mama Sajjad visits Mzee Shariff to initiate marriage negotiations. In the film video, Mama Sajjad is accompanied by a single male relation in visiting Maalim Shariff to initiate negotiations towards Sajjad's marriage to Aziza. This visit stretches the Muslim discourse on marriage and the need for complementarity of roles in socio-cultural engagements. Traditionally, witnesses to a Muslim marriage are part of the stipulations that lend legitimacy to the marriage contract. Islamic jurisprudence demands that witnesses must be Muslim, male, free, mature, sane, competent, and morally upright.[52] Mama Sajjad does not get excluded from the marriage

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50 Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll. "Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 4 (2004): 511

51 Jo Rowlands. *Questioning Empowerment*. (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997).

52 Mohamed Suleiman Mraja. *Islamic Impacts on Marriage and Divorce among the Digo of Southern Kenya*. (Wurzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007).

negotiations, nor does Maalim Shariff protest her presence. While Mama Sajjad's role in *Utata* is not as a witness to marriage, and hence her presence on the scene is not to be construed as her being the sole witness to the actual marriage but rather only to start the negotiations, it is plausible that the film video's depiction of that scene is a critique of religious norms that, at times, limit the involvement of women in socio-religious contexts out of the segregation of gender and attendant gender-based spatial organisation in Islam. The actual marriage ceremony, if it were to take place, would likely occur in private spaces such as the bridal home or, at most, a mosque. Muslim actors use film work to articulate local adaptations of Islam that, while not syncretic, nonetheless give audiences an alternate view of lived Islam, highlighting multiple ways local cultural traditions meet with scriptural Islam. In the case of Mama Sajjad contesting the different spaces for men and women in marriage negotiations, it is arguable that Mama Sajjad is more influenced by Digo customary patterns than Islam's specific and legal prescriptions when she visits Maalim Shariff. In this way, we see film video challenging symbolic marginalization of Muslim women and expanding their self-expression.

Muslim educational practises derive from foundational sources of Islam (the Qur'an and Sunna) and are mediated through mosques, madrassas, and Qur'anic schools.[53] This has mostly been the case for religious education. However, in secular education, Muslims in Kenya appear marginal. Explaining this marginality is the historical reliance of colonial administrations on Christian missionaries to provide education on Africans, leading to Muslim apathy toward secular education, which they considered a prelude to Christianisation.[54] While Islam considers education, in general, as a fundamental right for both genders, with its acquisition incumbent on each individual Muslim, there exist huge disparities between the freedoms of women to access education as envisaged in the Qur'an and the actual obstacles that societies place on women in their quest for attaining education.[55] These restrictions to Muslim women accessing education are not only confined to Muslim communities, but are also evident in other

[53] Ali Adnan Ali, "Historical Development of Muslim Education in East Africa," *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 128

[54] Ali Adnan Ali, "Historical Development of Muslim Education in East Africa", 2022

[55] Afreen Jawed and Gaurav Sikka. "Educational Rights and Status of Muslim Women as Provided for in Islam," *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 4 (2024): 1-10

communities in Kenya and attributed to cultural factors such as patriarchy, poverty, and parental illiteracy.[56]

Forms of patriarchy are identified as an obstacle to women's access to education in Kenya. Among Muslims, patriarchy presents a clear structure of marginalisation that impedes women's development, thereby curtailing economic opportunities open to them. Firly Annisa contends that "in a patriarchal system women are automatically assigned a specific role and identity that are not to their advantage".[57] In the context of Kenya, Annisa's contention would be that Muslim women are assigned the roles of both childbirth and domestic duties. Clearly, in patriarchal societies the role of women does not evolve beyond mere reproduction and housework.

In *Utata*, all three of Maalim Shariff's daughters attain both religious and secular education, breaking societal cultural patterns that limit the educational progress of girls. Maalim Shariff's effort to offer both Islamic and secular education to his daughters is a dynamic response to parenting in an urban environment. He takes pride in educating his daughters, reminding them "*Mumesoma vizuri, mna elimu ya dunia na ya dini*" (You are well educated, in secular and religious education) (*Utata*: 00:05:10). Exposing his daughters to education enables them to overcome socio-cultural impediments and acquire sufficient knowledge to fulfil their religious obligations as Muslims. The film video shows Halima, Mariam, and Aziza creating new representations of the Muslim woman as educated, enlightened, and progressive and, as such, challenging cultural exclusion and subordination. By casting the three young Muslim women as educated, the film video displays their experience as evolving beyond reproduction and housework, thereby challenging stereotypical representations and inscribing a form of authentic self-expression

[56] Pauline Wangari Mukuria, "Factors Contributing to High Rate of Illiteracy among the Borana Muslim Women in Marginalized Areas: A Case Study of Marsabit County," *Impact: Journal of Transformation* 1, no. 2 (2018): 1-23

[57] Firly Annisa. "Representation of Fashion as Muslima Identity in Paris Magazine," in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, edited by Johanna Pink (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). 274

Contesting Representations on Muslim women and the hijab

The foundational discourse on practises of veiling is traced to Surah *Nur* (The Light) (Qur'an 24:30-31). Verse number thirty reads "Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is All-Aware of what they do".[58] This verse stipulates modesty upon believing men. It is required of believing men to lower their gaze and not feast their eyes on women that are prohibited for them. Verse 31 reads,

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornments…And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.[59]

The second verse stipulates modesty upon women. It outlines the requirements of a Muslim woman's performance in public. The two verses place equal responsibility for men and women to lower their gaze and to protect their modesty. The emphasis is on avoiding the forbidden, protecting the privacy, and maintaining modesty for both.[60] That men and women are spiritually equal is confirmed by the directive for all to turn in repentance to God. While the instructions in the Qur'an appear self-evident, Muslim's interpretation on the practise of veiling is varied.

Katherine Bullock notes that multiple conceptions of the practise of veiling exist in Muslim societies, and consequently, different discourses and practises on veiling arise.[61] Drawing on fieldwork in Canada, Bullock points out that Western stereotypes that consider Islam inherently violent and oppressive to women similarly expose Muslim women to discrimination. In the liberation struggle in Algeria, and in response to the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), wearing the veil was a symbolic resistance to French efforts to depict unveiled Muslim women as modern and liberated.[62]

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58 Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan,* 2011
59 Pickthall, *The Holy Qur'aan,* 2011
60 Abbas, *Tafsir ibn Abbas,* 2007, 391
61 Katherine Bullock. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. (London: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 2002).
62 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*,88

In the Iranian revolution of 1979, the veil assumed meaning in the discourse against the imperial state of Iran and what was perceived as a puppet government of the Shah Reza Pahlavi. Women put on the veil in a deliberate attempt to identify with the revolutionary zeal of the Mujahidin of the Islamic republic of Ruhollah Khomeini and to offer symbolic resistance to the commodification of women.[63]

In East Africa, Muslim women wear the hijab to represent their religious affiliation to Islam as well as to express specific cultural identities.[64] The hijab in East Africa has different forms, ranging from simple head coverings (headscarves) to the colourful Swahili *kanga* (also termed *lesso*), and the full body *buibui* or *abaya*. Habibat Oladosu-Uthman and Mutiat Titilope Oladejo demonstrate that diversity in forms of veiling attests to local adaptations of Islam, where cultural norms become the lens through which to filter religious injunctions.[65] In their observation, "Muslim women veil differently across continents and cultures".[66] This localization of globally binding stipulations reflects a people's appropriation of aspects of their faith and the effort to give religion local interpretations to make it meaningful.

In Kenya, the coastal communities of the Swahili in the North coast and the Digo in the South coast share similar socio-cultural patterns and traditionally use vibrantly coloured pieces of cotton fabric termed *lesso* (or *Kanga*) for covering. *Lesso*, about one by one and a half metre and usually carrying printed Swahili proverbs along one side, are a symbol of modesty for Muslim women in these communities and are considered appropriate dressing for Muslim women.[67] Swahili and Digo women add variety to dressing norms. In formal settings, such as weddings and funeral ceremonies, these women discard the *lesso* and adorn a long black outer covering locally termed *buibui* that has become part of their cultural identity. Among the Somali of Northern

63 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil,*88

64 Mwenda Mukuthuria. "Islam and the Development of Kiswahili," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 8 (2009): 36-45

65 Habibat Oladosu-Uthman and Mutiat Titilope Oladejo. "Veiling and Muslim Women in African History since the Ottoman Empire," *Islam and Civilizational Renewal* 12, no. 2 (2021): 314-330

66 Oladosu-Uthman and Oladejo, "Veiling and Muslim Women in African History since the Ottoman Empire", 315

67 Laura Fair. "Dressing Up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar," *The Journal of African History* 39, no. 1 (1998): 76

Kenya, the *niqab* that covers the face is more common, usually combined with a full body robe locally termed the *abaya*. Borana women add variety to local formulations of *hijab*. The Borana, residing in the dry semi-desert environments of Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia, use a long cotton shawl thrown over the shoulder and tied at the waist, called *guntina*. Older women in this community use a headscarf, locally known as *agogo*.[68] While contentious how far the Borana covering fulfils the Islamic scriptural dictates for veiling, it has local utility in allowing the free flow of air and is accepted as modest by the locals.

The young Muslim women in *Utata* use their screen presence to voice the multiple responses that individual women deploy in their everyday lived Islam. The complex choices of the daughters Halima, Mariam, and Aziza over the *hijab* demonstrate the effort of Muslims to dismantle stereotype around the *hijab*. Indeed, the film video shows Halima exercising agency in her choice of dress and sense of fashion. As a teenage girl living in a cosmopolitan environment, her dressing is a negotiation between the religious sensibilities of her Muslim environment and the global fashion trends that seep into her cosmopolitan social urban setting. Among the Digo community of the South Coast from whom the video is set, Islamic dictates on dress are upheld, albeit with local adaptations in fashion for practicability. Halima is expected to uphold these etiquettes of dress but, at times, she does not, to the consternation of her friends. When confronted by her friends about the apparent conflict between her liberal fashion choices and the strict religious upbringing from her family, she dismissively refers to her father as "*yule mshamba"* (that old fashioned one) (*Utata* 00:13:07). This dismissive remark displays Halima's increasing agency in her choice of dress. She is not confined to the religious sensibilities of her Muslim environment. Halima signals a break with the older generation when she refers to her father as an "old fashioned one", implying that the dress choices popular among her generation are different from the choices of the older generation.

In contrast, the father, Maalim Shariff, represents the forces of conservative Islamic parenting that reflects ingrained notions about women's bodies as

[68] Kalthum D. Guyo. "Hijab: Cultural Dominance over Muslim women or a moral act?" (Daily Nation, Jan. 22, 2023). Available at: https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/hijab-cultural-dominance-over-muslim-women-or-a-moral-act-4095146

sources of *fitna*.[69] Such conservative parenting, with its attendant view of female sexuality as disruptive, is characteristic of the traditional Muslim male.[70] When he learns from neighbours that Halima disregards the *buibui* whenever she is out of the home, Maalim Shariff convenes a family counselling session where he admonishes his daughters:

> *Nina hisia kwamba kuna baadhi yenu mna tabia ambazo si za kistaarabu…mkitoka nyumbani hapa mnavaa vizuri, mnajistiri vizuri tu…inasemekana kwamba mkitoka huko nje mabuibui huvuliwa…mkavaa vile ambavyo mnataka. Kisha mkirudi hapa nyumbani unarudisha buibui lako…unarudi nyumbani* (I suspect some of you are misbehaving…you leave home well dressed, well covered…but it is said that when you are out there the *buibui* [full body covering] are taken off…you dress however you want. Then when it is time to come back you again put on the *buibui* [full body covering]… and come back) (*Utata* 00:04:10).

As a responsible parent, Maalim Shariff instils religious training to his daughters to approximate his ideals of a proper Muslim woman who is educated and decent as a counter to the encroaching secularism of the touristic Diani, their suburban home. By removing the *Buibui* (the Swahili community's equivalent to the Muslim full body covering for women) on her rendezvous into town to meet her lover, Irshad, Halima seeks to assert her liberties regarding dress code and courtship. This action can be read as a flagrant disregard of the local Muslims cultural norms. It is also antithetical to the Islamic education and moral upbringing her father has endeavoured to provide to his three daughters.

Conversely, her sisters Mariam and Aziza, always appear in the film cast in modest clothing that fulfils the local Muslims' notions of the ideal Muslim woman. While the two uphold conventional norms of dressing, thereby considered appropriately dressed, Halima provides a contrastive to what have been seen as restrictive discourses on women's bodies.[71] Kelly M.

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69 Fatema Mernissi. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

70 Henry Munson, Jr. "Review by Henry Munson, Jr.," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 85, no. 1 (1983): 213-234

71 Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*,50-70

Askew traces these restrictive discourses on women's bodies to "Islamic principles and practises of sex-based segregation".[72] Halima challenges these restrictive discourses by removing her veil when she ventures away from home and overturns conventional norms of dressing. Her actions conflict with both her father's authority and Digo society's notions of the ideal Muslim woman. Halima gives potency and power to the idea developed by Fatima Mernissi that patriarchies consider women's bodies a threat to the moral order.[73] It is in this regard that Maalim Shariff cautions his daughters,

> *Kama hamjiheshimu hamtaheshimiwa…nyumba hii inajulikana kama nyumba ya adabu…lakini kama nyinyi mtakuwa mnaibwaga nyumba yenu ni nyinyi wenyewe.*[74] (If you do not respect yourself, you will be disrespected…ours is a respectable home…but if you draw shame to this house that will be your own doing) (*Utata* 00:06:00).

It is unfathomable to Maalim Shariff that a Muslim woman can venture outside of the home except in a state of veiling. Appearing in public spaces without a decent Islamic covering is equal to drawing shame on the self, the religion, and the society at large. Maalim Shariff regards himself a custodian of the moral order. He embodies Mernissi's critique of the patriarchal view of women's bodies as sources of *fitna* (chaos, strife).[75] In the social context of the Digo Muslims of Kenya's South coast, the threat of the collapse of the moral order is compounded by international tourism. This threat leads traditional authority figures (represented in the film by Maalim Shariff) to fear the collapse of society. The contradiction that arises in contemporary Muslim societies is amplified by Maalim Shariff's choices. By ensuring his daughters receive secular education, he prepares them for formal employment and subsequent participation in the economy. Educating his daughters is a liberatory act. It reflects his attempt at achieving gender equity and at positioning his daughters to participate as co-equals in the knowledge economy and in society. Maalim Shariff, as the head of his family, embodies the traditional norms, represents patriarchal dictates, and preserves tradition. The challenge appears to be upon the young generation of Muslim

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72 Kelly M. Askew. "Female Circles and Male Lines: Gender Dynamics along the Swahili Coast," *Africa Today* 46, no. 3 (1999): 69

73 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil,*15-40

74 *Utata* 00:06:00

75 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 39

women who must leverage western education to gain mobility in public spaces while, at the same time, preserving modesty and family reputation. The veil, then, is a site of contestation, presenting secular education and employment outside the home as a latent challenge to Digo and Swahili notions of decency.

Makers of Islamic film videos in Kenya contribute to the discourse on veiling by giving visual display to the complex and multifaceted responses of Muslim women to the practice. While rooted in scripture, the practise of veiling is given local inflections by Muslims from the Somali, the Borana, the Swahili, and the Digo, among many other Kenyan communities. These local inflections reflect the geographical, cultural, and religious contexts in which veiling have been adapted to local contexts. The film video demonstrates the complex ways veiling creates identities, showing the struggles of Muslim women towards empowerment. Ultimately, the depiction of the practise of veiling by Kenyan Muslim actors offers contradictory narratives. These narratives demonstrate the encounter of global fashion trends with local Islamic conceptions of modesty, ultimately reflecting Muslim's local interpretations of Islam.

Conclusion

Utata exposes alternative responses to veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education. Veiling is considered a way to preserve the chastity of Muslim women. Young Muslim creatives, including producers and actors, use film video to challenge that view. The actors reinterpret veiling, casting it as a ploy by male authority figures to control women and curtail their visibility. While Maalim Shariff's three daughters receive formal and religious education, in contradiction they are expected to uphold traditional norms, such as the separation of sexes, and surrender their decision-making to traditional authority figures. Such expectations suggest that education has not been liberating to Muslim women and has not fully allowed them to participate as independent agents in the project of modernity. By exposing the contradictions of Muslim's responses to veiling, gender roles, and women's education, Muslim actors use forms of popular culture to engage with and challenge the discourse of religious scholars and elites.

Utata highlights the various alternative positions Muslims adopt in response to contemporary challenges. This film video gives voice to the myriads of

ways Muslim families respond to veiling, gender roles, and Muslim women's education. In a situation of perceived Muslim women's curtailment from the public sphere, film video allows Muslim women to approximate a measure of authentic self-expression. Film video allows Muslim women to express their identity as Muslims and contribute to Islamic discourses. This article demonstrates how the positions and pronouncements by religious authority figures are contested and reinterpreted in film video, allowing marginal voices of Muslim women actors to counter social exclusion and enable actors to participate in shaping national discourses.

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Challenging Boundaries in Acts 8:26-40: Toward seeing "othered bodies" through Decolonial Feminist Eyes

Miranda Pillay[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Miranda Pillay is a Senior Researcher at the University of the Western Cape, affiliated with the Desmond Tutu (SARCHI) Chair in Religion and Social Justice which is jointly supported by the Lund Mission Society and the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant number 118854). The author acknowledges that opinions, findings and conclusions expressed are those of the author alone, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape
mpillay@uwc.ac.za

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3335-2232

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ABSTRACT

Cartography, the scientific name for "mapping", sets boundaries that separate people and places. As a metaphor, it is "another name for stories told by winners", which may also refer to the politics of knowledge production captured in biblical texts. As such, stories mapped by hegemonic powers ignore the presence, knowledge, and insights of the marginalized "othered". Reception history of the story mapped in Acts 8:26-40, and by implication sermons preached on this biblical text, primarily lends itself to the advancement of the Christian missionary task – proselytization. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch has generally served as a literary prop to "proclaim the *Good News*". Explicit references to racial and sexual identity markers in the text are generally "glossed over" and the unnamed character is seen as the "other" in need of salvation. This paper explores how, when seen from a decolonial feminist perspective, a different picture of the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch emerges. The argument made here is that when hegemonic understandings of the biblical text are questioned, boundaries that separate people and places are challenged to reveal a theological map of radical inclusivity.

KEYWORDS:
Feminist; Decolonial; Acts 8:26-40; Ethiopian; Eunuch; Knowledge; Agency, Good News

Introduction: On Mapping Boundaries

> Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. (Acts 8:26).

An internet search for maps relating to the bible story about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 yields one with the caption "Philip's Journeys" with two arrows both pointing South and labelled "To Egypt and Ethiopia". One arrow points towards Gaza from Samaria, and the other points further South,

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away from Gaza.[1] Turkish novelist, Elif Shafak, says that cartography, the scientific name for mapping, sets boundaries that separate places and people. She poignantly states that a map represents arbitrary signs and carves lines that "decide who is to be our enemy and who is to be our friend, who deserves our love and who deserves our hatred and who, [deserves] our sheer indifference"[2].

Scholarship on Acts 8:26-40 increasingly engage the text as an interpretive site where ambiguity is purposeful and embodiment is contested. Burke frames this ambiguity as a literary strategy in Luke-Acts. He argues that the ambiguity functions as a literary device that justifies the application of reception-by-analogy as a critical methodology. However, such analogical interpretations are always applied responsibly with an awareness of their limits.[3] Yii-Jan Lin's 2020 textual-critical work examines Greek manuscript traditions of Acts 8:32-37, and shows how boundaries emerge from the instability of the written tradition itself, rather than from identity claims projected onto the character. In disability-focused receptions, Anna Rebecca Solevåg's 2016 article, "No Nuts? No Problem!", reads the baptized eunuch as a body marked by stigma, whose inclusion unsettles inherited assumptions about ability, gender, and belonging. Taken together, these scholars exemplify the major interpretive debates on Acts 8, demonstrating a deepening and widening literature that treats ambiguity, social exclusion, stigma, and narrative agency as fully embedded textual questions.
The story mapped in Acts 8:26-40 centers around Philip who had fled persecution after Jesus' crucifixion. Now in Samaria, Philip follows the instruction from "an Angel of the Lord" to "Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" where he would meet an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-27).

Acts 8:26-40 is read in many churches on the fifth Sunday of Easter as set out in Year B Cycle of the Common Lectionary. While the text often bears the heading "Philip and the Ethiopian", the pericope begins and ends with

1 See https://www.thebiblejourney.org/biblejourney1/7-journeys-of-jesuss-followers/philips-journeys/, accessed 15 July 2025.
2 Elif Shafak. *The Island of Missing Trees.* (Dublin: Penquin Books), 1.
3 Sean D. Burke. Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts. (Augsburg Fortress, 2013) https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22h6s0c. Also see Sean D. Burke. "Reading the Bible with Eunuchs," in *Mapping New Terrain in Queer Religious Scholarship*, ed. B. Schlager (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025, 207-211.

Philip.[4] Over the years, I have heard many sermons preached on this story and cannot recall any that mentioned the Ethiopian's racial or sexual identity. As Nadar et al. point out, traditional interpretations of Acts 8:26-40 tend to "gloss over the actual body of the eunuch" and focus instead on the salvation of his spiritual body.[5] The invisibilization and spiritualization of the character's actual body have shaped interpretations of the text.

I argue that the salvific message of the Good News about Jesus (Acts 8:35) and the focus on proselytization eliminate the Ethiopian eunuch as a leading protagonist in the story. Placing exclusive emphasis on the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch for salvation dismisses the character's ethnographic identity as *non est tanti*, a Latin phrase that means "of no great importance".[6] Martin links such interpretations to the pervasive problem in contemporary societies where the significance, contributions, and lived experiences of marginalized groups are persistently dismissed, ignored, deemed irrelevant and regarded as being of no great importance.

Almost half a century later, Martin's observation still rings true. Two examples come to mind, namely, the genocide in Gaza[7] and the exclusion or conditional inclusion of LGBTQI+ members in Christian communities.[8] Ironically, while Martin calls attention to the racially marked body of the Ethiopian, the character's sexuality remains "of no great importance" in her writing.[9]

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4 The *English Standard Version* (ESV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) capture the story under the heading "Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch" while the caption above Acts 8:26-40 in the *New International Version* (NIV) reads "Philip and the Ethiopian".

5 Sarojini Nadar, Paulo Ueti and Johnathan Jodamus, "Toward Gender Justice: Reimagining Religion, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Acts 8:26-40," The Ecumenical Review 75, no. 1 (2023): 107.

6 Clarice Martin. "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation." *Semeia* 47 (1989): 105-135. *Roughly translated in legal terms, Non est Tanti means "does not exist".*

7 Sarojini Nadar. *Gender, Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther: Engaging Tests of Terror(ism)*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025).

8 Miranda Pilay "Re-membering Community: Towards Unconditional Inclusion of LGBTQI+ Members." South African Council of Churches, WC. Verde Hotel, Cape Town, 25 June 2022.

9 Understandably, at that time, the issue of racial discrimination was of greater importance to her and other African Americans. It was also the case in apartheid South Africa when

In South Africa, where 85% of the population claims to have some Christian identity or church affiliation, the Bible remains relevant.[10] It is not surprising that some South African Christians continue to turn to ancient biblical texts to justify religious superiority, white supremacy, and heteronormative patriarchy. However, the work of many South African liberation theologians, including feminist theologians, illustrate that the same Bible can also be a tool of liberation to challenge racism, classism, sexism, and genderism in contemporary contexts.[11] Musa Dube, amongst other feminist theologians, points to the connection between the Bible and colonial oppression.[12] She argues that hegemonic power has been, and continues to be, "effected through the biblical text".[13]

Thus, one cannot read the story mapped in Acts 8:26-40 and its explicit reference to Gaza without calling to mind the wars waged by the state of Israel against the people of Palestine. Recently, our televisions flash life-and-death stories of those for whom this strip of land on the map is home; their humanity and dignity appear to be of no consequence. As pointed out

opposition politics was dominated by the objective "to mobilise women for the national liberation struggle" against racism, while sexism prevailed (Shireen Hassim. "Gender, Social Location and Feminist Politics in South Africa." *Transformation* 15 (1991): 65-82). See also Kumari Jayawardena. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. (Zed Books, 1986).

10 See South African Population Census (2022: 24).

11 Sarojini Nadar. "Barak God and Die!' Women, HIV and a Theology of Suffering," *in Grant me Justice: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible*, ed. M. Dube, and R. Kanyoro, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004). 63-67; Miranda Pillay. "See this Woman? Toward a Theology of Gender Equality in the Context of HIV and AIDS." *Scriptura* 89 (2005)*:* 441-455; Denise Ackermann. "Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture,* ed. D. Caroll and J. Lapsley (John Knox Press, 2007) 200-219; Elna Mouton. "Human Dignity as Expressions of God Images? Perspectives from in 1 Corinthians 24 and Ephesians 5." *Neotestamentica* 45, no. 2 (2011):.275-279; Nontando Hadebe. "Can Anything Good Come from Nazareth? Come and see!': An Invitation to Dialogue Between Queer Theories and African Theologies." *Concilium* 5 (2019): 85; Madipoane J. Masenya. "Without a voice, with a violated body: Re-reading Judges 19 to challenge gender violence in sacred texts." *Missionalia* 40, no. 3 (2012): 206.

12 Musa Dube. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

13 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation,* 17. Postcolonial biblical scholar, Sugirtharajah, explains that the colonized within early Christianity articulated "their identity, self-worth, and empowerment" in a context where dominant religion colluded with empire building (2002: 11).

earlier, the mapping of stories embedded in biblical colonialism, imperialism, and religious superiority ignore and obliterate the legitimate presence of persons "othered" by those in power.14 In a 2025 op-ed in the Mail & Guardian, South African feminist theologian, Sarojini Nadar, points out how Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, use "biblical allusions" to justify war against the Palestinian people of Gaza. She argues that in his speech at the UN General Assembly on 26 September 2025, Netanyahu invoked God's help as if Israel's war in Gaza is a divine instruction.[15]

Therefore, to read the divine instruction given to Philip to "Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" in contemporary Christian communities without any mention of Israel's occupation and expansionism is to ignore the dead and mutilated bodies that lay strewn in the roads of Gaza. While such oblivion raises serious questions about the justification of blatant expansionism, it falls outside the scope of this paper.[16] However, this observation, together with the observation that LGBTQI+ members in Christian churches continue to be excluded, provide the backdrop for the premise of this paper. That is that to "gloss over" the racially and sexually marked body of the Ethiopian eunuch in the reading of Acts 8:26-40 today is to be complicit in racism, classism, sexism, and genderism inherent in global nationalism.

However, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a first-century narrative written within the overlapping social worlds of Roman empire and the early Christ-movement. In this period, difference was not primarily organized through the modern identity markers familiar today. Instead,

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14 As Palestinian Christian theologian and activist Mitri Raheb. "Land, People and Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Christian Eyes," in *A New Critical Approach to the History of Palestine*, ed. I. Hjelm, I. Taha, and T. Thompson (Abingdon; Routledge, 2019) argues, Christian Zionist belief systems, backed by particular readings of the Bible, provide the "theological software" that legitimizes the use of military weapons and sanctifies settler colonialism.

15 See Sarojini Nadar, "The theft of prophecy: Why religion matters for all social justice struggles," *Mail & Guardian*, 7 October 2025, https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2025-10-07-the-theft-of-prophecy-why-religion-matters-for-all-social-justice-struggles/

16 See Nadar, *Gender, Genocide, Gaza, x*. Nadar recalls that when Gaza was about to be invaded by Israeli forces in October 2023, Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the biblical character, Amalek. This she says, "gestures toward a legacy of ethnic and colonial violence".

status, belonging, and exclusion were socially-coded through class positioning, imperial proximity, temple access, and ritual purity regulations.[17] Eunuchs, as a category, were recognized socially and politically, often linked to imperial systems that sought to regulate bodies, loyalty, lineage, and access to assemblies of power and worship (cf. Leviticus 21:20; Deuteronomy 23:1). Though the biblical text does not assign sexual identity to the eunuch, the first-century audience would have recognized him as a figure whose body already sat at the intersection of empire, piety, social stigma, and only conditionally included in Jewish temple assemblies within Roman provincial space.[18] Mickel reminds us that, locating the eunuch "requires an intersection of multiple identities that include his geography, social status, ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation".[19] It is from this historically implied and textually situated world that I move toward examining the story's reception, rhetoric, and interpretive life.

My decolonial feminist rereading of Acts 8:26-40 is offered with full appreciation of the exegetical labor already undertaken by scholars of Luke–Acts who have long noted that the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch sits at a crucial point in Luke's literary and theological mapping of the gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).[20] This scholarship has raised questions about how outsiders are narrated into the story of God. Brittany Wilson, for example, reads the eunuch as an ambiguous figure whose repeated designation as "eunuch" and "Ethiopian" exposes the entanglement of status, gender, and ethnicity, and embodies the boundary-

17 See, for example, Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Ethnocentrism and Research on the Historical Jesus," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Bruce J. Malina, Woldfang, Stegemann and Gerd Theissen (Fortress Press. 2002), 36. for an illustration of the social structure in the Herodian period as it relates to power, privilege and honor.

18 See Brittany Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts. (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) for a discussion of Luke's audience with particular reference to Acts and the intersection with gender constructions in the Greco-Roman world.

19 Steve Mickel, "Cross-Cultural Leadership Complexities: A Study of the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip's Interaction in Acts 8:26-40," in *Biblical Cross-Cultural Leadership: Principles from the New Testament,* eds. Suzana Dobrić Veiss, Elizabeth K. Hunt, and Joshua D. Henson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 155. See also, Sean D. Burke, "Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, eds. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, (Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

20 See, for example, Mickel, "Cross-Cultural Leadership Complexities".

crossing nature of the gospel itself.[21] Andrew Mbuvi revisits the translation of εὐνοῦχος and Aἰθίοψ, arguing that the figure should be understood as an African royal official and possibly an African Jew and foregrounds the significance of both the LXX background and Isaiah traditions for Luke's narrative framing.[22] In his PhD dissertation, Joshua Seokhyuny Yoon reads the eunuch as a "representative outsider", tracing how Luke's use of the Isaianic suffering servant in Acts 8:32-33 intersects with themes of exclusion and the inclusion of outsiders in God's reign.[23] Others have explored in detail how Isaiah 56:1-8 reworks Deuteronomy 23:1 and purity-based exclusion, offering a vision in which foreigners and eunuchs who "keep the sabbath" and "hold fast the covenant" are gathered to God's holy mountain. A tradition that many see as echoing beneath Luke's portrayal of the eunuch's journey from temple exclusion to baptismal inclusion.
[24]

Textual critics such as Yii-Jan Lin have shown how the contested presence of Acts 8:37 in the manuscript tradition opens further questions about confession, agency, and the shaping of the eunuch's voice in the reception of this passage.[25] Drawing on disability and crip theory, Solevåg foregrounds how the eunuch's marked body, stigma, and non-procreative status complicate purity and belonging.[26] My reading is in conversation with these literary, historical and theological dynamics in Acts but shifts the center of gravity to the ways in which "othered bodies" continue to be mapped, regulated, and erased in contemporary contexts of empire.

Considering these introductory remarks, I make three observations about the traditional mapping of the story in Acts 8. First, the focus is usually on the faithfulness of Philip who obeys the command of the angel of the Lord to

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21 Brittany Wilson, "'Neither Male nor Female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40." *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014): 403-422.

22 Andrew Mbuvi, "Revisiting Translation and Interpretation Issues in the Story of the African Royal Official (Ethiopian Eunuch) in Acts 8:26-40: The Hebrew Bible (LXX) Background." *Old Testament Essays* 34, no.2 (2021): 478-82.

23 Joshua Yoon, "A Representative Outsider and the Inclusion of the Outsider in Acts 8:26-40" (PhD Diss. Duke University, 2016): 74-78.

24 Raymond de Hoop. The Interpretation of Isaiah 56:1-9: Comfort or Criticism? *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 4 (2008): 671-695.

25 Yii-Jan Lin, "The Multivalence of the Ethiopian Eunuch and Acts 8:37," *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 25 (2020): 103-110.

26 Solevåg, "No Nuts? No Problem".

"Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza". Second, the understanding is that this act of faith and obedience is what leads to the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian. Third, the most common understanding of this ancient text in contemporary contexts is that Philip's obedience is in keeping with the call to spread the "good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35) "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

In this article, I challenge this "traditional" mapping of the biblical story of the Ethiopian eunuch. To this end, I drop pins to mark three spots to interrupt the reading of the biblical text: (i) Recognize the socially marked body of the Ethiopian eunuch; (ii) Reflect on the agency of the unnamed character in the story; (iii) Review the ways in which the *Good News* is exhibited in the story.[27] It is with this re-mapping in mind that I offer a decolonial feminist reading of Acts 8:26-40.

Feminist Epistemology and Decoloniality: On seeing from the "othered" side

> Feminist epistemology is not […] the study or defence of feminine intuition, of "women's ways of knowing", of subjectivism; it is not an embrace of irrationality or of Protagorean relativism.[28]

The above quote highlights the burden placed on feminist scholars to always explain "what we mean".[29] Critics of feminist scholarship do not simply offer academic critique but, in many cases, also reinforce the very hierarchies that critical enquiry seeks to question. Pushback against feminist perspectives and questions about whether, or how, it aligns to mainstream philosophical epistemology and its foundational assumptions are not the issues I seek to address here. Suffice to say that such pushback limits the horizon of

[27] This pinpoints the feminist biblical scholar's task to uncover/unearth/reveal characters "who are normally hidden" or ignored in biblical texts (Miranda Pillay, "Through the Eyes of a Mother: Re-reading Luke's Mary as a Resource for Gender Equality in the 21st Century?" in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in honour of Denise M Ackermann - A Feminist Theologian of Praxis*, eds. M. Pillay, S. Nadar, & C. Lebruyns. (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2009), 223.

[28] Helen E. Longino, and Kathleen Lennon. "Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 71 (1997): 19.

[29] Longino and Lennon, "Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology", 19.

meaning and ensures that the power "to know" is maintained within the hierarchical meaning-making justified by patriarchy.

It is also not my intension, here, to discuss feminist epistemology as a branch of philosophy.[30] Rather, I want to highlight the inter-relatedness between feminist epistemology and decoloniality as a grounding for the argument developed in this article. To this end, I foreground two interrelated aims of feminist epistemology. First, it seeks to debunk sexism and destabilizes androcentric thinking in the humanities as well as the social and natural sciences.[31] Thus, feminist epistemology investigates "the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge".[32] Second, feminist epistemology not only incorporates a "commitment to the liberation of women" but also a commitment to the "social and political equality of all persons".[33] In this regard, the feminist theologian's task is to "recognize the distortions of the Christian message created in the church's patriarchal socialization, and to reconstruct its social patterns, language, and theology to affirm the full humanity of both women and men".[34] Thus, consisting of both critical and constructive dimensions, feminist epistemology not only aligns with decoloniality in its critique of Eurocentrism, imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchalism, but also aims to reconstruct epistemic practices that maintain systemic structures.[35]

As I have noted elsewhere, there is no univocal feminist voice.[36] Historically, calls for liberation by the economically advantaged Western, Eurocentric, heterosexual feminists have often rendered the experiences of African, Indian, Asian, and Latino women (amongst others) as being "of no great

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30 For more insight on this topic, see "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science" (Anderson 2024) and "Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology" (Lennon and Whitford 1994) for insights on key points in this field of study.

31 Helen E. Longino. "Review: Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problem of Knowledge." *Signs* 19, no 1 (1993): 201.

32 Elizabeth Anderson. "Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense." *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): 54.

33 Andreson, "Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation", 54

34 Denise Ackerman, "Feminist Liberation Theology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (1988): 33. See also Pillay, "Through the Eyes of A Mother", 222-223.

35 Longino and Lennon, "Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology", 20.

36 Pillay, Miranda. "The Anglican Church and Feminism: Challenging the historic Patriarchy of our Faith*." Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* (2013): 5-22.

importance".[37] Harding recognizes that "people of European descent", like herself, ought to think more extensively about the cost of racism and imperialism in the lives of people "of Third World descent in which they [who benefit from systemic racism and imperialism] are so often complicitous".[38] Furthermore, decoloniality is not just another tool to theorize about diversity and inclusion.[39] As Stein et al. remind us, "Merely articulating or aligning with an intellectual critique of colonization does not immunize one from reproducing modern/colonial desires and habits of being".[40]

Thus, Nadar and Maluleke warn against foregrounding of perspectives that ignore positionality, power, and privilege.[41] They argue that the process of producing and validating what is regarded as knowledge in the academy, for example, can also in itself be a colonial exercise. Thus, Nadar and Maluleke reiterate that the task of decolonial scholarship is to expose the pervasiveness of coloniality to "control, produce and disseminate knowledge".[42] Such decolonizing of knowledge production would require "thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies".[43] It is to "speak of space, boundaries, time, difference, our bodies, cultures, traditions, ideologies and beliefs" says Ackermann.[44] Though, such

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37 See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, (Colombia University Press, 2010). Spivak argues that, in most cases, mainstream feminisms come from women who work within the privilege of dominant social groups.

38 Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991): 215.

39 Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no.1 (2012): 2.

40 Sharon Stein et al., "Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures: Reflections on Our Learnings Thus Far," *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education* 4, no. 1 (2020): 49. In this collaborative research project Stein et al. map the different approaches to decolonialization and synthesize critiques of modernity that they note have been "mobilized in Indigenous, Black, decolonial, post-development, post-colonial studies" (2020: 49).

41 Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, "Of Theological Burglaries and Epistemic Violence: Black Theology, Decoloniality, and Higher Education." *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022): 541.

42 Nadar and Maluleke, "Of Theological Burglaries", 548.

43 Ramon Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond the political-economic paradigms." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 221

44 Denise Ackermann. (2000). "Lamenting Tragedy from 'The Other Side'". In SAMENESS and DIFFERENCE: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society, eds. James Cochrane, and B. Klein (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), 216.

thinking and speaking are not always evident in the academy or the church where "the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonisation" are often ignored.[45]

In their argument against using decolonization as a metaphor, Tuck and Yang's article warns against merely "dressing up" decolonization in the language of transformation. They argue that such "dressing up" often serves to account for decoloniality as theoretical framework without taking seriously the materiality inherent in the concept itself.[46] As Nadar and Maluleke point out, such imprudent, performative "dressing up" is counterproductive to decolonial theory and praxis. It is a dangerous form of inclusion which "domesticates" the radical, transformative potential of decolonization. Indeed, "[d]ressing up the language of decolonization" is also foreclosure.[47] "Foreclosure", according to Tuck and Yang allows for "the settler to return and *repossess that which did not belong to them in the first place"* (emphasis mine). This, according to Nadar and Maluleke, is "epistemic burglary", a subtle, insidious form of coloniality.[48]

Colonization, explains Dube, is connected to "the coming of the white man" to Africa and "his use of the Bible".[49] She argues that a "postcolonial reader" cannot ignore that hegemonic power has been "effected through the biblical text".[50] In this regard the "burglary" is not so subtle, especially when one considered how the story about Jesus and his brown ancestors have been painted white by colonists. This picture results in the "good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35) being whitewashed.

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45 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization", 3; Nadar and Maluleke "Of Theological Burglaries", 545-548.

46 I am aware that there are different theoretical nuances between decoloniality, postcolonialism and decolonization. Where the terms are used interchangeably, the intension is not to conflate the concepts. The connection is (hopefully) made clear in the way the different concepts are used.

47 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization", 3.

48 Also see Othman Barnawi. "Epistemological theft and appropriation in qualitative inquiry in applied linguistics: lessons from Halaqa." *Applied Linguistics Review* 16, no. 1 (2024): 1-13.

49 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 3.

50 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 17.

Interrupting coloniality and patriarchy in ancient biblical texts is key in decolonial, feminist biblical scholarship.[51] Dube argues that a decolonial reading of biblical texts is an act of resistance – resisting colonial and hetero patriarchal stereotypes that mark marginalized individuals and groups as being helpless, backwards, and "in need of instruction".[52] Thus, to read from a decolonial feminist perspective is to recognize how the burden carried by "othered" bodies in biblical texts translate to the colonizing of bodies, knowledge and meaning making in contemporary contexts. However, the task of the feminist biblical scholar cannot be to solely expose how the text is patriarchal or colonial, but also to reimagine what it might mean to tell the story from a decolonial, depatriarchalizing point of view.[53] In other words, any decolonial feminist reading of biblical texts requires deconstructing oppressive norms that justify the exclusion of bodies and knowledge "othered" by hegemonic power, as well as reconstructing the narrative from the "othered" side. Ackermann argues that, to see "the other", is to also speak of space, boundaries, our bodies and difference.[54]

Acts 8:26-40: Toward seeing the "othered"

Decolonizing knowledge requires taking seriously the epistemic perspectives and insights of scholars who think "from and with the subalterized racial/ ethnic/ sexual spaces and bodies", says Grosfoguel.[55] The story of "Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch" can be seen as a "Colored" woman who has experienced blatant, overt racism and sexism during South Africa's apartheid regime and as one who continues to experience covert, insidious forms of racism and sexism in colonial and patriarchal embedded cultures of the academy and the church.[56]

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51 Pillay, Miranda. "Women, Priests and Patriarchal Ecclesial Spaces in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa: On 'Interruption' as a Transformative Rhetorical Strategy." *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (2020): 1-12.

52 Musa Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible." *Semeia* 78 (1997): 16.

53 Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, (Pilgrim Press, 2001), 16.

54 Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy", 213.

55 Grosfoguel, "Epistemic Decolonial Turn", 212.

56 I use the term colored with sensitivity mindful that "colored" might be an offensive, derogatory racial marker for African Americans. However, as a South African, I use the term with the intention to subvert the label of inferiority placed by the apartheid government.

Though, as a university professor and a lay leader in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, I also see myself as being in positions of privilege. In my research and advocacy as a theo-ethical feminist biblical scholar, I am aware that the ways in which contemporary scholars talk about religion remain steeped in the ongoing legacies of European colonialism and assumptions of white supremacy and patriarchy.[57] It is from this positionality and the socio-cultural, political, and religious complexities of a racialized and gendered body, as one who is both privileged and disadvantaged, that I see the unnamed Ethiopian Eunuch from the "othered side". To see from the "othered side" is to read against the imperializing agenda of traditional interpretations that "gloss over the actual body of the eunuch".[58] Such "seeing" is to recognize the knowledge and agency of the unnamed character in the story.[59]

I now turn to the three pins dropped on the story mapped in Acts 8:26-40. In offering a decolonial feminist reading of the text my intention is (i) to *recognize* the socially marked body of the Ethiopian eunuch; (ii) to *reflect* on the sexual ambiguity of the unnamed character in the story; and (iii) to *reconsider* the ways in which the Good News about Jesus is exhibited when the agency of the Ethiopian eunuch is affirmed.

Recognize: Nobody or Somebody?

As mentioned before, the racially and sexually "marked" body of the unnamed Ethiopian is generally "glossed over" to serve as a literary prop for the advancement of the *Good News* "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The story of "Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch" happens after the stoning of Stephen (Acts7:56-60) when the followers of Jesus were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria as Saul "began to destroy the church" (Acts 8:1-3). We are told that Philip had a successful ministry in Samaria where he was baptizing both men and women (8:12).[60] However, after Peter and John arrive on the scene to do

[57] See Malory Nye, "Decolonizing the Study of Religion," *Open Library of Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2019): 2; Nadar and Maluleke, "Of Theological Burglaries"; Pillay, Miranda. "The Anglican Church and Feminism: Challenging the historic Patriarchy of our Faith*." Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* (2013): 5-22.

[58] Nadar et al., "Toward Gender Justice", 107.

[59] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation.*

[60] It is clear that the Good News had reached Samaritans who were excluded and despised by the Jews, such as Paul.

what Philip seemingly could not do, the angel of the Lord instructs Philip to "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (8:26).

On the road to Gaza, Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch whom, we are told, was an important official, "in charge of all the treasury of the Candace queen of the Ethiopians". Returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah the prophet, when Philip caught up with him (8:27-30a). With such detailed description, it is impossible for me to gloss over the unnamed traveler's body or to see his Africanness as being of "no great importance". Moreover, I cannot ignore the explicit textual reference to the unnamed traveler's gendered body. Eunuchs were the marginalized "other" because of their mutilated genitalia and ambiguous sexuality. It is likely that the implied readers of this text would have known that, as a eunuch and foreigner, the traveler's access to the temple was restricted. Because of their cut, mutilated genitalia, eunuchs were considered ritually unclean and excluded from the Jewish temple-worshipping community (Lev. 21:20; Deut. 23:1).

We are not told *how* the Ethiopian traveler came to be a eunuch. It is very likely that he was castrated to control his sexuality and ensure loyalty to the royal household. As such, slave eunuchs were usually castrated before puberty. Not only was castration a sign of a valuable slave in economic terms but, with his sexuality under colonial control, the royal lineage was protected. Thus, the primary purpose of castration was to take control of the slave's body and being, rendering the eunuch incapable of engaging in sexual relations and procreation. As a colonized, "othered" body, with no prospects of having children, the eunuch would be a loyal subject. Traditionally, the eunuch in Acts 8 is recognized in terms of his class, being an important official in service of the queen of the Ethiopians. Glossing over the sexualized body of the loyal, royal servant deepens inherent gender biases. Spiritualizing the Ethiopian eunuch's body can render readers ignorant to stereotypical beliefs, attitudes, and actions. This, argues Dube, reflects the colonial ideology embedded in such readings.[61]

Reflect: On being betwixt and between

[61] Dube 2000, 80

The "betwixt and between" spaces in the lives of differentiated persons and groups can appear ambiguous in hegemonic cultures.[62] However, it can also be spaces of liminality that hold transformative potential. First used by anthropologists, "liminality" has been adopted and applied across disciplines in a variety of ways to expound on the understanding of transformation.[63] Conceptually, "liminality" has been used as a metaphor to describe a change of perspective to see new possibilities. As such it refers to a threshold and portal for possibilities to perceive and act differently. Mouton notes that, when "liminality" is used as a theological metaphor, it can refer to the ambiguous, "betwixt and between" life of differentiated persons and groups.[64]

By recognizing the unnamed traveler in the story as "somebody", four manifestations of ambiguity about Ethiopian eunuch's identity emerge. First, the Ethiopian holds a high status as a court official to the Candace (Kandake) of Ethiopia, yet, he is also likely to be a slave. Second, the traveler is identified as a man (Acts 8:27b). However, as a eunuch, he is emasculated and effeminized. Third, according to the text (Acts 8:27) the Ethiopian is described as a temple-worshipper. Yet, as a eunuch he would also have been restricted from worshipping in the temple. Fourth, the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch reads from the book Isaiah. Yet, he does not understand.

We are told that the Ethiopian Eunuch read "this passage of Scripture" (Acts 8:32):

> "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
> and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
> so he did not open his mouth.
> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
> Who can speak of his descendants?
> For his life was taken from the earth."

62 Elna Mouton, "Christian Theology at the University: On the Threshold or in the margin?" *HTS Theological Studies*, *64*, no. 1 (2008): 436.

63 Maja Maksimović, Insights from Liminality: Navigating the Space of Transition and Learning." *SISYPHUS Journal of Education*, 11, no.1 (2023): 150.

64 Mouton, "Christian Theology", 436.

This text in Acts 8:32b-33 echoes Isaiah 53:7-8, which is about a man who, having no choice, was cut/slaughtered. Like a muted child groomed to be cut, the lamb is silent before its shearers. The eunuch, who was "reading the book of Isaiah the prophet" (Acts 8:28b) sees one who, silenced by systems of power, suffers humiliation.

Who is this person? The eunuch questions whether the prophet Isaiah is talking about himself or someone else (8:34). Beginning with "that very passage of Scripture", Philip "told him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). But is there a possibility that the Ethiopian saw a reflection of his context in the text? The passage from Isaiah seems to fit the description of someone who has experienced what is familiar to the eunuch – being unnamed, silenced, humiliated, and cut. As a eunuch, the Ethiopian is doubly cut off. Not only is his genitalia cut, which cuts him off from the possibility to procreate, but, as a man with mutilated genitalia, he was also cut off from the Jewish worshipping assembly. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord". If, however, the eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, according to the text (Acts 8:27) he would have been excluded from full participation on account of his identity as a foreigner and eunuch.

Regarding the centrality of Isaiah in the reading of Acts 8:26-40, it is appropriate to consider that the exclusion of eunuchs according to the Deuteronomic law is also contested in Isaiah (56:3-7), where there is a promise from God to include eunuchs in the community of worship. Isaiah 56 speaks of the foreigner who will be invited into the congregation of God's people with the promise that eunuchs will be given an "everlasting name" (Isa 56:5). While Isaiah 56:3-7 is not quoted as being read in Acts 8, it is alluded to through the many likenesses between the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts and the eunuchs in Isaiah 56. Moreover, it is not unlikely that the unnamed foreign traveler read further than the passage quoted in Acts 8 given the references to eunuch, foreigners and the unnamed. It is also not unlikely for readers to explore the creative tension of the liminal space between the dynamics of the text and their lived reality.[65] Moreover, according to Acts 8:28b the man was "reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet". Therefore, even though it is not explicitly stated in the text, it seems likely that in his reading, questioning, and reasoning, the unnamed foreign

[65] Pillay, "See this Woman", 446.

eunuch found himself betwixt and between. This is a liminal space where certainty of "the way things have always been" is questioned. Deconstructing the hegemonic power yielded over "othered bodies" is an important concept and praxis in a decolonial feminist approach. It offers a space of liminality to step into new possibilities and see different ways of being.

Reconsider: Agency to step out

As the conver(t)sation about the Ethiopian eunuch's understanding of Scripture continues, Philip, now a fellow traveler, explains the reading from Isaiah with reference to "the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). However, it is the eunuch who sees the opportunity to question the system of exclusion as they travel together along the "desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (8:26).

"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?" (8:6-37). This is a rhetorical question as the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch does not wait for an answer from Philip. Realizing that, despite his cut body, there is no need for him to remain cut off and emboldened by his understanding of what he had read in the book of the prophet Isaiah in the context of his lived reality as a foreign, unnamed, eunuch, he "gave orders to stop the chariot" (Acts 8:38a). "Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him" (8:38b).

While it is Philip who was on a divine mission, it is the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch who, by reading Scripture from the "othered" side, produces new knowledge and meaning making about God's mission. In a sense, the spiritual embeddedness of the materiality of water in the physical world and his physical, embodied self, allowed the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch to step out of the socio-cultural religious chains of exclusion. However, claims to exclusive access to God's favor tightened the chains of perceived racial, sexual and religious superiority. As Tuck and Yang warn,[66] the material possibilities for justice require continued critical inquiry, unmasking of complicity, and challenging the deep roots of coloniality in knowledge production and institutional power.

[66] Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor", 3.

A decolonial feminist reading reveals that Philip, the one who had knowledge and experience about baptizing, is challenged to expand his own understanding of the good news about Jesus. It is Philip who must adjust his understanding to include insights from the eunuch. Philip learns that the racially and sexually marked body of the Ethiopian eunuch is not a justification for exclusion from, or conditional inclusion in, the kin-dom of God. In the last scene of the story Philip is suddenly taken away by the "Spirit of the Lord" and re-appears at Azotus, now a small village less than 30km north of Gaza.[67] We are told that the eunuch went on his (own) way, rejoicing. This self-awareness of inclusion marks the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch's presence as being of great consequence. Seeing the "othered" in the mapping of the story provides a cartography of dignity and inclusion of all.

Concluding remarks

Truth be told, the Bible reflects an imperialist history of expansionism based on perceived divine favor. Thus, the challenge is "to become decolonizing readers".[68] A decolonial feminist reading of Acts 8:26-40 reveals that traditional readings also reflect its colonizing history, especially since the text is generally understood as a call to be obedient to the "Word of the Lord" and bring "the other" to salvation. Such readings remain a colonizing tool when the explicitly marked body of the Ethiopian eunuch is seen only to be marked and invisibilized and subalternized as "the other". A decolonial feminist reading resists the glossing over and invisibilization of the Ethiopian eunuch's body and character in the story. Reading the text from the "othered" side reframes the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch as a subject and protagonist with insight, knowledge, and agency.

Moreover, a decolonial reading of Acts 8: 26-40 exhibits the agency of the Ethiopian eunuch who questions the boundaries that mark his understanding as being of no consequence. While the text is descriptive of hegemonic power, starting and ending with Philip, the text also exhibits the Ethiopian eunuch's resistance to such power, when the unnamed character questions Philip in ways that demonstrate his own understanding. The questioning is not mere rhetoric in service of hegemonic powers. On the contrary, the Ethiopian eunuch's question, "Why shouldn't I be baptised" upon seeing

67 https://bibleatlas.org/azotus.htm, accessed 5 July 2025.
68 Dube, "Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation", 23.

water, reconfigures the map that marks a black, sexually ambiguous body as being incapable of understanding. Instead, the Ethiopian eunuch's voice and action allow the reader to see the story from the "othered" side. His instruction to stop the chariot and stepping out without waiting for an answer from Philip reframes Philip's perspective and understanding of the instruction he received to "Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26).

Remapping the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch creates spaces for "othered" bodies to claim their legitimate presence in dominant heteronormative patriarchal cultures that dismiss their presence as irrelevant and of no consequence. Hopefully this, and other decolonial, feminist readings of the text will open avenues for seeing differently in contemporary contexts where the bible is used to exclude and invisibilize people based on their race, class, gender, age, ability.

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Selective Violence-Blindness in the Word and the World: Analysing Roots, Exploring Interventions

Thandi Gamedze[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Thandi Gamedze is a Senior Researcher in The Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape. This research falls within the Desmond Tutu South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Religion and Social Justice, jointly funded by National Research Foundation of South Africa and Lund Mission Society (Grant number: 118854).

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
University of the Western Cape
tgamedze@uwc.ac.za

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5326-0725

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ABSTRACT

While, in theory, largely opposed to violence, the Church, conceived broadly, has historically and in contemporary times been complicit in the legitimation of various forms of violence. To make sense of this, this paper theorises the concept of selective violence-blindness as a phenomenon operating within the Church to legitimise violence enacted upon certain bodies. It does this through analysing and drawing connections between two examples. The first highlights hegemonic readings of Hagar's story in Genesis 16 to highlight selective violence-blindness in engagements with "the word". The second centres hegemonic readings of the genocide in Gaza to highlight selective violence-blindness in engagements with "the world". The paper begins with an exploration of these phenomena. It then offers a framework with which to analyse some of the factors producing this selective violence-blindness. Subsequently, the paper names and analyses three of these factors: coloniality, theological grand narratives, and a failure to recognise discourses as sites of struggle. Finally, drawing on scholars of black theology, Palestinian liberation theology, and black feminism, the paper proposes ways of addressing these factors through liberatory readings of both "the word" and "the world" that make visible and problematise the violence enacted upon certain bodies.

KEYWORDS
Violence; coloniality; black theology; feminist theology; gender; Palestine

Introduction

This paper emerges from two recent experiences of what, I argue, are inter-related phenomena. The first, reading a violence-ridden piece of scripture within a group context and, through a process of collective engagement, recognising that the violence in the scripture was completely unseen by, or somehow rendered invisible, to the majority of the readers. The second, being confronted with how significant parts of the Church, globally as well as locally in South Africa where this author is based, have failed to see, or have essentially rendered invisible, the genocidal violence that Israel has meted out upon Gaza since the 7th of October 2023.

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These two experiences are examples of broader phenomena, namely what I term as selective violence-blindness[1] within "the word", and selective violence-blindness within "the world". This play between "the word" and "the world" draws from Paulo Freire's work on adult literacy that he understands as not limited to simply reading and comprehending text. Essential to the kind of literacy Freire proposes is a deep social and contextual analysis, awareness, and comprehension, that is a reading of "the world" in addition to textual engagement or the reading of "the word".[2] In this article's appropriation of Freire's conceptual contribution, "the word" represents the biblical text (and it is often known as such within popular Christian parlance as the shorthand for the word of God) and "the world" represents the realities of the present context, with specific reference to the context of the genocide in Gaza. In this regard, the analysis in this paper explores popular readings of "the word" and "the world", intentionally juxtaposing these to better to understand, not only how hegemonic power relations are reproduced in each, but also the ways in which these two processes are connected and potentially co-constitutive. The article, thereby, makes the argument that the hermeneutical lenses and the epistemic and theological orientations that determine what is seen in readings of scripture are the same hermeneutical lenses and epistemic and theological orientations that determine what is seen in readings of contextual realities, with important implications for those rendered inconsequential by these.

While much scholarship has either problematised readings of scripture that fail to recognise and, thus, legitimise the violence contained within it, or explored the theological justification of geopolitical violence, relatively few studies have placed these in direct conversation. This paper addresses that gap by analysing how similar patterns of selective violence-blindness shape both engagements with scripture and responses to the genocide in Gaza.

While the concept will be expanded upon within the article using the two highlighted cases to do so, when referring to selective violence-blindness, I

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1 I recognise the cautions that disability studies scholars have raised regarding the use of blindness as a metaphor. In this article, however, I use this term analytically to highlight the phenomenon of the seemingly widespread inability to see certain forms of violence perpetrated against certain bodies.

2 Paulo Freire (1985). "Reading the World and Reading the Word: An Interview with Paulo Freire." *Language Arts*, 62, no.1 (1985): 15-21

am referring to cases of violence that largely go unseen, invisibilised, or without broad public recognition or outcry.[3] The descriptor of "selective" recognises that this violence-blindness is not universal but operates differently from situation to situation. While certain kinds of violence are (made) very visible, other kinds of violence go unseen. In unpacking how and where this selective violence-blindness occurs, this article, drawing on critical race and gender scholars, highlights the ways in which interlocking systems of power render particularly gendered and racialised bodies marginal, and invisibilise the violence enacted against them. In light of this, the primary theoretical lenses informing this article's analysis are those offered by traditions of decoloniality, black feminism, and black theology. Decoloniality enables a recognition of the web of power relations that become internalised in a context of persistent coloniality,[4] and influence, as I will argue, interpretations of both text and context. Black feminism, particularly that offered by bell hooks, enables a recognition of the interconnected and interlocking forms of subjugation connected to race, class, and gender.[5] Black theology enables a recognition of the ways in which hegemonic theologies operate to oppress and subjugate particular (racialised, gendered, classed) bodies and is committed to theologies that centre and liberative for the oppressed.[6] Taken together, these lenses form the theoretical underpinnings informing this article's analysis and shape the ways in which selective violence-blindness is theorised.

I begin by expanding upon the two experiences mentioned above that precipitated this analysis. The first, the phenomenon of selective violence-

[3] It is useful to see this phenomenon on a spectrum, from selective violence blindness, where particular forms of violence enacted against certain bodies actually go unseen, to selective violence justification where the violence enacted against certain groups are seen and recognised, and, in this, supported and legitimized. Along the spectrum, this phenomenon has the effect of enabling violence against certain bodies, however, what differs is the level of consciousness and intention with which this is done.

[4] Ramón Grosfoguel, "The epistemic decolonial turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, no.2-3 (2007): 211–223. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514. Grosfoguel defines coloniality as "the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations" (219) captured in the "multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies ('heterarchies') of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation" (217).

[5] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. (South End Press, 1984)

[6] Itumeleng J. Mosala, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa," (PhD diss. University of Cape Town, 1987).

blindness within the biblical text, highlighting a recent experience of a communal reading of the story of Hagar. The second, the phenomenon of selective violence-blindness of the Church's response to the genocide in Gaza. Next, I propose a broad framework through which the factors enabling and sustaining these phenomena can be analysed. Using this framework, I then highlight and analyse three of these factors, namely what I think about as coloniality, theological grand narratives, and an uncritical acceptance of authoritative texts or a failure to recognise discourses as sites of struggle. Finally, drawing on scholars of black theology, Palestinian liberation theology, and black feminism, I propose ways of addressing these contributing factors towards readings of both "the word" and "the world" that make visible and intervene in the legitimation of the violence enacted upon subjugated bodies.

Selective violence-blindness in "the word": collective engagement with the story of Hagar as an example

I was recently invited to deliver a talk at a church service. My talk centred on the story of Hagar in Genesis 16:1-16. During the service, I read out the below passage of scripture in its entirety to the people in the room, and quote it in full to further the aim of this paper:

> *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.*

> *The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." And the angel of the LORD said to her,*
>
> > *"Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;*
> > *you shall call him Ishmael,*
> > *for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.*
> > *He shall be a wild ass of a man,*
> > *with his hand against everyone,*
> > *and everyone's hand against him;*
> > *and he shall live at odds with all his kin."*
>
> *So she named the LORD who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.*
>
> *Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.*[7]

After reading out this story, I put the following questions to the room: What is this story about and/or what are some of the ways in which you have heard this story preached or explained?

Having been part of various churches throughout my life, I was not surprised by the answers. Each respondent shared some version of how the story shows God's faithfulness to God's people, that God's promises always come to pass, how God is a God of miracles and so on. These responses are a fair representation of my own experience regarding how I have heard this passage preached in my time spent in churches. What I found confronting and disturbing was how not one response condemned, spoke about, or even

[7] Genesis 16:1-16, New Revised Standard Version

acknowledged the layers of violence that are so overtly present within the text.

First, at a very basic level, what is unseen or invisibilised is the deeply dehumanising and unjust nature of the relationships of gendered, racialised, and classed exploitation that these characters are embroiled in. Hagar is essentially enslaved by Abram and Sarai. Second, also ignored or unseen are the deeply disturbing implications that are expressed in the Sarai having the power to "give" Hagar to Abraham to, essentially, rape and bear him a child (one that Sarai intends to steal and take credit for). When this story unfolds as planned and Hagar acts towards Sarai in a way that she does not like, the text says that Sarai "deals harshly" with Hagar; one can only imagine the actual situation that these two words describe, in itself being a site of erasure or invisibilisation or unseeing.[8] Hagar then runs away for her and her child's safely. Finally, Hagar meets someone, who we are introduced to as the angel of the Lord, and this character sends Hagar back to her abusive situation, another dynamic that is invisibilised or unseen in our reading of the text.[9]

After this engagement, the question I was left with was why and how when many Christians read this text, do they not only *not see* the very present violence and deep injustice that exists throughout it, but actually see a story of goodness and faithfulness and hope? An analysis of this selective violence-blindness can shed necessary light on some of the mechanisms through which violent and oppressive ideologies are legitimised and perpetuated within churches and theologies.

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8 Phylis Trible, *Texts of terror: Literary-Feminist readings of Biblical narratives*. (Fortress Press, 1984). Trible sheds light on the reality depicted by these easily skipped over words. She makes the case that this is a strong description, "connoting harsh treatment" that parallels "the sufferings of the entire Hebrew population in Egypt" under the Pharoah's enslavement. Trible goes as far as to say that the description "depicts the torture of a lone Egyptian woman in Canaan, the land of her bondage to the Hebrews" (36).

9 These dynamics have been deeply explicated by authors like Trible in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women of Today and Women in the Bible*. 2nd edition. (Warner Books, 2005, Elsa Tamez in her chapter *The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation* in New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World, ed. John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter (World Council of Churches, 1986), and Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God*. (Orbis Books, 2013).

The unseeing of violence in our world: Christians and the Gaza genocide as an example

The second example illustrating the phenomenon of violence-blindness (or at least the failure to acknowledge, name, and recognise violence), relates to large parts of the Church's response to Israel's genocidal violence on Gaza. At both a local (South African) and global level, this has manifested in the failure or unwillingness of many Christians to see, name, or recognise Israel's violent actions in Gaza and Palestine more broadly, and the failure of many Christians to speak out or act against this. It has also manifested in prayer and overt support for Israel, and a very selective recognition of violence. For example, Hamas' actions on October 7th recognised and condemned as violence, but Israel's violent actions before and since going unseen and rendered invisible. This despite the extremely visible nature of these actions since October 7th, with many referring to this as the first ever live-streamed genocide.

In my own South African context, some concrete examples of this have been the holding of Christian pro-Israel vigils outside of parliament,[10], the organising of various prayer events where praying for Israel is central on the agenda,[11] so called "peace missions" to Israel by Christian leaders,[12] as well as the publishing of a statement by Christian leaders expressing their support for Israel and disagreement with the government's action of taking Israel to the International Court of Justice on charges of genocide.[13]

Moreover, there are many examples of what this has looked like more broadly. The open letter from Palestinian Christians to Western church leaders[14] highlights the silence of church leaders regarding Israel's actions in Gaza and essentially the invisibilisation of violence towards Palestinians.

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10 Tali Feinberg, "Christian protesters – victims of violence outside Parliament," (South African *Jewish Report*, 9 November 2023).

11 ICEJSA. "SA Stands with Israel – Rallies – 12 & 19 Nov 2023," (*ICEJ* Website, November 5, 2023)..

12 African Christian Democratic Party. "ACDP participates in peace mission to Israel," (Online Blog, March 27, 2024)

13 Philip Rosenthal, "SA Christian leaders oppose ANC's govt's genocide case against Israel," (*politicsweb*, 2024).

14 Palestinian Christians. "A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians," (Global Ministries, 21 October 2023).

The authors highlight further that this invisibilisation is not restricted to the current context but stretches throughout the multi-decade history of Israeli settler colonialism and its resulting violence in Palestine. Munther Isaac makes reference to several instances of influential Christian leaders making public statements about the biblical impetus for support of Israel, asserting that the current so-called "conflict" began on October 7th, thus erasing almost a century of injustice against Palestinians and even expressing overt desire for the complete ethnic cleansing of Palestinians within Gaza and the West Bank.[15] These examples show selective violence-blindness, specifically towards that inflicted by Israel upon Palestinians. Here, this violence is, at best, invisibilised and unseen and, at worst, justified and overtly supported. Again, these examples raise important questions around the mechanisms that enable this kind of violence-blindness. What factors are making it possible for Christians[16] to fail to see the violence enacted upon Palestinians, to render this violence invisible or insignificant, and/or to justify and even desire and celebrate this violence?

The examples above make visible two parallel phenomena of selective violence-blindness. In both the sacred text and society, certain violence (particularly that enacted upon the body of the gendered, racialised, ethnic, classed other) is unseen, rendered invisible, or unworthy of outcry and, thus, made permissible, while other violence is not. The remainder of this paper analyses these phenomena and explores the factors that appear to enable and sustain them.

[15] Munther Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza*. (Eerdmans, 2025).

[16] Of course, this violence-blindness is not restricted to Christians, but I specify, here, as this is the particular phenomenon that I am analysing.

Analysing the selective violence-blindness

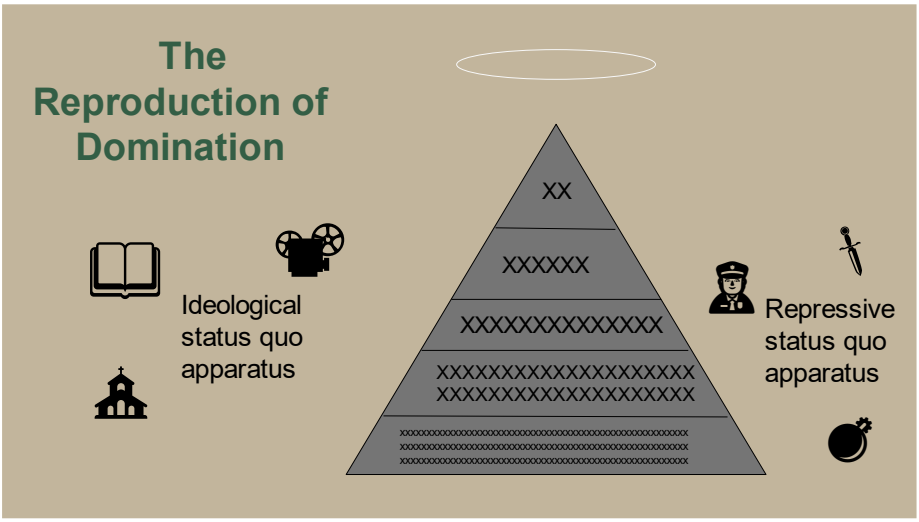

Figure 1. The Reproduction of Domination[17]

The above image, loosely adapted from Erlander's (1992) *Manna and Mercy,*[18] provides a framework through which to analyse some of the ideas that I engage here. The pyramid is a broad strokes representation of a typical contemporary society's population depicting the unequal and hierarchical power relations present. The large and highly populated base is emblematic of the economically and otherwise marginalised majority upon whose labour the society largely depends. The small and minimally populated peak represents the wealthy minority. The middle layers of the pyramid represent those who find themselves somewhere in between these extremes. In essence, the pyramid depicts a reality where certain groups have power and means, and other do not, and where the privilege of some groups is tied into the oppression and exploitation of others. Most importantly for the purposes of the framework, the image makes the case that these unequal realities are sustained by the mechanisms depicted on the left and right.

[17] Thandi Gamedze, Figure 1. The Reproduction of Domination, 2025

[18] Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe.* (Augsburg Fortress, 2018).

I refer to the mechanism on the left as the ideological status quo apparatus. This draws from Louis Althusser's conceptualisation of the "ideological state apparatus"[19]. This concept formed a key aspect of Althusser's analytical framework that sheds light on the mechanisms through which capitalist society is reproduced.[20] Within this framework, the ideological state apparatus creates the conditions for such reproduction ideologically, working through a range of institutions (the church, the classroom, the family etc.) to legitimise and normalise the capitalist structures of society along with its relations of exploitation and domination.

For purposes of decentering the state and making discursive space for the broad range of actors, sites, and institutions that do this work of ideological normalisation, I have renamed this the "ideological status quo apparatus". Embodied within this apparatus are all of the discursive, cultural, ideological, and theological mechanisms that legitimise and normalise the societal status quo with all of its dynamics of exploitation and domination. This apparatus is akin to what Palestinian theologian Mitri Raheb, in his analysis of how Israeli apartheid and occupation is upheld, conceptualises as the "software" that works to sustain the "hardware" of the occupation.[21] As the image shows, the divine is also frequently appropriated as part of this software in service of the status quo with claims made that this reality is God-ordained.

Drawing again from Althusser, depicted on the right side of the image is what I am conceptualising as the repressive status quo apparatus. This embodies all of the institutions that function to maintain the status quo through violence and repression. This includes systems of police, military, and private security. These mechanisms are always present in various ways, but more actively come into play when the ideological status quo apparatus fails to maintain the social order.

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19 Louis Althusser. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. (Verso, 2014).

20 Jaques Bidet, "Introduction: An Invitation to Reread Althusser," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, by Louis Althusser. (Verso, 2014).

21 Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes*. (Orbis Books, 2014).

Returning to the analysis of selective violence-blindness in "the word" and "the world", within this framework the three factors discussed below (coloniality, grand narratives, and discourses of the powerful) function as part of the ideological status quo apparatus doing the work of legitimising and sustaining the deeply unjust, unequal, and violent status quo.

Coloniality

The first factor that functions to enable and sustain the two phenomena under inspection is what scholars have conceptualised as coloniality. Coloniality refers to the lingering structures and relations of power that persist following political decolonization.[22] The particularities of these power dynamics are Western or Euro-centric, White supremacist, patriarchal, classist/capitalist, and heteronormative.[23] In a society characterised by coloniality, such ideas are hegemonic,[24] reproduced in various ways through various sites. Through these processes of reproduction, these ideas, often subconsciously, become the lenses, ideologies, and worldviews through which readers of "the word" and "the world" understand and interpret these "texts". A failure to interrogate and challenge these lenses results in readings of "the word" and "the world" that are inherently racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and other-phobic (with "other" referring to anyone outside of what is understood as Western); readings that favour and create positive associations with whiteness, maleness, West-ness, straight-ness, and wealth. These racist, classist, and patriarchal lenses are likely responsible, at least in part, for the fact that many readers of Genesis 16:1-16 do not bat an eyelid at the gendered and sexual violence present because the body bearing the brunt of it is simultaneously that of a foreign "other" (in terms of how she is presented in the story), a woman, and an enslaved person.[25] These colonial lenses enable selective violence-blindness through

[22] Grosfoguel "The epistemic decolonial turn", 219. See also, Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking," *Cultural Studies*, *21*, no. 2-3 (2007): 155-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498

[23] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*. (Berghahn Books, 2013). Available at: https://journals.co.za/content/latamrep/31/2/EJC197280

[24] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks: The Civil Society Reader*, (New York: International Publishers, 2003) 190-202.

[25] See Trible, *Texts of Terror, 9-36 ;* Weems, *Just a Sister Away, 1-22*; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness, 15-33.*

diminishing Hagar's humanity and deeming her story as unimportant and the violence enacted upon her as unworthy of outrage, attention, or even notice.

Another effect of these colonial lenses facilitating this kind of selective violence-blindness is what they allow or enable regarding how readers read themselves into the biblical text and which characters they identify with. Here, colonial lenses often function in tandem with the positionality of the reader as well as a lack of social analysis, allowing the reader to claim whatever position in the text benefits them at that point in time. In this regard, Masalha describes the way the story of David and Goliath is deployed in Israeli discourse, where it is presented "as a battle between a 'Jewish David and an Arab Goliath'"[26]. In this example, the racist and Orientalist[27] lenses frame Palestine as the dangerous, powerful, and inhuman other, while Israel is framed as the innocent and powerless underdog, prevailing over the enemy against all odds. Such a reading is enabled only by a severe failure of social analysis that makes invisible Israel's *actual* position as settler colonial occupying power, supported and sustained by massive amounts of Western resources of all kinds.

Such a misidentification and misreading obscures and invisibilises the true nature of the violence occurring, enabling a dangerous "unseeing" of certain violences. The 1985 South African Kairos Document's[28] analysis of church theology and violence is relevant here. The document critiques the Church's so-called commitment to non-violence. It argues that this stance was inconsistent, illustrated the Church's overt condemnation of violent popular resistance to the apartheid state, in tandem with its concurrent tacit support and legitimation of the apartheid military by sending chaplains to serve within it. In this, the document recognises and highlights another case of selective violence-blindness, that of the failure to see and recognise the violence that was being enacted upon the bodies of the black, non-Western "other". This

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26 Dur Nur Masalha, "Reading the Bible with the eyes of the Canaanites: Neo-Zionism, political theology and the land traditions of the Bible (1967 to Gaza 2009)," *Holy Land Studies*, *8*, no.1 (2009): 67. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/E1474947509000407

27 Edward Said, *Orientalism,* 5th edition. (Penguin Books, 2003)

28 The South African Kairos Document was written in 1985 within the context of a deeply and increasingly repressive apartheid state. The document was framed as a challenge to the church, theorising the church and theology as sites of struggle and critiquing the kinds of theology emerging from the South African church for the role that these were playing in upholding the repressive apartheid status quo.

shows, again, that coloniality, alongside certain positionalities and failures of social analysis, determines the kinds of violences that are seen and counted as violence and those that are not.

The above makes the case that coloniality obscures an accurate reading of "the word" and "the world", rendering certain forms of violence unseen and invisible. Thus, it should follow that decolonial commitments and orientations should assist in removing these blinders, enabling a more accurate "seeing" of this violence. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the scholars of black, womanist, and Palestinian liberation theology (which, I would argue, are inherently decolonial disciplines) who have done crucial work both within the biblical text and in society in recognising, foregrounding, and making visible some of this obscured violence.

In this regard, Weems overtly names Genesis 16:1-16 and the story of Hagar held within as "a story of exploitation and persecution suffered by an Egyptian slave woman at the hands of her Hebrew mistress".[29] Indeed, Phyllis Trible recognises the relationship between Sarai and Hagar as an oppressive one, marked by significant power differentials and overtly recognises the abuse of Hagar by Sarai, stating that "for Sarai, Hagar is an instrument, not a person".[30] Along the same lines, Okuye names Sarai's treatment of Hagar as "oppression".[31] Williams, also, importantly names Abram's actions towards Hagar as rape,[32] as does Musa Dube, recognising that these actions "did not include consulting Hagar or getting her consent".[33] Finally, regarding the instruction from the so-called messenger of the Lord to Hagar to return to her abuser, Trible does not shy away from naming this as "a divine word of terror",[34] acknowledging the violence inherent within it. In these readings, womanist authors also "offer readings of Hagar that create

29 Weems, *Just a Sister Away, 1.*

30 Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 34

31 James C.Okoye, (2007). Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, *32*, no.2 (2007): 168. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089207085881

32 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

33 Musa Dube, "And Sarah Laughed-Observations on Bible, Aging and Postcoloniality," in *Religion and Aging: Intercultural Explorations*, edited by Andrea Bieler, Matthias Stracke, Angelika Veddeler, 121-138 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017) 131.

34 Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 38

parallels with contemporary women"[35] promoting "the notion of an intimate relationship between biblical Hagar and Black women".[36]

In a similar fashion, the work of Palestinian scholars highlights and foregrounds the oft obscured and invisibilised violence enacted upon Palestinians, challenging the colonial orientations that enable such invisibilisation. An example of this can be seen in scholars' refusal of the Zionist notion of Palestine as "a land without people for a people without a land" by emphasizing the invisibilised reality that long prior the creation of the state of Israel, Palestine was a "multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multireligious region",[37] home to a vast and diverse people for generations. Similarly, Isaac overtly names racism and white supremacy as part of the structure enabling and sustaining the colonial theology of Christian Zionism that, on the one hand, justifies, legitimises, and sacralises Israeli settler colonialism and, on the other, invisibilises and justifies the oppression and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.[38] Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian exposes an additional layer of this invisibilisation of Palestinian suffering by highlighting the gendered dimension of Israeli settler-colonialism. She explores the ways "in which hegemonic economic, political, and patriarchal powers, including the mass media, ostracize Palestinian women and reproduce oppressive gender politics".[39] In response to this invisibilisation, Shalhoub-Kevorkian explicitly highlights the violence that has been rendered unseen, as well as Palestinian women's resistance to this colonial subjection. Such decolonial interventions centre and insist upon a recognition and rejection of the violence enacted on Palestinians, invisibilised and justified by so many Christians across the globe.

What is it about these authors and their work that enables and even necessitates a naming and insistence on seeing the violence within "the word" and "the world" that many Christians cannot see, choose not to see,

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35 Nyasha Junior, (2019). *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible.* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 108.

36 Junior, *Reimagining Hagar,* 69

37 Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine,* 60

38 Munther Isaac, "On the Use of Religion by Right-Wing Israeli and Christian Groups," in *Resisting Exclusion: Global Theological Responses to Populism,* edited by Simone Sinn and Eve Harasta, 181-188. (The Lutheran World Federation, 2019).

39 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case Study.* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

or make invisible? One explanation relates to the decolonial epistemological commitments and orientations of Palestinian, black, and womanist theologies. Black theology, Palestinian liberation theology, and black feminist scholarship position the oppressed and marginalised subject as the hermeneutical starting point in reading scripture or reading the world.[40] Such an orientation refuses the hegemonic colonial lenses reproduced through various sites and mechanisms and allows for and insists upon the seeing and recognition of the violence enacted upon the othered woman's body within the Genesis text, and the Palestinian body in Gaza. Another explanation relates to the positionality of the authors. The authors' experience of occupying oppressed or marginalised identities enables them to see those who similarly occupy oppressed or marginalised identities within "the word" and "the world" in a way that those in positions of privilege often fail to do.[41]

Theological grand narratives

Another important factor enabling and facilitating selective violence-blindness in the biblical text and society at large relates to the internalized overarching narratives of the "reader" that shape the interpretations of all that is "read". When looking at both "the word" and "the world", these stories or narratives (often subconscious) govern and determine what is seen and unseen.

When it comes to violence-blindness in the story of Hagar, one of these theological grand narratives that plays a key role is the idea of God as good. This narrative causes the reader to conclude that anything that God is said to do or say in the text must be good or, at the very least, okay and justifiable.

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40 Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology Of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict*. (Orbis Books, 2017). See also Itumeleng Jerry Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989); Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories are data with soul': Lessons from black feminist epistemology," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism,* edited by Tasha Oren and Andrea Press, 34-45. (Routledge, 2019).

41 As an important disclaimer, it is essential to note that occupying oppressed or marginalised identities in no way makes a decolonial orientation inevitable. This is where Gramsci's theory of hegemony is useful (Gramsci, 2003). It shows the ways in which ideas that benefit society's powerful are normalised and positioned as common sense and, thus, taken on, accepted, and internalised by even those who are oppressed by these ideas. On the flip side, it is also important to note that occupying a privileged identity does not make a decolonial orientation impossible.

In this way, when God is said to instruct Hagar to return to her abuser,[42] the failure to see comes into play and the reader is unable to recognise this as what Trible refers to as terror, because they are told that God said it and, therefore, must be good or, at least, justifiable. This plays out similarly, as Raheb notes, in the reading of the genocide and settler colonialism that unfolds in the book of Joshua.[43] This inhumane violence, which would go against any interpretation of international law today, is unseen, rendered invisible, or even deemed good because the God who is said to have ordered it *has* to be good. As an aside, the mental gymnastics required to hold these impossible tensions (and the impact of this) is another important dynamic that needs an analysis all of its own.

Another of these overarching narratives that relates particularly to the Hagar story is the idea that God is faithful and keeps Their promises. In light of this, anything done in the name of this faithfulness, even if that comprises of violence, abuse, and dehumanisation, is minimised and legitimated, because of ultimate importance is that God's promises will come to pass and God is proven faithful. Itumeleng Mosala's work on the Bible as a site of struggle is useful in thinking about this, particularly his assertion that "not every God of every biblical text is on the side of the poor".[44] This intervention refuses a reading of the Bible through any overarching narrative and recognises that many things are going on within this text that are, at times, in opposition to each other.

An aspect of these theological grand narratives that prohibits the reader from seeing, recognizing, and condemning violence in the text, is the orientation of entering "the word" and "the world" with a concrete sense of predetermined heroes and villains. Often, through deep socialization, Christian readers will, upon entering into the Genesis story, largely have a pre-conceived clarity that Abraham is the story's hero. Therefore, when Abraham is complicit in enacting violence, this is dismissed as something not requiring attention or outrage and, in fact, particularly if the violence is going to move the hero closer to their destination, it has the reader's full support. Sarojini Nadar illustrates this dynamic powerfully in her analysis of

42 Trible, *Text of Terror,* 15-16
43 Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine,* 53-92
44 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 8

the justification of the genocide of the Persian people in the book of Esther.[45] Through a reading that designates Esther as the story's hero, the massacre of 75,000 ethnic and racial "others" is at best invisibilised and, at worst justified, celebrated and even sacralised, as Nadar's "sacred economies of violence" framework shows.

It does not take much to close the distance between what is going on in these readings of scripture, and what is going on in the reading of Israel's genocide in Gaza. In the same way that Abraham is the predetermined hero in the Genesis text, Israel is the predetermined hero in the text of the Holy Land.[46] One of the grand narratives that plays a part in this is dispensationalism and end times theologies that believe that, for Jesus to return, the state of Israel must occupy the Holy Land in its totality.[47] This is the end point of the hero's journey and, thus, whatever must be done to get there is, at best, justifiable and rendered invisible and, at worst, celebrated and deemed good. Once again, Israel is David, a hero chosen by God for a time and purpose such as this, and Palestine is Goliath, the villain who seeks to get in the way of the hero's destination and must be resisted and destroyed at all costs.

These grand narratives determine what the reader is able to see and what remains obscured in their readings of both "the word" and "the world". They allow readers to gloss over and render unimportant or even justifiable the violence enacted against an enslaved foreign woman in the biblical text and, in the same vein, the violence against Palestinians in Gaza.

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45 Sarojini Nadar, *Gender, Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther*. (Routledge, 2025). Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003543367

46 This is the position deeply held in Christian Zionism and is widespread within the evangelical church in the United States as well in the Western world more broadly and increasing rapidly in the global South See (David M. Crump, "Echoes of Slavery, Racial Segregation and Jim Crow: American Dispensationalism and Christian Zionist Bible-Reading," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, *23*, no. 1 (2024): 1-17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2024.0324; Göran Gunner and Robert O. Smith, *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison*. (Fortress Press, 2014); Nilay Saiya, "Onward Christian Soldiers: American Dispensationalists, George W. Bush and the Middle East," *Holy Land Studies* 11, no. 2 (2012): 175-204. Available at; https://doi.org/10.3366/hls.2012.0044).

47 Crump, "Echoes of Slavery", 3-7 . See also, Saiya, 176-179"Onward Christian Soldiers",

Failure to recognise discourses as sites of struggle

The failure to recognise certain powerful discourses as sites of struggle is an additional and important factor that allows violence within "the word" and "the world" to go unseen or be rendered invisible.

An important source of such powerful discourse is the Bible. In the 1980s in South Africa, Itumeleng Mosala critiqued the church, and even many of his fellow black liberation theologians, for their uncritical acceptance of the Bible as "simply the revealed "Word of God".[48] He argued that in black theology at the time, while there was clear acknowledgement that biblical interpretation was a site of struggle or contestation, the Bible itself was seen as "uncritiquable" terrain. Within this framing, the site of struggle was at the level of interpretation rather that at the level of the text. The Bible was (and still is by many) believed to be a text of liberation, as long as it was interpreted correctly. This could, in fact, be seen as another "grand narrative" that disables a recognition of the ways in which the Bible itself is a site of injustice. The injustices present within or that result from the text, whether cases of violence or cases where the Bible's discourse represents elite interests, are swept under the rug or repositioned as just and good.

To counter this tendency, Mosala characterises the Bible itself as a site of struggle, carrying both strands of oppression and liberation and argues that for the bible to become liberating for the oppressed, the text needs to be liberated.[49] Raheb's work is consistent with this understanding of the Bible as a site of struggle. Specifically, regarding the ways in which scripture has been mobilised in service of Israel's settler colonial project (as well as other settler colonial projects), he notes that, not only can the realm of biblical interpretation be problematic, but "the biblical texts themselves are very troublesome".[50] He points particularly to the book of Joshua, terming it "the blueprint par excellence of a settler colonial ideology and theology".[51] Such a framing similarly necessitates the liberation of the text of which Mosala speaks.

48 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 5
49 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 4
50 Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine,* 65
51 Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine,* 65

This work of liberating the text is broad but, in part, involves paying attention to and reading the power struggles within the biblical text itself listening for the voices that have been marginalised, silenced, or redacted and reading contemporary struggles for justice into these intra-textual struggles.
In Mosala's words, "the category of struggle at all levels and through various phases of black history should be taken as the key hermeneutical factor".[52] With this starting point, Mosala's work

> seeks to probe the nature of the struggles behind and beneath the text; the struggles in the pages, the lines, and the vocabulary of the text; the struggles that take places when readers engage the text by way of reading it; and the struggles that the completed text represents.[53]

This approach recognises and foregrounds the real social and material conditions out of which the text is produced, as well as the material and social conditions into which the text is inserting itself and being read. In thinking about the Hagar story, such an approach would necessitate the making visible of the power relations and power struggles present (and silenced) within the text. This approach would name and expose the neutralised language that obscures the significance of the violence enacted against Hagar, such as Genesis 16:4 that, rather than naming Abram's actions as rape, simply states that he "went in to Hagar",[54] or Genesis 16:6 that, rather than detailing Sarai's abusive actions towards Hagar, simply says that "Sarai dealt harshly with her".[55] Hagar's person and story become foregrounded and the oppressive violence that she faces become very visible. This, in turn, necessitates the foregrounding of the contemporary struggles that are present with us and the ways in which oppressive violence is taking place in our society today.

In terms of Gaza, various powerful theological and social discourses, aside from the Bible, that are disseminated in churches, media outlets, education institutions, and other such sites that form part of the ideological status quo apparatus, act to enable violence-blindness in the face of Israel's genocidal violence. These dominant discourses do the work of misrepresentation

52 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 6
53 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* 6-7
54 Genesis 16:4 NRSV
55 Genesis 16:6 NRSV

painting Israel as "good" and Palestine as "bad". In this regard, many have commented on the vast differences between the ways in which media outlets have represented the violence enacted by Palestinians versus the violence enacted by Israel in the current moment as well as in the past.[56] These tendencies can also be seen in the way in which October 7th has been depicted as the start of the so-called "conflict", discursively painting over Israel's long history of violent settler-colonialism. Moreover, this can be seen in churches through the prevalent injunction to pray for Israel, alongside the implied notion that blessing Israel will result in being blessed and cursing Israel will result in being cursed.[57] It also operates through discourses like that previously mentioned of Palestine being "a land without people", or the idea that Jews are the original and rightful inhabitants of Palestine.

Taken uncritically and misunderstood as not being sites of struggle result in unquestioning support of the state of Israel and its actions, through their rendering of the genocidal violence carried out in Gaza as invisible, unworthy of attention or outcry, and even justifiable and good. However, recognising them as sites of struggle would force questions around power: whose voices are silenced in these discourses? Who benefits from these discourses? Where are the alternate discourses and what are they saying? Why have the alternate discourses been so marginalised and silenced?

Again, in Mosala's words, for a reading of any discourse that gives an accurate story of the power dynamics at play, struggle must be "the key hermeneutical factor".[58] In the absence of this, dominant texts or discourses, whether these are in the Bible, in the media, in churches, or any other sites,

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56 See Miriyam Aouragh, "Hasbara 2.0: Israel's Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age," *Middle East Critique*, *25*, no. 3 (2016): 271-297. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2016.1179432; Ghazi-Walid Falah, "The Portrayal of Palestinian and Israeli Suffering and Violent Incidents in Selected US Daily Newspapers," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, *22*, no. 1 (2023): 65-92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2023.0305; Cynthia Wang, "Victimhood in the Face of Media Ideological Battle: A Critical Discourse Analysis on the British Media"s Coverage of Stabbing Incidents in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, *16*, no. 1 (2017): 79-98. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2017.0153

57 Daniel Hummel "The New Christian Zionism." *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, (2017): 9-11.

58 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 6

will enable and sustain the unseeing of injustices and violences against those on the margins.

Conclusion

All of these factors allow and facilitate a selective violence-blindness pertaining to violence taking place within the biblical text as well as within society more broadly. This enables a normalization, justification, and acceptance of such violence.

The two phenomena laid out in this article of selective violence-blindness in "the word" and "the world" are deeply connected in terms of both the factors that enable and sustain them, as shown above, as well as the ways in which they influence one another. This kind of unseeing and ability to invisibilise and ignore violence within the story of Hagar is not separate from the ways in which Christian theology functions to provide legitimisation and support, or at the very least permission, for Israel's violence, apartheid, settler colonialism, and now genocide. In fact, I argue that what one can justify (or invisibilise or ignore) in the Bible, one can justify (or invisibilise or ignore) in real life and vice versa. The dynamic illustrated previously regarding the reading of Hagar's story sheds light on a dynamic that has much wider implications than simply relating to practices of reading the Bible: that the invisibilising or unseeing of violence in scripture makes possible and facilitates the invisibilising or unseeing violence in the world.

In my analysis, I have shown and expounded on three factors that are central to the enabling and sustaining of these phenomena. First, coloniality and the hermeneutical lenses that it imposes on readings of "the word" and "the world". Second, the grand narratives that become hermeneutical determinants of all that is read within these two sites. And third, the failure to recognise dominant discourses, whether biblical texts or those disseminated through other sites of socialisation, as sites of struggle through which power is always being enacted and in which clashes of power are always taking place. These factors create the conditions in which the violence enacted upon Hagar and the violence enacted within Gaza can go unnoticed and/or accepted.

In a recent interview, when asked his opinion on why, even with such rich histories and legacies of black and liberation theologies, the South African

Church continuously fails to challenge the various forms of injustice present in society, Itumeleng Mosala posits that this is because "We haven't audited colonialism, oppression, and apartheid… We haven't signed divorce papers on colonialism, and same with colonial theology".[59] Classifying this as an auditing failure is useful. There is today a widespread awareness of the entanglement of colonialism and Christian mission across the globe, but the Church has largely failed to do the work of understanding the depths and specifics of this entanglement and the subsequent painstaking work of disentanglement necessary for a truly liberating faith. This auditing failure has resulted in a failure to acknowledge the ways in which coloniality lives on and shapes widespread (mis)readings of "the word" and "the world", determining what is seen and what goes unseen. Essentially, this auditing failure has resulted in a theology that, theoretically, positions itself in opposition to violence and injustice but for various reasons like the factors analysed above, in reality, works to covertly uphold the violence and injustice that it claims to oppose.

In this paper I have explored a dynamic that is integral to the function of such a theology, the dynamic of which I am thinking about as selective violence-blindness, within the sacred text but, more importantly, with devastating implications outside of this as well. I have also explored how various decolonial thinkers and scholars have combatted the factors enabling the unseeing of violence. In many ways, this boils down to questions about power and to the deliberate centering of voices, stories, and discourses of the oppressed, whether this is choosing to centre and listen to Hagar in the Genesis 16:1-16 narrative or choosing to centre and listen to Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

[59] Interview with Itumeleng Mosala by author (2021)

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Alexiana Fry[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Alexiana Fry is a postdoctoral researcher for the project "Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism" at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, after having received her PhD in Old Testament from Stellenbosch University in 2021. She works at the intersection of trauma, migration, and feminism.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
adf@teol.ku.dk

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9028-9383

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On October 28, 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the Israeli soldiers he met with at military bases "are committed to eradicating this evil from the world, for our existence, and I add, for the good of all humanity". He followed this with a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:17, "remember what Amalek did to you".[1] Since the attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the field of Biblical Studies has been, and remains, divided. Even with blatant (mis)use of the biblical text, biblical scholars—like much of the general public—are being swiftly silenced and labeled as antisemitic for any critique of the modern-day nation-state of Israel. Sarojini Nadar's book, both unfortunately timely and absolutely needed, explicitly addresses and redresses this popular reading that conflates Palestinians with Amalek. Utilizing a decolonial feminist lens, Nadar links the harem and the herem in the Masoretic Text of Esther, forcing readers to "grapple with uncomfortable

[1] Press Release, "Statement by PM Netanyahu," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs,* October 28, 2023, https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023.

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truths: how victims can become perpetrators, how divine favour can be weaponized, and how sacred narratives continue to justify terror in our own time".[2]

Following a preface, Nadar's monograph is split into seven dense, but digestible, chapters. The first chapter acts as an introduction, guiding readers who might be less familiar with both storytelling and literary-based approaches to biblical interpretation and helping to unsettle the familiarity many have with the book of Esther. Moreover, Nadar assists more hardline, historical, biblical scholars in recognizing the necessity of a contextual stance that is not divorced from the material implications and lived realities of sacred texts. Grounded in African liberative, feminist hermeneutics, she demonstrates how a focus on the intersections of gender and religion form a particular economy of violence, à la Achille Mbembe, that "sanction and enact forms of social [and actual] death",[3] targeting specific bodies that are constructed as the enemy and the other in Esther. This concept forms the bridge to Chapter Two, where these frameworks provide a helpful analysis of the power dynamics in the narrative logic of Esther. Naturally, underpinning "sacred economies of violence" creates a double standard in which violence done by the "right" people is rendered righteous and justified, but violence enacted by the "wrong" people is considered terrorism. As Nadar rightfully shows, this is also pervasive amongst biblical scholars who repeatedly excuse and sanitize the violence found in Esther. Even feminist scholars, who often focus too narrowly on gendered aspects, are deserving of the correction provided in this chapter.

Chapter Three moves us into the biblical text itself, as Nadar revisits her previous work on Esther, specifically, the character Vashti. While the Book of Esther provides no mention of a deity, the scenes involving Vashti, indeed, highlight the stakes that other characters in this ancient Persian regime must face. A reading that seeks out the sacred economies of violence in the text understands that Vashti's erasure makes visible the hidden ideologies of "chosen-ness". If one interprets Vashti's removal as solely prefiguring "the potential annihilation of the Jews while neglecting its equally significant resonance with the actual erasure of the Gentiles at the narrative's

[2] Sarojini Nadar, ***Genocide, Gaza and the Book of Esther: Engaging Texts of Terror(ism)*** (Oxon: Routledge, 2025), xv.

[3] Nadar, *Genocide,* 10.

conclusion", one has inadvertently bought into the "prioritization of Jewish survival over the broader mechanisms of exclusion that the narrative perpetuates".[4] Esther begins and ends its tale as a political horror. The failure of many academics to account for the ethno-religious undertones that frame the text is damning. As Nadar further articulates in Chapter Four, the narrative mechanisms of "invisibility, invalidation, and erasure" that can be found in the treatment of Vashti are also found in the portrayal of the unnamed virgins—and eunuchs(!)—that are trafficked for the King's pleasure in Esther 2:1-4 and 8-19. These bodies, commodified and abused, remain in obscurity and violation "in service to the preservation of the chosen people".[5] Nadar, in feminist tradition, names one of the virgins, Makhera-Devi,[6] to validate their suffering and disrupt their objectification.

The final chapters of the book focus on the character of Esther and her relationships with the main male characters. As the introduction of the Jewish characters in the story is held together with language of vulnerability and victimhood, Esther is often read as a tale of legitimate violence. Nadar, however, clearly illustrates that this language is wielded as weapon to undergird "a complex dynamic of superiority".[7] Although the world of this ancient Persian regime "normalizes the expectation of death, with little regard for the sanctity of life,"[8] Esther and Mordecai do not just navigate sacred economies of violence but, rather, are complicit and enmeshed in perpetrating and upholding these economies. The sixth chapter unpacks the trope of Amalek as embodied by the villain of Esther, Haman the Agagite, and the never-ending cycle of violence is still anticipated by the close of the book.

The concluding chapter asks what many readers are already thinking: "Can Esther be engaged in ways that resist its own narratives of oppression?"[9] There have been many who seek to read this book in ways that are

4 Nadar, *Genocide*, 32.
5 Nadar, *Genocide*, 47.
6 Nadar, *Genocide,* 57. Makhera, meaning "suffering" in Amharic, coupled with Devi, meaning "goddess" in Sanskrit, evokes a poignant juxtaposition of suffering and divinity, and the cultural heritages of the empire (Persian, see Esther 1:1) that stretched from India to Ethiopia. The name juxtaposes the weight of their trauma with an affirmation of their divine dignity.
7 Nadar, *Genocide*, 72.
8 Nadar, *Genocide,* 76.
9 Nadar, *Genocide*, 107.

transformative, such as those Nadar mentions that view the text as one containing an ironic, generative critique, reimagining Purim festivals and reading Amalek as metaphor. Nadar instead offers the proposal(s) for liberative readings that center the epistemologies of the materially oppressed, marginalized bible scholars and narrative methodologies, thus paving the future for just interpretations of Esther. Both the past and the present ask us to confront the inequitable valuation of lives, including how we read sacred texts.

As part of the Routledge series "Rape Culture, Religion, and the Bible," in which there is a tight word count limitation, Nadar's ability to communicate with these strains is astonishing. Although I would have wished to see a decolonial reckoning of the ever-complicated and upsetting ways those who are minoritized and minorities in spaces choose to buy-in to the dominant matrices of power, that of a "colonial logic", this topic alone would likely need its own book. In a world marked by a kind of "emotional capitalism" that privileges the imaginary suffering of the powerful who claim to be victims at the expense of those actually and structurally vulnerable,[10] we are, and have been, in desperate need of a reorientation. Befitting of a professor who holds the Desmond Tutu chair in Religion and Social Justice, Nadar's book is clear, incisive, and unflinching about the costs of supremacy and exceptionalism of any kind. This brief work serves as an honest reckoning for both the field of biblical studies and the world. The rest of the story remains open as her book ends: will we refuse to pay these costs? It is up to us to tell good stories. "Once upon a time…".[11]

[10] See Lilie Chouliaraki, *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024); Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[11] Nadar, *Genocide*, 118.