

***A Womanist's Poetic, Theo-Ethical Response to Sexual Trauma: Ethics,
Theology & Black Women's Poetry***

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ABSTRACT

This paper gestures towards a womanist response to a recent conversation with a friend, indicative of many black women's experiences of sexual trauma and struggle to reconcile their identity as black women, Christians, and survivors. I put in conversation black feminist writings, womanist ethics and theology, and black women's poetry to gesture towards a womanist response to sexual trauma. This paper makes three primary claims. First, I assert that womanist theology and ethics provides a firm foundation for Christian responses to sexual trauma. Second, I argue for contemporary womanist ethics as a crucial dialogue partner for sexual trauma survivors. And finally, I posit the moral knowledge gleaned from three black women's poems as guides for womanist responses to sexual trauma.

I will keep broken things [Their beauty is they need not ever be 'fixed'].

I will keep you, pilgrim of sorrow

*I will keep myself.*¹ - Alice Walker

"I done slept with so many men, and been raped by most of them... When I look at these white ideas of what women are supposed to be, this Victorian woman, I have to remember, these weren't made for me." - a black female friend

INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY & OUTLINE

"I have come to believe that theologians, in their attempt to talk to and about religious communities, ought to give readers some sense of their autobiographies. This can help an audience discern what leads the theologian to do the kind of theology she does."² Delores Williams begins her landmark text *Sisters in the Wilderness* with these words, asking the theologian to give an account of the context that formed her.

So good afternoon. My name is Kimi Bryson, my pronouns are she/her/hers. I was born and raised in Denver, Colorado (so I'm back home), and I spent time in my grandmother's AME church as a child, but my primary theological influences have been white Protestant traditions, including the Christian Reformed Church and white evangelicals.

The heart of this paper began years ago, when I was a Resident Assistant at Wheaton College (in Wheaton, IL). I spent hours listening to women process their experiences of sexual trauma, shaming, and violence as they sat on my couch, eating chocolate and hugging throw pillows. And I noticed a pattern in their stories. They wondered aloud how to pray, how to ask for forgiveness, how God could still love them. They were unable to place responsibility and blame on the person who hurt them, believing instead that as women they had somehow provoked or instigated the trauma they experienced. It was somehow always their fault. The language they learned in youth group and Sunday sermons ultimately hindered their ability to recognize and name what happened. Anti-survivor theology compounded their trauma, searing guilt, shame, and a false sense of responsibility onto the hearts and souls of survivors.

So I began searching for answers, in theological texts, for how to respond to these Christian

survivors of sexual violence and trauma. This paper is one result of that search. I discovered a rich, survivor-affirming theo-ethical tradition in womanist and black feminist scholarship that enables me to critique anti-survivor theo-ethical orthodoxies. I found black women's poetry a vital necessity because it resists neat, rational, organized responses to violence and trauma that often baffle and remain unresolved. This poetic, theo-ethical response invites deeper reflection on the resources womanism offers to all survivors of sexual violence and trauma, but in true black womanist fashion, I choose to center black women and girls.

I begin with Delores Williams' critical, survivor-affirming theology and emilie townes' embodied womanist spirituality as foundations for this womanist response. I then argue that Eboni Marshall Turman's description of identity offers survivors a new lens through which to view themselves and their experiences. Poetry by Alice Walker, Nikky Finney, and Warsan Shire introduces each womanist text and gestures towards blending the academic and the poetic as one methodological response to the experience of sexual violence and trauma, which resists singular, monolithic, "rational" terms of engagement.

Williams' Inflammatory Theology

You write real soft.

Spell it out kind.

No bullet holes,

No open wounds,

In your words.

How you do that?

Write like you never been hit before? - Nikky Finney⁴

To my daughter I will say,

'when the men come, set yourself on fire'. - Warsan Shire⁵

Warsan Shire's final poem in "teaching my mother how to give birth" suggests radical forms of resistance to sexual trauma, shaming, and violence, as she instructs her daughter to "set herself on fire" when "the men" come. Shire reveals possibilities for black women, including radical calls to preemptively curtail sexual trauma. Intergenerational knowledge is essential in Shire's poem, but it is also critical: earlier poems reveal that what Shire will tell her daughter is precisely what her mother did *not* tell her. So we find in Shire both a requirement to pass on knowledge and a critique of knowledge that has been handed down. Shire's final poem suggests a womanist response: community, sisterhood, motherhood. And she makes room for inflammatory theological projects like Delores Williams's, making space for black women to burn down theories, ideologies, and doctrines that attempt to sacralize our suffering and oppression.

Williams' classic womanist text emerged in 1993 and shook theological strongholds as a critical reflection in light of black Christian women's lived experiences. Building on Williams' assertion that God participates in and provides vision for black women to identify resources for their survival, this paper identifies spiritual and theological resources for sexual violence and trauma survivors in womanist theo-ethics and black feminist poetry. ⁶ I incorporate Williams' text in my work, and remain indebted to it.

Spiritual and theological resources, though often overlooked in popular discourse around sexual violence (e.g. media coverage of the #MeToo movement), are necessary for survivors' wholeness. Refusal to account for spirituality and theology leaves racist, capitalist, heterosexist theology — anti-survivor to its core — unchallenged. Delores Williams' refusal to sacralize black women's forced and coerced surrogacy roles and her assertion that there is nothing sacred in the blood of the cross are theological resources for critical reflection on the consequences of making

black women's suffering, including sexual violence, holy.⁷ And her refusal remains radical and controversial twenty five years later.

Williams' theology enables *me* to challenge the belief that God intends for the status quo of many black women's realities, in which their lives and bodies seemingly belong to another, in which they exist in service of another person's sexual pleasure. However, in one critical departure from Williams, I will not frame black women's sexual exploitation in terms of surrogacy. I agree that "God did not intend the *defilement* of [black women's] bodies... during the slavocracy," but my black feminist commitments also require me to insist that no human being ever exists for another's sexual pleasure, however deeply entrenched the patriarchal and capitalist system that considers this the norm.⁸

Framing black women's sexual exploitation and rape in terms of surrogacy may inadvertently create a narrative that black women experience sexual violence that *should* be directed towards someone else — for example, *in place of* white women, because slave masters' wives were "unavailable."⁹ I find attributing black women's sexual violation during slavery to white men's misogyny, their commitment to performances of masculinity that glorify sexual conquest and violence, and their desire to control black women's reproduction, a more useful analytic.¹⁰ Williams' discussion of the "defilement" of rape remains helpful and her critique of far too many Christians' glorification of oppression remains essential to this womanist response.¹¹ *Sisters in the Wilderness* is absolutely necessary as a theological resource for contemporary black womanist theologians to challenge any theology that divinely sanctions black women's suffering.¹² The implications of Williams' work for survivors of sexual assault and trauma remain radically transformative today.

Townes' Spirituality: a Whole, Holy God

A train with boxcars carrying
broken women's bodies

/

I moved towards her
and we stood back to back
her hand grazing the top
of our heads,
my hand measuring out
our same widths,
each of us recognizing
the brown woman latitudes,
the Black woman longitudes
in the other.

I turned around
held up my shirt
and brought my smooth belly
into her scarred one;
our navels pressing,
marking out some kind of new
equatorial line¹³

- Nikky Finney

Nikky Finney’s poem “The Girlfriend’s Train” reveals the necessity of spiritual and physical communion between women, proposing an “equatorial line” that connects black women who’ve “never been hit before” and those whose “broken bodies” can fill a boxcar train.¹⁴ At this equatorial line, black women meet in a sisterhood that bridges and critiques color, class, and experiential boundaries. What could this gathering look like? How can black women meet safely in the middle of our vulnerable, exposed, selves? Townes’ *In a Blaze of Glory* is a step toward a spirituality that honors relationships between women and crosses sociopolitical borders within black communities.

Townes offers spiritual resources for womanist social witness and utilizes a methodological framework that incorporates poetics and literature into her engagement with the difficult realities of many black women’s lives. In her interpretation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Townes describes Shug’s call to believe in “God as Spirit” as a “spiritual reimagining” that challenges Christians “to do justice towards our bodies, our sexuality, and our genders.”¹⁵ Townes continues, “to envision a spirituality of a whole, holy God.... We need to get clear on why and how we permit and commit sexual violence on Black folk. We need to decide how we are going to love ourselves and one another....”¹⁶ Townes gestures towards critical contemplation of violence in black homes and communities, but also ends with a call to love. In a society where black death is a constant possibility, the exhortation to love anything remains radical, especially the womanist’s call to love her black female self.

Townes’ chapter on Baby Suggs’ exhortation to love your flesh also challenges the belief that black women’s bodies are, or ought to be seen primarily as, an invitation to another person’s sexual pleasure, curiosity, conquest, or disposal. Black women’s and black girls’ bodies need not be conceptualized primarily as sites of transgression or defilement. The existence of black women’s and black girls’ bodies is not an invitation to voyeurism or abuse. *The reality of violence against black women does not make black women’s bodies first and foremost a site of violence and violation.*

Baby Suggs’ exhortation to love your neck and love yourself is an invitation for black women to find joy, pleasure and appreciation in their own bodies — in their own hands and necks and backs. Townes’ exhortation provides black women who have experienced sexual violence, trauma, and shaming with a spirituality that moves towards social witness. Loving one’s own hands, and neck, and caressing one’s own face re-grounds a person in their body and claims that body as their own, not another’s. Black women’s self-love and belief in a God of the Spirit are necessary spiritual resources for this womanist response to sexual violence and trauma.

Turman’s Negotiating Identity

I will keep
broken
things.

[Their beauty
Is
they
need
not
ever
be
“fixed.”]

I will keep
you:

pilgrim
of
sorrow.

I will keep
myself.¹⁷ - Alice Walker

In Alice Walker's poem "I will keep broken things," we see seemingly incongruent realities: something happens to an object or a person — it breaks — yet its value remains unchanged — it is still worth keeping, it need not be fixed. This poem offers black women freedom to reevaluate their experiences of sexual trauma, shaming, and other forms of violence. Rather than allowing broken or breaking realities to define or denigrate one's worth, Walker leaves room for an "honored place" for experiences that *feel* damaging, destructive, or broken. She says they need not be covered over, concealed, or hidden because they *don't* make something or someone "trash." Walker's assertion that she will keep broken things *includes herself*, and enables survivors of sexual violence and trauma who may feel shattered beyond belief to consider their own beings something worth holding onto, to consider themselves worthy of an honored place. Walker ultimately resists the tendency to throw away broken experiences or "broken people."

Eboni Marshall Turman uses Christopher Morse's description of the *kata sarka* and *en sarki* realities of Jesus' identity to argue for a definition of black women's identity that aligns with Walker's poem. *Kata sarka* defines someone's identity by *what happened to* their bodies, while *en sarki* reflects a first happening in them, in and through the Spirit of God. An *en sarki* understanding of identity asserts that "there is divine agency at work in the flesh of Jesus."¹⁸ Turman continues, "Hence, an *en sarki* understanding of Jesus does not constrict identity to mechanisms of possibility that are deemed natural, historical, and/or appropriate."¹⁹ This means, essentially, that Jesus' identity is not solely defined by the crucifixion because there was divine agency — God at work — first and foremost in Jesus' flesh. Turman claims that, by extension, black women's identities are not confined to what has happened to them — the *kata sarka*. Rather, a first happening of the Spirit *in* black women establishes their identity beyond what might be "possible," beyond "the limits of *what is*."²⁰

Turman is not perpetuating the kind of anti-body spiritualization that Townes critiques, nor asserting that what happens to human bodies has no meaning, weight, or impact. Instead, Turman asserts that a *kata sarka* approach to identity does not and has never reflected the *entirety* of black women's realities even though a racist, heteropatriarchal society has continuously tried to define black women by what happens to their bodies. For Turman, "the constant negotiation of what happens to the body (*kata sarka*) with the primary happening in the body (*en sarki*) leaves room for resisting the injustice... that might suggest otherwise... resisting hierarchical schematics that assert that what happens to the body is more important than what God has already done in the body."²¹

Turman's *en sarki* approach to identity requires constant negotiation between what has happened *to* and what always already happened *in* black women's bodies. And this negotiation provides survivors of sexual violence and trauma a new paradigm through which they can view their experiences and themselves. Black women, despite damaging and breaking realities they experience, remain worthy of being seen, worthy of an honored place, worthy of keeping themselves. Williams' inflammatory theology, townes' embodied spirituality, and Turman's negotiating identity are mere glimpses into the deep, survivor-affirming theo-ethical tradition I

found during my search.

In Conclusion

Black women's poetry deepened my own engagement with the theological and ethical claims I found in womanist scholarship. In each poem I discussed above, we find moral wisdom that enables black women to respond to sexual trauma, shaming, and violence.²² And each poem includes other women. None of the poems leave black women alone to piece together sexual violence or trauma. From conversations between mothers and daughters in Shire's piece, to meetings between women who have not been hit and those with broken bodies, to the acknowledgment that "I will keep you: pilgrim of sorrow," the collective wisdom from these black feminist/womanist poems is a clear refusal to leave anyone on their own.

A mentor once described experiencing sexual violence in a religious community as a "second trauma." She said, "there's the initial trauma of whatever violation took place. But then there's the second trauma of the shame, guilt, and religious baggage she suffers as a result."²³ This paper focused on the second trauma — the religious trauma, buttressed by centuries of the-ology that denigrates human bodies, sexualizes and shames women's bodies, and confines black women's existence to serving the white heterosexist patriarchal system we call "the West," or "America," or "the United States," or any other number of things. At the very least, it is the second trauma — the religious trauma, the trauma of bad theology — that we theologians, academics, ethicists, Christians, and poets, must do something to change.

In this paper, I brought together insights from womanist theologians and ethicists alongside moral knowledge gleaned from black women's poetry, to posit the viability and necessity of a poetic, theo-ethical response to black women's experiences of sexual trauma and violence. Walker and Turman provided theo-ethical and poetic resources to assert that black women who experience sexual violence are not "broken things." Rather, their identity must take into account what has first and foremost happened in them and negotiate accordingly. Williams and Shire suggest radical, inflammatory theologies that openly condemn the sacralization of violence against black women and foster intergenerational resistance strategies. Townes and Finney allow black women to respond to the "train with boxcars / carrying broken women's bodies" with a spirituality of wholeness that includes communal responsibility, accountability, and meeting grounds for black women who have experienced sexual violence and those who write like they've never been hit.

Black women's poetry, ethics, and theology enable me to respond to my friend's experience of sexual trauma, violence, and shaming with black womanist and feminist models of surviving, despite, and loving yourself, regardless.²⁴ And that remains my prayer for each black woman survivor today. May we continue to deepen the survivor-affirming, womanist theo-ethical tradition that enables us all to survive. Thank you.

1 Alice Walker, "I Will Keep Broken Things," *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010), 62, 63.

2 Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), ix.

3 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

4 Nikky Finney, "The Girlfriend's Train," in *The World is Round* (Atlanta, GA: InnerLight Publishing, 2003), 63.

5 Warsan Shire, "In Love and in War," in *teaching my mother how to give birth* (United Kingdom: flipped eye publishing, 2011), 34.

6 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5.

7 Williams, 162.

8 Williams, 166.

9 Williams, 166.

10 When perpetrated by black men, black women's sexual exploitation can possibly still be framed in terms of surrogacy, as black women stand in the place of black men's inability to live up to / into a patriarchal ideal. The scene in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where Cholly hates Doreen could be one literary example of black women

as the victim of misplaced hate, aggression, frustration, and even violence (New York: Vintage Press, 2007). Dorothy Roberts asserts that control of black women's reproduction has been at the heart of the American project in her text *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, (New York: Vintage Press, 2017).

11 Williams, 166.

12 One strength of Williams' work that contrasts other black womanists who emphasize experiences of sexual violence (e.g. JoAnne Marie Terrell's *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005)) is that black women do not have to die or be *victims* of sexual violence in order for their experiences to mean something redemptive. Williams advocates for black women's full lives, and strongly condemns anything that causes, justifies, or perpetuates their deaths; we need black women alive today.

13 Finney, "The Girlfriend's Train," 63.

14 Finney, 63, 65.

15 Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 84.

16 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 85.

17 Alice Walker, "I Will Keep Broken Things," 62, 63.

18 Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 43.

19 Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 43.

20 Turman, 43.

21 Turman, 46.

22 This paper is deeply indebted to the late Katie Cannon, womanist ethicist and foremother, and her conviction that we can glean moral wisdom from black women's literature. Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York City, NY: Continuum, 1996), 59-61.

23 Conversation with Dr. Kristie Dotson, April 2018.

24 Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (Wilmington, MA: Mariner Books, 2003 reprint), xi.

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