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NO SAFE SPACE: THE IMPACT OF SEXIST
HERMENEUTICS ON BLACK WOMEN
VICTIM SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE
ABUSE: A WOMANIST PASTORAL
CARE PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The intent of this essay is to identify and examine one of the ways in which the Black Church replicates the psychic and emotional violence of intimate violence. At issue is concern over the destructive impact of sexist hermeneutics as transmitted during the preaching moment on a specific population of the congregation—Black women victim survivors of intimate violence.¹ The term refers to male perpetrated rape, wife/partner battering, and childhood sexual abuse. The scholarship and witness of African-American women's voices inform this discourse.

We begin by identifying the role of hermeneutics in the Black struggle for religious and social liberation and consider ways in which sexism (one of the key ideological factors that contribute to the phenomenon of gender-based violence and intimate violence) has been excluded from the Black theological agenda. It is the writer's contention that exclusion of the sexist critique in the task of hermeneutics,

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¹See Traci West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

when played out in the preaching moment, replicates the cycle of sexist violence that is all too familiar for victim survivors. Evidence of this phenomenon is considered within the context of a case study on Aquila, a childhood victim survivor of incest. Psychological defenses enacted by victim survivors of intimate violence as they respond to the initial act of violence and subsequent offenses committed against them are also highlighted. In response to the issues raised within the case study, the womanist approach to pastoral care is explored as a viable option for intervention.

History and Hermeneutics

The Black Church occupies a particular space in Black culture and consciousness, due to its heritage as a safe harbor against racial violence. Hermeneutics that affirm Black culture, Black existence, and Black history form the heart of this legacy. Hermeneutics provide the interpretive framework out of which African Americans have crafted a theology of liberation and an understanding of church that links autonomous worship and solidarity/social welfare of the Black community.²

The African experience of Christianity in America has demonstrated that hermeneutics can either liberate by working over and against racist theology and ideology or serve to further oppress by accommodating any theological suppositions that negate Black existence. African-American theologians engaged this dynamic during the 1960s and 1970s when they began to interpret scripture out of what is recognized as a "hermeneutic of suspicion," which acknowl-

²Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 108.

edges "the need to recognize that certain dominant forms and conclusions in biblical interpretation may be serving to reinforce forms of dominance, oppression and agendas of power. Thus one should be suspicious of received interpretations."³

In the Black Church context, this means being suspicious of traditional (primarily Eurocentric) interpretations of the biblical text that reinforce notions of white superiority and Black inferiority. This shift in theology represents Black theologians' participation in a polemic against white supremacist religious indoctrination. It presses Black preachers towards a pulpit rhetoric that affirms the Black self in spite of Eurocentric theology, white supremacy, and capitalism. This move towards interpreting the biblical text and doing theology from a position that validates Black life is empowering for the African-American community as a whole. However, participation in a polemic against white supremacist religious indoctrination remains incomplete.

The Black Church falls short in rejecting white supremacy in failing to direct this liberating approach to interpreting the biblical text in relation to biblically-based gender oppression. Evidence of this oppression exists in the battered bodies, minds, and souls of Black women victim survivors of intimate violence who, additionally, are forced to endure the violence of sexist theology proclaimed from the pulpit. What has white supremacist religious indoctrination to do with Black women victim survivors of intimate violence? The answer exists in Black America's continued struggle against the destructive forces of racism and its lasting effects within the community.

³Donald J. McKim, ed., *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 127.

Sociologist bell hooks addresses the effects of Black America's struggle against racism in the following way:

Continued racial oppression, especially when it took the form of lynching and outright murder of black people, made it clear to all black folks that one had to be careful about speaking the truth to whites. . . . Yet the time has come when we must examine to what extent the practice of dissimulation, of being deceitful, carried over into our social norms with one another. Encouraged to wear the mask to ensure survival in relation to the white world, Black folks found themselves using strategies of dissimulation and withholding truth in interpersonal relationships within black communities. This was especially true for gender relations.⁴

hooks' analysis offers an entry point at which the faith community may begin to acknowledge the collective impact of racism, which involves collectively recognizing the atrocities of sexism and gender-based violence. hooks claims that in order to protect themselves from the irrational daily attacks of racism, enslaved Africans often "told lies to white oppressors to keep from being brutally punished or murdered."⁵ She maintains that this survival tactic has turned inward (become internalized), and continues to affect gender relations. Unfortunately, these relations include the atrocities of rape, molestation, incest, battery, and emotional abuse committed against Black girls and women. As an

⁴bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam, Black Women and Self Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 22, 26. See also hooks' "Walking in the Spirit," in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

⁵hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 20.

institution that participates in the dialogue on gender relations, the church is not exempt. When Black preachers (women as well as men) fail to include a critique of sexism in the "hermeneutic of suspicion," a lie is told; the truth that Black girls and women are being abused is concealed. More painfully, for those whose reality is intimate violence, this silence about their realities renders them invisible in the body of Christ.

So, what is a "a hermeneutic of suspicion" that detects sexism and rejects gender-based violence against girls and women? It involves, but is not limited to, adopting a pastoral ethic that sanctions interrogation of the biblical text for ideologies supporting gender oppression; rejecting ideologies promoting male superiority and female inferiority; and speaking out against texts that condone violence against women. That violence should be understood as any attempt to "obliterate the fundamental liberty or active, dynamic, determination of the self by the human subject. . .[and] seeks to destroy not only the body, but the spirit as well."⁶ Sexism is a vice that obliterates girls' and women's determination of the female self, and destroys not only the female body, but the feminine spirit as well. Sexism is in and of itself an act of violence. Sexism in the worship space is a sin.

⁶Mary Shawn Copeland, "Editorial Reflections," in *Violence against Women*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), [119].

**She's Real and in Our Congregations:
Aquila, a Case Study**

The effects of white supremacy's racist assault is shocking, but the statistics about Black girls and women surviving intimate violence is even more so.⁷ By the time Black girls reach eighteen years of age, 1 out of every 2.5 (40 percent) will have experienced some form of intimate violence.⁸ These girls and women are among the Black women who make up 70 percent of the membership in African-American churches.⁹ To illustrate this point, consider the numbers of Black women who have been abused against the backdrop of the megachurch phenomenon. Megachurches are considered as any congregation with membership and weekly attendance from 2,000 and 20,000.¹⁰ If 70 percent of these members are women, it is possible that on any given Sunday between 240 and 1,512 Black women who have survived or are being subjected to intimate violence come

⁷See Patricia Goedeke Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, *Full Report on the Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice, 2000), 22, exhibit 6, wherein 18.2% of all women surveyed indicated they had been the victim of attempted or completed rape at some time in their life. More than half (51.8%) were less than eighteen years of age when it happened; also U. S. Justice Department, *Violence against Women: A National Crime Victimization Survey Report* (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994), iii, where 18.8% of Black women surveyed had been raped and 53.1% had been physically assaulted.

⁸West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 209.

⁹Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 137.

¹⁰Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, "Get on Board, Little Children, There's Room for Many More: The Black Megachurch Phenomenon," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXIX (Fall 2001/Spring 2002): 179.

to church every Sunday morning—to escape, recover from, and resist further acts of violence.¹¹

Aquila is an African-American woman in her mid-thirties. She is a seminary graduate and ordained minister. Aquila is also a victim survivor of intimate violence.¹² Beginning at age seven, her older brother raped her repeatedly for several years. Aquila now states she first started communicating with God because of her abuse. Her parents had taught her to pray, so she talked to God about her pain. The incestuous molestation began before she attended church and continued for several years while she attended. Although she talked to God about the trauma, she was unable to communicate with any adults about what was happening to her. The abuse finally ended when she was twelve years old.

What kept me. . . .The way that the little girl integrated that experience in her life so that she wouldn't lose her mind. She said one day, after hearing her female pastor (which is very important) telling her at twelve in confirmation class. 'You know, we really have to pray through Jesus, the son of God, so that God hears us and we are saved.' Blah. . . .blah. . . .blah. Okay so me,

¹¹The megachurch illustrates the reality of Black women victim survivors of intimate violence. This approximation (240-1,512) is based on calculations derived from Douglas' statement (70 percent of the people who attend African-American churches are female) and West's research (40 percent—one out of every 2.5—of African-American women will have experienced some form of sexual assault before reaching the age of eighteen). Applying this information to the numbers of women represented in the Black megachurch phenomenon, it is possible that between 240 and 1,512 abused women are in attendance on any given Sunday.

¹²Aquila [pseudo], interview by the writer, tape recording, 2 February 2005, Atlanta, Georgia.

the little girl went back home. Went to the restroom and talked to God and said, 'Oh. . .now I understand why my brother keeps raping me' or 'molesting me,' whatever my words were. I said, 'I have not been talking to you in Jesus' name.' I'd been saying 'God.' So, I said, 'Oh, please stop him from touching me, in *Jesus' name I pray.*' So that was perhaps a summer when he was going to come. And that summer he did not come. So I attributed that to the miracle working of 'Oh, it was Jesus.' That sustained me and kept me. . .but certainly that was not healing. And it certainly is not healing even to this place because I still have not said that to every person that I know.

Aquila's account of the circumstances surrounding her abuse indicates feelings of alienation and estrangement from God. What Aquila defines as an integration of her experience (*the way that the little girl integrated that experience in her life so that she wouldn't lose her mind*) is the internalization of the violence committed against her. Internalization is an internal psychological defense mechanism enacted in response to trauma that threatens psychic integration and wholeness.¹³ In order to maintain some sense of reality, enabling her to function day to day, Aquila also began to rationalize the presence of God during her abuse. To manage the devastating feelings of being abandoned by a God who did not rescue her from her brother's incestuous attack, she rationalized that God had not heard from her because she

¹³For an extensive analysis of the internalization and object relations theory associated with victim survivor's response to violence, see Carolyn McCrary, "The Wholeness of Women," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXV (Spring 1998): 258-294.

had not been praying *in Jesus' name*. The molestation stopped after she prayed *in Jesus' name*. This was her first saving encounter with Jesus, and she continues to pray *in Jesus' name*. Aquila's internal psychological structures organized to enable her to take care of herself by enacting the psychological defenses of internalization and rationalization. These defenses are her response to that which was unbearable—molestation by her brother and abandonment by God.

Although she managed her reality, the church was integral in compounding her struggle. The following recollection exemplifies one of the ways in which hermeneutics failed to consider her reality and hindered her attempts at healing and wholeness as a little girl:

Nothing that anybody was saying in the church was relevant to me at all. . . .The majority of little girls who have been molested will never fit in the imagery of a perfect Christian girl, because we will never—never will we be virgins. . . .I went through this whole thing with becoming a virgin, with the guilt and the shame and all of that. [And] unless you buy into, 'I become a virgin. . .a spiritual virgin,' even then. . .you're not the essence – you're not the purity of those who are virgins. And that was not your choice. . . .You were raped. That was taken from you. There is no liberation for molested girls.

Aquila's frustration and anger over not fitting in alludes to the greater reality that during her abuse, and in the years following it, the rhetoric proclaimed from the pulpit failed to take into account her experience as a molested girl-

child. She found no safe space to recover and/or develop a healthy understanding of her sexuality. Her feelings of alienation and shame persisted beyond the occurrences of molestation and were compounded by the messages she received in church. Her words, *The majority of little girls who have been molested will never fit in the imagery of a perfect Christian girl, because we will never - never will we be virgins*, is her response to the Christian sexual ethic rooted in female chastity and purity before God. However, this attempt is entirely impossible for those who could not make the choice to become sexually active due to being forced.

Ethicist and theologian Traci West describes the effect of these teachings on survivors of intimate violence. She says, "Teachings that prohibit sex outside marriage and emphasize virginity and abstinence for unmarried women can cause some women to see their victimization as a sexual sin on their part."¹⁴ West is referring to grown women. However, the impact is amplified for young victim survivors who experience intimate violence and sexist ideology under the guise of theological platitudes—early in life. This is not to say that abstinence is not a noble Christian value. However, when it is used to socialize girls to be ashamed if their life experiences fail to meet this standard, it is dangerous.

The result for survivors of intimate violence is a compounded sense of shame: first, over the initial violation; secondly, over the inability to ever become that which is held up as the standard. When preachers fail to operate out of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" that theologizes over rape, molestation, battery, incest, and any other forms of violence (mental, spiritual, and emotional) renders thousands

¹⁴West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 74.

of women silent and invisible by failing to acknowledge their stories.

The preacher's failure to acknowledge the experience of gender-based violence as one of the many stories that coexist in the worship space silenced Aquila's reality. Again, in an effort to maintain psychic wholeness she internalized the message received about being a virgin. In order to accept this message, she had to deny her real experience of sexual trauma. This internalization enabled her to rationalize that she had become a *spiritual virgin*, that she had surrendered her virginity in a "God-way."

It was years before she faced the truth that she had been molested and moved towards true healing, acknowledging that her experiences would never concur with the Church's definition of a "good" Christian girl. Accepting her invisibility within the church context redefined her identity as a female Christian by reconstructing her relationship with God. This act of self-determination enabled her to confront God about her abuse and to identify with other women in the biblical text who shared her experience of rape. During her last year of seminary, she turned to the Hebrew Bible story of Hagar, the Egyptian servant who is raped by her owner and eventually evicted from her home by the child's father.

My first dealing with Hagar was more of dealing with the inadequacy of God. Things [that] happened to her over which she had no control [are similar to] things [that] have happened to me in my life where I was absolutely powerless. . . . But I came to a place where (and I think Hagar came to this place too) where. . . I had to basically—no matter what the church was saying. . . I had to basically name and create a God for myself.

Rather than accept the traditional patriarchal interpretations of this story that favor Abraham and Isaac at the expense of Hagar's trauma, Aquila focused on the marginalized story that resonated with her experience as a raped Black girl. As an African-American, she identified with Hagar's African heritage as an Egyptian. She also held in common the experience of rape and estrangement from God. Unlike the attempts in her childhood to become a "spiritual virgin" in response to what she heard from the pulpit, her engagement with the biblical text around the victimization and survival of Hagar is different in that it did not require the negation of her life experience in order to be in relationship with God. As a matter of fact, her identification with an experience that mimicked her own forced her to confront God about her feelings of estrangement and abandonment, which she describes as the "inadequacy of God."

Aquila's self-determination and operation out of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is a form of resistance, which is not only healthy but necessary for survivors of intimate violence as they move towards healing. "Though hardly a guarantor of healing, acts of resistance can open up possibilities for a degree of healing to take place. These acts of resistance create the conditions for women to take steps toward their own renewed spiritual vitality. . . ."¹⁵

Aquila committed this act of resistance to combat the devastating feelings of alienation and estrangement/abandonment by God. But her defense is also a form of resistance against the oppression she experienced in the church. Her words, "no matter what the church was saying. . . I had to basically name and create a God for myself," indicate her

¹⁵Ibid., 151-152.

need to resist messages from the church contrary to her reality.

Over twenty years after her abuse, Aquila is actively developing a ministry for women. Most recently, she has participated in an African-American church that espouses a liberating theology and promotes empowerment and social justice for the African-American community. But even there, as an adult woman minister, she was violated.

In particular there is one sermon that was preached there, that I really should have gotten up and walked out—but I remained. It was out of Revelation. . . where there is a euphemism that is used. A cow. . . the great whore? Something? But the hermeneutic on it was 'That's what they say y'all are. I can't. . . I'm just preaching. This is what it says.' He did not pull away from the text and denounce any negative words about women. . . . At that point I was so conscious about just the effect of somebody of power agreeing with a book of power, and agreeing with the calling of [persons] women names that I became very in touch with wow. . . . You know. . . we just heard this sermon. But this here. . . This here s—right here. . . this has permeated us women in ways we probably will never. . . ever be able to articulate. And I meant that like, I can't. . . . It just was horrific. He went through that whole thing. We were all like 'huh'? [Other] women were like, 'yeh'! I was conscious of, 'Oh my God, what'? But I'm a trained theologian [and] I still didn't get up. And I didn't walk away. . . . I think my desire to be a part of that institution and what it takes to be a part of it was greater to me then. So. . . . you know—there were 400 people. At

least 300 women. Where was I going?

Although some would dismiss the euphemism in the text as a mere metaphor, it is dangerous to underestimate the power of metaphors as they operate as symbolic language shaping reality. Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant elucidates this point in her examination of the impact of language on hearers. "Language can be used to build community or to destroy it. It can affirm humanity or deny it. It can include or exclude. It can empower or disempower. It should be obvious, therefore, that the control of language via creation and definition makes for the control of people. It assists the process of keeping certain people in their prescribed place. It orchestrates peoples' feelings about themselves and about others."¹⁶

In Aquila's case, as a survivor of intimate violence, the preacher's failure to denounce the language that propagates images of women as whorish and immoral could do nothing less than negatively affect her attempts at re-creating an affirming sense of womanhood. Although the preacher was aware of the sexism in the text, he chose not to denounce that which dehumanized and debased female humanity. The failure to reject the language essentially condones the message conveyed by the language.

Beyond the immediate shock of the violation, Aquila experienced again the sense of powerlessness and silence that accompanied her victimization as a girl. Although Aquila was able to recognize that she was being violated in that very moment, "this has permeated us women in ways

¹⁶Jacquelyn Grant, "The Power of Language and the Language of [Em]Power[ment]," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXI (Fall 1993/Spring 1994): 85.

we probably will never. . . ever be able to articulate," she was unable to openly reject the violence being committed against her and other women in the congregation. She remained seated and submitted to the dominant/subordinate relational dynamic that occurs between members of the pulpit and members of the congregation.

The authority given to members of the pulpit by the congregation and community facilitates a dominant/subordinate relationship, which is socially accepted as normative in religious settings. However, when sexist ideology and theology are introduced in the preaching moment, an act of violence like the one Aquila experienced occurs, and the normative dominant/subordinate relationship dynamic is exploited. This transition is significant in that the relationship begins to mimic the power dynamic that exists between victim survivor and abusers and replicates that relationship in the following way: the congregation (which includes large numbers of victim survivors) is forced to listen to, and charged to accept without any opportunity to respond or reject, ideology and theology that debase female humanity. The preacher's claims about female humanity represent an act of violation.

This situation also recreated feelings of fear and alienation: ". . . there were 400 people. At least 300 women. Where was I going?" ironically resonates with her inability to talk to anyone other than God about her abuse as a small child. Her silence as a child, which echoes in her words as an adult, signifies a fear of punishment for acting out against the existing power structure. This reluctance is characteristic of the interaction, that relational dynamic, that exists between abusers and victims.¹⁷

¹⁷West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 65.

Womanist Pastoral Care As Intervention

If women like Aquila find themselves continually facing the blows of gender oppression in the church, the question becomes, "Where may they find a safe space to redevelop a healthy sense of self-agency and empowerment?" Womanist pastoral care provides a response. . . . "For the Black woman victim survivor of intimate violence, counseling in this context can provide not only a safe space, but also a sacred space. This counseling is sensitive to the internal and the external systems that oppress and/or uplift Black women and that inhibit or augment the healthy development of their psychic identities."¹⁸

Womanist pastoral care is able to operate within the church, one of the primary structures of institutionalized sexist oppression. The embodiment of an approach to pastoral care that sees women's experiences as primary and valid sources out of which to do theology and interpret reality is in and of itself a form of resistance to gender oppression. This ethic of resistance against gender oppression and self-agency as empowerment is integral to any attempts at facilitating wholeness in victim survivors of intimate violence. Particularly important are consciousness-raising techniques that help women differentiate between what they have been through and who they actually are.

For the purposes of contributing viable options for intervention, three of these techniques (power analysis and intervention, reframing/relabeling and bibliotherapy) are con-

¹⁸Carolyn A. McCrary, "Intimate Violence against Black Women," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXVIII (Fall 2000/Spring 2001): 33.

sidered to assist victim survivors in the process of healing through recovery and resistance.

Power Analysis and Intervention

Intimate violence marks the psyche and soul of victims with a pervasive sense of low self-esteem and powerlessness that result from the violence (be it physical, spiritual, emotional, even financial) committed against them. Much of the work done in the therapeutic relationship focuses on assisting women as they construct/reconstruct a positive sense of self and reclaim personal power and authority over their lives. While the reclaiming of personal power is the primary concern of both the victim survivor and the therapist, womanist pastoral care providers and therapists are particularly sensitive to the social dynamics of Black women's context, which may affect this process of rebuilding. Given the Black Church's historical position as safe harbor and advocate in the community, acceptance by the church community is particularly essential to Black women in general and Black women victim survivors of intimate violence in particular.

Therefore, specific attention is given to creating a supporting relationship within the therapeutic context as victim survivors attempt to reclaim personal power and authority over their lives. At issue is the possibility that this reclaiming will create tension and conflict between victim survivors and those with whom she relates closely: family, friends, and members of the extended community family (the church). An example of this tension surfaces in Aquila's story when she was reluctant to get up and leave the service when feeling violated. Her reluctance is typical

behavior from any victim survivor who seeks to reclaim her power, regardless of race. Yet, it is exaggerated for Black women whose cultural context relies heavily on interdependent functioning within a group as a normative value.

Teresa Snorton addresses this communal dynamic. The "African-American woman exists in a culture that does not value her attributes of strength [power]."¹⁹ Acting out the attribute of strength involves responding to pain and taking action to reject that which causes pain. For Aquila, exercise of that strength would have meant getting up and walking out in response to the sermon. But she didn't: "My desire to be a part of that institution and what it takes to be a part of it was greater to me." According to Snorton, all Black women exist under this devaluing dynamic, which functions to render them emotionally silent and their pain invisible. For the victim survivor of intimate abuse in the church context, the effect is exacerbated by the history and incidence of violence. Snorton believes this reluctance to self agency (which requires a noticeable amount of separation from the community) is related to the African-American sense of self, which is intricately woven into the identity of the accepting, communal group. . . . Aquila's words, "There were 400 people in there. At least 300 were women. Where was I going?" confirm the effect of this relational dynamic. Yet in the context of the Black Church, this sense of self is negated by the pathology of silence. The same interdependence that provides shelter for Black women can also contribute to their feelings of powerlessness.

¹⁹Teresa Snorton, "The Legacy of the African-American Matriarch," in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 62.

The ability to individuate towards a sense of healthy interdependence is the foundation from which the reclaiming of power proceeds.²⁰ As seen with Aquila, assertions of this kind of strength, which occurs when giving voice to her pain, and allowing it to propel her towards actions that honors her wholeness as a woman, may also place her outside the acceptance of her community (the church).

In response to the communal distancing that occurs when victim survivors reclaim power and authority over their lives, womanist pastoral care providers and therapists provide victim survivors with a one-on-one supporting relationship. Within this relationship they are affirmed and supported towards developing the internal tools that enable empowerment and wholeness. Although the one-on-one relationship between victim survivor and care provider is essential, the need for communal acceptance cannot be disregarded. The next step is to suggest other avenues through which victim survivors may find a community to share stories and develop practical tools to encourage their healing through an ethic of resistance.

Reframing/Relabeling

While the power analysis and intervention techniques primarily occur in the one-on-one relationship between care provider and client, the reframing/relabeling process occurs in a group context with other Black women victim survivors of intimate violence. Through collective storytelling,

²⁰See Carolyn A. McCrary, "Interdependence As a Normative Value in Pastoral Counseling with African-Americans," in *The Recovery of Black Presence, An Interdisciplinary Exploration: Essays in Honor of Charles B. Copher*, ed. Randall Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

the unique and painful experience of each woman is validated. This validation, in turn, enables victim survivors to begin to reframe their identity in terms of their developing sense of self-agency rather than the trauma of the abuse. By breaking the silence about their violent traumas, they reject that culturally accepted behavior of silence about intimate violence.

Author bell hooks refers to this relational dynamic as "collective unmasking." "Collective unmasking is an important act of resistance. If it remains a mark of our oppression that as Black people we cannot be dedicated to truth in our lives, without putting ourselves at risk, then it is a mark of our resistance, our commitment to liberation, when we claim the right to speak the truth of our reality anyway."²¹

hooks' statement indicates how speaking out (unmasking) assists victim survivors as they attempt to reclaim their power and assert self-agency. Effectively, the Black woman learns new messages: claim her power (speak out) without fear of further violence and know she is not alone. This dynamic empowers victim survivors to recover their stories, break the silence of their pain, and resist further oppression.

Bibliotherapy

In *God Don't Like Ugly: African-American Women Handing on Spiritual Values*, Teresa Fry Brown identifies fiction as one of many methods that Black women use to reclaim their voices and validate their experiences.²² Participants share how their stories intersect with the stories of the characters presented in the literature, which is demonstrated in Aquila's identification with Hagar's violation, feelings of powerlessness,

²¹hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 26.

²²See Teresa Fry Brown, *God Don't Like Ugly: African-American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Louisville, KY: Abingdon Press, 2000).

and estrangement/abandonment by God. During this process of interacting with the text, womanist pastoral care providers assist victim survivors in identifying the liberating ethics embedded in the character's lives in order to idealize and mirror those same ethics in their own lives. Herein lies the importance of using literature by African-American women and other women whose cultural and racial context with whom victim survivors may find some form of familiarity.

The characters in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* provide a source with which survivors of intimate violence (incest, rape, battering) may identify and move towards a liberating ethic. Recall the following scene between an enraged Sophia as she confronts Celie about advising her husband (Harpo) to use violence to make her "mind" him.

'You told Harpo to beat me,' she said. 'No I didn't,' I said. . . .She say, 'All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and even my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of mens. But I ain't never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. I loves Harpo,' she say. 'God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. . . .' 'This life soon be over,' I [Celie] say. 'Heaven last all ways.' 'You ought to bash Mr.—head open, she say. Think bout heaven later.'²³

²³Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 40, 42.

Walker used these characters to demonstrate the reality of intimate violence and the possibility of survival that includes resistance. Through the character of Sophia (who is also a victim of long-term intimate violence), Walker communicates a spiritual value about victim survivor's response and resistance to violence. "You ought to betta bash Mr. ____ head open. . .think bout heaven later!" Sophia's directive that Celie shift her focus away from eschatology towards her existential reality signals a shift in theology, from future eschatology to present reality. *The Color Purple* becomes a story around which the pastoral care provider engages the client about forms of resistance and restoration of power. In this way victim survivors develop a liberating hermeneutic based on a text familiar to her own story, which ultimately encourages her towards healing through resistance and self-empowerment.

Conclusion

Sexism is one of the key ideological factors that contributes to gender-based and intimate violence. Exclusion of sexism from the Black theological agenda replicates the violence that is all too familiar for victim survivors like Aquila and thousands of other women.

The womanist approach to pastoral care is an effective intervention, providing alternative safe space for Black women victim survivors of intimate violence. However, it does not excuse members of the pulpit from communicating a freedom oriented Gospel, liberating for everyone in the totality of their being. Failure to extend the hermeneutical task towards engaging the realities of Black existence that are

most painful, like violence between Black women and men, renders victim survivors invisible in the faith community. This engagement requires an act of truth-telling about violence as it occurs in the Black community and uncovering the sexist ideology in the biblical text that supports gender oppression. Only then will Black preachers be completely faithful to the "hermeneutic of suspicion" that seeks liberation for the entire community.

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