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FIGHTING THE MATRIX: TOWARD A WOMANIST PEDAGOGY FOR THE BLACK CHURCH

> . . . .resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically.[1]
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> - Chandra Mohanty

Introduction

In *The Matrix* motion picture trilogy, the "matrix" represents a world where we—all humanity—are controlled completely by an outside force composed of machines. Our entire existence and daily function in the world is con-

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[1]Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Discussion in the 1990s," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry A. Grioux and Pete McLaren (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 148.

trived. The matrix, or reality as we know it, is actually a computer designed, manufactured world, created to keep us in a docile state—free of resistance, ready to be drained. Outside of this computer world, our bodies are used as batteries—a power source for the beings controlling us. We are completely dehumanized—seen as inferior life forms available for exploitation. The beauty of our humanity in all of its various manifestations is overlooked. We are oppressed because of who and what we are. We serve as involuntary subjects of a systemic domination that exists at multiple levels.

This fictitious plot is analogous to what womanist[2] scholars refer to as the "matrix of oppression" or the interlocking nature of race/gender/class and other forms of oppression that marginalize certain groups. This real matrix exists at personal, group, and systemic levels. Moving away from the identification and analysis of one or two primary forms of discrimination, womanists view these systems of oppression as connected and assume that each distinct form needs the other in order to function.[3] Systemic, interde-

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[2]In 1983, Alice Walker became the progenitor of womanist discourse. Coining the term "womanist," Walker emphasized the value of Black women's culture and history, suggesting that the experiences of Black women and white women are different to the point of necessitating a different name for Black women's quest for liberation. Walker offered the term "womanist" which she defined as: Womanist, from *womanish*. A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior.

[3]Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 222-224. This approach enables an analysis of social relations of domination and how they affect various groups that encounter different aspects and dimensions of the matrix. While womanist/black feminist initially identified race, gender, and class as the three interlocking forms that most dominantly affect Black women, more recent scholarship has expanded this triad to include sexual orientation, age, religion, and other categories that can be grounds for discrimination.

pendent forms of domination create a hierarchical order of relations used to control subjugated persons. It was recently discovered that the so-called writers/producers of *The Matrix*, the Wachowski brothers, who made 2.5 billion dollars on the trilogy, illegally used this story. It was originally written by a Black woman named Sophia Stewart. After a six-year battle, in October of 2004, she won her case of copyright infringement. It is ironic that this fictitious story about control and domination is connected to a real-life story about a fight for recognition and justice.

In *The Matrix* motion picture, only those who are "awakened" or "unplugged" from the matrix are free to join the resistance against their oppressors. Now in a position to see both the cause and the effect of human subjugation, they can choose to dismantle it. The reality of the matrix of oppression in real-lived experiences makes it necessary for Black women and other oppressed groups to develop strategies of resistance.

Womanist Pedagogies

Black women must be intricately involved in the systemic processes that shape the formation, development, and progress of the community—voicing their perspectives. As Mohanty states in the beginning quote of this essay, it is crucial that we understand teaching/learning practices as acts of resistance, having the potential to revolutionize institutions and systems. The disclosing of women's herstories is central to the quest to resist oppressive normative discourses. In the church setting, such resistance contributes to the formation of liberative spaces where counter-cultural hermeneutical lenses can freely critique current

and past practices, and structures.

Just as womanist pedagogies emerged from the shared observations of Black women in the academy in response to the male-canonized texts and interpretations, so too must womanist pedagogy impact the educational practices of the church. Delores Williams identifies the foundations of womanist pedagogy in a 1978 publication:

> If I were asked what we black women students need to make the Union [Theological Seminary] experience meaningful, I would say we need what every other student needs. We need role models. We need competent scholars who are black women. We need black women to provide input into selection processes. We need to select our own voices to represent us in those processes. We need mature black women scholars who are actively committed to the task of welding together the theological and the ethical, the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the theological enterprise. We need black women in the support and counseling areas. . . .We need spiritual, community and financial support to structure whatever it takes to make our academic experience here compatible with our vocational objectives and with our personal needs as students. We need the facilities to enter into those self-definition processes which help us understand more fully our ministry to the world.[4]

Williams' point is clear: if Black women in the academy are to be empowered, they must have the support of committed Black women willing to engage in transgressing

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[4]Delores Williams, "One Black Woman Reflects on Union," *Union Dues* 2, no. 1 (November 8, 1978): 4.

boundaries that prevent their spiritual, emotional, and intellectual flourishing. This is no less true for the church. If current and future generations of women are to be empowered, a liberative pedagogy for the Black Church that includes the stories and contributions of Black women is needed. Then we can carve out spaces where they can flourish without impairment.

Persons participating in educational ministries need opportunities to wrestle with real life issues that impact their daily existence. As they confront issues related to identity, race/gender/class oppression, sexuality, violence, and a myriad of other issues, they seek to make meaning of their experiences as they engage in the teaching/learning process. The "matrix" is real for them, and they come seeking resources that help them respond to and dismantle oppression. Educators who avoid discussions about life issues considered complex or controversial silence many voices. Avoidance and denial prove detrimental to the thriving of ecclesial communities.

Jacquelyn Grant poses critical questions for the Black Church. If the Black Church espouses a stance that includes the task of striving toward and embodying liberation, how can this same institution ignore the oppression of women? How can the church justify majority representation by women who make up a small percentage of the leadership and decision-making bodies? As Grant states, "One can see the contradictions between the church's language or proclamation of liberation and its action by looking both at the status of Black women in the church as laity and Black women in the ordained ministry of the church."[5]

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[5]Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 328.

In western society women have been excluded from the benefits of individualism as presented by the dominant culture. This has not meant substantive equality because men have transcended individuality and have formed a collective "I"—the standard by which all other "subjects" are judged. This has been the case in the church as well. Equality in Christ has not granted women substantive equality. As Grant states, "If the liberation of women is not proclaimed, the church's proclamation cannot be about divine proclamation. If the church does not share in the liberation struggle of Black women, its liberation struggle is not authentic. If women are oppressed, the church cannot possibly be 'a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality' for the gospel cannot be real in that context."[6] The incongruence between the "word" that has granted women access to formal equality and the "deeds" that have hindered them is indicative of the lack of female representation in leadership positions.

Grant assserts, "racism/sexism/classism as a corporate point of departure for doing theology and Christology is embraced as an appropriate and corrective approach in theology."[7] Religious educators are also called to consider the political and socio-economic locations of Black people. Any pedagogical approach that proposes to be liberative for Black congregants must include a willingness to engage in dialogue about forms of injustice. It must include a particular level of awareness, or a special way of "paying attention" within the context. It is to this charge that womanist ped-

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), [261] précis.

agogy provides a particular response.

Womanist religious education is a growing academic discipline, addressing the multi-dimensional nature of oppression and its pedagogical implications. Like other womanist disciplines, womanist religious educators are committed to the task of reinterpreting and retelling history in ways that claim the voices and contributions of women. We embrace the real-lived experiences of Black women as viable sources for constructing theological, educational, spiritual, and epistemological statements. As a womanist religious educator, the writer seeks to answer several questions: What is the pedagogy that resists the matrix of oppression? Which approaches to Christian education prove effective for the spiritual and holistic formation of oppressed groups? What is the role of Christian education in helping Black women and all oppressed people navigate and negotiate their daily experiences? What are the components of a liberative teaching/learning philosophy?

Womanist liberative pedagogies create participatory spaces where diversity and particularity are valued. In the liberative classroom, a nonhierarchical acknowledgment of experience values multiple ways of knowing and prevents the claiming of authority in ways that can be used to silence others. The practice of freedom extends to the multifarious ways in which churches participate in religious education. Charles Foster notes:

> Church education occurs. . .whenever and wherever congregations seek to transmit, interpret, and create attitudes, knowledge, skills, habits, sensibilities or perspectives integral to the transformative ministries of God in and through the worship and mission of the

> church. Therefore, when describing the congregation or parish as the context and impetus for a new vision for the education of Christian communities, our attention is directed to the reconfiguration of the congregation's life as we know it.[8]

But what are the specific imperatives posed by womanist pedagogy that will support the educational development and thriving of women and all persons throughout the various ministries and manifestations of Black church life? In the spirit of a celebration of humanity and embodiment, three categories are offered that convey human senses, which serve as metaphors for a teaching/learning process related to communal knowing and creates a dialogical method of liberative pedagogy for the Black Church: seeing and embracing ourselves, hearing into speech, and touching for embodied connection. These categories are by no means exhaustive but point toward foundational issues related to the teaching/learning process and the ways it can be informed by womanist approaches.

Seeing and Embracing Ourselves

To know one's self is one of the most important aims of a lifetime. This necessitates a focus inward that reflects upon identity and purpose. Considering the long history of the effects of interlocking oppression, Black people need to see ourselves, not through the external gaze of other individuals or groups, but as we are. We must claim our own subjectivities that allow for self-definition and re-creation.

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[8]Charles Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 14.

As Na'im Akbar states,

> Though we are fully equipped and fully capable of conducting our lives freely we have become so accustomed to giving our lives over to other influences that we do not realize that we have the necessary equipment. We actually run from the opportunity to exercise influence over our own lives because so many outer influences compete for authority. Despite honestly expressed doubts about the appropriateness of those authorities, people persist in giving themselves to them simply because of the habit and the carefully programmed appeal that they have for us.[9]

This process is particularly critical for Black women who are constantly tempted with the demand to focus all energies on others and on external issues.

The concept of self-actualization for the educator is summarized by Asa Hilliard: "African teachers must first become whole, productive, and conscious beings. Only then can they transform students."[10] It is critical that teachers engage in a process of self-actualization, becoming aware of their own political and social location. Through grasping the relationship between power and their own ideologies, they can move away from control, domination, and unjust exercises of power, toward an empowering approach that de-centers "their" agenda. Self-actualization works to keep educators honest in their attempts to embrace the rhetoric of diversity.

Educational substance should cultivate the student as

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[9]Na'im Akbar, *The Community of Self* (Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions & Associates, 1985), 19.

[10]Asa Hilliard, *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind* (Gainesville, FL: Makare Publishing, 1998), 107.

an individual and a collective member of society. As Dexter Fisher asserts, "To be totally centered on the self would be to forget one's history, the kinship of a shared community of experience, the crucial continuity between past and present that must be maintained in order to [e]nsure the future."[11] In addition to knowing and acknowledging one's self, we must be able to see and accept other people as subjects of sacred worth who belong to communities of sacred worth. This is central to the formation of liberative Christian communities and should be reflected in educational methods.

Historically and presently, Black women experience multiple forms of oppression and are often made to feel insignificant or even invisible. In *Daughters of Dignity*, Laverne Gill notes that central to the task of acknowledging the presence of women is the need to develop new insights into personal spiritual growth and to employ new reading strategies for the Bible. Gill offers a justice reading strategy that looks at "the impact of African biblical women. . .because of God's option for the oppressed and the disinherited. . .to point to the work of God in the world to all of humanity—male and female."[12] Women are no longer "footnotes in salvation history" but are central to God's redemptive work.[13] A justice reading demands that readers "include in the human circle those who have been left out and locked out. . . .God's mandate for humanity to establish right relationships with the oppressed in society."[14] In our engagement of the biblical text we move beyond normative

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[11]Dexter Fisher, ed., *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 148.

[12]Laverne McCain Gill, *Daughters of Dignity: African Women in the Bible and the Virtues of Black Womanhood* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), xvi.

[13]Ibid., xvi-xvii.

[14]Ibid., 4.

readings, asking questions as: Who is oppressed or marginalized? Whose voice is omitted from the narrative? Do all of the characters have agency? What is the agenda of the biblical writer and who does it serve?

According to bell hooks, education as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that fosters a mutual recognition. This mutuality provides teachers with the ability to participate in the spiritual and intellectual growth of learners.[15] Moving beyond the task of sharing information, teachers embrace a notion of sacred vocation that facilitates mutual exchange and critical awareness. hooks explains:

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.[16]

Educators in the church setting striving to create participatory spaces must embrace a mutual recognition that acknowledges all participants as persons created in God's image. Each person's experiences are respected and embraced as viable sources for meaningful contributions to community formation.

Dialogue means engaging in a conversation with one's

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[15]bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 13.

[16]Ibid.

self and, subsequently, to engage in a subject-to-subject interchange of mutual respect. Again, the process of self-actualization is activated as persons claim their inner voice. Na'im Akbar states, "Unfortunately, most people have come to fear [their] inner voices because they tell the truth about us. They speak our fears and our weaknesses while also revealing our strengths. Most of us have learned to run before we get to the strengths. . .because we fear these inner voices, we quickly go back to the loud outer voices."[17] Black women in many churches continue to be silenced because of theologies and structures that relegate them to second-class citizenship in God's beloved community. This ongoing presence of patriarchy both in the life of the church and the community at-large, makes it difficult for women to move beyond internalized oppression.

When mutual respect is practiced, the classroom is energized and effective teaching and learning can occur. hooks' statement is true: ". . . .Our capacity to generate excitement [in the classroom] is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence."[18] If educators are to be respected, they must respect learners. Understanding the educator's role as caregiver, role model, and mentor, it becomes difficult to disrespect learners. Noteworthy is hooks' desire to deliberately transgress boundaries as she communicates with persons of different races, gender, and academic fields. hooks shares her personal theoretical work and her students' personal experiences. By risking the exposure of her own subjective experiences, hooks' method

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[17]Akbar, *The Community of Self*, 18.
[18]hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 8.

aligns with her theoretical stance.

Another critical component in the process of seeing and acknowledging ourselves and others is embracing cultural heritage. Pre-slavery African education and its religious influences have historically been viewed by Western culture as "inferior," "primitive," and even "savage." After the end of institutionalized slavery, cultural genocide was replaced by a cultural suicide, demanding the erasure of African history and an assimilation to European cultural norms. As a result, most Western educators either cannot demonstrate adequate knowledge about African approaches to education, or they deem such approaches irrelevant.[19] As Asa Hilliard asserts, schools in the U.S., ". . .have been and continue to be a structure of domination of Africans by Europeans, through curriculum, school structure, methods of instruction and public policy."[20] Many African Americans have been trained and indoctrinated to be "institutionalized followers," meaning they are not free mentally, spiritually, and culturally from hegemonic systems, nor do they recognize the ethnic imperatives that drive globalization. Such a plight demands that Black educators disentangle the structures of power that dictate the objectives, parameters, and agenda of courses of study.

Hilliard correctly asserts that, ". . . .We cannot wait for a more humane pedagogy to evolve. . . .We must produce and assert it. . . .We must draw from the wellspring of our traditions, and from all successful traditions. . . .We must change the world."[21] He identifies an "African indigenous pedagogy" rooted in African culture from the Nile to the

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[19]Hilliard, *SBA*, 108.
[20]Ibid., 115.
[21]Ibid.

Niger Rivers. In the African system, education is intrinsically spiritual. The intentional connection of spirituality and education, which in the U.S. is relegated to seminaries and religiously affiliated private schools, is commonplace in the African education system.

As a spiritually developing Black youth in the Baptist church, I was often disengaged from didactically sterile lessons. It was not until a teacher assigned to our age group was willing to diverge from traditional approaches to the teaching/learning process that we began to connect our realities as Black youth with spiritual principles. Her desire to both embrace and integrate issues relevant to the daily experiences of youth enabled her to create both content and methods that ensured meaningful learning experiences.

Many of the formal experiences of religious instruction continue to reflect the appropriation of educational models that are not always successful in engaging African-American learners. The all too common use of lecture mode with a brief pause for questions and answers is not always the most effective way to ensure that learners understand content, engage in critical reflection, and integrate lessons into life experience. Content and methods not socio-culturally relevant can be equally ineffective.

Womanist Christian educator Yolanda Smith laments both the usage of ineffective pedagogical methods and the absence of culturally specific curricula and methods in the Black Church. Reflecting upon her experiences with the educational ministries in an African-American church, she states:

> . . . .There was usually only one teaching method used in the classes: the lecture method. The majority of the class time was spent either listening to the lecture or

> reading through the Sunday school book without sufficient time for exploration or reflection on the biblical text. Although the lack of variety of teaching methods and techniques is not peculiar to African American churches, it was especially disturbing to me as an African American because the rich resources of the African American oral tradition, such as music, dance, poetry, ritual, proverbs, metaphors, stories, and historical accounts, had been replaced by printed resources that were primarily developed by white denominations. . . .There was often a heavy emphasis on Christian doctrine without much attention to our heritage.[22]

Many Black Christian educators privilege a single educational method. Further, they regard Christian doctrine and identity as more significant than aspects of their cultural heritage and identity. For Smith, this is an unnecessary separation. Smith offers a "triple-heritage model" that proposes the use of curricula which integrate components of African, African American, and Christian heritage.[23] By reclaiming their full heritage, African-American Christians tackle life challenges, drawing from the wellspring of viable resources in their own traditions.

It is increasingly clear that educators, both religious and secular, must become knowledgeable about the chronological, geographical, and social location of African people in order to adequately educate students of African descent. If persons of African descent are to become more culturally and socially aware, it is critical that we imple-

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[22]Yolanda Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), viii.

[23]Ibid., 1.

ment liberative approaches to education beyond the commonly legitimized models of Western culture, many of which have failed to adequately educate Black people. Reawakening requires a reclaiming of the pedagogy of our ancestors. This objective proves difficult given the cultural genocide and devaluing of African value systems that remain as an inheritance of enslavement and colonization. In the U.S., teacher-training centers around a conception of teaching as a technical exercise or practice. Whereas technical skills are important and can enhance teaching and learning, the African approach has a familial notion of the teacher as elder and nurturer of students. The teacher/elder is one who respects and is knowledgeable of the culture of the student's community.[24] The teacher does not have to live the experience but must make efforts to be inclusive of the student's culture.

Hearing into Speech

One central component of African indigenous pedagogy is the vision of the teacher as a selfless healer intent on inspiring, transforming, and propelling students to a higher spiritual level. The oldest complete text of ancient African pedagogy is *The Teachings of Ptahhotep*,[25] a Kemetic scribe/sage who lived circa 2,350 B.C.E. His thirty-seven teachings are a section of what Europeans refer to as "wisdom" literature. Of significance is Ptahhotep's perspective of a true learner and teacher as a hearer and a listener. In his description of the role of the African teacher/healer,

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[24]Ibid., 114.

[25]See A. G. Hilliard, *The Teachings of Ptahhotep: The Oldest Book in the World* (Atlanta: Blackwood Press, 1987).

Hilliard quotes from Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Healers*. Here the teacher Damfo places emphasis on the importance of listening:

> After his training the healer walks through the same world every person walks through. But he sees signs others don't see. He hears sounds others don't hear. The same tree that just stands there dumbly to everyone, to the healer its leaves have things to say. The healer learns the meaning of the river's sound, of the sounds of the forest animals. And when he needs the curing spirit from a plant, if his eyes are well prepared, he may see from a great distance some small sign if the leaf that is ready to be taken.[26]

The healer/teacher must pay attention in particular ways and look beneath the surface to examine hidden meanings.

Liberative pedagogy demands active listening. Women continue to live with hidden shame because they have not been heard. Jacquelyn Grant states:

> Black women represent more than 50 percent of the Black community and more than 70 percent of the Black church. How then can an authentic theology of liberation arise out of these communities without specifically addressing the liberation of women in both places? Does the fact that certain questions are raised by

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[26]Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers: An Historical Novel* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1978), 98; quoted in Asa G. Hilliard, *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind* (Gainesville, FL: Makare Publishing Company, 1998), 80.

> Black women make them any less Black concerns? If. . .the liberation of Black men and women is inseparable, then a radical split cannot be made between racism and sexism. Black women are oppressed by racism *and* sexism. It is therefore necessary that Black men and women be actively involved in combating both evils.[27]

Many church settings offer little or no space where the deep issues impacting their lives can be heard, addressed, and heeded for the purpose of creating a more healthy worship space. Thomas Groome highlights "telling" and "listening" as central to the shared praxis of a group.[28] As persons either tell or listen, they learn about themselves and others. Dialogue must include the presence of faith, hope, love, and justice. These qualities foster the kind of shared praxis in the community and create the ideals to which religious education aspires.

Listening is often relegated to the pastoral counselor and even that role does not guarantee serious listening. In *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*, Edward Wimberly asserts the convergence of preaching and pastoral counseling, each of which attends to people's stories in ways that enable a change of worldview.[29] This same convergence exists between preaching and liberative Christian education. Both disciplines, through theo-educative practice, can potentially undermine negative assumptive worlds and point toward more positive perspectives and possibilities.

N. Lynne Westfield employs a womanist approach to

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[27]Grant, *Black Theology*, 335.

[28]See Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

[29]Edward Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth: Preaching & Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 17.

religious education as a remedy for what she calls, ". . .uninteresting, slow-paced, even dull" classroom experiences.[30] Stemming from her own interactions with Black women and the already existing legacy of Black women's resilience, she offers hospitality and concealed gatherings as a liberative methodological approach. Westfield organized a literary group for Black women. Rather than meeting in a formal classroom setting, they gathered in the homes of various women, and ". . .through the giving and receiving of hospitality, experience[d] a welcome. . .expressive and conducive of intimacy."[31] For Westfield, rituals of healing occur when Black women have opportunities to gather, engage in an exchange of hearing and speaking, and participate in the sacrament of hospitality.[32]

In her book, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, Anne Wimberly posits a distinct methodology for doing Christian education. Her method, which she calls story-linking, involves the linking of the Christian story, our own cultural heritage stories, and our everyday stories. As a result of this process, we are able to engage in ethical decision-making.[33] Present realities are addressed through critical reflection on the past and present in order to usher into the present a liberative future.

Wimberly's method can prove important for Black

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[30]N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), viii.

[31]Ibid., 49.

[32]Ibid., 81. Westfield defines sacrament as, ". . . .any profound experience that puts us in touch with the mystery of life, thus putting us in touch with God. . . .Sacramental experiences are experiences of persons' bodies, emotions, intellect, and will coming to deeper knowledge and love of God."

[33]Anne Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 39.

women who need to connect their own strivings against the interlocking evils of oppression with their Christian identity and lifestyles. It is particularly empowering for Black women in several ways. First, it assures that they have a space to tell their stories and be heard. It also makes space for historical reflections that intersect their experiences. Participants may reflect upon how historical figures, even in their own families, were able to face oppression yet prove resilient. The process of writing and/or speaking is a source of empowerment for women who wrestle against systems that would render them silent. Second, story-linking takes seriously the real-lived experiences of Black women who share their everyday experiences and recount the ways in which they navigate race/gender/class oppressions. For many women this includes the so-called "taboo" subject matter not normally addressed. As they link their everyday stories to cultural and Christian stories, their experiences are heard and affirmed. Third, when story-linking has as its aim liberation, it enables a hermeneutic of liberation, re-interpreting theologies in ways that support Black women's experiences. When Black women and members of any oppressed group are assured engagement in a process of listening and being heard, they are empowered to speak.

Touching for Embodied Connection

In *Fashion Me a People*, Maria Harris uses the term "fashioning" as a metaphor for educational ministry and curriculum. According to Harris, as we extend definitions of curriculum beyond the notion of schooling, we can include the entire lived-experiences of the community as source and means of educating. Harris centers her approach in five cur-

ricular forms: *kerygma*, *didache*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*.[34] It is this fashioning of congregations through these "forms" that the church community is cultivated in its mission and identity.

Harris's metaphors of "fashioning" and "forming" naturally lend themselves to a description of a curriculum that takes seriously an embodied, living community. She states: ". . . .The forms themselves are the primary curriculum of the church, the course of the church's life, and that in fashioning these forms we fashion the church. And because *we* are the church, the fashioning of the forms becomes the fashioning of us."[35] In the context of the church community, we experience the curricula of community, prayer, teaching, service, and proclamation through our bodies. When we speak of "forms," we are not referring to educational processes that do not affect us holistically. Rather, we are connected beings whose physicality is part of the totality of our experience. In other words, we make meaning through our bodies.

While Harris gives credence to the importance of communal life and the particularities of that experience, she does not provide an in-depth analysis of certain cultural distinctions. Therefore, certain questions must be addressed: how do we respond to different "types" of forms, physical and otherwise? In the church context, what does it mean to be in a Black female body? How does the fashioning take shape when its process is mediated through a particular cultural and hermeneutical lens? How can a liberative pedagogy for Black people consider the relationship among its

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[34]Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 36.

[35]Ibid., 17.

theology, worship, and embodiment?

James Cone pointedly articulates one of the most significant problems facing the contemporary Black Church:

> The Black church, like all other churches, is a male dominated church. The difficulty that Black male ministers have in supporting the equality of women in the church and society stems partly from the lack of a clear liberation-criterion rooted in the gospel and in the present struggles of oppressed peoples. . . .It is truly amazing that many Black male ministers, young and old, can hear the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism but remain deaf to a similar message in the context of sexism.[36]

The Black community along with some white communities have made great strides against racist oppression. Many Black churches stood at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement and continue to actively combat racism and bigotry. But when it comes to the inclusion of women, many male-dominated churches lag behind the quest toward equal participation. The traditions and mainstays of the church continue to hold liberation captive. They remain to prevent a shift of power in church structure, organization, and functioning. A major reason for such stagnation is the lack of willingness to critically examine issues of gender and embodiment as related to theology and religious practices.

As we educate through various curricular forms, it is

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[36]James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 23.

critical to pay attention to the ways in which our bodies are involved in our educational practices. Michael Dyson poignantly expresses connections between Black church worship and embodiment.

> The Black church. . .is full of beautiful, boisterous, burdened, and brilliant black bodies in various stages of praising, signifying, testifying, shouting, prancing, screaming, musing, praying, meditating, singing, whooping, hollering, prophesying, preaching, dancing, witnessing, crying, faking, marching, forgiving, damning, exorcizing. . . .surrendering, and overcoming. There is a relentless procession, circulation, and movement of black bodies in the black church. . . .In the black church, it's all about the body: the saved and sanctified body, the fruitful and faithful body, working and waiting for the Lord.[37]

The body is involved in almost every aspect of Black worship. It is ironic that many Black churches are largely silent when it comes to embodiment, given the enormity of bodily expression in worship and fellowship. The ritualistic embodied practices of the church need to be connected with its preaching and teaching.

Christian theology is incarnational theology. It pivots upon the witness of a God who wraps God's self in human flesh and becomes an embodied being. Jesus dwells among and with other embodied beings whom he touches. Jesus touches skin, cries, groans, sweats and bleeds, gets angry, hungry, and thirsty. Jesus is human! While the Black

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[37]Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 88-89.

Church has been able to make connections with Jesus' crucified body and woundedness, which parallel the bodily suffering of Black people, it has not been able to connect with Jesus' many other embodied experiences. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel offers the story of Jesus having his feet anointed and kissed by a woman who then dries his feet with her hair. She contends that Jesus enjoyed this woman's touch—perhaps even sexually.[38] The gospels provide other accounts where Jesus is in bodily contact with others through acts of healing or through day-to-day koinonia. Moltmann-Wendel further states: "A reorientation of Christianity must begin with a rediscovery of the body and its energies, for only in this way can the power issue from it to be 'salt' in present-day society. Just as the woman [at the well]. . . .draws living energy from the body of Jesus and can now go her way in wholeness, so with his body we could receive, taste, [and] hand on whole life—life which is not simply a sacrifice, but dedication to a cause, the cause of righteousness."[39] A new approach to the body is needed, moving out of the realm of taboo. Empowerment and self-love are intricately connected to one's relationship with embodied living. One of the first steps in mutual recognition is a willingness to accept and celebrate the God-given bodies of others and the entire range of their embodied expressions. We are called to honor one another, not just as spirits, but whole beings including our gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientations.

Beyond declarations from the pulpit, sexuality continues to be a taboo subject in many churches. According to

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[38]Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 64.

[39]Ibid., 53.

Kelly Brown Douglas, a sexual discourse of resistance is needed at all levels of Black communal life.[40] Douglas states, "A sexual discourse of resistance has two central goals: first, to penetrate the sexual politics of the Black community; and, second, to cultivate a life-enhancing approach to Black sexuality within the Black community."[41] Sexuality is a pervasive indirect, unspoken curriculum in the Black Church and community at-large. While sexuality in all of its expressions permeates the community, including the church, it remains hidden from the table of open dialogue and exploration. It exists and is even manifested in the roles and rituals central to community life but is seldom examined for its implications and outcomes. Only recently have church communities begun to broach the subject in open forums and through substantive teaching strategies. According to Douglas, despite the fact that the Black community has not historically engaged in sexual discourses, it is critical that the Black Church examine its sexual rhetoric.[42] If the church is to be a community of liberation and wholeness, it must be actively engaged in the process of critical reflection about its own rhetoric and politics.

In the attempt to uphold so-called Christian standards, many pastors emphasize the importance of being "separate from the world," without realizing that the people of the church are the people of the world. Christians face the same issues and problems that so-called "worldly" people face. Church leaders, especially pastoral counselors, must be open, willing, and equipped to address sexuality both to

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[40]Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 72.

[41]Ibid., 69.

[42]Ibid.

counsel those dealing with unhealthy shame and other complex issues and to point parishioners toward a holistic self-understanding. As Edward Wimberly explains:

> Pastoral care of diversity within the African American community was understood within the context of narrative meaning making. Critical in the meaning making process was the context of racism and the legacies of African naturalism and Greco-Roman orthodox views regarding sex. Emphasis was placed on the fact that Black sexuality has been a very severe problem in a climate where racism is grounded in sexual stereotypes and fear. Though Black sexuality has historical and contemporary influences, pastoral counseling was thought of as that context in which Black sexuality could be affirmed within proper communal and relational boundaries. . . .In essence, Black sexuality was affirmed as part of all of life, and its place within relational and spiritual contexts was significant.[43]

Wimberly correctly asserts the potentially affirming role of pastoral counseling, but affirmation has to be defined by the recipient of care. If Black sexuality is largely defined and interpreted by a male-dominated leadership with sexist assumptions, then the care received may fall short. The Black Church and Black pastors/counselors cannot adequately point Black women toward wholeness without unpacking, addressing, and eradicating the systems of oppression that create many of their problems. Discourse cannot exist solely on a traditional theological level. It must

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[43]E. Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*, 56-57.

delve deeper into dialogues of resistance and empowerment that debunk traditional theological and cultural assumptions. The church must not assume that things are the way they are supposed to be. Instead, the church must ask, "Why are things the way they are?", and if the answer is harmful to its membership, "How can we shift our paradigm?"

Kelly Brown Douglas summarizes the need for open dialogue and open resistance to oppressive sexual constructs:

> Without a sexual discourse of resistance the legacy of one woman's pain cannot be confronted. The absence of such a discourse means. . .too many Black men and women are left to feel ashamed of their bodies. They have limited avenues for discovering that the pain, ambivalence, and/or shame they feel are shared experiences generated by a history of exploitation. They are left to negotiate by themselves the burden of years of humiliation heaped upon them by a white culture that suggests that Black physiognomy is a sign of inferiority and wantonness. They are left with little help in their quest to love themselves. The impact of such unactualized self-love has been devastating for the Black community.[44]

If the Black Church is truly to be a community of healing and wholeness, it must not ignore the pain and struggle of its constituents.

bell hooks notes the devaluing of embodiment and eros

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[44]Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 74. The author previously argued that white culture and a history of institutionalized slavery and other subsequent forms of oppression are primarily responsible for both the internalized negative valuations of the Black body and the culture of silence related to sexuality in the Black community.

in the classroom and its subsequent detrimental effect on teaching/learning experiences.[45] Knowledge becomes strictly objective, detached from the subjective lived experiences of the communicator. She actively resists this tendency in her scholarship by sharing her own experiences of the erotic in her classroom. "Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination."[46] Eroticism is not something to be denied or repressed; rather, it is a resource for self-knowledge, interconnectedness, and passionate educational experiences.

Referencing womanist approaches to Christian education, N. Lynne Westfield states: "The spirituality exemplified in concealed gatherings is a spirituality that lives out of the notion of 'soma'. . . .Through concealed gatherings, Christian African American women remember our very selves, remember to reattach our body (soma) parts, to reconnect with the holy, both divine and carnal. . . .The gatherings enable genuine touch. . .to feel one's own body while laughing, eating, talking, living, is to receive genuine, healing hospitality."[47] African approaches to education view the body as the temple of the spirit. Therefore, teaching for the mind cannot be separated from the body. Body, mind, and the spirit are connected. It is the teacher's responsibility to speak to the intellect, spirituality, and body of the student.[48]

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[45]bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 191-199.
[46]Ibid., 195.
[47]Westfield, *Dear Sisters*, 95-96.
[48]Hilliard, *SBA*, 108.

If shame is to be countered, educators must develop specific strategies for doing so. The Black Church needs a curriculum of embodiment that educates through formal teaching opportunities and through informal educational experiences. Biblical interpretations must include an examination of texts for issues related to gender and sexuality. One such strategy may involve rethinking biblical texts, asking questions such as: what are the roles of women in this passage? What are the experiences of shame in this story? Is embodiment valued or devalued? How is our reading of the text related to heterosexism?

Another strategy for Christian educators or parishioners could be the use of a learning activity:

> Participate in your worship experience as a first-time visitor. Observe the liturgies and rituals as well as the interactions among worship participants. How does the body function during the worship experience? What is the nature of the interaction among the bodies? Which practices of ritual in your congregation exclude certain groups/types of bodies? Which practices shame particular groups/types of people? What church practices have the potential of countering toxic shame?

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel offers several liturgies for worship that respond to issues of embodiment. One offering is a confessional from a church in England:

> We confess our misuse of sexuality;
> we have found pleasure in the degrading of others' bodies;
> we have failed to respect and care for our own bodies;

> We have chosen to condemn, rather than to delight in each other. . . .[49]

Another confessional reads:

> God,
> I confess before you,
> that I have had no faith in my own possibilities.
> That in thought, word, deed I have shown
> contempt for myself and for my ability,
> I have not loved myself as much as others,
> neither my body nor my looks,
> nor my talent nor my own way of being.
> I have let others direct my life.
> I have let myself be scorned and mistreated.
> I have trusted the judgment of others rather than my own. . . .[50]

These and other such readings contribute to the formation and liberation of parishioners through *leiturgia* as Christian education.

Christian educators must be trained to teach whole embodied persons. The Black Church should include discourses on sexuality and celebrations of the body in worship. The body should become an important and central curriculum for Christian educators seeking to address physical, mental and emotional health, sexuality, ableism, race and ethnicity, and the many other issues related to the embodied self and community.

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[49]Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 55.
[50]Ibid., 54.

Conclusion

The matrix is real and Christian religious education is central to its dismantling. Many strides have been made in the process of embracing a more liberative vision of the ecclesial and world community. According to Rebecca Chopp, if the church is to proclaim and reflect the Kingdom of God, it must do so through "discourses of emancipatory transformation."[51] This takes place only when women's dreams and desires speak from the site of realized freedom. This critical dilemma calls not merely for the amending of the ecclesial order, or for a resistance to the application of rules, but as Chopp suggests, it necessitates the renewal of the religious community by transforming the rules, categories, visions and relations of the "ecclesia."[52] Emancipatory transformation occurs only through a reordering of relations. Therefore, the church must dialogue against the oppressive elements of tradition and scripture that reinforce notions of female inferiority. The interconnected nature of our theologizing, our reordering, and our educating is clear—even as the need for more dialogical interpretive space remains.

Womanist pedagogy asserts the creation of spaces where a more liberative reality can be imagined, created, and implemented. As new messages are heard from the pulpit, from Christian educators, and from congregants, both women and men are empowered to deconstruct and reconstruct worldviews in ways that are liberative for the entire community.

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[51]Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 18-24.

[52]Ibid., 76.