

Powers & Principalities: A Black Womanist Interrogation of Demonarchy 25 Years Hence

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In consideration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, my very brief comments this afternoon venture to position Williams' assertion of demonarchy throughout her scholarly corpus as the most uninterrogated, yet a most critical theological category implicitly emerging from the classic text that we celebrate today. To be sure, *Sisters* and Williams' broad research concerns pursue the dismantling of what she would identify as "Eurocentric Christian doctrine" and its "Afro-Saxon" endorsements. Yet, normative emphasis on the erogeneity of atonement that locates a principle stimulus in the phallic symbology of the cross and, in relation to black women's particularity, in the pornotropic visual logics of black women's suffering that grotesquely titivate the church and the public square, has largely ignored that which preconditions the task of theological disassembling that propels much of the black womanist theological task, especially as constituted in Williams' field-shaping contributions; one of which I see as naming demonarchy.

As I have encountered *Sisters* over the past sixteen of its twenty-five years, first in form as a womanish black student in James Hal Cone's *Systematic Theology 103*; then in content as a student of black womanist theologians, theological ethicists, and biblical scholars, most significant for today, as a student of Delores S. Williams, the-then Paul Tillich Professor of Theology and Culture at the Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Now, as a decidedly black womanist scholar-teacher-preacher, it has occurred to me that with few exceptions *Sisters*, as it agonizingly (for some) creeps into the appendices of introductory syllabi is, often and rigidly, been read through the prioritizing of the very symbol that Williams challenges readers to destabilize, namely, the cross and its concomitant suffering. Its reading over the past two and a half decades has, thus, invisibilized an equally important core thrust of Williams' argument which, as posited in her Introduction and intimated in her concluding chapter and Afterword, is equally about black women's creative re-productivity born from faith in a God who sees black women, but may not liberate them from the demonarchal realities emanating from the collusion of white women and men across racial-ethnic distinctions who function together as co-equal theological problems for black women. In other words, when we consider Williams it is typically through the cross and the pornatropes of the kata sarka - which is why, it would seem, I am often asked by whites how they should refer to course modules focused on minoritized communities (i.e. "The Cries of the Poor," "The Sufferings of the Margins," etc. *ad nauseum*). I would like to propose, however, that we consider Williams through the demons, that is, the demonarchy that precipitates black women's social crucifixion (*vis a vis* a Tillichian view of the demonic) such that the en sarki of black women's lives proactively displaces the pathologization of the wilderness as "cries and sufferings," rather than the pathologization of the demon: white racism, male superiority, and heterosexist normativity.

It is from the guiding premise of unrelenting demonarchy - that is, white women and men as theological problems for black women and their families - that this paper turns to womanist creativity amidst the demonic and interlocking forces of white racism, male superiority, and economic disenfranchisement that compel black women's subordination. Black women's "creative wrestling," as it overflows from Williams' own life of poetry into the constructive charge of the text which is wrapped up in the womanist Spiritualist impulse and theological crafting, is *Sisters'* fulcrum, giving profound and corporeal meaning to the Pauline declaration, "For we wrestle...against powers and principalities" (Eph. 6:12) in the wilderness of triangulated anti-black woman oppressions.

In her "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," which was written

concurrently with *Sisters* and whose argument is peremptorily taken up in its chapter 7, “Womanist-Feminist Dialogue: Differences and Commonalities,” Williams does the definitional work of explicating demonarchy through her assertion of the limits of patriarchy for black women. Echoing the white feminist contributions of Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Williams describes patriarchy as “the power of the fathers; a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure...ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor...” determine women’s roles in society and subsume women under men in all manner of life (47). Theorized by white racist feminists as “the major source of all women’s oppression,” Williams contends that patriarchy is “limited and problematic” in that it does not address black women’s “total experience” of subjection in the US (46). In line with black feminist and black womanist contributions that preceded her, Williams maintains that Black women are not only oppressed by the power of men, but also by certain groups of women, namely, white women, who oppress black women and other women of color. Accordingly, she argues that white women consistently participate with men in oppressing other women because of how they sometimes benefit from the productive intent of white patriarchy and supremacy.

While *Sisters* does not explicitly reference demonarchy, as such, the timing of Williams’ aforementioned article seemingly compels her use of “Hagar symbolism” in the text to emphasize the raced and gendered nature of black women’s forced condition of motherhood, social-role surrogacy, the pigmentocratic aesthetics of white racial terrorism, and the distinction between the “woman’s experience” and the “wilderness experience” as decisive illustrations of the demonarchal. Critically, though, in *Sisters* we find Williams broadening the concept, building upon the initial provocations of black womanist theology that sought to understand the limits of white women’s feminist theological musings, as unraveled in Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (1989). Hence, through an interrogation of the limits of black liberation theology in Part II of *Sisters*, Williams expands her demonarchal analysis to include black men especially those whose theological projects require the invisibilization of black women, and more specifically, black women’s God-talk. Here, Williams initially echoes William R. Jones’ critique in his classic *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology*, by conclusively contending that God is not a liberator. She intensifies Jones’ challenge, however, by further asserting that the “black experience” invisibilizes black women in ways that must lead them to conclude that perhaps God is not only a white racist, but perhaps sexist, and classist too, or at least in Williams’ words, “partial and discriminating.” It is precisely this uncomfortable sort of name-calling that is one challenge of black womanist God-talk: which boldly names the multiplicitous and interlocking nature of powers and principalities in ways that reverberate with the Geresene demoniac who, as gospelsed, confessed, “My name is Legion; for we are many.”

More simply stated, as we tarry in tr%\$p’s America post-midterms, the fact that 53% of white women voters voted for tr%\$p, 51% for Desantis in Florida, 59% for Cruz in Texas, and 75% for Kemp in the state of Georgia, that is, that white women voters overwhelmingly vote against sisters in the wilderness, casting the lives and life chances of black and brown women and their families further out into the desert, it is clear that the prophetic import of *Sisters in the Wilderness* twenty-five years hence cannot be disputed. While we wonder aloud and on Facebook, “what is this?” “how can this be?,” Delores S. Williams told us then who white women are right now – racist and oft-committed to upholding the patriarchy even, and I daresay, especially when they wear safety pins and pink pussy hats. Moreover, her deployment of Hagar symbolism, positions Sarai as a prediction of the new Jim Crow snares of “BBQ Becky,” “Permit Patty,” “Cornerstore Caroline,” and “Golfcart Gail” – and their abhorrence to the free black body that escapes white women’s surrogatic yearning that demands black life and death “at their pleasure,” as codified in the last week words of Mississippi Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith, who admitted that she would be *happy* to be on the front row of “a public hanging.” This is demonarchy; and before we start pointing fingers, it is equivalent to the machinations of those who I name as “Stealing Sarah,” white women in the

theological academy who contemporarily endeavor to Columbus black womanism as their own theological and pedagogical projects without consideration for how their racism, cis/het “in public” commitments to the patriarchy, obligations to the propagation of the white family, and social privilege, if not economic wealth, makes that ridiculous. In the face of this charge of praxeological infeasibility (which always matters for the liberationist theological project), “Stealing Sarah” has the gall to call the guild police on black women for carrying their own stuff; or in fashion with Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, black women who through it all “found God in herself” and demands that “Stealing Sarah” who every time tries to run off with it, give it back.

Further, demonarchy conceptually supports understanding how black male aspiration for white cis/heterosexist manhood compels patriarchy in black communities, especially the African American denominational churches. A prophet without honor, twenty-five years ago Williams was also calling out those black men who aspire *now* to “Make the Black Church Great Again,” by way of Plessy-like ecclesial erections that, through hiring practices, pulpit supply, lay leadership rolls, archaic and masculine theological language, and social media promotional materials, to name a few, unqualifiedly and somewhat homo-ironically declare, “cis/het [in public] men only.” I could call names and say so much more here as I do in my current project, *Black Women’s Burden: Male Power, Gender Violence, and the Scandal of African American Social Christianity*, but for now I would point you to *Sisters* chapter 8, “Womanist Reflections on the Black Church, the African American Denominational Churches, and the Universal Hagar’s Spiritual Church” for further treatment.

Suffice it say that, per Emilie M. Townes, the everydayness of black women’s flesh and blood realities compelled by the demonarchy that, for Williams, is intermittently unsettled by the “God who sees,” makes the demonic instructive for a demonarchal analytic especially as a womanist incarnation ethics endeavors to mediate the *kata sarka* with black women’s creativity as a primary site of inquiry for black womanist theological aesthetics. It must be noted that Tillich is careful to distinguish between the demonic and the absolute negativity of the satanic. Accordingly, the demonic ensues when the natural being (“We wrestle not against flesh and blood...”) is endowed with supernatural authority and divine power (“...but against powers and principalities; spiritual wickedness”) that begets permanent unrest and self-conflict. The demonic self-destructive desire for infinity disappears the absolute even as it transforms the absolute into “a real world actor,” a frame for reality. Having disappeared the absolute by costuming it as “natural being,” the demonic then creatively confirms itself through the destruction of other forms of life (http://www.mpifg.de/pu/mpifg_dp/dp12-2.pdf). A Tillichian perspective might characterize the recent Trump billboard displayed off of I-170 near St. Charles Rock Road in St. Louis County, MO (and its bold capital letters that caption a picture of “45” with John 1:14 emblazoned across his chest, “the word became flesh”) as a cultural form of the demonic. The larger point for Williams, distilled through Tillich is the way in which the destructive and the creative are always mediating. The hinge of this mediation is found in where divine power is located, and the nature of creativity, (constructive/destructive), which are not inherently mutually exclusive. *Sisters* helps us to identify the creative demonic destruction that is permanently in conflict with itself (*vis a vis* for example the republic, the franchise, the religious academy, and the church), and whose apex is the crucifixion of others, as demonarchy. Her subsequent intervention asserts with precision that amidst demonarchic white powers and male principalities, **black women wrestle**.

As a black womanist who is a black feminist, I not only read the centrality of black women’s wrestling for Williams in relation to Tillich’s demonic, but also in dialogue with black feminist Brittney Cooper’s more recent work, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, wherein she names black women’s enraged responses to demonarchy as “eloquent” “orchestrated” and “symphonic.” Building on the legacies of Audre Lorde, in her classic “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” the first theory of black women’s anger, Cooper emphasizes that black women’s rage shows up in their daily lives as “strength, force, and insight”

(Lorde) – such that in relation to the destructive and alienating forces of the demonic, black women’s anger has the potential to creatively emerge/perform in ways that lead toward social transformation. Theologically considered, this black woman’s dynamism or creativity that eloquently mediates the demonic *kata sarka* – what Katie Cannon called “unshouted courage, invisible dignity, and quiet grace” – is primary evidence of the *en sarki*, or more traditionally resonant with Black church traditions, of that “something within that holdeth the reins” against dominant narratives and social structures that preserve black women’s dispossession, and as such, rightly deserve a TKO. For Williams, though, the fight is not against flesh and blood, *but always adjacent to powers and principalities transubstantiated to natural being through the insidious scheming of the demonic* that black women must consistently negotiate as they move about the wilderness doing the work of liberating themselves. And yet, black women’s fight is validated by the real world confluence of the demonic and the demonarchic as revealed in our our prophetess Ms. Sophia’s confession in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*:

“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 [insert white women]. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house. I loves Harpo. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me.”

This black womanist fight for our lives or what I assert in concert with Cooper’s “eloquent rage,” as black women’s creative wrestling against the demonarchic, is distinguished from the creativity of the demonic in that it does not *require* the “destruction of other forms of *life*” nor the endowment of black women with supernatural power. But it always demands the “casting out of demons” and the assumption of “God in us,” *en sarki dei*, “for reasons of health.” The processual trajectory of black women’s survival and flourishing further entails “a making” – sometimes *making a way*, sometimes *making do*, sometimes *making it through*, sometimes *making it over*, sometimes *making something out of nothing*, and sometimes *making it up as we go*, as fundament of self-liberating womanist creativity – but a deontological “making” that, as noted on the final page of the text, always “trusts the [telos] to [an all-seeing] God” (239). This work of casting out demons by the power of God in us, who sees us creatively making on the way, while still trusting the end to God, is black womanist liberation.

In conclusion, black women’s creative wrestling toward survival and quality of life is precisely where *Sisters* begins. Williams asserts two traditions of African American biblical interpretation; most importantly, a “female-centered tradition” that centers black women’s “survival/quality of life,” as opposed to the masculinist liberation tradition of black biblical interpretation that universalizes the particularity of God’s liberating activity for some. The precision of Williams’ deep-dive into the biblical field may be disputed especially given that black womanist biblical scholarship has rigorously proliferated through publication since she wrote *Sisters*. She is a systematic theologian, of course. But what is most significant for me theologically and theoethically, is how Williams’ privileging of black women’s interpretive attitudes gestures, not only toward the importance of black women’s creative reading of the bible, but also toward their creative ascription of sacrality to black women’s lived experience (through Hagar, “we in the Bible!”), and extrabiblical and non-biblical sources like *The Color Purple* and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, as addressed in chapter 2, “Tensions in Motherhood: From Slavery to Freedom,” as building blocks for theological and moral vision that hold the *qualitative survival* of black women and black families as the constructive core. This black womanist creative wrestling is revealed again in Williams’ disassembling of the cross that glorifies black women’s suffering, and her emphasis on Jesus’ life that casts out demons. Finally, the text concludes with her identification of the Spiritualist Church, specifically, the Universal Hagar’s Spiritual Church, as an example of what black women’s creative wrestling against powers and principalities can institutionally cultivate. Twenty-five years hence the beating heart of Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness* resonates amidst the obstinacy of the demonarchy in church, academy, and society. In this present fight for black women’s lives, circumscribed as they are by “wickedness in high places,” *Sisters* solicits us with simple profundity, “what will you *make* of it?” This is Williams’ challenge to black

womanist God-talk in the 21st century.

Thank you.

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