

A TRADITION HER OWN: WOMANIST RHETORIC AND THE WOMANIST SERMON

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## ABSTRACT

Lara Lengel, Advisor

This dissertation argues that womanist rhetoric is a cultural discourse. It asks the questions, what is womanist rhetoric, who engages in womanist rhetoric, and what are the implications for womanist rhetoric in the everyday lives of Black women? I ask and answer these questions within the context of the Black Church as a cultural location and social institution. This allows for a rich and complex discussion of the organic elements of womanist rhetoric, which enter the academy but are not limited to the academy. I define the Black Church in both historic and contemporary terms to demonstrate the cultural location of womanism within African America.

Womanist rhetoric has three pillars: authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural knowledge, and ethical discourse for salvation. This dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach to present each of these three elements. Historic and literary womanist shape my definition of womanist rhetoric. In centralizing Black women's narratives through womanist discourse, Black women create spaces in which and through which they make their voices heard and their presence known. Through this engaged discourse within and outside of the Black Church, African American women have created and maintained spaces for authentic womanist voice. African American women daily embody the process of womanist rhetoric. Through an analysis of Wanda Davis-Turner as a womanist minister, I am able to discuss womanist rhetoric in the context of the sermon.

Womanist rhetoric goes beyond womanist theory and beyond womanist theology to get at the root of the cultural meanings within the deep cultural spaces African American women inhabit daily. Through her sermon *Sex Traps*, Wanda Davis-Turner presents herself as an authentic womanist voice within the Black Church. Her sermon and book series *Sex Traps* utilizes gendered cultural knowledge to explore issues of morality and the ethical discourse of salvation that constitute womanist discourse.

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Claude Taylor, III, who had a place on his bookshelf for this dissertation since the day I said I wanted to attend graduate school.

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In the end, it is my mother who told me that the world is a better place because of the God we serve and the women that we know. Thank for teaching me this truth.

## Preface

There is a precedent in African American academic writing for critical cultural approaches to research and writing. What has come to be known as autoethnographic writing has been common among African American scholars and scholarship for more than one hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Even though the autoethnographic and other critical approaches to research have a long history, they have not always been recognized or celebrated by the academy. Even today, this is a marginalized writing style that is not always well received. So why construct a dissertation that utilizes this paradigm? What benefit is there? First, there is the organic nature of it. There is a humanizing that must occur. For me, this means remaining true to my own humanity. This dissertation argues for womanist rhetoric as a theoretical model based in the daily experiences of African American women. I ground this model in womanist ways of knowing that apply to the ways in which through womanist sermonizing an ethic of voice emerges. By looking at literary, historical and contemporary sermons, we can see the framework and tradition of womanist rhetoric. More than that, we can begin to articulate the ways in which the words of one person to a group of people create the world. The study of rhetoric is ultimately the study of words and one person's ability to harness the power of words. In

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1. There are some well-documented discussions about the contributions of African American scholars to the early development of critical scholarship. The best example of this type of writing is W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903). For a discussion of his work, his development of and contributions to autoethnography, see David Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919 – 1963* (New York: H Holt, 2000). For a discussion about the validity of personal as theoretical in the African American intellectual tradition, see V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).



that process there is room for the humanity of the speaker, but somehow, in the modern study of rhetorical discourse, we lost the humanity of the researcher. In the womanist academic tradition, the humanity of the researcher is central to the research. She is a source in and of herself for valid cultural knowledge. To bring rhetoric back to the humanity of the researcher as well as the humanity of the researched is central. For this dissertation, it means a critical approach to rhetoric that is organic. It is humbled by lived experiences. Theory that grows out of lived experience and can be practiced in the daily lives of people is real theory to me.

My father is still my primary reader. He understood the Bible and the Black Baptist preacher. The theologian and theorist were his friends. The computer engineer and corner storyteller were his daily cup. I grew up in the mixed up world of street corner theorist and ivy tower pontificators. It means something that one's audience meets people where they are. It means something to sit down and know that your reader is an academic with decades of teaching and research in the field of rhetoric, but has little to no practical experience in the Black Church. It means something that your reader has decades of experience preaching and teaching in the Black Church, but has limited experience in or with rhetorical research and writing. I purposefully designed my writing to meet the needs of both communities.

A friend once asked me if I thought of myself as primarily Black or primarily a woman. To this day, I am glad he was driving instead of me when he asked me that question. I was so distracted. It took a while to remember what I was doing when he asked the question. I surely would have hit something. Yet, my answer comes as easily now as it did then: neither. I am a Black woman. IamaBlackWoman. I am one thought. I

have one holistic identity. Years later, I still think of myself in the entirety. My research issues forth from my understanding of identity as whole.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is an organic holistic process that is informed by my audiences and my lived experiences and the experiences of others. It is the past, present, and future moment. My research is influenced as much by Aristotle as the book of Genesis, DuBois as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker as the Book of Psalms, Kool & the Gang as Mahalia Jackson. The references are more than academic requirements or tools for the creation of an argument for the validity of the study of Black women's voices and lives; they are the influence of cultural knowledge. I call upon them as voices. I use them as examples. I explore them as arguments. I pick them for the groundedness of their cultural place and space.

As I enter into this dissertation, I am uniquely aware of its simultaneous preexistence and nonexistence. In contemporary African American discourse there is a response call and response pair where "speak it" can be both the call and the response. It references the power of speech; the idea that one can speak into existence that which previously did not exist. Within the Black Church this is based on the multiple Old and New Testament references made to speech acts that have power. The work of the critical scholar within the African American intellectual tradition has a past that was ordained and predestined. I enter this tradition writing myself into the past that was here, a present I can be, and a future I can speak over.

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2. It is myopic to assume that identities are not influenced by their internal multiplicity. The depth of critical research is contextualized primarily by the ideology that race, class, sexuality and gender are identities of privilege and oppression. These identities can and are employed by individuals that are oppressed by one category while privileged in another. This dissertation argues for womanist rhetoric within this paradigm.

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## Chapter 1

### Womanist Beginnings: Introduction to Womanist Rhetoric

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*”<sup>1</sup>

—Anna Julia Cooper, *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*

In 1886, scholar activist Anna Julia Cooper was invited to speak to the convocation of Negro Episcopal clergy during their annual conference.<sup>2</sup> She was a womanist before her time. She was concerned with the social, intellectual, economic and spiritual uplift of African American women. Convinced that the uplift of women meant the uplift of the race, Cooper worked tirelessly to see Black womanhood honored by all within her community. Her statement “when and where I enter” is part of a larger argument for the inclusion of African American women as not only lay leaders and workers, but as part of the decision making bodies within the Black Church and other social institutions whose goals were racial uplift. Her argument legitimizes the role of Black women as partners in the project for racial uplift. She uses the phrase “only the Black woman” to focus her audience’s attention on Black women as cultural change agents. This dissertation argues for womanist rhetoric as a theory that centers Black women’s experiences, narratives and discourses as valid points of departure for academic work. Centering Black women within the only theory that privileges their experiences,

narratives and discourses allows me to argue from the place where Anna Julia Cooper leaves off in her 1886 speech. I employ her quote as a starting point for analysis of Black women's discourses within the Black Church as a social institution.

This chapter has two goals. First, to present womanist rhetoric and the Black Church as explored through this project. Second, to discuss the use of Wanda Davis-Turner's sermon *Sex Traps* as a text that explores womanist rhetoric within the Black Church. The overall goal of the dissertation is to argue for womanist rhetoric as an intellectual tradition. I have chosen to place my arguments within the context of the Black Church because it has functioned as the social, cultural and intellectual institution through which African American scholars have passed for centuries. Anna Julia Cooper was a scholar not a preacher, but she spoke with clergy regularly. These conversations are part of a long intellectual tradition within the African American community. This tradition is exemplified by womanist theological and ethicist scholars. This chapter will introduce this tradition and the key concepts that ground it.

This dissertation uses Wanda Davis-Turner's sermon and book series *Sex Traps* to argue for womanist rhetoric. First, womanist rhetoric is defined within the African American woman's experiences as a primary cultural discourse. As a primary cultural discourse womanist rhetoric contains three pillars: authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethical discourse for salvation. Second, the Black Church is explored as an institution with a past and a present. The dual historic narrative of the Black Church as both "invisible" and "visible" is defined in terms of DuBois's historic narrative. The present location of the Black Church is introduced through a brief discussion of the Mega Church and global ministries. This will allow me to investigate

the ways in which the Black Church functions as a cultural and intellectual gatekeeper through which African American preachers and scholars pass. Grounding this dissertation in the Black Church allows me to argue that womanist sermonistic rhetoric has grown with the Black Church from its earliest days. Third, introducing Wanda Davis Turner as a contemporary example of the womanist preacher, I explore her use of womanist rhetoric and womanist discourse as a minister, global ministry leader and mentor. These three themes are addressed in this chapter using an interdisciplinary approach to communication research. It mirrors the African American womanist tradition. This dissertation is an organic argument that is grounded in the lived experiences of women and men whose womanist ways of knowing extend beyond the academy.

### **The Cultural Context of Womanist Rhetoric**

This discussion could have begun in a number of viable locations. I have chosen the Black Church as the cultural context because it offers the oldest institutional context, except for slavery, for the articulation of African women's voices in America.<sup>3</sup> In this section, I will begin by defining how womanist rhetoric functions for this dissertation. Womanist rhetoric is used as an umbrella to discuss the various formal and informal discourses entered into by African American women. These conversations center on the mental, physical and spiritual health, wealth, and vitality of African American women and their community.<sup>4</sup> This includes an active discourse about the roles of race, class, gender and sexuality as normative social constructs. Critical to womanist rhetoric are authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural



knowledge and ethical discourse for salvation.

Authentic womanist voice creates an oppositional discourse to normative social constructs. The identities constructed through normative discourses function in both historic and contemporary frameworks to demean, exploit and destroy Black bodies.<sup>5</sup> Womanist employ authentic womanist voice to privilege their own standpoint as social agents. Womanist rhetoric seeks out the injustices within and outside of the Black community. Womanist social agents attempt to find humane and equitable solutions for the good of the whole community, rather than simply the good of women.

Womanist employ gendered cultural knowledge as a way to contextualize the world around them. This is done through the use of narratives that contain gendered verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic cues. Central to gendered cultural knowledge are the ways of knowing that come through the narrative of Black Women. Womanist intellectual tradition exists in and outside of the academy. As a narrative, womanist rhetoric is identifiable by its concern and search for equitable solutions to the problems of liminal identity discourses that play themselves out within and outside of the African diaspora. Gendered cultural knowledge organizes the narratives of Black women as solutions to the problem of normative identity discourses that exclude them and their unique ways of knowing.

Finally, womanist rhetoric contains an ethical discourse for salvation. Ethical discourse for salvation focuses on the ways in which Black women organize their narratives to privilege their salvation. This speaks back to normative Christology that does not articulate a way to salvation for Black women. Womanist social agents

engage in ethical discourse for salvation through daily discourse, sermons, personal narratives, novels and other forms.

Womanist rhetoric is has a discourse that functions within the African American community. As a discourse that occurs within the institutional framework of the Black Church, it is important to recognize that the first womanist scholars that operationalized this terminology were theologians.<sup>6</sup> Accepting that claim allows this dissertation to move within a framework for womanist rhetoric that is not only concerned with what womanist rhetoric is, but what it does. Within the practical discourses of sermons as daily institutional and social discourses, womanist sermons take on additional structures. Most African American women still do not come into contact with the ivy towers of academia. They will not read the theories of womanist scholars. They may not have heard the word womanist. But they know what it is. They participate in the sermons of local and celebrity preachers. They attend church weekly, and not only on Sundays, but Wednesday for Bible Study or Thursday for Women's Circle. They may attend meetings and gatherings throughout the week as their activity in a given congregation dictates. As such, it is culturally significant to ask the question, what does womanist rhetoric sound like in this environment? How is it framed by ministers and congregants? What does it do for Black women to be able to participate within this discourse in the Black Church? As this dissertation moves forward, it seeks to contextualize these questions within the Black Church experience. By centralizing womanist rhetoric in this experience, I do not exclude the myriad of other experiences that Black women have. Rather, I provide a functioning lexicon and common cultural history through which to understand womanist rhetoric.

### **The Black Church and the Use of Historic Narrative**

Now that womanist rhetoric has been introduced it is time to introduce the Black Church. In this section I will focus on the use of the historical narrative as a method for defining the Black Church as a social, political, cultural and religious institution. The first academic study utilizing historic narrative as a method to explore the roots and social impact of the Black Church in America was conducted by W. E. B. DuBois. *Philadelphia Negro* was originally published in 1899.<sup>7</sup> Using a mix-method approach to studying the urban conditions of modern day Negroes, DuBois defined the method of historical narrative for the study of the oldest Black churches in Philadelphia. Combining the use of autobiographies, written church histories, oral histories and ethnographic interviews, DuBois created a method of historical narrative that privileged and authenticated the voice of African Americans as organic intellectuals. Using both primary and secondary sources to create a historical narrative that accounts for the dualistic origins of the Black Church, he lays the groundwork for future scholars to expound upon the rhetorical power of the Black Church.

Later, DuBois would add to this method of inquiry in *The Negro Church* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, both originally published in 1903.<sup>8</sup> In providing an authenticating space for the use of personal narratives as authoritative voice, DuBois does something for the Black Church that its founders conceived, but had not been able to name. He legitimized native knowledge. I add to the historical narrative as method, the use of institutional websites as primary sources. The use of websites extends the historic narrative. The use of the internet to maintain native knowledge and demonstrate cultural links to the past and the present is crucial for the contemporary

Black Church. Every church that is more than fifty years old and has a web presence includes a history written in the style of historic narrative that DuBois pioneered.

Churches that were founded prior to 1900 tend to use the historic narrative as a crucial component to their overall institutional narrative. Often, it demonstrates the intellectual and historic tradition of the church. They often use the historic narrative to subscribe to either the “visible” or “invisible” Black Church tradition described by DuBois.

Churches that subscribe to the “visible” tradition tend to be in large urban centers such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington D.C. or Los Angeles. “Visible” churches often have a conception of Black Liberation Theology and Christology wherein in salvation is an option for everyone who seeks it. There is an active discourse of liberation from racist ideologies and Christology wherein in African Americans are deemed less worthy for salvation. The oldest of these “visible” churches were founded in the late 1780s. They constitute the “visible” church because they were active social institutions that functioned in the full view of white America. Not every church enjoyed this luxury.

The contemporary Christian mega church is born out of the urban church experience of the past. The founding of large congregations of mixed audiences goes back to the 1700s in the United States. Protestant and Episcopalian congregations in New York, Philadelphia and Boston often included master and slave at that time.<sup>9</sup> Many of these congregations later split when African American members were asked (sometimes forced) to move from their pews on the main floor of the sanctuary to the upper gallery, vestibule or outdoor seating.<sup>10</sup> The founding members of Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia split from St. George’s Methodist in 1787, and their church

became the first church in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Likewise, Abyssinian Baptist Church split from First Baptist Church in Manhattan in 1808.<sup>11</sup>

What both of these congregations have in common are founding memberships that refused to be isolated based on their race. As such they create what DuBois called the “visible” Black Church.<sup>12</sup>

Among Black Liberation Theology scholars there is the narrative of the “invisible” Black Church that supports the foundations of Black Liberation Theology.<sup>13</sup> The “invisible” Black Church is imagined as a location of opposition; a site where enslaved Africans would conceive of a discourse for the salvation of the enslaved in the Deep South. In the secluded swamps, dark cabins and out-of-the-way places, Black men, women and children indulged in true and legitimate salvation. Using the sanctioned teachings of plantation ministers and memorized scriptures they were required to listen to during Bible studies with the master’s family, they would create an alternative discourse that privileged liberation. This dissertation argues for both traditions as informants of womanist rhetoric. The use of both narratives by contemporary Black churches requires that both be explored.

### **The Contemporary Black Church: Mega Churches and Global Ministries**

As African American congregations continue to grow from large urban churches to contemporary urban mega churches it is important to understand the historic narratives they employ. The historic narratives used often influence the ways in which they see the growth of mega churches and global ministries. This section

continues to introduce the basic elements of the second theme of this dissertation: that womanist rhetoric functions within a growing Black Church institutional structure.

For this project, large churches are considered to have between 1,000 – 2,000 members. Mega churches are defined as having between 2,500 – 20, 000 members.<sup>14</sup> Mega churches are not limited by ethnicity, nationality or denomination. Mega churches are often thought to be predominantly white. This assumption is owed to the proliferation of white televangelists who have the lion's share of the market. Networks such as Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and churches such as Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California allow for the continued growth and support of urban American mega churches that are predominantly white. It is possible that as a global cable network, TBN (having language-based networks and programs in Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America), is largely responsible for the mega church explosion. However, TBN is not exclusively the domain of white mega churches, their leaders or congregants. TBN supports the churches and ministries of many African American mega churches as well.<sup>15</sup> In general, mega churches can be found in the United States and Europe. All denominations report at least one if not several mega churches.<sup>16</sup> Some denominations like the American Baptist, United Methodist and African Methodist Episcopal count among their mega churches several historic churches. There are churches that remain unaffiliated with any denomination. As these churches have continued to grow, the contemporary mega church has begun to extend missionary work to the creation and establishment of global ministries.

Global ministries have always been a part of the mega church. All

denominations engage in mission work. As part of the maxim of Christian outreach, churches are engaged in mission work at home and abroad. There are various types of mission work and funding. It is common in the Black Church to have “Mission Sunday.” Often this includes fundraising for branch churches, sermons delivered by ministers trained by the church providing the financing, and other activities. Missionary work is defined separately from global ministry by financing, location and technology.

In the case of the Black Church, global ministry has come to signify all ministry work the church does abroad and domestically that extend beyond the local community. Dash and Chapman define this as the outreach work that extends the pastoral care beyond a twenty mile radius.<sup>17</sup> Financially, this is the exclusive domain of mega churches. Mega churches tend to have congregants that tithe of their time, talents and finances to online ministries, prison ministries, college ministries, military outreach and the like. Beyond finances, the location of the urban church is of initial benefit. Mega churches tend to be located in urban centers, making access to diverse populations possible. Finally, technology is employed. Mega churches record not only sermons occurring during regularly held Sunday worship services, but special events, Bible studies and classes as well. These recordings are distributed through pod casting, digital audio and video formats at no cost to the recipient.<sup>18</sup> Within the cultural context of the church is the role of leadership. With global ministries growing out of mission work, the need for church leaders that can function on local and global fronts has increased.

### **The Black Church and Black Women Leaders: A Case for Womanist Rhetoric**

As the contemporary Black Church sees a shift and growth there is a need for leaders. These leaders need to understand the communities served by the church in both local ministry and global ministry. Historically, the leadership of the Black Church has been the exclusive domain of men. In the last twenty years there has been an unprecedented shift. In general, the leadership roles available to women in the Black Church have been few. The roles provided for women tended to be highly coveted. Additionally, they were often limited to lay leadership or positions provided to the wife of the pastor, such as First Lady. In this section I will introduce the last element of the second theme. The second theme of this dissertation is that womanist rhetoric functions within the Black Church as an institution. This section introduces two African American women that blazed the trail for women in professional ministry within the Black Church.

Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart were the first African American women granted itinerant minister licenses and who spoke before mixed crowds.<sup>19</sup> Jarena Lee was one of the first women ministers to receive an itinerant minister license by the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Lee was granted a license to preach by Bishop Allen of the AME in 1818. She was an active itinerant minister and public lecturer. She often spoke out for the rights of women of color and the abolition of slavery.

Maria Stewart was a preacher and lecturer. In 1830, Maria Stewart became the first documented African American woman to speak before a mixed ethnic and gendered group.<sup>20</sup> Stewart was born free in Boston. She spoke passionately against



slavery, for the general rights of women, and specifically the right of a woman to inherit from her husband. Both women were denominational and ministerial pioneers who left a legacy for contemporary African American women preachers in the form of their written texts.

Today, significantly more women are being ordained as ministers and taking on leadership roles. Women are senior, associate, and or executive pastors, administrative ministers and global ministry leaders, yet there remains significant ground to cover. Within the Black Church, many women find that their leadership is regulated to specific title roles such as First Lady, Women's Ministry Leader or Youth Ministry Leader. Some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist, have made organizational changes to eliminate the ordination of women. In the face of this backward movement, women of other denominations acknowledge moves forward in theory and theology. The moves backward in denominational practices only seem to fuel more women to move toward sustained leadership roles.

The contemporary roles of African American women in the Black Mega Church mirror and extend the previous roles. The number of African American women who participate in the church as ministers and pastors has steadily increased over the years.<sup>21</sup> Some suggest that the increase in African American women leaders is owed to increased numbers in the seminary.<sup>22</sup>

Even with the increase, some women find themselves lacking support. The lack of support comes from individual congregations as well as denominational organizations. Women who lead churches where they are the founding pastor or co-

pastor often find greater support than those who do not.<sup>23</sup> Not all positions of leadership have been opened to women in all denominations. Most notable are the gaps in Catholic leadership opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Other denominations also limit the number and likelihood of women as ministerial leaders and elders. While many women have found a place of leadership as missionaries, they are still expected to serve with their husbands. Women have been the backbone of the Black Church. They raise funds, participate in events, and organize for the stability of global ministry at home and abroad. Today, women are involved in urban missions projects that include AIDS hospices, drug and crime prevention, homeless shelters, housing projects and other locations.<sup>25</sup> Africa as a mission site is also very popular and offers many of the same opportunities for service.<sup>26</sup> Black women have continued in their roles as itinerant preachers, ministers and pastors.

### **Womanist Sermonic Rhetoric: An Analysis of Contemporary African American Women Ministers**

The argument for womanist rhetoric requires historic and contemporary examples. Throughout this dissertation I will weave together three key elements of womanist writing and discourse identified by Stacy Floyd-Thomas.<sup>27</sup> She focused on personal narrative (autoethnography), secular text (fictional and non-fictional literature), and sacred text (biblical) as contributing to womanist discourse. While her discussion is one of methodology, which will be explored in greater depth in subsequent chapters, it is significant here as I introduce Wanda Davis-Turner. I open this chapter with a quote from Anna Julia Cooper that begins with the phrase “when

and where I enter”.<sup>28</sup> For me, this phrase has an inherent peace of mind. This peace of mind is significant because it gives rise to womanist discourse as centered upon the voices of African American women. While other discourses privilege race (Afrocentric Rhetoric) or gender (Feminist Rhetoric), womanist rhetoric privileges the holistic identity of Black women. Womanist discourse found a grounded articulation in the academic and practical theology of African American women. The spirituality of Black women is the foundation for the claim “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.”<sup>29</sup> As a womanist minister this is clearly articulated in the ministerial career and life of Wanda Davis-Turner.<sup>30</sup> She exemplifies the contemporary role of African American women in global ministry as backed by the Black Mega Church. She is a sought after conference speaker. Her most widely read book, *Sex Traps*, discusses in greater detail the thoughts and theology behind the sermon of the same title. She is a tireless mentor to women through her newest endeavor, First Lady Ministries.

With a rhetorical analysis of Davis-Turner’s sermon and book *Sex Traps*, I argue that womanist rhetoric centers on three pillars. The first is a cultural claim of authentic womanist voice. Within the context of the sermon, Davis-Turner demonstrates her unique and authentic womanist voice as an African American woman through the use of gendered and raced discourses that demonstrate her cultural membership. Second, she engages in the creation and maintenance of gendered cultural knowledge. Finally, she utilizes sacred and secular text in her creation of ethical discourse for the salvation of Black women and their communities.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. This chapter provides an introduction to the arguments for womanist rhetoric as the general premise for the dissertation. Chapter two, *The Black Mega Church and Global Ministries*, defines the contemporary context of the Black Mega Church as issuing forth from a dualistic past of both the visible and invisible Black Church. Chapter three, *Constructing Womanist Sermonic Rhetoric*, discusses the theories and methods used to construct the dissertation and advance womanist sermon rhetoric as theory and method. In chapter four, I argue the historical location of womanist sermonic rhetoric as a consistent preaching tradition. Chapter five locates Wanda Davis-Turner as an African American women minister whose sermons extend the tradition of womanist sermonic rhetoric today. This chapter focuses on an analysis of her work within the social context of the Black Mega Church as an institution. This chapter draws together the argument for womanist rhetoric as a critical and emancipatory discourse. Chapter six discusses implications for the future and the role of this type of research for understanding the most prominent of African American institutions, the Black Church, and within it the particular churches known as Black Mega Churches.

Together, these chapters argue for womanist rhetoric as a place from which to theorize womanist discourse. By defining womanist rhetoric within the Black Church, we will have a solid cultural location from which to identify the key elements of womanist rhetoric. As I move forward through this dissertation, I will begin with locating the Black Church within the American cultural landscape. This allows me the

opportunity to introduce a specific cultural history and narrative that is diasporic yet has specific rhetorical responses unique to womanist discourse in the United States.

## Chapter 2

### The Black Church: Dual Pasts, Single Foundation

“Spiritual identity for African American women, I believe, is an archetype that transcends divisions and reflects African American women’s quest for true community.”

–Dorothy L. Pennington, in *Understanding African American Rhetoric*

I read Alice Walker’s *Possessing the Secret of Joy* on a vacation with my family.<sup>31</sup> I was sixteen and we were taking a cruise. There was another Black woman sitting in a deck chair soaking up the Caribbean sun as the boat floated to the islands where our ancestors were taken to be “seasoned,” and she commented that the book was odd reading for a vacation. Too intense, she thought. Looking back more than fifteen years later, I suppose that was intense reading for a lot of reasons. As African American women walk through our daily lives collecting lived experiences like flowers in a garden, many of us consider our first introduction to ourselves as women. This chapter looks at the Black Church—the first institution in which many African American women and men come to know themselves, their culture and their possibilities. The Black Church as a cultural, educational, and spiritual institution is responsible for so much. Historically, the church has been a refuge from pain and suffering. It supplied a location for true expressions of self-love, learning and uplift.

The church has been the leader mobilizing the fight for equality and equity, and at the same time forcing open the doors of American democracy to include all African Americans collectively, not one at a time or on a trial basis, but as fully contributing to the success of the American project.<sup>32</sup>

This chapter seeks to contextualize the culture and labor of the Black Church, the Black Mega Church, and global ministries within the African American cultural context. While this is primarily a moment to discuss the American Black Mega Church, its history, culture and direction, some attention will also be paid to the diasporic challenges of the Black Mega Church. Finally, this chapter discusses the roles that women play in the Black Mega Church, particularly as pastors, ministers and ministry leaders. The importance of naming in terms of titles for women in ministry leadership, not just for the location of personal experience but as a way to manage roles within the Black Mega Church, is a central theme of this chapter as well. This chapter gets at the heart of the issue of the value and role of women's work in the Black Mega Church and global ministries.

### **With Purpose and Conviction: Two Histories, One Past**

I have had a long and enduring relationship with the Black Church and Black preachers. As my first institution, the Black Church has come to have a significant meaning in my life. It is the only American institution in which, since its inception, an African American person can lead, vote, teach, live, breathe, express, create sing speak play run jump read yell fight love praise worship find peace. There is no other place

that allows for and encourages the entire gamut of human emotion without penalty of humiliation for the Black person. There is no other freedom.

The history of the Black Church as an empowering institution for the Black community is clearly integral to an understanding of the roles of African American women preachers. The underpinnings of this institution reveal themselves in the deep structure of the African worldview. In chapter one, I provide a general introduction of the Black Church and the Black preacher. Here I will go into detail. In this chapter I argue for the cultural context of the Black Church as a diasporic institution; one that provides meaning and location to Africana peoples and thus focuses the Black Mega Church and the goals of global ministry. Later in chapter three, I will discuss more deeply the value of that worldview to the construction of womanist ethic and rhetorical location.

The Black Church is born out of a uniquely American experience that has become a diasporic institution. There are three cultural implications of the Black Church as an institution. First, the Black Church is the only institution throughout the Black diaspora that was started by and for Africana peoples with a specific rhetoric of liberation and diasporic survival. Second, the Black Church still promotes the cultural worldview of Africana peoples. Finally, as an institution it is the most diverse and successful at organizing for the liberation of Africana peoples.

These cultural implications allow for a discussion of the Black Church that follows three currents or themes. First, I will discuss the Black Church as an invisible and visible institution. This allows for the exploration of the historic foundations of the church as one concerned with liberation and survival. I go on to discuss the



contemporary definitions of African American Christian Denominations as the Black Church. This discussion focuses on the ways in which the Black Church remains viable for a Post-Civil Rights world. Finally, the move from Black Church to Black Mega Churches answers critical questions about the social justice agendas surrounding issues of race, class and gender that have taken on new meaning in a diasporic public discourse surrounding identity and religion.

### **The “Invisible” and the “Visible”:**

#### **Defining the Black Church by Historical Narrative**

The Black Church has two institutional pasts. Every scholar has his or her own reasons for privileging one narrative of the Black Church over the other.<sup>33</sup> Here I seek to explore both narratives as their duality contributes to today’s views of the work and leadership of African American women within the church. In the South, the tension between the cruelty of chattel slavery and the discourse of Christian slavery were so dichotomous they forced true religious expression into the shadows. In the North, limited freedom and palpable racism created tensions in urban centers so great that when Blacks were refused entry into houses of worship on equal levels with white citizens, they excluded themselves to start other churches and in some cases denominations.

The Black Church is an institution born of two tandem realities. It develops as a regional specific social institution that until recently purposely shrouded itself in self-perpetuated mystery. Thus it becomes an enigma within the American political

landscape. The foundations of this institution were constructed and maintained by people who understood religion as part of the pre-existing African worldview.<sup>34</sup> Further, they understood both the function of a liberatory religion and the ability of the oppressed to discover the liberation inherent in the religion of the oppressor. To this is added the understanding by the oppressed that the oppressor viewed their affirmation of humanity, based on the religion of the oppressor, as problematic. As such, the Black Church reflects the survival needs of an enslaved and marginalized people.

*That Ole Time Religion, Slave Cabins and Field Meetings:  
A Historical Narrative of the “Invisible” Black Church*

The Black Church is often referred to in early Negro<sup>35</sup> writings of the antebellum South as the “invisible institution.” Former slaves wrote of the beginnings of the Black Church, describing it as cloaked in the secrecy of slave cabins, masked by the darkness and born as a response to the oppressive and murky water of “Christian slavery.” With a passion for freedom, Africans thirsted for a place to express pain and suffering, share in their few allowed joys and entertainments, and to praise an eternal God for the hope of a future of freedom. This is the cultural context out of which Black Churches arose.<sup>36</sup>

In the American South, the Black Church developed as a largely “invisible institution.” On plantations and in plantation run counties, African slaves were not allowed to gather without the white masters, overseers or ministers.<sup>37</sup> When attending churches run by masters, slaves were not allowed to read, lead, pray for themselves, or engage in activities that demonstrated a sense of personal freedom. In order to engage

in a more personal worship, they would sneak off to secret meetings for worship. The “minister” or “preacher” that ran these meetings often had a phenomenal memory and would preach sermons from memorized biblical text. There are documented cases in which these meetings were led by slaves who could read. The sermons, prayers and songs of these ministers that could read and write were recorded often after the ministers escaped, purchased freedom, or were emancipated. In some cases, white travel writers from the North and Europe with abolitionist sympathies documented the literacy of the slave preachers.<sup>38</sup> The vast majority of these meetings were held without the knowledge of slave masters and by those that could not read or write.<sup>39</sup>

In these cases the sermons, prayers and songs were repurposed from those heard in the “sanctioned” church services. Ministers and masters often allowed or required slaves to listen to the reading of scriptures during the evening with the rest of the family.<sup>40</sup> It was during these times that many slaves reported learning more than the typical scriptures of obedience. They would memorize the scriptures and their context and apply them specifically to their situations, thus the birth of liberation theology.<sup>41</sup>

The true purpose of the Black Church in this instance was to provide a liberation discourse for the enslaved. Developing in secret, the Black Church in the southern context is one based on the emotional relationship of the oppressed to their God. Here, the sermons, prayers and songs that have survived have an Old Testament theme. Often linking the plight of the enslaved Africans with the plight of the Old Testament Hebrews, sermons voiced the truth of liberation and freedom.

The slave narrative, or more specifically, the conversion narrative, are powerful text that serve as documentary witness to the more secretive beginnings of the Black

Church in the antebellum context.<sup>42</sup> In Milton Sernett's *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, he covers nearly three centuries of Black religious discourse. Sections of personal narrative written by freeborn and former slaves contextualize the duality of institutional history of the Black Church. Offered as a partial witness to the depth and breadth of Black religious experience, Sernett argues that any history of the Black Church must recognize the multifaceted history of the institution as an institution.<sup>43</sup> In the course of making that argument, Sernett compiles as part of the early history of Black religion the narrative of Peter Randolph, who defined the early Black Church as the "invisible institution." Randolph, born a slave in South Carolina and later emancipated, became a minister and advocated against slavery. His "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible" defines with passion the ability of the Black Church to exist somewhat outside of the laws of chattel slavery. For Randolph, the Black Church served as a spiritual center for early Africans. He portrays the type of "Christian education" provided to slaves as hypocrisy. He describes the instruction given by slaveholding ministers as limited to topics of disobedience, lying, and stealing, as these were considered to be major sins "against the Holy Ghost, and is base ingratitude to your kind masters, who feed, clothe, and protect you."<sup>44</sup> These were the teachings of slave holding ministers. The ministers in Randolph's accounts were not all slave holders; there were two overseers, and one itinerant minister hired to preach to slaves. The one itinerant minister, Randolph reports, is quite interesting as he is later run out of town by an angry mob for preaching on topics of freedom.

Within the cruelty of the American slave system, African captives found ways to subvert the teachings of piety and obedience taught by white ministers. Often forbidden to gather without white supervision, these men and women would create methods of meeting within the midnight of the swamps and secrecy of the slave cabin. Randolph tells us that the “understanding” of place and time was but one function of the invisibility of this religious institution. Bending branches and clearing paths, a few would go forward to clear a safe location for the meeting later that night. Blassingame notes in *The Slave Community* that a song might be sung and within the lyric the directions for the meeting place were hidden. In this fashion the Black Church was born, creating preacher-leaders and members who were socialized to keep the history or its beginning is song. In contrast to this secretive and rural history of the Black Church in the South, the northern history comes about in a slightly different reality.<sup>45</sup>

*Can't Put Me Out My Father's Heaven: A Historical Narrative of the “Visible Institution” of the Black Church in the North*

In a slightly different pre and post Revolutionary period, northern Black churches arose in response to a conflicted Africana identity. That identity included freeborn, emancipated, indentured and enslaved Africans.<sup>46</sup> Technical physical freedom could be gained by birth, religious deliverance, personal industry or finally government decree. Africans granted physical freedom from slavery still suffered within an ideology of white supremacy that led to oppression and discrimination. Therefore, out of necessity, the Black Church developed as an institution promoting

spiritual fortitude, education, and social justice movements. In both the North and the South, the church became the center of African American culture.<sup>47</sup>

In discussing the historical narrative of the Black Church within the social, cultural and political environ of the American North, several prominent Black churches have documentary histories that outline their coming into being as cultural centers.<sup>48</sup> The first is Mother Bethel in Philadelphia, and the second is Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. The first of these two churches is significant for its founding of the first African American Christian Denomination, as well as its early trend of allowing women to enter into leadership roles.<sup>49</sup>

The true power of the Black Church as an institution in the North can only be understood within local realities in tandem with the national realities surrounding it. Slavery in Pennsylvania was met with a gradual end. Like many of the northern colonies, Pennsylvania, instituted gradual emancipation laws for slaves while at the same time restricting the legal rights and movements of freeborn Africans. This included the limitation of land ownership, marriage, education and religious expression.<sup>50</sup> Into this context of gradual emancipation and limited legal rights, both slave and freeborn Africans meet with specific challenges to their freedom to worship.

Post Revolution Philadelphia had a well established urban identity. In 1787, after years of worship and leadership at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, African members and ministers found themselves ordered to leave their regular seats and were "placed around the wall."<sup>51</sup> Months later, after being removed to seats around the perimeter of the church, the trustees required the African congregants to be moved to the gallery. Before the end of 1787, when the trustees of St. George's came to

forcibly remove Rev. Jones, Allen and others even from the gallery during service, Rev. Jones is quoted popularly as saying, “Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more.”<sup>52</sup> At the time of their removal from St. George’s, Richard Allen was already a successful itinerant minister preaching in the Methodist tradition. He often preached the sermons at the 5 o’clock in the morning and the evening services at St. George’s. Rev. Absalom Jones, ordained in the Methodist tradition, had occasion to lead services and preach at St. George’s as well.<sup>53</sup> Later, in describing their removal, Bishop Richard Allen writes, “Notwithstanding we had subscribed largely towards finishing St. George’s church, in building the gallery and laying new floors, and just as the house was made comfortable, we were turned out from enjoying the comforts of worship therein.”<sup>54</sup> From their local church, many had become aware of the truly precarious nature of their freedom. Rather than return to the location of their public humiliation, Jones, Allen and others remained separate. Organizing as the Free African Society, they functioned as an exploratory committee and mutual aid society for the banished African congregants of St. George’s.<sup>55</sup> After much conversation, they decided on two faith traditions: some would organize as Episcopal while others would continue as Methodist. They found sympathy among fellow African and white citizens and were able to raise funds to build two churches.<sup>56</sup> This was a monumental feat. Not only were these men able to raise funds, they were able to purchase land, build two buildings, and refurbish a third to create two houses of worship in Philadelphia for Africans between 1787 and 1794.<sup>57</sup>

## **Saying What You Mean: Defining the Black Church and African American Christian Denominations**

To fully grasp the importance of the Black Church as a social and cultural institution, it is important to understand the history of the Black Church as an institution born of specific cultural and political needs. This section takes the historical narrative created to advance both conceptual and operational definitions of the Black Church. Using both conceptual and operational definitions of the institution itself provides a clear functionality to outsiders. Therefore, a relational understanding of who the Black Church is (conceptual) becomes possible for the uninitiated. This section highlights the functions of the Black Church within the community as an institution (operational), focusing on its conception and existence within the African American worldview and its function in support of a narrative of Black survival in North America. Weaving the past into the present, the definition of the Black Church presented will set up the discussion that continues on the power and place of the Black Mega Church.

### *Knowing Where We've Been: Historical Narrative as Conceptual Definition*

The historic framing of the Black Church contextualizes it within its accepted Southern slavery context born of a specific matrix of oppressions. By also including the dual history of the creation of the Black Church as a “visible” institution in the pre and post Revolutionary eras, the Black Church is situated as a political institution intimately concerned with social justice. Together, these narratives work to establish a



conceptual definition of the Black Church as an institution concerned with the life and liberty of Africans in America. This history is further contextualized in Cornel West's conceptual definition of the term Black Church as coming "into being when slaves decided, often at the risk of life and limb, to 'make Jesus their choice' and to share with one another their common Christian sense of purpose."<sup>58</sup> While privileging the narrative history of the secrecy of the early Black Church in the Deep South, there is a reflection on the critical and prophetic response of the church to chattel slavery. In defining the Black Church it is important to link this conceptual definition articulated through historical narratives to the operational definitions that have been popularized through communal discourse then academic inquiry.

As an institution, the Black Church historically took on many of the responsibilities that the American nation-state absolved itself of or flat out refused to provide to African Americans. Serving as more than a location to learn about God, the church provides social services, becoming a board of education, a bank, a furniture store, clothing and grocery store for its congregations. This both reinforces the church's role in generating/preserving a lineage of survival and reifies the church's ties to the worldview of its constituency. In his discussion "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr."<sup>59</sup> West argues that the Black Church is both an educational and political institution within and for the Black community. The church is also a place to develop leadership within the African American community. For example, West defines Martin Luther King, Jr. as having a sermonic and educational background that emerges from a long tradition of excellence within the Black Church. In doing so he alludes to the northern roots of the Black Church as a stronghold for

political activism.

*Knowing the Past to Profess the Future: Operationalizing the Black Church Definition*

Social justice activism and sermonic tradition are specific characteristics of the Black Church. But how do you know what the Black Church is? For this I turn to two specific operational definitions that are grounded in the communication practices of the Black community. Cornel West offers an operational definition for the current use of “Black Church” as a term. He surmises that it serves as “a rubric to designate black Christian communities of many denominations.”<sup>60</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya provide an operational definition in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* where they list the seven historically African American denominations that constitute the traditional Black Church: “the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).”<sup>61</sup> To this I would add to that the newly formed Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship International. Full Gospel is the youngest of the African American denominations and would fall in line with the Baptist traditions that include holiness forms of preaching and worship. Traditionally, when referring to the Black Church, scholars are referring to one or all of these denominations. Within this dissertation I have operationalized the Black Church thusly in order to reference these Christian traditions.<sup>62</sup> The cultural, historic and operational definitions of the Black Church

establish the temporal links between the past, present and future at work in the experiences of the Black Church.

Imbedded in these operational definitions is a specific link to the social justice heritage of the early church. The history of the Black Church in general follows two parallel paths in America. In providing the historic narrative in the conceptual definition, it is critical to include that history as an operational discussion for understanding the seven historically African American Christian Denominations. In the American North, the Black Churches and African American Christian Denominations (AACD) are established in direct response to exclusionary and separatist tactics of northern white church leaders. Even as slavery comes to an end in the American North, there are growing tensions between the large populations of freeborn and emancipated Africans and the newly arrived white immigrants<sup>63</sup>. Often as a way to control African populations within the cities, white church leaders would attempt to continue to control African congregants even after they were expelled from white churches where they once worshiped, tithed and led.<sup>64</sup> The leaders that started Mother Bethel and Abyssinian also made up the rising Black middle class of their day. As middle class business owners and trained ministry leaders, they were able to combat racism in specific ways. Given the middle class standing of its founders and leaders, these churches often were able to provide social services and business services to the Black community.

### **Cabins to Cathedrals: The Growth of the Modern Black Mega Church**

Today, the contemporary Black Church is aware of its historical roots. Reflexive of its tandem creation as a “visible” and “invisible” institution, the Black Church recognizes cultural locations and traditions owing to its early history. This is perhaps most evident in the continued support of social services and benevolent societies. In both the invisible and visible Black Church, the support of community members has always been central. Today, this is seen in both the public and private funding of social services offered. The Black Mega Church as one type of Black Church is perhaps the most obvious social clearinghouse for government or public funded social services. Since the 1930s, Black Mega Churches like Abyssinian have received city, state and federal monies to run specific social service programs.<sup>65</sup> In the contemporary moment, some Black Mega Churches have taken advantage of government grants to help fund literacy, healthcare and anti-drug programs.<sup>66</sup>

In the area of private fundraising, the Black Church, in general, and Black Mega Church, in particular (especially with its firm foothold in the Black middle class), has two sources for private funding: membership and private grants. Membership provides all funding for building maintenance, payroll, missionary work at home and abroad, some social service programs, and all other church expenses. Private grants are often used for large social service or missionary programs.

The growth of the Black Church to include the modern Black Mega Church means a new understanding of the cultural and social networks that make up the African Diaspora. The growth of the Black Mega Church has not come at the expense

of the small local Black Church. The majority of African Americans that attend church regularly still go to small local churches.<sup>67</sup> These churches are part of global AACD. These include the elder African Methodist Episcopal (AME) started by Bishop Allen. A younger AACD is Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (Full Gospel). Small churches are part of the growth of the Black Church as they contribute to global and local ministry efforts of AACD and other Christian Denominations (CD) such as American Baptist Churches (ABC) and Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The growth of the modern Black Mega Church has meant increased funding for local and global mission projects.

There is space and critique in the current location of the Black Mega Church as a global power with a sphere of influence. The large Black Mega Church located in urban centers adds a new discourse to the African Diaspora. The pastors and bishops running Black Mega Churches are often responsible for multimillion-dollar church budgets, media empires, and ministries with local and global interpersonal connections. They also often possess political power. The new discourse has been led by ministry leaders, seminary, critical cultural scholars and journalists. These conversations have included observations, critiques and practical ideas about the daily management of the Black Mega Church. Some critique has focused on the social, political and economic power of ministers and bishops.

Within the diaspora there remains the uneven participation of Black women in leadership roles in the Black Mega Church. There is a great deal of critique by ministers and laypersons about the lessening of opportunities for women in church leadership. As women have begun to outnumber men in seminary schools, the

opportunities for them in the Black Church and Black Mega Church in particular seem to be shrinking. The recent move by SBC to no longer allow women ministers seems like a shocking response to the trend that affects not only African American women but all women of that denomination.

The uneven leadership roles for women function on a diasporic level in a multitude of ways because of the unique mix of ethnic co-cultures that are the Black Diaspora. In response to the uneven opportunities for leadership, women have taken on leadership of their own and other global ministries.

### **Closing**

This chapter focuses on the history and contemporary location of the Black Church as a diasporic institution. It begins with the dual paths of the “visible” and “invisible” institution. It ends with a discussion on the cultural personality of the Black Mega Church as one type of Black Church. Focusing on the Black Mega Church and its implications for the diaspora allows for a contextualization of women’s work in the Black Church. This allows for a specific analysis of literary, historic and contemporary examples of Black women preachers who speak to and within a specified context. The analysis and critique of the Black Church and Black Mega Church as diasporic institutions with specific rhetorical weight and goals allows women’s work to be framed within both the historic and contemporary. To that end, chapter three will argue for womanist rhetoric as a theoretical position. This discussion foregrounds a theory that is organically rooted in the daily lived experiences of African American

women, but also applies to Africana women in general.

### Chapter 3

#### Constructing Womanist Rhetoric: Discourse on Method

...to write the books one wants to read is both to point the direction of vision and, at the same time, to follow it . . .

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*

I have, what I believe to be, a unique genealogy of knowledge. There are few womanist scholars my age who can locate their womanist genealogies prior to college. Most, if not all, locate themselves as having met womanist scholarship in the classroom. When the canonical works of womanist theory, theology and literature were written and published, I was in elementary school. I was eleven when I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.<sup>68</sup> I was eleven when I read *From Slavery to Freedom*<sup>69</sup> and *Before the Mayflower*.<sup>70</sup> My father encouraged my odd reading habits by asking me to write about what I read. My mother supported my ideas by providing me with the tools to use the infinite possibilities of womanist language before I really knew what it was. At fourteen, on my way to high school, I declared myself a feminist. My father was driving and upon hearing the declaration, almost crashed the car. After regaining control he launched into a lecture about how I could not be a feminist because the concerns of feminism were not mine. As he continued to explain the ways in which the feminist project ignores, devalues or flat-out vilifies Black women that love their men and their community, he turned down Alum Rock and headed toward San Jose State.



My father had never driven me to his alma mater before. He parked and we went to the library. I don't remember how many books he made me carry back to the car, but there began my womanist education. When I think back on that day I realize he let me in on the secret that he had been grooming me for years. He was raising a womanist. I have chosen to enter this chapter through this narrative for the practical purposes of grounding my use of womanist rhetorical theory and method within the specific traditions of critical intellectual tradition, and a specifically womanist intellectual tradition. Cornel West argues that the genealogy of knowledge that we bring to scholarship influences not only the scholar but also the reader.<sup>71</sup> West establishes his traditional (academic) and his non-traditional (cultural) education as being equally powerful contributions to his intellectual genealogy. The value of critical reflection on one's intellectual genealogy is reflected in the works of womanist writers. It seems that critical to the establishment of one's right to womanism is a process of avowal. I own my womanist perspective not only by claim (avowal) but by action of applied criticism. In articulating my genealogies, I contribute to the process of knowledge creation that is both formal (academic) and organic (communal).

This chapter contextualizes womanist rhetoric in terms of the cultural and social locations that influence it. The Black Diaspora is a language, music, people, writings and stories. It is a constant history and a changing life. It is what sustains the Black Church. It is what the Black Church sustains. It functions as a starting point, contextualizing the journey. Fundamentally, this chapter theorizes a location for womanist rhetoric that is based on cultural knowledge that leads to organically produced and employed scripts and definitions of what counts as womanist.<sup>72</sup> This

daily process is brought into academia in the form of Black women and men who employ womanist cultural scripts<sup>73</sup> and investigate social, historical, and cultural locations through a womanist lens. These everyday discourses become formalized traditions of ethics, epistemology and theology, finally producing formal womanist rhetoric that then regenerates as cultural knowledge, thus remaining organically cyclical. This cultural and intellectual location springs forth a space for theorizing that is specifically located for this dissertation within the Black Church.<sup>74</sup>

### **Fertile Grounds on Womanist Rhetoric**

For this reason, the work of contextualizing the Black Church within the dual narratives of North (Visible) and South (Invisible) as cultural institutions, allows for locating womanist rhetoric within a specific cultural space. The general cultural histories of Black Churches are critical to the understanding of the work of womanist theologians and theorists whose work exists not in a vacuum but as part of the cultural world.

Theories that guide this dissertation draw from the body of research influenced by multiple sources and narratives. Theorizing womanist rhetoric is about locating the cultural and theoretical narratives that place Black women at the center of their own narrative. It has been the overarching goal of womanist scholarship since its inception. This goal recognizes that for centuries women in general and Black women in particular have been the oppressed subjects of “universalizing” European academic discourse. Theories about Black women that become the basis for the policy du jour

have had little to nothing to do with the Black female experience. Rather, they stem from white masculinist assumptions about what must be necessarily useful, experiential, or morally incorrect in the Black female body. What is problematic in utilizing theories that center a dominant narrative is that the Black female body is always cast as morally corrupt—assuming there is a location for the Black body at all. The corrective is to utilize theories and narratives that come from the same community from which the rhetorical data comes forth. In this case, that means using womanist theory and theology in order to understand the constructions of Black women's sermons.

In this chapter, I will employ womanist theory and theology to create an argument for womanist rhetoric. My argument hinges on the idea that rhetoric is the last construction of formal knowledge. If one places the role of knowledge production only in the hands of academics then rhetoric would be the first school of knowledge. The list of Greek and Roman rhetoricians and philosophers one could consult on this idea are numerous.<sup>75</sup> For me, this idea really comes to the foreground in understanding the systems of knowledge that come out of the construction of the modern university system, which has its roots in the medieval system. In the medieval system, rhetoric is the second (after grammar and before logic) school of knowledge in the traditional liberal arts.<sup>76</sup> The method of organizing knowledge in terms of the liberal arts has its roots in the formalization of education during the Middle Ages. It was based in part on the organizations of knowledge in the Egyptian, Roman and Greek cultures. Arguing from this standpoint allows me to do two things. First, it locates academic theorizing within the system of values that understand rhetoric as a necessary element to the

sustained power of knowledge. Second, it allows me the tools to interrogate the system of values that has excluded and continues to marginalize the voices of women of color. Arguing for a new rhetorical genre is no easy or lighthearted endeavor. Rather, I enter into it with reverence. This reverence is born out of the respect for womanist scholars before me who have laid the necessary groundwork to continue this path.

Locating rhetoric in this way within the confines of formal knowledge creation is useful but limiting. To expand on the limitations I return to West's discussion on the genealogies of knowledge. Formal knowledge in all cultures finds its roots within the informal or everyday systems that sustain the daily environs of life. To take knowledge out of the daily discourses and interactions is to take away the basics of meaning.

African philosopher Emmanuel Eze<sup>77</sup> argued that it is at that point that knowledge is no longer based in reason, but rather becomes an abstraction with no value. To this, West adds that one must constantly locate productions of knowledge within their cultural, political and social moments. He further states that the historical location is what gives meaning to the context of knowledge. Therefore, while limiting rhetoric to formal knowledge is restrictive, it is no more so than leaving it solely in the hands of local or popular context. What is required is a marriage of the two. Womanist scholars bring to academic theorizing their historic locations, cultural, social and political knowing. This knowing is born out of a place of liberation, rather than a constant dwelling on the limiting discourse of oppression. This opens womanist scholarship up to a new possibility for discourse. Since the theorizing does not happen primarily in the academic arena for the womanist theorist, but rather happens outside of academics as a result of finding solutions to the problems that persist in their communities, Black

women have a theoretical paradigm that is shaped by experience as raced, classed and gendered. From there local theory is created that utilizes cultural scripts. These cultural scripts utilize biblical, literary, music and personal narrative to construct a worldview that is viable and gives moral agency to African women. As we map the creation of knowledge from local spaces to academic places, we find that Walker's definition and coining of the term womanism comes at a critical juncture for Black women theologians in particular. The naming of the cultural identity allowed for the construction of theory and theology that leads directly to epistemological centeredness that becomes rhetoric. As we move through this chapter, each of these moments are illustrated with personal narrative, scholarship, literature, and the conversion narratives of early African American women preachers. These combined narratives create the foundation of womanist discourse, thus allowing for the process of theorizing womanist rhetoric to remain rooted within the culture. In this way, it remains organic and viable.

### **Living in This World: Black Feminist Epistemology**

After a discussion on rhetoric it seems fair to move to epistemology. Rhetoric is the formal articulation of knowledge, so to discuss the theory of knowledge or epistemology allows for groundedness. In *Centering Our Selves*, editors Marsha Houston and Olga Davis introduce the volume with the idea that in the daily lives of African American men and women there is an acknowledgement of a cultural knowledge of survival. This cultural knowledge is added to daily with the embodied narratives and performances of individuals within a given community. Coming out in a

variety of ways in womanist scholarship, cultural knowledge appears in the womanist consciousness and informs narratives of self-presented within this text. In this section, I explore the ways in which the “theory of knowledge” is articulated as womanist ways of knowing, which are authenticated through communal discourses both formal (academic) and informal (daily cultural interactions) by womanist scholars.

As a centralizing work that focuses on the ways in which social knowledge is constructed in African America, Patricia Hill Collins opens her text with a positioning of the discourses of Black women.<sup>78</sup> For her, central to a discourse on Black feminism is that it be understood not as an offshoot of white feminist theories or movements, but as a vital movement and theory that is unique.<sup>79</sup> She recalls in part Walker’s fourth art of the womanist definition that “womanist is to feminist what purple is to lavender.”<sup>80</sup> Further, she creates distance between the Black civil rights and nationalist movements and Black feminism. In reading these initial arguments one might misunderstand distance for separation, but in reading her connection to later arguments, it is clear that in her vision the standpoint from which Black feminism is articulated is a raced/gendered/classed semiotic location; one that is understood, experienced, and articulated in relational terms. In this way, there is no problem in hailing both the intellectual traditions of Black women and men in the creation of a Black feminist aesthetic epistemology.

What this allows for is a relational discourse for Black women’s theories that centers her narratives as a valued part of the discourse. Collins begins with the recovery of Maria Stewart. This functions as a location for Black feminist rhetoric as having always been about the semiotic relationship between race, class and gender

oppressions, which she would later refer to as the “matrix of oppression.”<sup>81</sup> The experiences of women in this matrix give rise to the seeds of Black feminism but not the trees. There is an acknowledgement by Collins that not all who share a raced/gendered body will mark that body or their experiences with a Black feminist understanding.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in her hailing to those before her, she has given voice to those women who had marked their bodies with understandings of themselves as Black feminists and womanists on varying levels. Moreover, in using Maria Stewart there is a hailing to the roots of Black feminism in the Black Church.

Demonstrated throughout her text is her use of various women’s voices. By using scholars, preachers, domestic and political workers, Collins articulates the variation in understanding of Black feminist thought.<sup>83</sup> What is more important is the diversity from which this knowledge is created. Collins takes on the notion that knowledges are created, shared, and maintained through various methods. She understands that knowledge produced and perpetuated through and by the academy carries the cultural weight, yet at the same time, she acknowledges that localized knowledge is of perhaps the most value to Black women as they seek to survive and thrive.

Black feminist theories deal with the narratives of women in similar ways. These stories function as the foundational discourse for cultural products and norms, creating within themselves specified knowledges about the worlds in which Black women find themselves. Central to womanist theology and Black feminism is a discourse of self-created knowledge. The importance of a vital and demonstrated local epistemology is evident in Patricia Hill Collins’ definition of Black feminist thought.<sup>84</sup>

A Black feminist epistemology, along with a womanist hermeneutic, allows for an evaluation of Black women's sermons as organic rhetorical moments constructed within a cultural space for the benefit of the members of that culture. As with the previous discussion on womanist theology, this section focuses on a critical and foundational work whose structured analysis provides a location for analysis.

### **Womanist Theology—Defining a Discourse**

Laying the groundwork for this argument within my personal narrative of how I was introduced to womanism provides a small window into how womanist scholarship functions. As part of the process of womanist theorizing, the scholar is required to become a transparent and active agent within the text. This does not mean that there is a rampant self-disclosure without reflection. Rather, it requires that the scholar consider her or himself as both speaker and hearer of the text presented. In this way, one remains consistently engaged. In terms of womanist theology, this is particularly evident in the scholars who take on the definition that Walker pens and immediately puts it to use in the American Academy of Religion.<sup>85</sup> In the near twenty-five years since these women first began to engage in womanist theology there have been significant changes in the landscape of theological education. This section narrates my own introduction to womanist theology through an epistemological rather than theological gate, and creates a dialogical space where I can engage the works of three major womanist theologians. Early on, the definition that Alice Walker penned for womanism was introduced to this project as an understood but not fully articulated undercurrent. This is a deliberate choice. I will not interrogate the definition but rather



accept it in its entirety. Given my decision to accept the definition, I can move to a discussion that centers on womanist epistemology—or womanist ways of knowing.

Womanist epistemology has several key elements, not the least of which is a central understanding of being racialized and gendered in an identity matrix that contextualizes religious expression, education, healthy femininity, wealth and self. The contours of daily life for Black women do not generally allow for a shaping of knowledge about ourselves in hierarchical or dichotomous forms of identity construction. For Black women, one is not race then gender, nor can one be race or gender. The day a girl child comes into the world she is taught to know herself as a compound identity. Her social class and regional location will often dictate the descriptors that grace the tongues of those who will construct the early narratives and discourses of her life. She may have occasion to hear herself described, damned, redeemed, belittled, and or exalted in terms that reflect her racialized and gendered self. It is within this daily context and identity script that contemporary African American women ministers function.

After Walker<sup>86</sup> famously defined womanism, three foundational theological texts were written. Each text explores the questions of race and gender as identity constructs that influence the practices of religion. The text also serve as a response to feminist and liberation theology, which are unique theological perspectives that deal with justice, race and or gender as elements of a Christian hermeneutic. Womanist theology grows and defines itself as a theological tradition with sermonistic roots that far extend its own short history. Womanist readings of the Bible function to support a narrative of Black women that is positive and productive for them and their

communities.

As outsiders within, African American women engage in a process of theology building that takes on a critique of the limits of both feminist and liberation theologies. What is unique about their critique is that there is a legitimacy granted to both feminist and liberation hermeneutics, while at the same time they seek a legitimating space of their own that centers the narrative of Christ in the experiences of Black women.

Of note also is that these texts are entered into in a chronology of my own engagement, of the order in which I met them, thus the argument builds in this way. The first of the scholars, Katie Cannon, defines womanist theology as the theology of the “darkest sister.”<sup>87</sup> It does not include white women and it does not include white men. It is in effect that branch of liberation theology, which deals specifically with the place and story of the African/African American woman in the Kingdom of God. Cannon<sup>88</sup> based her definition on the four-part definition of womanist presented by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

In the introduction to *Katie's Canon*, the definition and development of womanist theology brings about a new methodology by which to view the work of African American women in the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>89</sup> Cannon comes to her explanation through some frustration with the limiting responses she receives from other theologians who seek to delegitimize Black women's voices. She seeks to locate within the narrative of Christ and the redemption of the church, a space where African American women thrive without apology or constant reminders of oppression. She argues that too often when womanist theologians' dialogue with other members of the theological community there is a

tendency to ignore the importance of the expansion of theology to include the work, and more importantly, the voice of African American women. Cannon explains that the work of womanist theologians is put under the category of white women (feminist theology) or Black men (liberation theology). That standing alone, womanist theology is viewed as “apolitical, inferior and dangerously essentialist.”<sup>90</sup> The ways in which this limits and excludes the voices of Black women from theological inquiry are plentiful and disturbing. She concerns herself primarily with the ways in which this leaves Christology only to the normative linguistic and theological sphere of white men. In coding/ignoring Black women’s articulations of Christ as liberatory for all people, but particularly the outcast of society, there is a tendency of Christology to remain reserved within a paradigm that only allows for the morality of white men as inheritors of Christ’s kingdom and whose sins are then seen as redemptive. By bringing to the foreground this limitation in normative Christology, Cannon foreshadows the expansive possibilities for Christologies that center on the liberative discourses of Christ. For Cannon, this is a significant improvement over normative Christology structures, which only see Christ as viable to the few. Finally, she concludes her argument with a call for a more inclusive discourse on American Theology that accounts for the differences in standpoint offered by women of color. The value in this text is the ways in which Cannon provides agency for Black women, who for the first time are articulated as having engaged positionalities that allow them to organize the scriptures in specific ways that create an authentic womanist voice and ethical discourse for salvation within the biblical texts.

From this groundbreaking discussion of voice, we move to Jacquelyn Grant’s

critical response to the feminist (white) womanist (Black) dichotomy that is part of the discussions for Black women in theology. In her book, *White Woman's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Jacquelyn Grant likens womanist theology to liberation theology. Her goal is to demonstrate that womanist theology serves the purpose of liberating Black women from a form of Christology that does not apply to them and is nothing more than the extension of "white supremacist thought."<sup>91</sup> Grant explains that where feminist theology might ask how or if Jesus can be the savior of women, womanist theology looks at why He is the savior of everyone, particularly those oppressed in society.<sup>92</sup>

What becomes central to Grant's argument is the humanity of African American women. Citing Old Testament through contemporary movements where African women experience firsthand the voice of God, she estimates that if God includes African women in His earliest works then their humanity can not be denied. She troubles the claim that it was only as slaves that African women had Biblical significance by calling the reader's attention to the number of wives and mothers whose Africanness is central to the teachable moments of the Holy Spirit. She argues that even as Christian slavery and its psychological residue attempted to erase or misrepresent the roles of biblical African women, the centrality of their existence in basic biblical narratives is so apparent that it becomes the theme of contemporary Black women's identity within the body of politic of Jesus Christ.

Womanist theology can and does work in cooperation with liberation theology as recognized by Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*.<sup>93</sup> Williams, like Grant, suggests that the two theologies work in

concert with one another to liberate the souls of Black people from the social conditions that surround them. Williams, more than Grant or Cannon, however, speaks to the important placement of womanist theology in the African American experience. Williams uses the story of Hagar and the treatment of that story to give rise to the voice of African women in the Old Testament.

Williams uses the narrative of Hagar to demonstrate the realities of God-talk. This same thought is demonstrated as cultural knowledge in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The idea that God-talk is central to the narrative of Black women, for Williams, begins with Hagar. That God would choose to speak directly to Hagar is a powerful idea. It prefaces God's later dialogue with Mary and suggests the centrality of God to the daily lives of women. Moreover, in Williams' analysis it demonstrates yet again that God has chosen African women as inheritors of His word, love, and wisdom. The relationship that is so of the moment is one of intimate faith on the side of Hagar and faithfulness from God. This relationship is so central to womanist imagination that it becomes a replicable theme in the idea of being "called." Just as God called on Hagar, he calls on other women. Thus, for womanist theologians, this narrative offers a central understanding that all are worthy of God's time and blessing; all can be asked to serve in the Kingdom of God.

Cannon, Grant and Williams each provide a definition of what womanist theology is by looking at both feminist theology and liberation theology. All of them demonstrate that the main and significant difference between womanist theology and feminist theology is that womanist theology gives voice and credibility to the legitimate experiences of African and African American women. Womanist theology

expresses no ill feeling toward men and does not in any way downplay the legitimacy of their liberation experience through God. At the same time, these theologians find that liberation theology does not do enough to encompass the full and diverse experiences of African American women. Womanist theology then offers the one address of cultural knowledge that Black women employ in their daily lives, thus contributing to a holistic discourse.

### **Womanist Ethics and the Location of Authentic Voice**

Theological discussions necessarily lend themselves to discussions on ethics. At the start of this chapter I argue for the formation of a recognized canon of rhetoric as the last step of the canonization of knowledge on a given subject. Before engaging in a rhetorical conversation, however, there must be a discussion of logic, which is presented here as a discussion on womanist ways of knowing or womanist epistemology and theology. The use of womanist theology leads us directly into a discussion of womanist ethics. In presenting womanist ethics, I extend the discussion on method of womanist ethics presented chiefly by Stacey Floyd-Thomas to include the ethic of voice. In this section, the ethic of voice is defined and applied to the character of Sethe in *Beloved*.

Before defining ethic of voice, it is important to understand voice in a womanist context. The viability of voice in the womanist context functions in several ways: first the voice of the scholar, then the preacher, and finally the cultural community.<sup>94</sup> It is important to discuss the voice of the scholar as contextualized with the voice of the preacher. Up to this point in this chapter, we have heard from academics whose

theorizing of voice starts with the personal, then the local, and finally the global. Essentially, what we have at this point is a collective argument for the study of Black women's spiritual narrative as a communicative event that is culturally specific and globally significant. In this way, the formal study of womanist theology creates the groundwork for the formalization of womanist rhetoric. Voice is essentially the right to speak and the cultural position and knowledge to speak. As discussed in chapter two, as the leader of the Black Church, the Black preacher was often called to be the face of the community and the official voice as well. As such, the preacher is entrusted by the community to hold the interests of the community paramount and to protect those interests. While the scholar is often entrusted to perpetuate knowledge, the preacher is trusted to perpetuate knowledge and truth. The cultural community possesses a voice that is authenticated by the telling of self that is contextualized through social narratives. Voice in the womanist context is understood in terms of the speaker and the cultural community. Voice is the authentic telling of truth and knowledge that is agreed upon between the scholar, preacher and cultural community. Each possesses voice, and the ethic of voice is constituted by and through their presences.

Womanist ethics as theory and method functions to center the ethical and moral choices that Black women make as foundational discourse.<sup>95</sup> Womanist ethics sets forth the argument that Black women are capable of and engaged in ethical behaviors and discourses. Womanist ethics speaks directly to the images, discourses and actions upheld by normative ethics that support a racist ideology against African women. As a theory advanced in scholarly arenas, it is grounded in the daily practices and talk of women who in their lived experiences speak back to normative ethics that seek to

discount them.

The backbone of this ethic is a clear understanding of Black women's daily applications and implications in a contemporary moment. The test of such theorizing, however, is the ability of a group of people to live the ethic of the community over time. One of the goals of this project is to show how the need for African American women to define themselves gave rise to womanist rhetoric. Like womanist theology, womanist ethics, and by progression womanist rhetoric, are rooted in the lives of Africana women in literary, historic, biblical and present day narratives. Karen Baker-Fletcher offers the idea that "without women's stories there is no articulation of women's experiences."<sup>96</sup> Baker-Fletcher goes on to say that she agrees that "storytelling" is "elemental to the construction of womanist and feminist theologies."<sup>97</sup>

It is through the telling of the personal past, both triumph and tragedy, that Black women develop an ethic of voice. Central to her ability to share her story is a womanist appeal to her moral center and the morality of her community. Next is her authority as a speaker. For an ethic of voice to be effective, speakers must be viewed as having authority to speak with knowledge and discernment. This requires the speaker to be able to tap into her own narrative and locate that narrative within the cultural knowledge of the larger community. In this way, womanist theo-ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas argues for a method of doing womanist ethics research. This method utilizes several elements, including the employment of "sacred text."<sup>98</sup> These texts include both biblical and literary sources. While she acknowledges that the systematic analysis of such sources is strictly an academic pursuit, there is also an acknowledgement that the analysis is not foreign to the communities of Africana women. She argues that as



women employ these sacred texts in their daily lives, they draw on the narratives as a source of strength, identity and method through which to articulate resistance.

To demonstrate the functionality of sacred texts for womanist ethical analysis, I will utilize Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.<sup>99</sup> Her book is a fictional account based in part on the real life of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, immortalized as the character Sethe, who takes the life of her daughter rather than see her and herself returned to slavery. In Morrison's account we meet men and women scarred by and ultimately haunted by the brutalities they suffered in American Christian slavery. Our discussion meets Morrison's characters years after they have each escaped the bonds of slavery and are living "free" lives in Ohio. Morrison asks readers to interrogate a multitude of issues. Each of her characters is presented as a self-reflexive and engaged individual with a clear sense of their humanity and morality. They each possess and present truth as they interpret their actions and those of others through the foggy lens of slavery and its terrors. Morrison leaves the reader with a sense of the horrors of slavery. This is evidenced by the way in which the characters of Baby Suggs and Sethe discuss Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe had been raped during her escape to freedom. During the rape her attackers nursed her. The violence of the attack became the clanging cymbal of her moral center. Morrison gives Sethe a superior morality as a mother driven to protect her children.

As Sethe explains her actions to Baby Suggs, Paul D and the narrator, the reader begins to visualize the way in which she builds her ethic of voice. Personal responsibility and the moral codes of Christian ethics meet the unforgiving reality of an America that treats Black women as a commodity rather than as human. The need to

carve a total humanity that includes just and ethical treatment of self and others becomes central to Sethe's claims that her action of attempting to murder her children rather than see them returned to slavery was just. That Morrison has Sethe reintroduced to a man that she knew in slavery some sixteen years after her decision allows the reader to see the ethic of voice in action.

The previous and current relationship of Sethe and Paul D had credibility. Paul D would not believe the reports he heard from others of the gruesome actions Sethe was supposed to have committed. Given his intimate relationship with Sethe, he felt he knew her nature. As Sethe tells of what happened leading up to the day, Morrison allows the characters of Sethe and Paul D to have separate moral epiphanies. Vital to Sethe is the understanding that she could not explain her actions to anyone who did not share the cultural knowledge that grounded her actions, i.e. a slave mother's horror at losing her children not through death but by sale. For a slave mother this is a life worse than death, especially, in her mind, for women. It was not simply the experience of slavery, something both characters understood; rather it was the experience of slavery as the only slave woman on a farm full of men. Suddenly, the reader is brought into an ethic whose internal stability is grounded in a specific gendered reality. The only other woman on the place was the master's wife. Sethe describes her generally as having no children, thus not being available to talk.<sup>100</sup> As she continues in her narrative, the importance of having a community of women becomes essential to Sethe's development as a wife, mother and woman. Sethe builds into her claim the idea that had she had other women to talk to who shared her cultural knowledge and social identity, she would have had more cultural scripts to choose from. In Morrison's

writing of Sethe, the womanist ethic of voice then is also one inherited through cultural discourse or women's talk.

Readers of Morrison see this theme repeated as characters make moral choices based upon the discourses they are exposed to and engaged in. Through narrative, individual women are empowered toward change. Morrison allows Sethe the choice to make continued claims to her moral voice in her authentic telling of the events that lead to her killing one child and attempting to kill the others. Even when Paul D states, "What you did was wrong," (192) Sethe's response demonstrates her power to make a choice based on her knowledge of the violence the alternative offered. She asks, "I should have gone back there? Taken my babies back there?" (192) Paul D continues to insist that there had to be some other option. One could argue that it is in this moment that normative ethics meet with the limitations of racism. While Paul D appreciated that slavery has no benefits, he does not see the extreme of murder as one which creates an opportunity for safety or freedom. In his experience, the way toward freedom was movement. He sees her more viable option as one grounded in what he perceives to be her humanity. That humanity allows her to make a choice. His application of cultural knowledge allows him to tap into a script that demands something other than what he perceives to be an animalistic response. This is clear when he responds, "You got two feet Sethe, not four." He judges her choice as morally wrong and based in allowing herself to become what proslavery discourse perpetuated. Morrison allows the reader to see what competing discourses of ethic and violence produces. Moreover, in the telling of the complete narrative, we later find that Sethe is inclined to live with the ghost of her baby, accepting of her sons' need to leave the

haunted house and the psychological limitations of her remaining daughter. She believes in the ultimate forgiveness of a divine God. Her ultimate goal was to keep her children out of slavery and that goal was achieved. Later, the reader finds that Sethe feels that the only one who can judge the ultimate morality of her method is God. Given this belief, she is content to live in the house with the spirit of her baby, and she is secure in the knowledge that she will one day find forgiveness.

In Morrison's employment of the ethic of voice, we see the moral center of applied Christian ethics against the violence of racism. The power to voice one's own experience and choices as authentic and having a moral imperative that separates ultimate moral goal and method of achieving the goal is crucial. That the womanist narrative claims the need for forgiveness in an ethic of voice is central also to authentication of a human imperative. That forgiveness is sought through God and not man is a recognition of the liminality of a cultural discourse that holds Christian ethics in relation to the lived experiences of raced gendered violence.

For the womanist reader this is a telling moment. We see the difference between Paul D and Sethe as she tells her story. The logic that she employs in making her decision to kill herself and her children rather than return to slavery seems foreign to Paul D. Suddenly, the brutality of her victimization at the hands of Teacher's nephews prior to and in the process of her escape sends a shockwave. Just before telling her story, Paul D revealed that Sethe's husband witnessed the attack on her by Teacher's nephews and was driven mad. Unable to stop the attack on his wife and captured before he could meet her and their children in freedom, he goes completely insane. Paul D tells Sethe and the narrator of his own brutalization. In the telling of his

own narrative, Paul D embedded a story that he can't bring himself to tell. The reader is left to imagine the depth of the horrors of slavery that remain in the minds of its victims. Yet, even with his personal horrors, he is unable or unwilling to accept Sethe's choices in response to the horrors she has known. Nor is he able to understand her passionate and fierce protection of her female children, her pressing need to see them safe from the horrors of slavery visited upon women. In this way, the reader is meant to figure out from Sethe's telling how one reconciles her experiences in slavery with normative discourses on motherhood and womanhood and what counts as moral behavior. In Morrison's narration, the reader begins to understand the internal narrative that Sethe has given herself as a means of coping with the guilt and loss she felt in relationship to the death of her daughter. She ends her conversation with Paul D with the sentiment that she is content to remain in the house with the ghost baby until she meets God. She says she does not need the forgiveness of men; rather, she will accept the forgiveness of God, although she does not always seem sure she is deserving of God's forgiveness.

What this narrative does is bring about the ethic of voice which is central to ethical discourse for salvation. Rather than have the narrator tell the story, the reader hears the story from Sethe. This is vital as she, for the first time in relation to this part of her personal narrative, takes center stage. She confesses a sense of safety within her relationship to Paul D that prompts her to "go ahead and tell him what she had not told Baby Suggs, the only person she felt obliged to explain anything to." (161) At this moment, Sethe is able to become fully human. She experiences the fullness of life in the way in which she is allowed to feel safe with another person. In confiding her inner

most thoughts and motivations, she gives something of herself to the reader as well—something we had not seen up to that point. She expresses agency. Her sense of personal agency runs continuously through her telling of the events that lead up to the moment in the shed. So crucial to the narrative is her sense of agency that it is the single most telling narrative. It is this telling and retelling of Sethe's sense of personal empowerment to leave slavery even while nine months pregnant with small children in tow, and her decision to kill them and herself rather than see any of them returned to slavery, that bring to the forefront of the modern imagination the horrors of American slavery. More than that, the reader is left to decipher the meanings of her narrative through a lens of Sethe's own creation. In this way, Morrison has succeeded in her womanist project. In creating a narrative of such complex identities where moral action is colored by competing narratives of slavery and freedom and just versus unjust are loaded with gendered oppression and race oppression, the reader must also become an active agent in the story. This necessitates an active reading. I suggest that the employment of what I call the ethic of voice allows the reader to see how the character creates a moral code for herself that speaks against normative discourses that seek to keep her in a place of perpetual servitude. Sethe's employment of ethic of voice allows readers to come to ethical discourses of salvation as a necessary element of womanist liberation.

The idea that Sethe's choices are justified as a way to escape an unjust system is central to the basic elements of salvation through Christ. Morrison adheres to the womanist sense of the ethic of voice, which leads to ethical discourse for salvation by placing Sethe's salvation in the hands of God. Womanist theologians stress the need

for Black women to engage in an ethical discourse of salvation that sees themselves as moral agents. Their agency can work for the benefit of the community as a whole, but cannot be based in man's ability to forgive. Morrison, in her creation of Paul D, gives the reader a sense of the limitations of human forgiveness and understanding. Initially, Paul D's desire to see Sethe as he had known her leads him to disregard the news clipping and the stories he heard from others. This is then turned against both characters when Paul D, after hearing the details of Sethe's decision, applies the same normative ethic inherent in Christian slavery that oppresses and abuses them both. What Morrison does so deftly is create a space wherein the reader is engaged in the narrative at the level where they are not asked to judge the events. Instead, they are asked to find value in Sethe's humanity, and thereby accept her right to the narrative telling of the events. It would have been easy to give the narrator the power of telling Sethe's story. However, at this crucial point Morrison desires to hear Sethe speak her own story. The ethic of voice in literature really focuses on the characters' coming into their own and speaking themselves into existence in the telling of their own stories.

### **... Prior to Womanist Rhetoric**

I would like to transition this chapter from the application of womanist ethics to a literary text back to where this chapter started, which is in a situated womanist rhetoric. I started this chapter with a discussion of canonical texts and how those texts shape knowledge creation about Black women. From those texts, I argue that womanist theory and theology is grounded in the daily discourses and experience of everyday women. As Black women enter the academy, womanist knowledge and discourse

becomes part of the academy through the formal work of theorizing Black women's experiences. It is this last step of formal theoretical work that I argue is necessarily rhetorical. By giving the definition of Black feminist epistemology, then womanist theology, and finally moving to a definition of womanist ethics, we validate the rhetorical positioning of the Black woman's sermon as a culturally bound yet culturally ascending product that comes full circle. Each element of womanist rhetoric authentic voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethic discourse for salvation are each part of the analysis of characters in *Beloved*.

The moral agency Morrison bestows in Sethe is critical to the understanding of womanist discourses that ground daily experiences. While largely a fiction, *Beloved* is based in part on the real life story of Margaret Garner. The choices Garner makes reflect the brutal realities of Christian slavery and a normative Christian ethic that seeks to support white supremacist ideologies over God's ultimate desire to see the salvation of humanity. What an analysis of *Beloved* does, using the tools of womanist rhetoric, is allow me to discuss the ways in which sacred and secular texts work together to inform the daily lives of Black people in general and Black women in particular. The relationships between the sacred and the secular in womanist discourse are teased out more in the next chapter. My discussion on womanist rhetoric as part of a larger cosmology of Afrocentric thought within and outside of academe, provides a way to talk about Black women's sermons as cultural work. It is not possible to understand the products of culture without first gaining insight into the culture that gives rise to the product. In discussing the general role and power of Black ministers and preachers, as well as their cultural location, it is possible to articulate a womanist



discourse and knowledge creation process that offers varying perspectives within the same culture.

## Chapter 4

### Preacher Politics: Nineteenth Century

#### African American Women Canonize Womanist Rhetoric

In the previous chapter, I argue for womanist rhetoric as a specific genre of rhetorical analysis; one rooted in the oral and written traditions of African American women who place their narratives at the center of academic, religious, moral and daily discourse. In arguing for such a genre, I outline the ways in which discourses are engaged in daily traditions and how those engagements are organized for systematic academic inquiry through the use of womanist theology and theory. These two traditions create a lexicon for womanist discourse that situates Black women's ways of knowing or womanist epistemology. Womanist epistemology provides the tools to engage in methodological discussions that become womanist ethics. As presented in chapter three through the analysis of Sethe's narrative in the modern day slave narrative, *Beloved*, the application of womanist ethics within the context of womanist rhetoric allows me to theorize the womanist ethic of voice.

In this next chapter, I seek to expand this discussion of the ethic of voice by looking at the tradition of Black women preachers during the nineteenth century. There are some compelling reasons for introducing the ethic of voice to womanist rhetoric of the nineteenth century. First and foremost is the sense that the reader of Black women's conversion narratives of that era understands the need for these women to establish themselves as agents of their own discourse. In looking at the work of two prominent African American women preachers and speakers, there are several key elements

present in their narratives. First is their resistance to the limited space in which women were to reside in public context. Second, both articulate the problems of normative social gender narratives that because of the continuation of American slavery did not apply to the “fair daughters of Africa.”<sup>101</sup> Finally, each woman expresses the goal of establishing not only her humanity, but her right to voice that humanity, and by extension her moral character through her Christian experience. It is evident that each of these women felt it was their duty to speak on behalf of African American women. As we will see in the analysis, they both answer a persistent “call” to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This they do without regard for the social mores that dictated their supposed social inability to participate in public and specifically religious dialogue. To the contrary, each writes of what she perceives as her inherent duty as a child of God to speak. In this way, they each utilize their interpretation of women in the Bible who spoke to, with and as prophets of God.

### **Black Women in the Black Church: Or the Matrix of Oppression at Home**

In chapter two, I discuss the history and responsibilities of the Black Church as an institution. As African Americans have sought to make a life of meaning, it has become evident that tough choices have to be made. These choices have often been met with resistance and sacrifice.<sup>102</sup> Women were not always welcomed as active leaders in the Black Church. The limiting of women’s voices from the pulpit had a common place in the earliest histories of predominantly Black congregations and denominations. The history of the Black Church is so tightly woven with that of the continuing legacy of slavery that those Black women that felt called to preach had to contend with a great

deal. More than just the social mores of the day, the dual systematic oppression of slavery and patriarchal norms gave African women little opportunity to express their needs and seek change. Patriarchal traditions limited the access of all American women to the public sphere. Within the Black community, the goals of building the race led men to preserve spaces for tangible leadership of the community for themselves.<sup>103</sup>

While it was accepted within Black communities that women were more than equipped to speak at Bible studies and worship meetings, it was not commonly accepted that they should be allowed to lead or preach from the pulpit because of the influence of American patriarchy.

In the early Black Church there are powerful and distinguished early Black preachers. Often, these men were asked to function as the unofficial and official voice of the community, and did so unquestioned. While these men worked hard to bring about the end of chattel slavery, there were women working equally as hard. These women often found that their race and gender collided in their oppression; they spoke not only for the abolition of slavery but for the right to be seen as women, activists, and preachers. The first womanist preachers and activists demonstrated their womanism through their speeches and activities.<sup>104</sup> Often characterized at the time and since as either suffragist or abolitionist, early activists Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart worked diligently to present themselves as both raced and gendered. Jarena Lee precedes Stewart she and saw herself as laboring for the salvation and spiritual uplift of her people.<sup>105</sup> Both women spoke against their dual oppressions and, like today's womanist, actively sought to free both Blacks and women from the traditions that subjugate them.

The use of such powerful historical examples allows for a discussion of each as a foremother ushering in themes evident in contemporary womanist sermons. Given that sermons of these women have not survived, the use of their journals and published autobiographies provide an excellent stand in. Each of these women pioneered the writing of African American women's conversion narratives of the nineteenth century. As argued by V.P. Franklin, the conversion narrative offers a unique text, particularly when written by Black preachers.<sup>106</sup> In the cases of Lee and Stewart, the conversion narrative does more than convey their individual Christian conversions; it catalogues their work as itinerant ministers. In both cases, the women used their autobiographies as a way to argue for women's rights and the end of slavery. They also used them to catalogue sermons and the responses from both hostile and friendly audiences. Each autobiography provides examples of the three themes of Black women's preaching. First, they offer spiritual grounding. They construct an ideal of Black womanhood and sexuality, and finally they provide a discourse for social justice. The discussion that follows is a chronological analysis of early Black women's preaching, focusing on lived experience as reflected through the rhetorics of Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart.

### **Jarena Lee: The Icon of Womanist Spirituality**

Locating the lives of African American women is a necessary step in the location of womanist theorizing. Collins argues that there is no way to articulate a womanist knowledge without paying homage to the past.<sup>107</sup> An epistemological discourse necessarily includes historical locators. Due to the groundbreaking work of historians interested in the lives of African American women, many of the early

preachers have been recovered. While this recovery has been fruitful, it has not extended to the field of communication and specifically rhetoric. Often seen only as a historic figure, Jarena Lee has not yet seen the light of the rhetorical day. Sojourner Truth, whose speaking career starts some decades later, has eclipsed her most often. Grounding this discussion in Lee's surviving memoirs allows for a discussion of the foundations of contemporary womanist spirituality and preaching that are fundamental to the rhetorical construction of the sermons reviewed later in chapter five.

Jarena Lee is one of the first recorded women ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.<sup>108</sup> Lee was born in 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey. She was born to free parents. At the age of seven, she was apprenticed to a family as a domestic after her parents died. In 1804, she had her conversion experience and became an active member of the AME church in Philadelphia where Bishop Richard Allen was leading the congregation. Feeling the call to preach, she petitioned him for a license to preach in the AME church, but he did not grant her request at that time. Even though she was denied a license, she continued to study, pray, and participate within the church. She later married in 1811, and by 1817 she was widowed with two children.<sup>109</sup>

Lee continued to increase her knowledge of the Holy Spirit and went again to Bishop Allen. She was granted permission in 1818 to become an itinerant minister.<sup>110</sup> Essentially, this allowed her to speak after the licensed minister had brought his message to the congregation. It was from this moment that she began to outline her travels in her autobiography. Making her home in Philadelphia after her husband's passing, she traveled extensively, preaching the gospel in homes, churches and at camp

meetings. She would often teach classes and lead revivals. It was common for her to speak before both white and Black audiences. She recounts several times that she spoke before large crowds that included both “master and slave.”<sup>111</sup> This was a phenomenal accomplishment given the location of both women and African Americans at this time. This bibliographical information about Lee locates her as one of the women who participated in The Great Awakening. While the country seemed enthralled with the conversion experience, there was still great trepidation about the roles of women and Africans, both free and enslaved.<sup>112</sup>

The North had become a consortium of free states by law, but not yet by practice. While it is true that they were making their way toward becoming truly free states, New York and Pennsylvania had gradual emancipation laws that allowed for the freedom of individuals born before a specific year to be freed immediately and children to be freed after a certain age.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, there were laws stating that individuals born after a certain year were free.

As a minister who believed it her charge to bring spiritual/conversion messages to the people, she felt a specific responsibility to speak to both Black and white audiences. She was often physically sick and weak, yet she continued. Her autobiography, filled with “sermon notes,”<sup>114</sup> outlines her argument for women’s spiritual and legal emancipation, as well as her arguments against slavery. Upon close review of the biblical texts she utilized during her first five years as an exhort minister, it is clear that her concern was for the conversion and salvation of her listeners.

For Aristotle, rhetoric is about defining truth and humanity through discourse. Therefore, rhetoric is a tool to discover truth. Given this, part of the goal of the

womanist rhetor has to be the use of discourse as a tool to dismantle the tabernacles of oppression that are constructed and maintained through malicious discourses to keep women of color from ordained rhetorics of truth and worth. In the womanist tradition, manifest discourse can be operationalized as speaking one's self into existence. This is the central theme in the early conversion narratives of African American women ministers and missionaries. As evidenced in Jarena Lee's narrative, she speaks herself into existence as preacher when she relays "my call to preach."<sup>15</sup> In her eloquent recounting, her singular focus is her own experience of Christian conversion and conviction to enter into ministry. With limited discussion of social mores or consideration, she is centrally articulated as a Christian woman eager to preach in the Methodist tradition. In recalling her trip to meet with Rev. Allen to discuss her intention to enter the ministry, she ends with her considerations on the organizational structures of the modern church. Deftly mixing her critique of the church with an intimate knowledge of scripture, she questions the motives of the founding leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Within the forum of the conversion narrative, she openly questions their application of the scriptures and tenets of Methodist practice, which would seek to create ordained exclusion over inclusion.

O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible, with God. And why should it be



thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? seeing the Saviour [sic] died for the woman as well as for the man.

If the man may preach, because the Saviour [sic] died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour [sic], instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear.

Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour [sic], and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity -- hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? for she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.<sup>116</sup>

Lee would often choose texts that focused on the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit. Occasionally, the text chosen spoke to the issues of women preachers and the rights of women to speak as members of the body of Christ. One such sermon was delivered in New Hope to a good-sized crowd. She took for her text John iii, 14<sup>117</sup>, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” Lee’s sermon focused on the need to spread the word of God to all people, and to lift up all of the congregation, male and female, black and white.

During her travels, she often had to endure challenges to her womanhood. For

example, in her autobiography, she states that at this meeting a gentleman challenged her, saying that she was a man in women's clothing. She responded gracefully to the gentleman, saying that only as a woman of God could she come before this and other groups to bring the messages of God. She indicates in her narrative other such incidences, but seldom comments or reflects on them past what is stated in the moment.<sup>118</sup>

The majority of Lee's sermons were given to revival crowds. Often, the goal of her sermons was continued spiritual uplift and clarity. Her early work as a foundational womanist speaker is reflexive of where the country was at the time. Lee both derived benefits and punishments through her work. Her contemporary and later speakers such as Maria Stewart enjoy the benefits of her speaking career.

### **Maria Stewart: Let Not Your Womanhood be Discouraged**

Maria Stewart, a contemporary of Sojourner Truth, fought hard to increase the dignities of African American women. Born free in Boston in 1803, Stewart married a prominent Black businessman by the name of James Stewart. After the death of her husband and two others<sup>119</sup> whom Stewart held in high regard, she felt compelled to participate in both the abolition and suffrage movements. While a contemporary of Truth's, her lesser status in the ranks of abolition and suffrage is owed perhaps to her great desire to be a womanist voicing ideals of racial uplift.

Often touted by historians as the first woman to give a public speech to a mixed gender crowd, Stewart owes her interest in the project of racial uplift in part to her husband. While this may seem at odds with feminist ideals, it is in keeping with the

ideals of womanism as later outlined by Alice Walker more than a century later. Often interested in all aspects of womanhood, a womanist is said to be all woman and willfully so. After her husband's passing, Stewart became increasingly interested in both the gender and racial uplift of her people. She began delivering anti-slavery and suffrage talks, as well as lectures throughout the American North.

As a political speaker, Maria Stewart gave lectures throughout Boston and New York. Her speeches were recorded in the abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. The paper printed the full text of her speeches as well as commentary by notable abolitionists and suffragists.<sup>120</sup> In 1832, when she gave her first address, she spoke out passionately against the newly formed colonization movements led by white colonizationist. They sought to remove freeborn and emancipated Africans from America and deposit them with limited resources back on the western shores of Africa. Stewart saw the project of colonizationist for what it was—rape and theft. She argued that this was nothing more than a plot to continue the cruel and lucrative practice of slavery in the American South, and to gain control over the infrastructure and capitol being built amongst a burgeoning Black middle class.

Her insistence on presenting her ideas for the emancipation of Africans and the financial freedom of all women in flat terms was often met with extreme resistance. However, her speeches given amongst the members of the African-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston were met with constructive criticism and methods for improvement. In a collection of Stewart's speeches gathered by Marilyn Richardson, it is noted that the literary societies and particularly the African-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston were of central help in the formation of Stewart's

ideas.<sup>121</sup>

Maria Stewart delivered four public addresses before retiring from public speaking.<sup>122</sup> Each of the four addresses were published in *The Liberator* and were republished by the author and included with an autobiography, essays, poetry and meditations in two different texts.<sup>123</sup> The 1835 *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart Presented to the First African Baptist Church & Society, of the City of Boston* included three of her four public speeches. In each speech, Stewart weaves sacred and secular texts to argue for the equity of women in an eloquent and compelling way. In a speech delivered at Franklin Hall in Boston in 1832, the first speech delivered by an American woman to a mixed race and gender audience, Stewart presents the following:

I have asked several individuals of my sex, who transact business for themselves, if providing our girls were to give them the most satisfactory references, they would not be - willing to grant them an equal opportunity with others? Their reply has been--for their own part, they had no objection; but as it was not the custom, were they to take them into their employ, they would be in danger of losing the public patronage.

And such is the powerful force of prejudice. Let our girls possess what amiable qualities of soul they may; let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself; let their natural taste and ingenuity be what they may; it is impossible

for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants.<sup>124</sup>

In this moment, Stewart address both racism and sexism. In keeping with womanist interest to see justice and equity for all, Stewart argues that it is not until Black women can be seen for their true selves that they will rise above servitude. In this speech, Stewart uses the common language of the American sermon of the day with an argument for the ethical discourses of salvation that mark womanist rhetoric. She sees the limits of women's achievements as a problem caused not only by a patriarchal system, but by women's insistence on holding each other back—particularly white women who do nothing to change a system that limits their access and renders impossible the access of African women. She tells her audience that the African American women that seek employment in white-owned businesses are moral, intelligent and hard working individuals who seek to do their best work yet are routinely denied the opportunity. She is unable to hide her disdain.

Ah! why is this cruel and unfeeling distinction? Is it merely because God has made our complexion to vary? If it be, O shame to soft, relenting humanity! "Tell it not in Gath! publish it not in the streets of Askelon!" Yet, after all, methinks were the American free people of color to turn their attention more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement, this would be the result: prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to

say, unloose those fetters!

Though black their skins as shades of night,

Their hearts are pure, their souls are white.<sup>125</sup>

Stewart calls for an immediate end to this sort of immoral behavior of excluding African American women from worthy work. She argues that:

Few white persons of either sex, who are calculated for any thing else, are willing to spend their lives and bury their talents in performing mean, servile labor. And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of there being no possibility of my rising above the condition of a servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger. O, horrible idea, indeed! to possess noble souls aspiring after high and honorable acquirements, yet confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil. Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house-domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables. I can but die for expressing my sentiments; and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I and a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast.<sup>126</sup>

It is in the final sentiment that Maria Stewart engages her audience to see her as a “true born American” one who would rather “die by the sword” than endure a life of

perpetual servitude. Returning for a moment to the ethic of voice employed by Toni Morrison's character Sethe, we see how the call to ethical discourses of salvation in womanist rhetoric are employed. Here, we see Stewart employing the ethical discourse of salvation in a secular forum. Salvation in this case is from the sin of American slavery, which she says results in Africans being "confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil" solely because of the color of their skin. Stewart calls for emancipation. Through not only physical, nationwide emancipation, but also emotional, psychological and intellectual emancipation can African American women enjoy what she believes are the true inheritances of their womanhood. She says this salvation is not won by sitting about doing nothing; rather, it is something that African American women must agitate for. She expressed the need for Black women to become educated in order to bring about their own salvations.<sup>127</sup>

Her passionate, eloquent delivery created a powerful rhetoric for the liberation of slaves, as well as the rights of women to inherit from their husbands or own property. At the time of Stewart's retirement from public speaking, her insistence on mixing the discourse of physical freedom for slaves and financial freedom for women had gotten her into some trouble in both camps. Yet, as a womanist perhaps far ahead of her time, she did not give up on these fights. She would continue to write and support other speakers. What her early combinations of women's suffrage and abolition rhetoric along with her successful address before a mixed-gendered mixed raced audience did to advance the call of suffrage and abolition is immeasurable.

## **God Gave Her a Word Today: Analyzing Black Women's**

### **Sermons as Critical Rhetorical Space**

Starting with the literary and historic examples provides an understanding of where contemporary womanist sermonizing begins. In the example of Baby Suggs' character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, there is a strong example of how spirituality becomes a local practice to combat daily struggles and ensures a sense of survival for enslaved and freed women. In the example of Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart, both women are concerned with the spirituality of women as they navigate both the cruelties of slavery and the oppressive realities of pseudo freedom.

In the late 1970s and through the mid-1980s, women of color went about the tedious work of constructing their pasts through the lens of feminism, early suffrage and Black Liberation movements. Having found little reward and still less respect among white women, many of these early scholars began to look beyond Truth for the women who influenced her and those that followed. Their early work gives voice to Lee and Stewart. While not as much is known of Lee and Stewart there is a continued value in considering these three women in particular for this project. Each brings a foundational voice to womanist sermonizing in their discussions of Black womanhood, spirituality and social justice.

Womanist rhetoric is a discourse entered into by African American women that is concerned with the mental, physical and spiritual health, wealth and vitality of her community. This includes an active discourse about the roles of race, class, gender and sexuality as social concepts. Womanist rhetoric understands the limits placed on Black



bodies through dominant normative discourses, particularly as they relate to the construction of gender and sexuality norms. These discourses seek to regulate the Black body to a space of deviance. What survives race-based slavery is the ideology that deviant Black bodies do not possess the ability to engage in ethical intentions or logical prowess, and because of this they cannot be considered active social agents.<sup>128</sup> Womanist rhetoric seeks out these injustices within and outside of the Black community and attempts to find human and equitable solutions that are for the good of the whole community rather than simply the good of women.

Part of womanist rhetoric as a method is going into the text and asking questions of identity and authenticity. Womanist rhetoric requires that the speaker first encounter her or his own voice. This requires a moment of calling on the foremothers. Calling on the Foremothers is not just about citing an academic epistemology. Calling on the foremothers is a personal journey to womanist theorist that recalls the womanist education that starts prior to the academic. A womanist scholar must include her/his own cultural epistemology of being womanist. After calling on the foremothers, one must locate herself within the cultural and academic tradition of “knowing.” Finally, s/he must claim a womanist way of knowing one’s self within one’s community.

In applying womanist rhetorical analysis to these texts, the journey of self-reflection, communal knowledge and responsibility is organically inherent. Womanist theory is an organic intellectual tradition born in the communities of African American women and articulated in an academic space for cultural liberation of oppressed peoples. This chapter provides the argument for why specific theories and methods

have been chosen and how they work together. The goal here is to present the theories and methods in a kaleidoscope to focus on their interplay with one another. Ultimately, this chapter is about the ways in which these theories and methods allow for an investigative discourse about the roles women play within the Black Mega Church and its global ministries.

## Chapter 5

### Womanist Sermonic Rhetoric: An Analysis of Contemporary African American Women Ministers

During the past five years, I have had many opportunities to share my research with African American women and men who are engaged in professional ministry. Often in speaking with women, I have asked if they are familiar with womanist theology. The majority report being familiar with womanist theology, but not necessarily using womanist theology in their sermons. For those like Wanda Davis-Turner whose sermons I have analyzed, they were often surprised to find that the three pillars of womanist rhetoric that I discuss in chapter two are present in their sermons. Often they have shared that they had never thought of “womanist” as a way of speaking. They had only considered it a way of “knowing” or “being.” In a telephone conversation with Dr. Wanda Davis-Turner, she revealed that she had not thought of womanist ways of speaking either.<sup>129</sup> She, like others, has admitted to not having thought about their sermons in such detail. They would often say to me in the course of our conversations, “Now, I have something new to think about,” or “When can I buy your book and read more about this?” This chapter benefits from the personal and professional conversations with womanist preachers as they have aided me in constructing my analysis of Wanda Davis-Turner’s sermon *Sex Traps*. The goal of this chapter is to analyze *Sex Traps* as she utilizes womanist discourse and embodies womanist rhetoric. The previous discussions on the Black Church, historic and literary

womanist help shape my definition of womanist rhetoric. Through those discussions, we see that womanist rhetoric embodies both the everyday and the academic. Ultimately, I argue that rhetoric is a formalized process that undergirds knowledge creation, and that in the centralizing of Black women's narratives through womanist discourse, Black women create spaces in which and through which they make their voices heard and their presence known. In this chapter, I will contextualize Wanda Davis-Turner as a rhetor who engages in this formalized creation of knowledge through her sermonizing. First, I will demonstrate the viability of Davis-Turner as a credible and authentic voice in the Black Church. Second, Davis-Turner is discussed as a womanist among womanist ministers—one who seeks the liberation of all but whose focus is often women. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of Davis-Turner's sermon *Sex Traps*. This analysis argues the ways in which she has constructed a womanist rhetoric through her sermon that employs an authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethical discourse for salvation.

### **Cultural Contextualization of Womanist**

#### **Sermonic Rhetoric and Preacher Persona**

Rhetorical analysis of sermons must be done within social context. This is not only true of womanist sermons but all sermons. Sermons as rhetoric derive their value and meaning from multiple sources. The goal of the sermon is to persuade individuals to start and continue a life that is dedicated to God.<sup>130</sup> In part, an analysis of the sermon is an analysis of the preacher, particularly in the Afrocentric tradition in which

rhetor and the word, or “nommo,” are one socially constructed identity.<sup>131</sup> In this tradition the power of nommo is held in speech. As the speaker or rhetor creates a narrative, there is power within the words for both the speaker and the listener. This power is evidenced in the communal meanings assigned to the word and the actions that follow. Womanist sociologist Cheryl Sanders argues in the introduction to *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* that womanism extends the power of the word that Afrocentrism discusses. Chiefly, she argues that as womanist are engaged in interpreting the “prophetic proclamations of the Black preacher” within the community of believers and outside to academia, they utilize various tools of language and structure as appropriate to each community.<sup>132</sup>

The preacher persona is arguably the most guarded Africana persona. Hubbard argues that as the cultural face of the Black community against white supremacy, this persona took on necessary masculine physical and emotional characteristics to protect the community.<sup>133</sup> This was of particular import during the early colonial and antebellum periods of the Black Church when institutional leadership in the early American church often translated to civic leadership as well.<sup>134</sup> Tommy Lott argues in *The Invention of Race* that as the race-based arguments for slavery increased, so to did the need to discredit the masculinity of African men.<sup>135</sup> Often, the arguments of white slave-holding ministers included feminizing and childlike arguments of African men. Because the Black preacher/pastor is seen as the seat of cultural power, and as traditionally responsible for speaking back against white supremacy, Black men and women have protected the preacher/pastor as masculine for the last three hundred years. For at least that long it has also been a challenge for Black women and men to

include Black women as preachers and pastors.<sup>136</sup>

In the contemporary moment, the persona of the Black preacher as only male has changed as more women enter professional ministry. Professional ministry, for this dissertation, is defined as more than full time work, but also as attending seminary, which includes training in hermeneutic, pastoral care and counseling. To this more culturally global persona, we can add womanist ways of knowing that respond to the three elements of womanist rhetoric. Calling on past cultural scripts includes the use of popular biblical and cultural narratives unique to the survival discourses of Africana women. Bishop Allen engaged in these texts when communicating with Jarena Lee in her confirmation as a preacher. McKenzie called on these scripts when she was confirmed as the first female bishop in the AME Church, centering herself as a moral, powerful and viable member of her community. Using the ethic of voice by speaking herself into existence as a preacher persona is central to womanist sermonic rhetoric. This rhetoric goes beyond proving her right to preach, to stating that preaching is her God given purpose. In the following discussion focusing on Wanda Davis-Turner's ministerial career and the careers of two of her contemporaries, we see that she exemplifies the differences in paths taken to ministry. She also demonstrates the need for women and men to move beyond trying to "convince" someone of women's right to speak and preach, arguing that in the post-modern age we are beyond "right" and "moral" and are in a place of "prophetic responsibility."

### **Wanda Davis-Turner: Authentic Voice in Black Church Leadership**

African American women daily embody the process of womanist rhetoric. I focus on the church and preaching women because theirs is an awesome task. They are constructing a narrative for themselves and other African American women from a long held seat of cultural power—a seat that has been almost exclusively held by men. Since the beginning, women have been challenging this exclusionary view of leadership in the Black Church.

From the period marked by slavery in America, Black preachers have provided the cultural leadership needed for physical and emotional survival of many African Americans. Doland Hubbard, in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, discusses the role of the Black preacher within the Black community.<sup>137</sup> Hubbard credits the preachers in the African American community with the responsibility of creating the face of the community.<sup>138</sup>

Prior to Emancipation, few Black communities existed without the exacting hand of the slave master to guide it.<sup>139</sup> Hubbard argues that after Emancipation there was a need for a cultural and psychological face not carved out by the slave master. The responsibility of creating that face fell upon the shoulders of the Black preacher. Hubbard continues to say, it was the Black preacher who took the word of God that the plantation owners had used to force submission and destroy the self-worth of African captives, and turned it into a language of freedom and liberation. With this cultural history, the preacher becomes the leader of not only the Black Church but also the community.<sup>140</sup> The need for leadership within the community that valued African heritage and an African worldview is something womanist scholars do not dispute. In

fact, *Daughters of Thunder* author Bettye Collier-Thomas argues that the Black preacher is the official leader of the African American community.<sup>141</sup> As such, the preacher is charged with the spiritual and the secular leadership of the community. What she disagrees with is the idea that only men are responsible for this leadership.

There is a great deal of conversation as to the legacy of women's leadership in the Black Church. As early as post-Revolution America to the present moment, women have functioned as ministers, theologians and leaders.<sup>142</sup> As discussed in chapter two, the Black Church has tandem histories. In the North, through the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, we have a different view of the role of women. Jarena Lee began petitioning Bishop Allen for a license as a preacher as early as 1807.<sup>143</sup> While the church by-laws at that time did not allow for women to be licensed as preachers, it did allow them to function as prayer leaders, teachers and extorts (preachers who spoke from the floor rather than the pulpit after the main sermon has been given). Lee was eventually successful in her arguments to see women take on more formal leadership roles, and became ordained as a minister herself. In the AME denomination, women in leadership have a longer history than in some other denominational histories. Some of the younger Baptist denominations that were organized after the 1960s can boast women's leadership and women in the pastorate for the entirety of their existence. Full Gospel has had women pastors, ministers and lay leaders in strategic and powerful positions.<sup>144</sup> Even with women's leadership and participation on the rise, there are still those that criticize the Black Church for not being a place where women can assume leadership roles.<sup>145</sup> As a scholar and lay leader, I must agree that there are not as many women in pastoral leadership as perhaps I



would like to see, however, there are many more than I saw growing up. What does this discussion on women's leadership in the Black Church do for our understanding of Wanda Davis-Turner? It establishes the cultural place and space she and women like her hold.

The cultural and personal background of the rhetor is important to the location and contextual grounding of both the rhetoric and its analysis. It is vital that there is a clear understanding of the locations from which the rhetor pulls evidence and examples for arguments and form. This section presents a contextualized personal and cultural history. This allows for analysis of both the validity and vitality of her sermon as past moments with present significance—owning the tradition in womanist rhetoric of calling on the past to speak into existence a present that is already in action.

There are thousands of women in professional ministry.<sup>146</sup> Davis-Turner has longevity and diversity in her career to date. As a member of the professional ministry she has been a pastor and global ministry leader. She demonstrates womanist theological and ethical standards through her ministries, sermons and written text. She also demonstrates diversity of leadership within the Black Church. Within her body of work as a minister, the power of naming is evidenced. This chapter focuses on her convention sermon *Sex Traps* as a central sermon that demonstrates womanist sermon rhetoric and its transformative empowerment of women within the Black Church.

Prior to becoming a global ministry leader, Davis-Turner was the First Lady and Associate Pastor of First Apostolic Church in Inglewood, California. She reports knowing “who I was in the ministry without a lot of strife and struggle as many women have experienced.”<sup>147</sup> This sets Davis-Turner apart as womanist leader, yet at the same

time provides an authentic voice in leadership as one who has worked hard and seen the changes in the ways women have been treated in leadership. During our telephone conversation, she mentioned that the difference between the way that women were perceived in the pulpit now and how they were perceived ten years ago when she first delivered *Sex Traps* was an astonishing blessing. She is not only asked to deliver sermons at women's conferences, but is seen as having a much greater contribution to the overall leadership and structure of the Black Church. When asked why, she suggested that her recent doctoral work in organizational leadership and pastoral care may help, but that she really credited God for the expansion of minds.<sup>148</sup>

Black women enjoy a visibility and viability in church leadership that they have not previously enjoyed. They have attended seminary in record numbers and are finding more doors to leadership than their predecessors. Yet, there are some remaining hurdles. Davis-Turner, like all womanists, is reluctant to credit her achievements to only herself. Rather, she credits God and those that have come before her. In the next section, I will focus on the women that have come with her, contextualizing Wanda Davis-Turner as a womanist minister among womanist ministers.

### **Wanda Davis-Turner: Womanist Minister Among Womanist Ministers**

In the mid-1990s there were three prominent African American women ministers speaking on the convention circuit: Wanda Davis Turner, Vashti McKenzie and Juanita Bynum. They all spoke on issues related to women and men of African decent in the Christian faith. In this section, I will present McKenzie and Bynum as sister trailblazers with Davis-Turner.

Vashti McKenzie as a womanist preacher cuts an interesting figure. McKenzie is a scholar who has years of church leadership experience in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She was the first woman senior pastor of the historic Payne Memorial AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>149</sup> Among her many accomplishments is her position as the first female bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. McKenzie was appointed the first female bishop in the more than two hundred year history of AME church in July 2000.<sup>150</sup> She has written on Black women in religious leadership for the past eleven years.<sup>151</sup> Her familial background secures her historically in the Black middle class.<sup>152</sup> She is the granddaughter of one of the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Her great-grandfather started the *Afro-American* newspaper, which she later contributed to as a columnist. In the mid-1990s she was on the conference and guest-preacher circuit.<sup>153</sup> Her leadership has increased in the last twenty years as she been the presiding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and is currently the thirteenth district bishop.<sup>154</sup>

In the mid-1990s, Juanita Bynum was making a name for herself as a woman's preacher. Before becoming a powerful global ministry mogul she was on the conference circuit. She has run a prominent Black Mega Church with her husband that has hundreds of active ministries.<sup>155</sup> Along with that, she has started her own publishing company, production company and record label that offers and promotes Christian books, DVDs, CDs and television programming. Her ministries focus primarily on women and women's issues. She covers the gamut of women's topics in all forms of media. Given her impact on the Black community and her media empire, she is in some ways a smaller scale Oprah Winfrey.<sup>156</sup>

Bynum's conference sermon *No More Sheets* is one of the most popular women's conference sermons ever released,<sup>157</sup> and the related praise and worship music CD continues to be a huge seller. She continues to preach to women on issues of spiritual health and renewal. Like Davis-Turner, she often encouraged women to put themselves and their spiritual and emotional health first. In *No More Sheets*, she encourages women to stop hiding from God and the things in life that hurt in the beds of men that don't appreciate, love or care for them. Hiding from God and using sex as a way to heal is not healthy or effective spiritually, Bynum argues. As part of T.D. Jakes' "Woman, Thou Art Loosed" conference tour, both Wanda Davis-Turner and Juanita Bynum preached sermons of womanist healing and womanist God-Talk to sold out crowds.<sup>158</sup>

Wanda Davis-Turner, Vashti McKenzie and Juanita Bynum each contribute to this conversation in specific ways. The diversity of Davis-Turner's ministerial career and her canonical conference sermon *Sex Traps* inspire a discussion on womanist sermonic rhetoric as being uniquely interested in the moral and cultural relationship of womanist God-Talk as cultural narrative. She stands out as a womanist minister among womanist ministers for her leadership, service and sermons. She, like McKenzie, has expanded her ministry to include other areas of focus. During our 2007 conversation, she discussed her continued focus on women through two new ministries. First, she had begun ministering to young women and men in the Armed Forces. She discussed their need to have spiritual guidance and support from home while abroad. She became passionate about service to service men and women when members of her congregation signed up for military service after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Many of them, she reported, were

barely old enough to serve but were passionate about serving their country. While traveling for other ministry commitments she would hear from them or see them and she became interested in their concerns. She said, “One day praying for them wasn’t enough. I needed to pray with them.”<sup>159</sup> She began visiting women and men abroad and corresponding with them in the field. During the course of our conversation I felt and heard the passion she has for them in her voice when she interrupted our talk to take a call from a young woman who had returned home. It was clear that Davis-Turner had taken on a new ministry that extended her compassion to a part of the body of Christ that is not often considered.<sup>160</sup>

She remains faithful to her calling as a minister and ministry leader of women in her First Ladies Ministry. According to her website:

Calling First Ladies International Ministry was birthed to directly impact the lives of First Ladies, Bishops, Pastors, Athletes, Entertainers, Medical & Legal Professionals, Politicians and Corporate Icons, stateside and abroad, as well as single women of distinction who are first in their respective fields of interest.<sup>161</sup>

She had found a way to help women in leadership adhere to the personal and organizational calls on their lives while balancing their lives. Davis-Turner’s growing ministries and commitment to the diverse concerns of women demonstrates her role as a womanist minister amongst womanist ministers. Her new and continuing ministries allow her to live womanist concerns everyday as she seeks to bring the word of God to people. She argues that her call to preach isn’t a Sunday thing, it’s an everyday thing. This embodied daily life allows her to stand out in ministry.

In the previous sections I have contextualized Wanda Davis-Turner as a womanist minister engaged in formalized creation of knowledge through her discourses about her preaching and ministerial work. By first demonstrating the viability of Davis-Turner as a credible and authentic voice in the Black Church, I have shown how her early and later career function within the larger context of Black Church leadership. In acknowledging the ways in which her ministerial career both mirrors and diverges from the careers of others, we see her as part of the tradition yet having her own path. Second, Wanda Davis-Turner is a womanist among womanist ministers—one who seeks the liberation of all but whose focus is often women. Her current work with military personnel and women in leadership defines her as a woman interested in serving where needed. By presenting the forward momentum of her mid-1990s contemporaries, we see that Davis-Turner is not the only womanist minister in daily ministerial leadership or weekly preaching. This is important as too often there is a tendency to exalt a single rhetor without acknowledging the rhetor's peers or surrounding culture. In presenting the careers and ministries of McKenzie and Bynum, we are also able to explore the ways in which Davis-Turner epitomizes womanist discourse and space. The last portion of this chapter focuses on an analysis of Davis-Turner's sermon *Sex Traps*, which argues the ways in which she has constructed a womanist rhetoric through her sermon. Using the constructions for womanist rhetoric that I presented in chapter two, this section argues that in *Sex Traps* authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethical discourse for salvation are all present, making it an archetypal womanist sermon.

## Preaching the Cultural Script: Womanist Sermonic

### Rhetorical Responses in the Every Day

This section introduces the second major goal of this chapter, arguing for womanist rhetoric as theory and method using a contemporary womanist preacher and her canonical sermon. Focusing the conversation on Wanda Davis-Turner allows for a centralized authentic voice in the Black Church. With a central rhetor we have a clear persona and situation as outlined in Asante's *Afrocentric Idea*, one who is clearly demonstrated as having an intimacy with the cultural worldviews expressed by womanist theorist as argued in chapter two of this work.<sup>162</sup> Davis-Turner's sermon *Sex Traps* comes at a specific contemporary moment in which she felt led to respond within the context of the prophetic.<sup>163</sup> Davis-Turner mixes multiple cultural scripts in this sermon, and while adhering to the best of each she creates a canonical womanist sermon.<sup>164</sup> With a womanist sense of leadership and straightforward address of problems with creative solutions (evidenced in part four of Walker's definition), Davis-Turner responds to the daily lives of Africana women in local and global ways through their ministries. Her sermons then become texts that respond not only to the global position of women in the Black diaspora, but the local texture of women in African American Christian denominations. Davis-Turner's responses to social problems are grounded in womanist God-talk as a biblical and culturally practical discourse.<sup>165</sup>

*Sex Traps* flawlessly weaves the cultural narratives of women within the sacred biblical text of the New and Old Testament with womanist God-talk, which allows for an articulated voice of Black women in past and present moments. The subsequent discourse is engaging for the women in the audience who are then centered within the

text as powerful children of God. The idea of womanist God-talk argues that Black woman can petition God, hear from God, and directly act on His word. Thus, they become active agents in their own salvation. As the discussion continues to advance, we see the ways in which Davis-Turner utilizes humor, personal appeals, and her knowledge of gendered cultural language to enact womanist God-talk as one element of a womanist sermon.

In the mid to late 1990s, Black women were engaged in ministry in new ways. Statistically, by the end of the 1990s, American seminaries had seen their largest increase in enrollment of women that had ever been recorded.<sup>166</sup> This increase led to the addition of feminist and particularly womanist theology courses as the population of African American women saw the greatest increase. More women were also being ordained into professional full time ministry.<sup>167</sup> Local churches throughout the AACD were also hiring women as senior, associate and executive pastors.

The entrance of more women into professional ministry also meant a change to the types of secular text that now become part of the repartee of Black preaching. Geneva Smitherman, in her text *Talkin That Talk Language, Culture, and Education in African America*, discusses the differences in gendered language in the Black community. She argues that while the sacred and secular are often mixed in the context of the Black sermon, the examples provided are specific to the gender of the speaker. Smitherman argues that the references to songs, films, or forms of the dozens are all gender specific references. A gender specific cultural script guides the ways in which the minister may talk of romantic love, family ties or social justice. This is clear in Davis-Turner's sermon as well. She calls the audience's attention to the ways in which



“we can all get trapped y’all. But ladies, we can trap ourselves.” She places non-verbal stress on “ladies” with a slow rotation of her hips from right to left as she shifts her weight and prepares to walk away from the podium. As she makes careful eye contact, with the women in the auditorium, she marks this moment with continued eye contact, suggesting that a “womanist” teaching moment is nearing. Smitherman states that gendered language such as the use of familiar gender labeling like “bro,” “girl,” “hommie,” “ladies” and “dude,” as well as the use of gender specific terms of endearment like “sweetie,” “baby girl,” “boo” and “honey,” all mark the conversation and employ specific cultural scripts and subsequent discourses in response. Within the context of the sermon, this leads to patterns of call and response that Smitherman argues can also be gender specific. Smitherman ends with the discussion that the success of the preacher at the use of these cultural scripts is dependent on whether they know the gender codes for secular and sacred behavior within the Black community. For researchers, it means that it is not enough to know what is happening in womanist theology, but we must also know what is happening within and around the cultural text.

Within and around Davis-Turner’s text there is a marked shift in the popular culture of African America. Cultural critic and pastor Michael Eric Dyson remarks that the mid-nineties inside and outside of the church saw the benefits and the drawbacks of a post-civil rights world.<sup>168</sup> Hip-hop was changing and R&B was less about class-based outrage or romantic love and more about bling and booty.<sup>169</sup> As ministers of the first generation of hip-hop and funk R&B take to the pulpits, the topics of the post-civil rights Black Church change and broaden in scope. The Black Church needs to locate itself as meaningful and does so with some success and some failure. More than a

sermon about abstinence, *Sex Traps* was a sermon about spiritual health and it offered Black women a message of hope. Delivered during a Full Gospel conference in 1997, this sermon comes before Bynum's *No More Sheets* and asks women to be cognizant of the traps the devil lays.

As a text delivered in an auditorium to tens of thousands, this sermon, like others, contains all of the rhetorical signs of a Black sermon. There are elements of call and response, Black language, cultural scripts and other symbols to locate this text. What sets this sermon apart as womanist are the ways in which womanist rhetorical troupes are employed. We have seen the ways in which Davis-Turner positions herself as an authentic voice within the church, but how does she accomplish this in the context of the sermon? Further, what does she do to demonstrate gender knowledge and ethical discourse on salvation? This next section utilizes the sermon to answer these questions specifically.

### **A Womanist Rhetorical Analysis of Wanda Davis-Turner's *Sex Traps***

In the previous sections, Davis-Turner is presented as a cultural leader and exemplar womanist amongst her peers. Her ability to utilize gendered language and mix cultural scripts of the sacred and the secular as defined above demonstrate her general cultural knowledge as a Black preacher, but how does this make her or her sermon womanist?

My analysis of *Sex Traps* is based on a transcribed sermon text. After viewing and coding the sermon, I engaged Dr. Davis-Turner in an interview. I asked her specifically about her use of the three elements of womanist sermon rhetoric—

authentic womanist voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethical discourse on salvation—I outlined in her sermons. This section focuses on a brief description of the video and analyzes her use of authentic voice as an introduction to her sermon.

The video begins with a brief musical interlude and shots of Davis-Turner preaching. The audience is made aware throughout the interlude that this is a conference sermon. She is shown walking back and forth across the stage. In other scenes, the camera starts behind and above the audience, gaining full view of the auditorium, and moves forward to focus on a full body shot of Davis-Turner standing behind a plexiglass podium. She is wearing a classic first lady outfit: a white skirt suit with gold vertical strips on the front and back of the jacket. After the introductory credits, the video begins with a tight shot of Davis-Turner. The waist level shot features Davis-Turner standing and holding a remote microphone. She is framed against a blue hued backdrop. As the camera opens up, the home audience can see that a traditional pulpit has been assembled with the musicians to her right and her husband, other speakers, ministers and lay leaders to her left.<sup>170</sup>

The home audience enters the sermon with the distinct impression that it has already begun. Davis-Turner dabs her upper lip and the bridge of her nose with a white handkerchief as her voice is brought up over the music and applause. It is clear that the videographer chose to edit out the welcomes and other preliminaries that customarily accompany a speaker of her caliber. The audience then welcomes her and she begins to explain her text. I want to start my analysis with a discussion of her introduction. She begins her sermon by reading her key scripture then moves to a brief analysis. As part of her analysis, she uses gendered language and the cultural script of call and response

to engage her audience in the creation of authentic womanist voice.

For the home audience the sermon begins, “The one-hundred and twenty-fourth division of Psalm sixth through the eighth verses speak prophetically to each of us.”<sup>171</sup> She continues to read the scriptures and after reading them goes into a brief analysis of each one. She explains:

“Although these verses tell us that God didn’t give us to be prey  
and that our soul is escaped out of the snare—and that the snare is  
broken and we are set free—it also says that our help is in the  
name of our Lord. What’s the name of our Lord? (The audience  
responds “Jesus!”). Oh, you wouldn’t convince an imp, much less  
a demon. What’s the name of (slight raise of voice) OUR LORD?  
(The audience’s response is louder, “Jesus!”). (Voice remains  
raised) Oh, say it until the technicians outside can hear you.  
(JESUS!) (Brings voice down to initial speaking tone) Why do we  
need help from the name of our Lord?

She presents herself through this initial call and response pattern and analysis of her chosen text as someone who has studied and received the word of God.

In her introductory analysis of the scriptures she uses gendered language to demonstrate her location within the community of women. She says that while “our souls are escaped, our bodies, our flesh, hasn’t!” Earlier in this chapter I presented the specific linguistic cues. Davis-Turner utilizes gendered language as discussed by Geneva Smitherman.<sup>172</sup> Smitherman argues that verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic cues are all gendered.<sup>173</sup> In this call and response introduction, the audience sees and

hears Davis-Turner's use of nonverbal and paralinguistic gender cues. As she walks heel toe across the pulpit between the first call—"What's the name of our Lord?"—she is erect with a slightly feminine lean as she takes rhythmic, measured steps. During her second call her voice and posture change. She turns to her audience and shifts her weight, preparing to place hand on hip. The camera remains tightly focused, but it is clear that she is slightly right of center on stage. She squares herself to her audience. This posture physically opens her up to the audience. As she chastises her audience with the tone of a mother sister-girl, she provides this warning, "Oh, you wouldn't convince an imp, much less a demon. (She raises her voice) What's the name of OUR LORD?" Davis-Turner successfully uses all three elements of gendered language to enter into a womanist space with her sermon. Her use of call and response signals that she is aware of the cultural scripts and gendered cultural language of her audience. The responses of her audience signal that they accept her uses of gendered cultural language. This initial step is crucial toward authentic voice. It requires that both the speaker and the audience be engaged in the sense making and knowledge building process.

Floyd-Thomas argues that through the process of creating authentic voice the womanist scholar must engage her audience. For the womanist preacher this is done through the initial call and response pairs. As evidenced, Wanda Davis-Turner uses gendered language and cultural scripts to engage her audience in an authenticating moment. This moment is as much about Davis-Turner presenting herself as an authentic voice as it is about the audience. Had Davis-Turner not been successful in her use of call and response pairs as they related to gendered language, she would not have

established herself as an authentic womanist voice.

The second element of authentic voice as we have come to talk about it within this text centers on Walker's definition of womanist as agent and Cooper's idea that Black women are endowed with their own agency as cultural keepers. The idea that women are responsible for themselves and others is not particular to Black women. In fact, it seems to be the one global construct that both womanists and feminists can agree. What is problematized within the discourse between feminist and womanist theologians in particular are the actions and responses to gendered gatekeeping. While womanists seem to view gatekeeping as a necessary part of Walker's idea of community wellness, feminists tends to see this as exclusionary and apolitical. Katie Canon suggests that this same criticism, when brought to bear on feminism, is met with silence and scoff. That for centuries feminists have masqueraded behind sisterhood while holding firm to hegemonic power structures and discourses seems to be of no great consequence. Canon argues that it is white women's insistence on ignoring the ways in which they have benefited from white supremacist ideologies and dominant discourses that make meaningful discourse impossible. It is this very idea that Davis-Turner addresses in the first few minutes of her sermon. Her challenge of dominant discourses positions her as a womanist rhetor almost immediately, although Canon, Walker and others would agree that it is not enough to challenge dominant discourse to be considered a womanist. Rather, it is in the ways in which dominant discourses are challenged.

As we enter Davis-Turner's sermon, we see that she uses authentic voice to challenge dominate Christology, which seeks to limit Black women's access to

salvation. What is jarring in some ways about this is that Davis-Turner opens with a critique of popular culture and dominant discourses of sexuality that vilify Black women as social deviants. The elements of the Black sermon that typically engage the audience in an early call and response pattern have already occurred when the home viewer enters the scene. For this reason, the home viewer is greeted with applause and small responses given, which are central to the audience's participation and acceptance of the text.<sup>174</sup> More so than language, the cultural example locates the sermon as one unique to the African American woman's experience. There has been in African American popular culture a response to dominant discourse about Black women as either asexual or hyper sexual. Within the academy there have been essays, books and births of whole disciplines of study dedicated to these responses. The translation into daily discourse through the sermon is one that is located particularly within the Black women's domain.

As the primary attendants and contributors to the Black Church,<sup>175</sup> Black women have location to voice frustrations, celebrate God's blessings and grieve the sins against them. More importantly, the current fervor of women ministers and theologians has created a safe space for women to learn of their spiritual awakening and liberation. Cannon argues that for a sermon to be womanist it must not only talk about Black women, it must be delivered with the intent of creating a safe space for a healthy spiritual relationship that acknowledges the unique cultural locations of Black womanhood.<sup>176</sup> It is with the cultural examples offered by Davis-Turner that the audience receives its spiritual calling to a womanist rhetorical response. One of the central examples in Davis-Turner's sermon is the use of self and past sexual activity to

illustrate the trap that sex is. The argument she articulates is that Black women's spiritual energy and health is caught, yes, "trapped" in sex. She argues that whether this is in hetero or homosexual relationships there is a trap, and that trap allows for a level of physical and spiritual decay. At one point, in discussing the traps that the devil will employ, she suggests that lying about the relationship creates a larger gap. She says, "Women, you can't be laying up under each other either, and sayin' 'that's my auntie' or 'she and I, we just good friends.'"<sup>177</sup> This is less about the morality of homosexuality for Davis-Turner. This is about the extent to which the devil will go to corrupt the spiritual health of women to introduce what she calls a "cancerous growth" that is so invasive it cannot be removed by prayer alone. Her example of homosexuality is not one that is often employed in sermons of this type, but it is noteworthy for analysis as she does what is common in Black sermons, which is to treat homosexuality as a tool or a trick of the devil to lead individuals astray. For Davis-Turner, this trap is the most hideous as women often come to it through profound hurt, psychological abuse and weakness. She asks the women in the audience that are in this particular sex trap to ask not for forgiveness, but a profound spiritual healing, and she argues that it is within this request for healing that women can be released from this trap. Not wanting to stop at a simple request for healing, she asks young women in particular that are in the audience to not allow the devil to lead them to this sexual trap as they may be tempted to sleep with women to avoid the risk of pregnancy. She laments that she has heard far too many testimonies of young women who enter these relationships not out of a love for women but as a way to experience the physicality of sex without the danger of pregnancy. What is profound about this



revelation is that she ends it with a loud, lyrical chant: “IT’S A TRAP! The devil wants to trap you.”

Her obvious concern for the spiritual wellbeing of Black women does not allow her to only use heterosexual examples. For her, sex traps are not only about the physical act of sex or the verbal act of lying about the realities of a relationship. She is also concerned with the way the devil works with the emotional and psychological location of sex as well. The best examples ministers can offer are often ones from their personal lives. Within this context Davis-Turner is no different. She shares with the audience a time before she was married when she was engaged to her husband. They had traveled to the city where his family lived and were there to meet them prior to the wedding. She describes the suite she stayed in and the late night call she made to her fiancé after he had dropped her at the hotel. In her tone and body language the audience gets a feel for the extent to which the sex trap works. It is in this moment that she sets up for her audience not that it is just the devil out to get you, but that sometimes the devil is you. She articulates in her example a reasoning she engaged in before having made the call. She reasoned that since they had waited and since she was a good Christian woman and he was a good Christian man and they were to be married in a matter of months, this was not a sexual indiscretion or a trap but rather a physical move to cement a spiritual relationship. She asked the audience to be with her in this moment. She asked them to identify with her the trap that she had laid for herself. She ended by narrating for the audience what would have been her fiancé’s response to her request to return. She tells the audience that had she made the call and the request that she would not be standing before them happily married. That rather this one night of

reasoned passion would have ended a relationship built for the glory of God and the encouragement of His kingdom. Davis-Turner argues that in her mind this was a moment that she could have allowed the fire and the candles and the music-setting mood to sweep her away; however, the trap was set by her own desires. Part of the trap of sex is “our own willingness to be trapped” she tells her audience. In her narrative she is careful not only to describe the cultural cues of a romantic sexual encounter, but she adds lyrical and physical emphasis with a small swaying of her hips as she crones “Lutha was singin’ his song y’all.”<sup>178</sup> The audience is there with her and understands the psychological location as they too can identify such moments in their own past. She places those personal moments within a contextual framework of society’s pension to use sex to sell, persuade, and distract. As she closes her sermon, she brings her audience to tears with her call to be set free from sex traps. For her audience, this womanist sermon locates the grace and forgiveness of God not in the far off, but in the mouths of these women. Each of them can become honest with themselves and be released from the traps.

The goal of spiritual healing is met through empowering women in this moment not to feel that they have to “out” themselves for public humiliation in order to be healed or released. Rather, she closes with a call to women to meet God where they are and to call out to Him and articulate to Him their desire to be set free. The power of this sermon is not just that she deals frankly with hetero and homosexual sex traps, but that she locates her sermon within a womanist response to social and religious dogmas that require women to carry the brunt of sexual deviance not simply in physical but psychological and spiritual ways. She urges her audience to find spiritual release from

these traps. That this release need only be requested of God to be granted is central. Within the context of her closing remarks there is a process of spiritual empowerment and healing. She argues that this is not about show or about society's ability to label women, but it is about their individual healing. The personal and spiritual space created and extended to women in this moment is key to the ways in which womanist sermons are delivered and constructed. There is care to allow for multiple areas of healing and growth and acknowledgement that the sermon is but the beginning for those that take God up on this offer to grow.

### **... After Words on Contemporary Preaching Women**

Womanist theology is outlined as a discourse through which African American women define self and self-awareness. Utilizing historic and literary figures I discuss and define womanist theology as within the conditions set forth by Cannon and others. What womanist theology allows is a centralized naming of specific cultural context that feed the construction of Black womanhood. The construction of womanhood is central to usages of womanist theology. Dr. Wanda Davis-Turner's *Sex Traps* uses the cultural knowledge and scripts of Black women to employ the ethic of voice.

Wanda Davis-Turner, Juanita Bynum and Vashti McKenzie each utilized biblical text to articulate a vision of Black womanhood that is liberatory. Each of them presents a self through sermon that is centrally understood within the cultural script of the Black Church. Throughout Davis-Turner's sermons, she utilized common call and response patterns and gender language that reflect her authentic womanist voice. As this analysis began with the first theme of womanhood, it concerns itself primarily with

the cultural authority Davis-Turner is given and executes as a minister to bring about a true and lasting understanding of the centrality of healthy Black womanhood to the community through her employment of the ethic of voice.

## Chapter 6

### Epilogue: Conclusions in Context

We have stories to tell and to teach. Those stories are our experience. That experience is our knowing. That knowing is our struggle. That struggle is our survival. That survival is our strength. That strength is our center.

—Olga Davis, *Centering Ourselves*

Every journey has an end. Or perhaps it is better to say every journey has a pause—a point at which you stop and look back over the distance traveled. The purpose of this epilogue in the context of this dissertation is to do just that: to acknowledge the distance traveled in the space available. There is still much remaining work to be done on womanist rhetoric. In this dissertation, I have only scratched the surface. In embarking on this project my goal was to engage in womanist rhetorical theory building using the tools of womanist scholars and African American intellectual tradition both in and outside of the Black Church. In using the Black Church and African American women preachers, I am able to situate the rhetoric within a pre-existing rhetorical tradition. This provides a multitude of benefits and challenges. In this epilogue I address both the benefits and challenges of theorizing womanist rhetoric from this space, as well as what I see as the most viable ways in which this work can continue.

I end this project where it began with the narrative of Black women. In recent months I have had the opportunity to discuss my dissertation project with multiple

audiences. Their engagement with and support for the work has varied mostly due to their interest in and knowledge of womanist theology or theory. When I have spoken to my grandmother, I have often talked of my work in terms of “the way we know things as women.” She has often responded with stories that illustrate what she has learned in her years. In listening to her talk, I can hear her theories about her own life as she acknowledges her resistance to normative discourses that sought to limit the access she or her children and grandchildren had to a happy and successful life. Her experiences working in the community in the late sixties through the mid-eighties provide a narrative for social justice. As she speaks herself into existence through the retelling of her own stories, she engages in the ethic of voice everyday. She authenticates her story for herself, her daughter and her granddaughters, reifying the idea that as Black women engage in theory they engage in a discourse that is first and foremost about locating the self within the cultural narrative of the community. As the above quote by Olga Davis testifies, “[w]e have stories to tell and to teach.”<sup>179</sup>

### **Chapter Summary**

As I stated in chapter one, this dissertation advances womanist rhetoric as viable for the analysis of Black women’s daily discourses. Womanist rhetoric goes beyond womanist theory and beyond womanist theology to get at the root of the cultural meanings within the deep cultural spaces African American women inhabit daily. For this reason, I have located our discussion in the primacy of the Black Church. As chapter two presents, this is a historic and cultural location with which the majority of African American people interact on a daily basis. It is important to the

analysis to present the multiple histories of the Black Church so as to understand the continued relationship that Black women have with this humanly flawed but divinely inspired institution known as the Black Church. This allows me to present a historical location from which a clear trajectory emerges. Locating this discussion of womanist rhetoric within the Black Church allows me to utilize the largest body of research (that done by womanist theologians) and the widest body of critique (also done by womanist theologians). Why is it important to acknowledge the Black Church in this way? The answers are complex, however, they are also transparent to some degree. As the largest and most powerful institution in Black America, the Black Church influences the daily lives of Black America on a weekly basis. Since its inception, the Black Church has functioned as more than a place to express religiosity. It has also been a place to express social, intellectual and political freedoms. The men and women that worked as laypeople and as ordained ministers strived to maintain a continuity that was necessary for the survival of the community. This does not discount the power of God in the daily life of the Black Church. I in no way want to create the assumption that the church is a humanly constructed institution without holy and divine virtues or manifestations. Rather, the Black Church must be seen as created out of the desire of African Americans to have a safe space of worship, one where the color of one's skin did not dictate the fervor of one's spirit or the right of one to pray.

Within the contemporary church this historical narrative is not lost. There is still a fervent desire to seek solace in worship. There is also a sense that while specific choices regarding racial uplift may have been made during the first century of the Black Church that limited the roles of women as ministers and leaders, there has

always been opposition to those limitations. Within the structure of the contemporary church, particularly mega churches which concentrate financial, social and cultural resources in specific ways, women who are able to gain positions of power and prominence are still far too few. However, it is this reality of scattered opportunities and response to the spiritual “call to preach” that is interesting. How then does one reconcile these seemingly competing narratives? What happens when women are called to preach but the church seems less willing to give them the opportunity? Delores Williams concludes in her *Sisters in the Wilderness* that what Black women engaged in was a fight for social justice both inside and outside of the church.<sup>180</sup> That the church became a site for rhetorical location is interesting as it offers a view of the realities of Christian life in daily practice. Asking questions of the rhetorical continuity of womanist discourse within the church provides an excellent location. As I stated earlier, there is no other institution that shapes Black life more, or with which Black women come into greater contact. What this allows for is a multilayered theorizing of womanist rhetoric.

This multilayered theorizing takes shape in chapter three as I seek to define womanist rhetoric as a social discourse. Womanist rhetoric, as with all formal discourses of knowledge, is rooted within the daily lives of all individuals’ yearning for knowledge. We all look for ways in which we can express ourselves and engage with our surroundings. To this end, we involve ourselves in specific projects of knowledge and theorizing. Arguing from a position that states that formal theorizing of rhetoric is the final frontier for organizing knowledge, allows me to get at some of my most interesting questions. What drives this dissertation is a fundamental interest in the



organization of Black women's cultural knowledge as both a lived (organic) and intellectual (academic) pursuit. In other words, I seek to acknowledge the cultural and intellectual paradigm shift that increased discourse by and about womanist scholarship creates. When I embody womanist knowledge in my academic discourse I engage in this very shift. It is a way to assert and validate a specific lived narrative that is one which informs scholarship.

Fundamentally, this chapter theorizes a location for womanist rhetoric that is based on cultural knowledge that leads to organically produced and employed scripts and definitions of what counts as womanist. This daily process is brought into academia in the form of Black women and men who employ womanist cultural scripts and investigate social, historical, and cultural locations through a womanist lens. These everyday discourses become formalized traditions of ethics, epistemology and theology, finally producing formal womanist rhetoric that then regenerates as cultural knowledge, thus remaining organically cyclical. This cultural and intellectual location springs forth a space for theorizing that is specifically located for this dissertation within the Black Church.

The final discussion on the role of ministers within the African American community provides the last tenet for this analysis. It is not possible to understand the products of culture without first gaining insight into the culture that gives rise to the product. In discussing the general role and power of Black ministers and preachers as well as their cultural location, it is possible to articulate a womanist discourse and knowledge creation process that brings forth varying perspectives within the same culture. Womanist, like Blackness, is a nuanced identity. It is compounded by varying

identity bound experiences. For example, I was dining recently with a white female colleague who was telling me of a close friend of hers. This friend is also an academic and self-identified womanist who recently took a trip South to find out more about her family heritage. My colleague said that her friend had a perception changing moment when she found, in county documents, that since the late 1870s her family had been land owners. My colleague said her friend was shocked and reported that she would now have to change her thinking about herself and her sense of identity. I tell this narrative as it relates to the idea that womanist rhetoric is multilayered and multidimensional—that as a cultural discourse it is a fluid and constantly moving dialogue. Like all discourses, it is culturally bound and identified by those engaged in maintaining it, but it is not something that can be captured and tied to a single peg.

This is why I engage womanist rhetoric in relation to the Black Church and Black preaching, but I do not leave it there. In chapter three, my inclusion of *Beloved* functions to present the very fluidity of this discourse. The way in which Morrison utilizes the narrative troupes of voice common during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in slave and conversion narratives is engrossing, so much so that a future project is needed to look at the rhetorical arguments created in the conversion narratives of eighteenth and nineteenth century African American women. These narratives, I surmise, do exactly what we see in Morrison's fictional account. They speak into existence the lives and bodies of Black women subjugated as chattel through slavery, yet are subject to western forms of femininity that do not apply to their subject realities. This forces Black women to create a moral narrative within the context of a Christian ethic that is both empowering and uplifting, yet meets them where they are.

In an analysis of *Beloved*, we see the character Sethe creating this moral position for herself, which takes into account her positionalities as a black slave woman who becomes a free Black woman through acts of violence.<sup>181</sup> Therefore, she is able to liberate herself physically and spiritually through the discursive act of speaking herself into existence in the telling of her narrative. Through the character of Sethe, Morrison allows the reader to locate the three elements of womanist rhetoric—authentic voice, gendered cultural knowledge and ethical discourse for salvation. Similarly, the narratives of Jarena Lee and Maria W. Stewart allowed their contemporary audiences to engage Black women in a context of their own design as it fought the normative context of their day. Each of these women speaks to the modern womanist rhetorical theories. Lee and Stewart speak themselves into existence not only as women but as preachers and speakers, and in doing so they create a space for womanist rhetorical analysis and discourse.

In chapter 4, “Preacher Politics: Nineteenth Century African American Women Canonize Womanist Rhetoric,” my argument for womanist rhetoric as a specific genre of rhetorical analysis takes a historical turn. Stacey Floyd-Thomas argues that in the memory of womanist narratives there is a moral truth that is centered on the right of African women to inherit the kingdom of God. She continues and argues that it is in the recovering of historical narratives that we see the truth of this for African American women. Utilizing her framework, I argue that in the assertion of these women’s right to proclaim the gospel, they set a precedent for womanist sermonizing. The ways in which Lee and Stewart simultaneously engage and systematically address their detractors is worthy of note. Intimately aware of their opposition both in and out of the

church, they engage in the creation of an ethic of voice that is viable not only for themselves but for their communities. Lee and Stewart use the tools of the conversion narrative to assert rhetorics of social justice through the church. This also cements, in very real ways, the intimate relationship that African American women would continue to have with the Black Church as a location for liberation and justice discourse.

In the beginning of this discussion my analysis of literary and historic texts allows me to construct an argument that is in keeping with the womanist organic cultural discourse rather than the western tradition of a linear discourse. My purpose is to demonstrate the fluidity of womanist rhetoric as a cultural discourse; a discourse that has only recently been structured within the academy, but has always existed as a way to organize cultural knowledge and daily realities. This allows for a movement back to the contemporary moment in an analysis of Wanda Davis-Turner's sermon. What is truly unique about this sermon is the way in which she acknowledges the ways that Black women still find themselves under "kettles and pots."<sup>182</sup> Wanda Davis-Turner provides in her sermon *Sex Traps* an example of how the three elements of womanist rhetoric work together in the contemporary moment.

Wanda Davis-Turner, through her sermon *Sex Traps*, presents herself as an authentic womanist voice within the Black Church. She repeatedly acknowledges her roots in the Black Church by recounting her role as a First Lady and her own conversion as a small child. She employs the womanist ethic of voice wherein African American women can speak their moral character into existence. Speaking back to what she perceives as a loss of grounded spiritual narratives in the Black community, she calls on the women in her audience to be delivered and healed from the emotional

hurts that cause them to lose sight of their value in the kingdom of God. While one could get sidetracked by her uses of normative Christian discourse, particularly while speaking of homosexuality, what is most interesting on closer inspection is her call to women in homosexual relationships to stop lying about the context of the relationship. Rather than condemn the relationship, she condemns the motives and the narrative that surround them, saying, “I seen too often sisters engaged in these relationships to escape hurt. That’s not a reason gal!” Her call to women to engage in healthy relationships with each other and with men, returns us to the original tenets of womanist ideology. Davis-Turner’s sermon comes at a time when the community seems to be spiraling, having lost its ability to maintain equilibrium while under constant attack.

What she presents is a womanist view of sex and sexuality within womanist ethical discourse for salvation. Within the womanist Christian ethic, there is a sense that sex and sexuality can be healthy and spiritual. In her book, she takes even greater pains to stress the ways in which sexuality is an ordained identity, arguing that God created the whole of our humanity for us to express praise. This is what makes Davis-Turner’s sermon unique. She is not condemning sexuality as is often seen in normative Christian ethics. Instead, she functions in a womanist Christian ethic wherein sexuality is a gift from God. This idea allows Black women to have a healthy view of both their spiritual and physical bodies as made in their entirety as a reflection of God. Ending the dissertation with this analysis leaves the doors for exploring womanist rhetoric wide open. There are still more questions and inquiries. In this next section I will explore some of the contributions the current inquiry makes and the connections to future work.

### **Where Do We Go From Here? Current Implications and Future Projects**

Within this dissertation, I have argued for the construction of womanist rhetoric as a genre. My argument takes into account the existence of formalized discourses that count as womanist rhetoric. There are canonical texts in literature, theology and history. There are iconic speeches collected for their historic and social significance. What is missing are the ways in which communication as a field contributes a nuanced view. What I love about communication is the totality of our view as a discipline. Within this garden the flowers of womanism truly flourish. There is a recognition in the text *Centering Ourselves* of the myriad ways in which African American women and men engage in womanist ways of knowing in their daily and academic pursuits.

What the organization of womanist rhetoric as a genre does within communication is provide a space for these ideas to nourish and nurture one another. Rather than live as isolated ideas, there is a collection of those ideas that form an academic sky under which these flowers bloom. The implications of this are far reaching. The questions that can be asked move within and outside. They burst forth in a fluidity of present past future that is organic and cyclical. It allows the cultural ways of knowing that have supported African American women for centuries to enter the academy with them. In this way, womanist rhetoric is not lost from the womanist theorist. Both retain their cultural roots as narratives of strength and survival. Engagements in this meta-narrative allow for questions that relate to the past, present and future moments in which African American women and men find themselves. This type of analysis allows new questions to be asked about the performance of identities, organizations that purport specific notions of Black femininity, and the ways in which

technologies impact discourses. Entering into these dialogues through this location of womanist rhetoric allows scholars to identify the meta-narrative at work. This contributes to communication as it opens wider the lens on African American discursive communities.

What womanist rhetoric offers are tools for analysis. With womanist rhetoric, we can now begin to see the ways in which Black women construct a narrative that speaks back to the limitations of normative discourse. This is what I believe Patricia Hill Collins starts. In participating in this discourse, I seek to acknowledge my forbearers who have already cleared a path and whose voices beckon me forward. It is upon their authority I stand.

Dissertation projects function to advance knowledge in specific ways. The limits of space, however, necessitate a specific sort of argument. What I see this discussion doing is furthering the already existing discussion on womanist rhetoric. Is my goal to create a genre single handedly? No. My goal is to acknowledge and speak into existence that which is already there. By engaging in womanist rhetorical critique I am able to extend a discourse on Black women's lives within which I am always enmeshed. It is a rare and rarefied thing. This discourse matters in communication. Womanist realities are the positionalities from which millions of Americans perform their daily lives and to understand that is to understand them. I end this project with a future. There is yet more to uncover. Like a garden there is more to plant and to cultivate. The ideas are out there and the discourses are spoken daily.

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*Notes for Chapter 1 – Womanist Beginnings*

1. The emphases of all caps and italics are that of the author.

2. Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice From the South*. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-century Black Women Writers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

3. The Black Church is the only institution in America that was founded by African men and women. In the later sections of this chapter and subsequent chapters I go into great detail on the significance of this foundation for womanist rhetoric in the American context.

4. For the purposes of this project, I focus my comments on womanist rhetoric within the African American cultural context. This allows for a singular cultural framework that is understood by most readers as the first frame of reference for womanist theory. Later in the dissertation and subsequent chapters, the narrative history of womanist rhetoric as a diasporic discourse will be discussed in limited fashion as it relates to the growth of the Black Mega Church and global ministries.

5. Layli Phillips, "Introduction," in *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xix-lv; Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas, "Introduction," in *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 1-14;



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Cheryl J. Sanders, "Introduction," in *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 9-17.

6. See specifically Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006). She provides an excellent discussion on the academic genealogy of womanist theology. She argues that it is within the context of academic theology that womanist theory gets its first true assessments as theory, method and practice. In so doing, she argues that these scholars have created a praxis for womanist ethics that extends out of the confines of academia and returns to womanist roots of community and social justice.

7. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

8. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1903); *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

9. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

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10. Ibid.

11. Both Mother Bethel Church and Abyssinian Baptist Church continue to thrive today and would be considered Mega Churches. Complete histories on both can be found in a number of places. For a brief early history of Mother Bethel Church, see W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*. For a brief early history of Abyssinian Baptist Church, see W.E.B. DuBois, *Du Bois on Religion* and [www.abyssinian200.org](http://www.abyssinian200.org).

12. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). It is important to note the year; while I reference the centennial reprint of this text, DuBois originally published this study in 1899. This is significant particularly of his discussion of Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia. The church had celebrated its centennial ten years before DuBois was commissioned by his employer, the University of Pennsylvania, to conduct a sociological study of African American life in urban Philadelphia. This study is significant in a number of ways that I will not enter into here. What is most important for this study is his systematic ethnography of the “Negro Church” in Philadelphia. It provides the basic groundwork to make claims in chapter one that are further detailed and explored in chapter three about the dualistic

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history of the Black Church as a social institution and keeper of oral traditions for both men and women.

13. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources For A Constructive Black Theology*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

14. Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

15. It is impossible to get an accurate listing of all the mega churches supported by TBN or that support TBN. On their website they have links to several churches and ministries of prominent African American churches and leaders. The links generally go to specific programming that has aired on TBN in the last sixteen months.

16. This claim is based on multiple sources including Dash and Chapman, *The Shape of Zion*, as well as the denominational websites of all the major groups that report predominant to significant African American membership. For a complete listing of denominational groups that make up the Black Church, see chapter three.

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17. Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

18. It is extraordinary to see the sharp increase in availability of text over the last ten years. Not only can full video and audio texts be found on the websites of individual churches, but searches in iTunes and YouTube turn up hundreds of texts as well. In many cases these are contemporary texts. However, some historic (those produced thirty or more years ago) and famous texts (those delivered by Revs. James Cleveland and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) can also be found.

19. Both women spoke for mixed gender and race audiences. For nineteenth century women this is a huge accomplishment. See Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread Of Hope: The History Of Black Women In America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

20. This claim is based on Maria Stewart's public addresses not her ministerial career see Maria W. Stewart and Marilyn Richardson, Introduction to *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Blacks in the diaspora. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

21. Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

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22. Ibid.

23. Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Stephen C. Raser and Michael I. N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

24. This dissertation does not attempt to address all churches, faith traditions or denominations. I recognize that this limits the ability to explore the various ways in which womanist rhetoric functions for women of African descent in Muslim and Jewish faiths, as well as other Christian traditions like Catholicism. The vast body of work specific to African American religious experience and African American womanist experience tends to focus on Christian faith traditions of specific denominations. The most notable are Baptist, Methodist and Protestant. Additionally, Wanda Davis-Turner and the other ministers discussed in this dissertation come from one of these three faith traditions. Finally, the lack of opportunities for pastoral leadership, professional expression and or exhortation in the faith tradition leads me to exclude faith traditions in which women's roles are generally limited. A future study that does not focus on womanist sermonic rhetoric may include other

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faith traditions.

25. Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 67-89; Stephen C. Raser and Michael I. N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 61-77.

26. Ibid.

27. Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

28. Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice From the South*. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-century Black Women Writers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

29. Ibid.

30. Chapter one introduces the concepts and ideas advanced in the following chapters. By defining the BMC and its role in the Black diaspora, we are able to locate the arguments advanced here within a specific context. Organizing the dissertation around a specific individual allows for an exemplar of African American global ministry that is recognizable to those that participate in the Black Church today as well as those concerned with and

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interested in the alternatives to the Christian Right, which could be read as the “Christian White.” Davis-Turner provides in life and deed an alternative reading of popular Christianity that is crucial to the discourse of America.

*Notes for Chapter 2 – The Black Church*

31. Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

32. “American Project” is a term that is repeated throughout African American Studies scholarship. It refers to the goals, dreams, imagined outcomes and disconnected realities of an America that continues to exclude people of color. The systematic exclusion of people of color, specifically African Americans, has made the America of the founders little more than an incomplete project. For specific reading on this, look to Michael E. Dyson’s *The Michael E. Dyson Reader*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and Cornel West’s *Democracy Matters*.

33. This is a significant statement—one that cannot adequately be justified with simple citation. The reason being, too few scholars of African American history and culture articulate their reasoning behind privileging one narrative

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over the other. The earliest examples of this deliberate choice articulated in scholarship, however, come from W.E.B. DuBois. While conducting his ethnographic research for *Philadelphia Negro*, originally published in 1899, and again in his comprehensive works *The Negro Church*, (Atlanta University Press, 1903) and *The Negro*, (New York: Holt, 1915), DuBois articulates his reasoning for placing both narratives of Black religion within his text. He argued that the existence of specific congregations as well as the self-reports contained in slave narratives and conversion narratives required the use of both narratives of the history of the Black Church. However, he referred to it as “Negro religious expression” throughout all three texts.

34. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1903).

35. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). I have gone back and forth on the use of terms and labels for Black people in this project. I have settled on a thought that DuBois expresses in *Philadelphia Negro*. No term is enough for the whole interpretation of the complexities of racial and ethnic identity. Second, that whichever of the three terms that have come to be common place in academic writing by and about



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Black peoples for the last two centuries shall be capitalized. In 1899, when DuBois published *Philadelphia Negro*, he states that “eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter.” In 2008, I believe that nearly forty million Americans rate a capital letter and the acknowledgement of our past.

36. Fredric Douglass, “Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ,” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 100-109; Peter Randolph, “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible,” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 63-68; Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

37. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

38. There are two key discussions on this. The first is John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). The second is Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Both provide a useful discussion on the impact of white travel writers and missionaries with abolitionist leanings. Blassingame provides the more in-

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depth discussion of the two commentaries.

39. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

40. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

41. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources For A Constructive Black Theology*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

42. The slave narrative is a specifically constructed text. It is constructed chiefly as a rhetorical argument against slavery; it also argues for the humanity of African peoples. Nearly all such narratives include a conversion narrative as well as a discovery of human worth and dignity. The conversion narrative is generally understood as a personal narrative of religious, primarily Christian conversion. One of the most comprehensive looks at the conversion narrative of African Americans is V. P. Franklin's *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths*.

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Franklin makes the argument that as literature and intellectual writing, the slave narrative is the only original indigenous literature of the United States.

43. Milton C. Sernett, "Introduction," in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985).

44. Randolph, "Plantation Churches," 64.

45. I end this brief history of the southern roots here, but this is not to ignore the fact that there is a documented history of the Black Church in the South that mirrors the northern history. In South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia, there was an independent Black Church movement that established churches for the benefit of African worshipers in 1773 and continued until the post-Revolutionary War era, Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 80.

46. I use the term Africans here as it is used and understood by authors past and present in discussing African American communities of pre-Revolutionary War northern colonies that subsequently become the northern states in post-Revolution to Civil War America.

47. As the cultural center of African American life they supported the underlying ideology that while you can put someone out of a church, no person could exclude another from heaven. Hence the sentiment "Can't put me out my Father's heaven."

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48. I use both print and online primary sources. Online primary sources are defined as the official websites created by the churches. I define my use of secondary online sources as those constructed by state and federal agencies, educational institutions and historical societies.

49. A great deal of information can be found specifically about the trailblazing leadership of women in the AME tradition. While significant works have been written by and about these women, it is interesting to note that they often make light of the denominational heritage of the AME affiliation of these women. Perhaps the best volume to address this is Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

50. Lerone Bennett, Jr, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1982).

51. The AECST. "About Us." African Episcopal Church St. Thomas <http://www.aecst.org/about.htm> (accessed March 6, 2008); Richard Allen, "The Life Experience and Gospel Labors" in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 139-154.

52. Richard Allen, "The Life Experience and Gospel Labors" in *Afro-*

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*American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett

(Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 139-154.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. The AECST. "About Us." African Episcopal Church St. Thomas <http://www.aecst.org/about.htm> (accessed March 6, 2008); Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen: To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America: Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Color in the United States* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960). Ulle's dissertation notes the start of the Free African Society as before the date that the members were removed from St. George's. This is agreed upon by some sources but not all. Robert F. Ulle, "A History of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church, 1794-1865" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1986) 26-31. A definitive source is DuBois' *Philadelphia Negro*, upon which Ulle also relies.

56. Ibid.

57. In 1794, African Episcopal Church St. Thomas was dedicated under the Episcopal Church. In contrast, Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal

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Church was dedicated in the same year but becomes a separate denomination refusing to be governed by the oppressive and demeaning elders that had removed its members from St. George's Methodist Church in 1787. For further study, Robert F. Ulle "A History of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church, 1794-1865" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1986).

58. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 16.

59. Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

60. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 16.

61. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Duke: Duke University Press, 1990).

62. This is not to undervalue the important contributions of the Nation of Islam, Catholicism and other religious sects to the contemporary understanding of African American religious communities. I have chosen not to include them as a means of narrowing the definition as well as staying within the discussions on Black religious life that have been traditionally canonized.

63. DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*.

64. Allen, *The Life Experience*; Ulle, *A History of St. Thomas*, 26–40.

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65. The Abyssinian Baptist Church. <http://www.abyssinian200.org>

(accessed February 6, 2008).

66. Dash and Chapman, *The Shape of Zion*.

67. Ibid.

*Notes for Chapter 3 – Constructing Womanist Rhetoric*

68. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1970).

69. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

70. Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1982).

71. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (Routledge, 1994).

72. I continually refer to organic intellectual. I employ this term using the argument Cornel West articulates as the common tradition of Black Intellectual work. He argues that intellectualism is not restricted to academia. He argues that the most engaging intellectual work grows out of the community and is theorizing for personal and communal survival in an oppressive social system.

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This he applies directly to the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and expands to socially conscious Black intellectuals, preachers and others whose daily work involves a praxis of survival. See especially Cornel West, "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual" in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999).

73. Cultural Scripts includes linguistic, nonverbal, identity, social, and historic narratives that guide the common public and private discourses of social agents within their given cultures. See specifically Rona Halualani's *In the Name of Hawaiians*, Ronald Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* and Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*.

74. Let me be clear, I could have chosen any setting. I stated in chapter two that the Black Church is the only institution formally constructed by and for African American expressions of not just religious and spiritual self but the whole self. For this reason, it is a valuable cultural location through which to contextualize womanist discourse, particularly given the breadth of work by womanist theologians.

75. Start with Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. The translation by Kennedy also includes excellent notes on the role of rhetoric in modern liberal arts education as well as its roles in the Greek, Roman and Egyptian education of Aristotle's



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day.

76. I am inclined to go with the traditional understanding and view of rhetoric as the third school in the cannon of liberal arts. For a more detailed discussion on the history of the liberal arts and an informative reading on the etymology of the term, see the *Oxford English Dictionary* and David Wagner, *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1983), 6-8.

77. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Duke University Press, 2008).

78. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

79. I use the term Black feminist in this section because it is the term Collins employs throughout *Black Feminist Thought*. Within the book, however, she acknowledges a womanist argument that is more inclusive than what is typical of Black feminists. The 2000 edition of *Black Feminist Thought* acknowledges the need to employ the holistic positionalities that womanism privileges. This is in specific regard to womanist scholarship's tendency to espouse the value of experiences of oppression and liberation of women, men and children.

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80. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, xi-xii.

81. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

85. There are several key scholars who were part of the start of the womanist caucus at American Academy of Religion. There have been in their journal and conference symposia discussions on the foundation and inception of the caucus. For further reading, see Katie Cannon, *Katie's Cannon*; Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*; Monica A. Coleman, "Must I Be Womanist?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22 (2006): 85-96, as well as the responses to this article, particularly from Cannon appearing in the same issue.

86. Alice Walker, *Inside Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

87. Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

88. Ibid.

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89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (American Academy of Religion academy series, no. 64. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

92. Ibid.

93. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

94. Cultural Community in this moment constitutes the womanist audience, and how those individuals share cultural scripts, gendered knowledge and narratives that provide the context for meaning.

95. Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

96. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper as a Resource for a Theological Anthropology of Voice* (Boston: Harvard University, 1991).

97. Ibid.

98. Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 16-23.

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99. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987).

100. Ibid.

*Notes for Chapter 4 – Preacher Politics*

101. Maria Stewart, *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart Presented to the First African Baptist Church & Society, of the City of Boston* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835).

102. I say “choices” here deliberately. In the letters and autobiography of Bishop Richard Allen to Jarena Lee, there is a clear back and forth engagement between the two of them about the rights and abilities of Black women to preach the Gospel. Later, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McCloud Bethune and Ida B. Wells, among others, would engage African American male leaders in a discourse about their deliberate moves to exclude Black women from visible leadership roles both in the church and elsewhere. Each of these women expresses concern over the eagerness of men to put race over gender in the fight for equity.

103. Dwight N. Hopkins, and George C. L. Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources For A*

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*Constructive Black Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men: The W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1998) .

104. Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread Of Hope: The History Of Black Women In America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

105. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and published for the author, 1849).

106. V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

107. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

108. Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*.

109. Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*; Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience*.

110. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience*.

111. Ibid.

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112. Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

113. Each state determined the ages and years of release based on the use of slaves and the value of them to the local and state economy. See Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson, 1982); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

114. I use the term "sermon notes" lightly here. There are no surviving sermons written by Lee and limited suggestion that she was inclined to write out her sermons. In fact, her autobiography suggests that she tended to preach as led by the Holy Spirit and would speak from a given text extemporaneously with little preparation outside of spiritual meditation.

115. Jarena Lee. *Religious Experience*.

116. Jarena Lee. *Religious Experience*. While some scholars fix grammar and spelling errors, I have chosen to leave them as they are reflexive of the

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differences in grammar and spelling rules that are applied today versus those applied in 1849 when Lee wrote her text.

117. This is taken directly from Lee's autobiography. In researching this particular scripture, I found it useful to maintain her source styling, as I did not find this same scripture in modern interpretations of the Bible.

118. Catherine Brekins in *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) argues that Lee was following what had quickly become the tradition among women preachers in their conversion narratives, which was to downplay any sense that in preaching the word of God these women were acting outside of the norm of woman's role as meek or humble.

119. While Stewart is often forthcoming in her biography, she did not clarify as to who these others were. It is suspected that they were close personal friends, as she continues to discuss close family members for a decade or more.

120. Maria W. Stewart and Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Blacks in the diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

121. Maria W. Stewart and Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart*,

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*America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 127-128.

122. Ibid.

123. Maria W. Stewart, *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart Presented to the First African Baptist Church & Society, of the City of Boston* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835); Maria W. Stewart and Richardson Marilyn, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, Blacks in the Diaspora. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

124. Maria W. Stewart, *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart Presented to the First African Baptist Church & Society, of the City of Boston* (Boston: Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 52-53.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid.

127. Maria W. Stewart, *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*, 51-56.

128. For more in-depth reading, see Ronald Jackson's *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

*Notes for Chapter 5 – Womanist Sermonic Rhetoric*



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129. Wanda Davis-Turner, telephone conversation with author, August 26, 2007.

130. Lyndrey A. Niles, "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching." (*Journal of Black Studies* 15, no. 1, 1984: 41-52); In George Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Traditions from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) there are four types of sermons presented. This reference employs the "missionary sermon," whose primary goal is conversion. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 155.

131. Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

132. Cheryl J. Sanders, Introduction to *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 11-12.

133. Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

134. See Ulle as he discusses the roles of civic leadership open to leaders of St. Thomas and Mother Bethel within the greater Philadelphia community. This included their local African community and the white community. Robert F. Ulle, "A History of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church, 1794-1865" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1986).

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135. Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).
136. See chapter two of this dissertation for the historical discussion on Black women preachers.
137. Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).
138. Ibid.
139. Peter Randolph, "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible," in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 63-68.
140. In chapter three my discussion of the start of northern churches eludes to this as both the founders of Mother Bethel and St. Thomas were key civic leaders and business leaders instrumental in the creation of the Black middle class in post-Revolution Philadelphia. For more on this, read Elijah Anderson's introduction to W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). Also, preachers as political leaders are not only a common occurrence since the mid-1700 in Black America, but they have often been written about. For continued investigation, see Michael Eric Dyson, *The*

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*Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004); Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004); West, Cornel. *Prophetic Fragments*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988); Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion Leadership and Life in Black Churches*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

141. Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons 1850-1979*, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

142. Ibid.

143. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 11.

144. Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, "About Us," Full Gospel, <http://www.fullgospelbaptist.org> (accessed June 17, 2007).

145. For criticism about the availability of leadership roles for women on both sides of the pulpit, Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) is an excellent study that utilized womanist theory and ethnographic interviews to engage women in a discussion about the Black Church and its leadership. Lay leaders, parishioners, ministers and pastors were interviewed, capturing a picture of Black women's church leadership in one South Carolina

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community.

146. I focus on women in professional ministry because of their years of lay and seminary training. These women often have no other occupations and are solely supported by their work in the church. Not all of them are senior pastors, but all of them are employed in full time ministry.

147. Lisa C. Jones, "Preachers Married to Preachers." *Ebony* 49, no. 11 (September 1994): 80. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 30, 2007).

148. Wanda Davis-Turner, telephone conversation with author, August 26, 2007.

149. Jennifer McGill, "Reverend Dr. Vashti Murphy McKenzie, First Woman Bishop in the AME Church." *Chicken Bones: A Journal for Literary and Artistic African-American Themes* (Baltimore, MD: ChickenBones, 2007). <http://www.nathanielturner.com> (accessed May 19, 2008).

150. Ibid.

151. See specifically, Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry*, (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996).

152. Jennifer McGill, "Reverend Dr. Vashti Murphy McKenzie."

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153. McKenzie's lecture calendar for the mid-nineties included conferences in the U.S. and abroad within the AME denomination, as well as sermons at other churches, including Trinity United Church of Christ.

154. African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Directory – Presiding Bishops." African Methodist Episcopal <http://ame-church.com/directory/presiding-bishops.php> (accessed August 30, 2008).

155. At the time that this chapter was written, Bynum and her husband were in the middle of a high profile separation and divorce.

156. Bynum is only less visible than Oprah because her audience is primarily focused on those involved in Christian worship, however, not only those involved in the Black Church, as Bynum hosts a talkshow that airs on TBN, one of the most powerful global cable network conglomerates.

157. This is based on sales, YouTube viewing records, and popular press citations. Additionally, as part of T.D. Jakes' Woman Thou Art Loosed Conference and subsequent series, this sermon has continued to sell at a million copies per year from 1998 – 2001, according to Michelle Buford, "Carnal knowledge - preacher Juanita Bynum – Interview."

158. This conference was born out of a book by the same name authored by Jakes. The conference tour was so successful it spawned a DVD series, CDs

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and a feature film by the same title, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, produced by Jakes' production company, TD Jakes Ministries, in 2004.

159. Wanda Davis-Turner, telephone conversation with author, August 26, 2007.

160. Ibid.

161. Wanda Davis-Turner Ministries, "Calling First Ladies." <http://www.justwanda.org/callingfirstladies.htm> (accessed August 30, 2007).

162. Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

163. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2002), 16-20.

"The basic contribution of prophetic Christianity, despite the countless calamities perpetuated by Christian churches, is that every individual, regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex, should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentialities." 16

164. Davis-Turner utilizes what Cornel West calls the prophetic voice. She mixes the prophetic voice with the basic elements of womanist discourse and the traditional mixing of secular and sacred texts, which is a mainstay of Black preaching. In Cheryl J. Sanders, "Introduction," in *Living the Intersection:*

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*Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 9-17, she argues that it is this weaving of intersecting traditions that gives womanist theology, and I argue womanist rhetoric, its strength and cultural footing. Womanism does not operate outside of the cultural realities of Black peoples. This is not to be confused with an inability to be critical of those realities. Rather, Patricia Hill Collins argues that it is the view from the outside in and the inside out that gives Black women their unique abilities to be a critical cultural worker, thus the agent of her own making. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

165. This is demonstrated in her sermon with her use of secular and sacred examples of sex and sexuality. The relationship this has to womanist God-Talk as a sacred text is the subject of Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993). Williams argues that in the reclaiming of Africana women in the sacred text and their often pivotal roles within the story of ancient Israel, Black women are able to align themselves within the sacred text not as vilified sexual deviants but as agents for the change and in some instances the salvation of Israel. The way in which Davis-Turner hits at these sacred text is explored in

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greater detail later in this chapter.

166. Michael Dash, *The Mark of Zion*, (2003), 102-106.

167. Ibid.

168. Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, (1996).

169. Ibid.

170. Wanda Davis-Turner is not a stationary speaker. Like most Black preachers, she tends to utilize the entire space of the pulpit. She often walks across from one side to the other in order to maintain eye contact with her audience. She uses gestures, props and dais members to make her points. The camera angles are varied but tend to focus on Davis-Turner. When the audience is shown, the camera often focuses on three to five audience members. This allows the home viewer to see the verbal and nonverbal audience responses as part of the call and response pairs.

171. Wanda Davis-Turner, *Sex Traps*, VHS, (Shippensburg: Holy Smoke Production, 1996).

172. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986).

173. Ibid.

174. Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Geneva



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Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986).

175. Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

176. Katie Cannon, *Katie's Cannon*.

177. Wanda Davis-Turner, *Sex Traps*, VHS, (Shippensburg: Holy Smoke Production, 1996).

178. Ibid.

*Notes for Chapter 6 – Epilogue*

179. Olga Davis, "Theorizing African American Women's Discourse: The Public and Private Spheres of Experience," in *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist studies of Discourse*, ed. Marsha Houston and Olga Davis (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002), 49.

180. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 235-239.

181. I use the lower case "b" here for emphasis. There is a clear sense in Morrison's articulation of the character of Sethe that she had a personal journey that required an active change in her sense of self. At the moment in

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the text where Sethe acknowledges that she escaped slavery by herself and bore a child in the process, she makes the shift. It is so gradual, however, that on first read the reader does not notice Morrison's own subtle changes in reference and voice. Sethe goes from referring to herself as a "girl" to a "woman," from a "slave" to a "negro," and from a "negro" to a "Negro woman." The import of this internal shift is that it allows the character of Sethe to have a moral discourse within which she recognizes the violence of her choice to kill her child versus subject her child, her daughter, to the life of violence that is living as a woman slave. Morrison's articulations of this moral construct are chilling as they are based on the actual life choice made by Margaret Garner. We see similar choices made by African American women who sought to avoid the sexual violence of slavery. When constructing their narratives they make similar rhetorical moves to shift to the ethic of voice theorized in this dissertation. For further reading, see Harriet A. Jacobs and Jean Fagan Yellin, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987); William L. Andrews, ed. *Classic African American Women's Narratives* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

182. Maria W. Stewart and Marilyn Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. Blacks in the

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Diaspora. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 38.

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