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07/29/2009

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Toward a Pedagogy of Hope: A Womanist Christian Education and Homiletics Approach to  
Catalyzing Hope in the Lives of Young Black Women in America

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Homiletics Approach to Catalyzing Hope in the Lives of Young Black  
Women in America

By

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## Abstract

### Toward a Pedagogy of Hope: A Womanist Christian Education and Homiletics Approach to Catalyzing Hope in the Lives of Young Black Women in America

By Veronice Miles

Over the past several years many people have experienced the growing ambiguity and painful realization that what we expect of the future has reached a level of uncertainty that evokes more questions than answers. Suffering abounds in the lives of persons and communities throughout the world. Environmental distress and the ongoing depletion of our natural resources threaten our global wellbeing. Our world cries out for wholeness, calling us together as human family and as preservers of our shared domicile.

The destructive potential of the present is compounded in the lives of young black women. Not only do they hear the cry of global and domestic suffering, they experience the ferocity of racism, classism, sexism and economic disparity as an ongoing reminder of our collective unwellness. They live and survive within the tension of their hope-filled dreams and a cultural and religious milieu that they experience as oppressive and hostile. Cultural negation distorts the *voice of Hope* and can lead to *culturally induced despair*, an insidious embodiment of hopelessness intended to convince persons that oppressive social constructions are impervious to change. Hope negates culturally induced despair and invites us to participate in creating a just and life-affirming existence for all persons. Hope is an existential necessity.

In this investigation, I explore the socio-cultural and religious dynamics that engender *culturally induced despair* and delimit one's ability to live with hope as a pedagogical problem. Our pedagogical tasks include addressing (unmasking) and redressing (negating) culturally induced despair, so that young black women and others might sense the voice of Hope and embrace life affirming alternatives. The resultant pedagogical model, drawn from a cultural analysis of hope and despair, interdisciplinary dialogue, ethnographic interviews, and educational and homiletical theory and practice, is intended for implementation in worship communities interested in sustaining and enhancing young black women's ability to live with hope. The model embodies commitments and pedagogical practices that are *imaginative, transformational, dialogical, and relational*. It also contains strategies that communities might adopt and adapt to their specific contexts. Finally, the model invites us to live with hope as an expression of our shared existence.

Toward a Pedagogy of Hope: A Womanist Christian Education and Homiletics  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Distribution Agreement</b>	
	<b>Approval Sheet</b>	
	<b>Abstract Cover Page</b>	
	<b>Abstract</b>	
	<b>Cover Page</b>	
	<b>Acknowledgments</b>	
	<b>Table of Contents</b>	
<b>1</b>	<b>HOPE AND CULTURALLY INDUCED DESPAIR: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>1</b>
	Hope and Despair in the Experiences Of Black Folk	<b>9</b>
	Hope and Despair in the Experiences Of Black Women	<b>18</b>
	Image, Power and the Imagination	<b>34</b>
	Image, Myth and Ideology	<b>49</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>70</b>
	Cultural Analysis Of Hope and Despair	<b>74</b>
	Interpretive Theory Building	<b>105</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>SAFE SPACES FOR OUR STORIES</b>	<b>114</b>
	Young, Black and Female	<b>116</b>
	Staving Off Culturally Induced Despair	<b>128</b>
	Resonances Of Hope	<b>137</b>
	Hope, Culturally Induced Despair and the Black Church	<b>149</b>
	Hope-Filled Musings	<b>158</b>
	Patterns For Living in the Present and into the Future	<b>160</b>
	Negating Representations and Controlling Images	<b>178</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>EXPLORING THE THEOLOGICAL TERRAIN</b>	<b>184</b>
	Theologies Of Hope: Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries	<b>188</b>
	<i>Womanist Conceptions Of Hope</i>	<b>189</b>
	<i>Human Suffering and the Veracity Of Hope</i>	<b>205</b>
	<i>Hope and God's Historical Fidelity</i>	<b>231</b>
	<i>Hope and the Spirit Of God</i>	<b>251</b>
	<i>To Live With Hope</i>	<b>255</b>
	Hope-Filled Musings	<b>257</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>KERYGMA, DIDACHE AND THE GOSPEL OF HOPE</b>	<b>260</b>
	Pedagogy, Epistemology and Learning Hope	<b>264</b>
	<i>Learning in U.S. Culture</i>	<b>266</b>
	<i>Pedagogy and Epistemology</i>	<b>271</b>
	<i>Pedagogy and Christian Hope</i>	<b>274</b>

	<i>Mapping the Historical Discussion</i>	<b>292</b>
	<i>Contemporary Musings</i>	<b>301</b>
	<i>In Response</i>	<b>311</b>
	Toward A Pedagogical Consideration Of Hope	<b>313</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>ASCERTAINING THE VOICE OF HOPE: A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL</b>	<b>316</b>
	Midwifery and the Temerity to Live With Hope	<b>318</b>
	<i>Insights and Pedagogical Intimations from the Cultural Analysis Of Hope and Despair</i>	<b>322</b>
	<i>Insights and Pedagogical Intimations from the Theological Discourse</i>	<b>331</b>
	A Pedagogical Model For Hope	<b>340</b>
	<i>Pedagogical Commitments</i>	<b>341</b>
	<i>Preaching and Teaching in a Shared Communal Ethos: Midwives Of Hope</i>	<b>366</b>
	Some Last Words	<b>396</b>
	<b>Attachment A</b>	<b>400</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>403</b>



## CHAPTER ONE

**HOPE AND CULTURALLY INDUCED DESPAIR:  
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Thus says the prophet:*

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.<sup>1</sup>

As a black woman in U.S. culture, I stand upon the hopes and dreams of my enslaved African ancestors who chose to live with hope and, in so doing, *hoped* the present generation into existence. Or, in the words of that great prophetess and poet, Dr. Maya Angelou, I and the women who gifted me with their stories are “*the dream and the hope of the slave.*”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as a tribute to my enslaved ancestors and in the spirit of womanist thought, I offer the stories of 22 young black women who continue to discover the meaning and power of resurrection in light of the ongoing ferocity of oppression and negation with which they are confronted. I have attuned my ears to the sound of their

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<sup>1</sup> Angelou, Maya, “Still I Rise,” in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994), 164.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

voices, listening attentively as they *spoke for themselves* and grappled with the possibility of living with hope in U.S. culture, a social and religious milieu deeply stained by negating racialized and sexualized representations of black women and in which their mothers, grandmothers and other ancestral mothers paved the way for their survival and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

As I surveyed the theological literature on hope, I found that the voices of young black women were largely absent, with the exception of Evelyn Parker's *Trouble Don't Last Always*.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, I saw them negatively represented again and again in the media as well as in other facets of U.S. culture. Their images were everywhere but their voices were largely unheard. I wondered how they might respond if given the opportunity to speak, what we might learn from their wisdom, how they see their world and whether or not they were able to sense that divine spark of hope that I remain convinced lives in each of us. In response to these inquiries, and as Linda Thomas suggests, I decided to engage young black women as "living human documents" and invite them to participate in the interpretive process of deconstructing the world in which we live and discerning how it is that young black women might live with hope.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout this investigation I explore the socio-cultural and religious dynamics that influenced twenty-two young black women's ability to live with hope. My intention is to elucidate the elements of a pedagogy that might sustain them in hope and catalyze

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas, Linda E., "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm", *Cross Currents*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 1998-1999, p. 488-499. Thomas asserts that "Womanist theologians can bring the experience and knowledge of the marginalized to the center by standing aside to let the community speak for itself."

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, Linda E., "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm", *Cross Currents*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 1998-1999, p. 488-499.

them toward creative and liberatory action in the world in which they live. My thesis is that an adequate *pedagogy of hope*, drawn from a contemporary cultural analysis of hope and despair, the wisdom of young black women, educational and homiletical theory and practice, and theology, can address and redress culturally induced despair and contribute to the transformation of human lives.<sup>6</sup> I am proposing a pedagogy that is grounded in a deep conviction regarding God's presence, promise, power, and enlistment of human persons in God's ongoing redemptive work. I also suggest that the Church is the context, and preaching and teaching the means, by which a pedagogy of hope might find expression. In other words, at least one purpose of the church's preaching and teaching is to awaken and sustain persons in hope.

In this investigation, I employ descriptive language for hope drawn from my participation in the Judeo-Christian faith and its particular expression in the Black Church, augmented by a robust dialogue with womanists, black feminists, black theologians, traditional Christian theologians, and the young black women whose stories frame this investigation. Two distinct yet related descriptions emerge from that dialogue. Hope as a noun remains elusive, due in part to the myriad theological conceptions and personal experiences that frame our conceptions of hope. What appears consistent, however, is that human persons sense a deep and abiding yearning within for a world characterized by human freedom and the cessation of suffering. Therefore, I describe *Hope* metaphorically as that which creates in human persons yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; Hope is a personification of the Spirit, assuring us of God's presence, power

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase, "pedagogy of hope," is borrowed from Paulo Freire's publication of the same title, in which he revisits his earlier publication, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He argues that his educational theory is, in fact, a pedagogy of hope. *cf.* Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996, c.1992).

and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. As I will detail in Chapter Four, hope is always present with us, speaking and calling us though often distorted by suffering, oppression and domination. Therefore, one aspect of an adequate pedagogy of hope is that it can strengthen our acuity to the voice of hope that continually calls us toward participation in God's ongoing work of redeeming the world.

Human participation in the redemptive work of God illumines the possibility of hope as a verb. For human persons *to live with hope*, in hope's verbal and active sense is to say *yes* to God's *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world. That is, to order our lives with attention to the possibility of *shalom*—the Hebrew expression which signifies God's commitment to health, wholeness and prosperity for all persons—as a tangible reality in our world and to commit ourselves to its actualization. An adequate pedagogy of hope, therefore, might also help persons diagnose their cultural situation or the world in which they live in order to unmask and decode oppressive and negating structures and to identify constructive responses that make living with hope possible.

I am similarly concerned with the protracted and ongoing ferocity of sinful oppressive structures that inhibit young black women's ability to live with hope. In other words, I want to identify and begin the process of developing pedagogical strategies in order to help religious communities address and redress what I describe as *culturally induced despair*. Culturally induced despair is an evil and insidious cultural production created and sustained by structural oppression.<sup>7</sup> It draws its energy from persistent and

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<sup>7</sup> In this dissertation, I am not suggesting that despair itself is sinful, but that oppressive cultural situations that cause suffering and despair are sinful. In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone contends that “when

repetitive cultural negation intended to strip persons of their value within the broader cultural contexts in which they live—structural oppression—and convince them that they are powerless to challenge or change the oppressive structures that encompass their lives. Therefore, even as persons and communities struggle to survive and act for themselves under the conditions of oppression, culturally induced despair sustains the perception that the present order is impervious to change.

Given my contentions regarding the insidiousness and evil nature of despair as a cultural production, a brief discussion about the similarities and differences between *despair* as described in traditional Christian moral theology and culturally induced despair seems instructive. This seems particularly important because, although I describe culturally induced despair as evil I do not simultaneously identify the despairing person as sinful, a departure from traditional theological conceptions of despair. Thus I want to consider culturally induced despair in dialogue with Thomas Aquinas' discourse on hope and despair.

Aquinas contends that despair is a sin against the theological virtues because of its potential to lead persons to abandon God as the “infinite good” and to revere an alternative “transient good.”<sup>8</sup> Specifically, despair is a sin against the theological virtue *hope* in that “*the principal object of hope, precisely as it is a virtue, is God. And since this is the very definition of a theological virtue...it clearly follows that hope is a theological virtue.*”<sup>9</sup> Despair, on the other hand, is a sin because despair is contrary to

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suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it.” (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1975), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, (Blackfriars, 1966, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1966) 2a2æ, Vol. 33, p.89.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 (emphasis added).

hope; it negates that which pertains to God and presents “A false view of God.”<sup>10</sup> As Aquinas argues, “the mind’s true appraisal about God acknowledges that he (*sic*) grants pardon to sinners and brings men (*sic*) to salvation.”<sup>11</sup> Despair suggests that God denies pardon to sinners and evinces “a voluntary refusal to trust that God makes salvation genuinely possible.”<sup>12</sup> At the risk of restating Aquinas’ description of despair as a sin against the theological virtue hope too simply, I might argue that sinful despair is ontological in nature—denying God as the source of being—as well as anti-salvific in intent—negating God’s salvific intent or *beautification* of human persons.<sup>13</sup>

Not all despair is sinful, however. For example, Aquinas argues that despair is normative for those who are *damned* because they have no possibility of ever “regaining happiness,” an argument best left for another time.<sup>14</sup> He also suggests that when persons despair about something for which they have “no capacity at all or for which he (*sic*) is not obliged to strive, as for example, if a doctor were to despair over the cure of someone fatally ill, or if someone were to despair of ever acquiring wealth,” such despair is not

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 89. “Contrariwise, false opinion envisions God as denying pardon to the repentant sinner, or as not converting sinners to himself through justifying grace. And so the act of hope, squaring with true judgment, is praiseworthy and virtuous; while the opposite attitude, which is despair, reflecting as it does a false view of God, is vicious and sinful.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 181 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> See definition of “*beatitude, happiness*: the *end* or destiny of the intelligent creature in which lies total fulfillment of all capacities; within the Christian economy this is something *supernatural*, the *beatific vision*, consisting in the attaining of God. Objective beatitude is God himself so attained; subjective (or formal) beatitude is the creature’s act of so attaining God in vision and joy (180). Also, see 91- 93 in which Aquinas also answers the question of whether or not despair requires infidelity by suggesting that “one who has right judgment about something taken universally, at the same time may be wrongly disposed in the movement of his appetite, his judgment about a particular case being distorted.” In other words, despair is not always all encompassing as one might continue to believe and have faith in God, as per universal judgment, yet at the same time engage in appetitive acts that lead them to believe that “there is no such hope for himself in his present state of soul, because his judgment about particular applications is distorted.” He describes this as an “act of despair” and a *mortal sin*. Mortal sin: sin “in which a creaturely thing is preferred to God, one deserving of eternal punishment” (glossary, 187).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 89.

sinful.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, despair is not considered a sin because the person perceives her/himself as powerless to change their situation.

As I read Aquinas, despair in these instances is neither a negation of God nor the affirmation of a transient good—sin against the theological virtues. Rather, one experiences despair because of the concrete obstacles that prevent them from experiencing life otherwise. In this respect, the despair to which Aquinas refers is similar to culturally induced despair. That is, culturally induced despair does not constitute a voluntary refusal to trust God but rather results from an inability to discern or sense alternatives in the face of negation or structural oppression. However, given Aquinas' concern with hope and despair as they relate to the *eternal beautification* of humanity, I hesitate to draw too close a parallel between the his conception of despair and my own. Hope and culturally induced despair, as I describe them, are primarily concerned with God's historical and ongoing involvement in the world in which we live and how human persons might live responsively to that reality in their day to day lives.

Culturally induced despair challenges God's fidelity to human persons and distorts one's ability to sense the voice of hope. As a consequence it also inhibits one's ability to live responsively to God's presence and activity in the world. Simone Weil powerfully illustrates this point in her consideration of the life of the biblical character Job. She contends that "Affliction hardens and discourages because, like a red-hot iron, it stamps the soul to its very depths with the contempt, the disgust, and even the self-hatred and sense of guilt and defilement which crime logically should produce but

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 91.

actually does not.”<sup>16</sup> Those who are afflicted often believe that they have done something wrong—guilt—when their affliction is actually from another source. For example, as I will discuss in chapter three, young black women have been led to believe that they have done something “wrong” and therefore must do something “right” in order to end their oppression in U.S. culture. Similarly, Job’s affliction distorted his view of reality and prevented him from hearing the testimony of faith that had been common to his existence. Therefore, Weil argues, “He implores God himself to bear witness, because he no longer hears the testimony of his own conscience; it is no longer anything but an abstract, lifeless memory for him.”<sup>17</sup>

This is not sinful despair or negation of God, but the cry of despair that results from prolonged suffering and that yearns to hear God’s voice. Similarly, cultural distortion and the suffering that it creates can prevent us from sensing and discerning God’s faithfulness to a just and life-affirming existence, placing us at risk for culturally induced despair. That is, if structural oppression is left unchallenged. In this dissertation, I identify structural oppression as sinful in that it inflicts suffering and, as James Cone contends, “when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, I want to discover how persons and communities might struggle against structural oppression alongside young black women in order to enhance and sustain hope in their lives and consequently our world.

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<sup>16</sup> Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, George A. Panichas, ed. (Rhode Island: Moyer Bell, 1977), 442 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 442-443.

<sup>18</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1975) 177. I am not suggesting that all suffering is sin, e.g. suffering for the cause of Christ’s image of a just world. Cone continues by saying “But when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer, because there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice.”



## HOPE AND DESPAIR IN THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK FOLK

The juxtaposition of the African American community's expression of hope and its encounter with the enslaving reality of oppression in U. S. American culture is a theological theme that religious leaders and scholars have explored and discussed for more than a century. From Sojourner Truth's biographical testimony to her assertion of black womanhood in *Ain't I A Woman*<sup>19</sup> and W.E.B. DuBois' inaugural work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and his claim that black folk deeply desire the opportunity to be "coworkers in the kingdom of culture,"<sup>20</sup> to contemporary theological discourse regarding the multidimensional character of oppression, thinkers have grappled with what it means to learn and live with hope despite the painful experience of oppression. On the one hand, African Americans, and especially the Black Church, have articulated a strong faith in the liberating and delivering God of the biblical Exodus and Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. In spirituals and folk tales, songs and poetic assertion, our enslaved ancestors hoped against hope that the God who delivered Moses and the biblical Israelites would deliver the oppressed and stigmatized African in North America. They also encountered the Crucified and Risen Lord who had suffered as they suffered and would return again to free them from bondage. On the other hand, the protracted and ongoing ferocity of sinful oppressive structures in American culture counter these hope-filled assertions of God's fidelity and power to liberate. Oppression despairingly suggests that our only recourse is to accept that the present structure of things is the way that things ought to and will always be; to live without hope.

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<sup>19</sup> Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, unabridged (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997); Truth, Sojourner, "Ain't I A Woman?" in *Ain't I a Woman! A Book of Women's Poetry from Around the World*, Linthwaite, Illona, ed. (New York: Wings Books, 1993), 129.

<sup>20</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994, c. 1903), 3.

As chattel slaves in the U.S., black people's response to the tension between hope and the despairing realities of life was multifaceted, reflecting a multivalent understanding of life. Some chose their own death and a return to their ancestors over the chronic abuse of their bodies and minds as a more viable alternative; the one means by which they could exercise agency over their lives. In many instances death reflected the continuation and not the end of life. Charles Ball, a former slave, recounts that native Africans in the slave community "are universally of opinion, and this opinion is founded in their religion, that after death they shall return to their own country, and rejoin their former companions and friends, in some happy region."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in the Negro Spiritual "Oh Freedom," enslaved Africans decried the horror of slavery and longed for a life of freedom, asserting "before I'll live a slave I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free."<sup>22</sup> Others chose various acts of resistance that obstructed, frustrated, or otherwise prevented slaveholders' attempts to domesticate them, some of which led to their own or the slaveholders' death.

Death was not their only recourse, as James Cone illustrates. Those who lived discovered various means of survival and/or resistance, including running away,

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<sup>21</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 44-45.

<sup>22</sup> James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972). Other Negro Spirituals reflecting a desire for liberation either in this life or the next include *Down by the River Side*, *Steal Away to Jesus*, *Don't be Weary Traveler*, *Walk Together Children*, *My Lord Delivered Daniel*, and numerous others. Cone asserts that "The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back" (31).

protesting, sabotage and other means that announced their unwillingness to accept the *isness* of their world as the *oughtness* of their existence.<sup>23</sup>

Those who could not run away chose other forms of resistance. “They protested by shirking their duties, injuring the crops, feigning illness and disrupting the routine.” ... Theft and arson were common also. Some slaves injured themselves by cutting off a finger or bruising an arm—deliberately unfitting themselves to work for masters...

Another ingredient of slave ethics was deception. To survive in an oppressive society, it is necessary to outsmart the oppressors and make them think that you are what you *know* you are not.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, some presented themselves as docile and obedient servants, took advantage of opportunities that elevated them above their peers, or worked hard to do what was expected of them in order to avoid beatings and whipping, rape and other forms of abuse in their quest for freedom as a tangible reality in their lives. Cone asserts that “the appearance of contentment was a tool of survival.”<sup>25</sup> Lunsford Lane’s slave narrative illustrates this well: “Even after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people.”<sup>26</sup> Lane goes on to indicate that he was careful to conceal his possessions (money and property) and his intelligence: “This all colored people of the south, free and slave, find it peculiarly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe.”<sup>27</sup> While we may never know with absolute certainty how many enslaved Africans actively participated in survival strategies or acts of resistance, and how many succumbed to the despairing institution of

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<sup>23</sup> Notable among those who resisted are Harriet Tubman, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesset, Nat Turner, Henry Garnett, and numerous other unnamed women and men.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also, “Narrative of Lunsford Lane” in William Loren Katz (ed.), *Five Slave Narratives*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 31

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

slavery, their narratives and songs reveal that the vast majority found slavery an inadequate expression of life. They refused to exist in eternal deadness or accept enslavement as the only possible reality for their lives. That is, even though there may have been many who could not or would not act for themselves either because they were afraid or simply could not imagine other alternatives, their corporeal experience of slavery and violence did not permit oblivion. They chose to live, either through corporeal survival or continuation of life with their ancestors, for living seemed the only viable alternative.

Living demanded that they search for and at times create resonances of hope lest they be consumed by the despairing ethos that encompassed their lives. For example, enslaved Africans held religious gatherings in the *brush harbors*, outside of the purview of the white slaveholding community, and created a context in which they could imagine a new reality for themselves and their descendents. These *brush harbor* meetings became contexts of solace and existential freedom, if only for a few minutes, for those who survived under the conditions of slavery. It was the place where they could commune with the god(s) of their ancestors; the place where insurrections and trips on the Underground Railroad were planned, where the spirituals were born and where they could imagine themselves and their world in new ways. There they met a god who affirmed their humanity and who would walk with them through their time of trouble. As time progressed, many who were enslaved in the U.S., though not all, began to embrace the Christian God and the stories of God's activity in the Bible, and to identify with Jesus, the One who suffered as they suffered. They also began to experience the dissonance between the God who the plantation churches asserted required them to

remain in slavery and the God of the biblical text who parted waters, delivered God's people and destroyed enemies. Eliminating the dissonance required them to create their own understandings of God; to consider how the God of Christianity might speak to their existential needs, desires, and contextual situation. The Black Church and its theology is one expression of the God consciousness that emerged.

### **Hope and the Black Church:**

The Black Church, and its preaching and teaching were born of the beckoning cries of black women and men, made vital by the experiences of a people caught in the dehumanizing institution of slavery in North America. Rev. Charles Adams declares that the Black Church "was compelled into existence. It had to emerge... [It is] a voluntary institution produced under the conditions of involuntary servitude."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Henry Mitchell asserts that the Black preaching tradition "did not spring into existence suddenly. It was developed during a long and often quite disconnected series of contacts between the Christian gospel variously interpreted and African men and women caught up in the Black experience of slavery and oppression."<sup>29</sup> I dare say that the Black Church emerged as God's resounding *yes* over against the *no* of American culture and the institution of slavery.

Born in the context of slavery and reaching its maturity over centuries of racial and economic oppression, the Black Church has been a place of refuge, rest and restoration for those who enter its doors. From its inception, the Black Church has

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<sup>28</sup> Rev. Charles G. Adams, "The Burden of the Black Church," preached at the Tenth Annual Lake Yale Bible Retreat of The Florida Mass Choir, Inc., Lakeland, FL: ATJ Associates, Inc., 1989.

<sup>29</sup> Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 23.

encompassed the entire community as its congregation and combines care of the soul with a commitment to meeting the physical and emotional needs of the people. The Black church proclaimed a Gospel of liberation and justice to those within and without its walls, as an expression of God's intent for the world. Thus, the Black Church has functioned as a religious *and* socio-political institution.

The historical significance of the Black Church's dual role is powerfully illustrated in W.E.B. Du Bois description of a typical black church, in his 1903 publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The Negro (*sic*) church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character... the Church often stands as a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right."<sup>30</sup> He contends that the church "reproduced in microcosm, all that great world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition."<sup>31</sup> In other words, through its theological and socio-political commitments, the Black Church created a culture within the larger American culture that made it possible for black women, men and children to live with dignity.

The Black Church's theological and socio-political commitments converge at the point of the community's suffering and God's liberative action on their behalf. In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone argues that black people in the context of slavery discovered a liberating and life affirming God whose fidelity is reflected in their expressions of hope

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<sup>30</sup> Du Bois, 117-118.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

and their Christological understanding of God.<sup>32</sup> Their circumstances suggested that there was no recourse, no deliverance, and no possibility of change, but their hope in God and the promise of heaven helped them imagine and anticipate a future in which they would be no longer slaves but free.

While the liberating God of the Exodus has been the predominant biblical hermeneutic in black religious thought, Delores Williams contends that black people and black women in particular also discovered a God who offers *survival resources* and *quality of life* in the concreteness of their lived experiences. She names this parallel tradition, through her appropriation of Hagar's story in Genesis 16 and 21 and other biblical stories that emphasize "female activity and [de-emphasize] male authority," the "*survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.*"<sup>33</sup> After careful analysis of Hagar's life, Williams concludes that God's concern for Hagar was not *liberation* but survival and securing an acceptable quality of life for her and her son Ishmael. Williams maintains that the survival/quality-of-life emphasis reflected in Hagar's story is consistent with other traditional African American appropriations of biblical texts.

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<sup>32</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 127. Cone asserts that "their hope sprang from the actual presence of Jesus, breaking onto their broken existence, and bestowing upon them a foretaste of God's promised freedom. They could fight against slavery and not give up in despair, because they believed that their earthly struggle was a preparation for the time when they would "cross over Jordan: and "walk in Jerusalem just like John."...Jesus was the divine coming One who would take them to the "bright mansions above." These men and women anticipated a future in which slavery and suffering would be no more. Their longing for heaven was not an attempt to flee the material world in favor of some other-worldly life of bliss, or the fanciful musings of free men and women abdicating their responsibility as citizens in a free society. They were captive and bound human beings yearning for the freedom to live no longer as chattel in the clutches of slaveholding culture. They wanted to live as agents of their own reality, grounded in their belief in a Christ who negated suffering and affirmed their humanity (*cf.* Cone, 130).

<sup>33</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 2, 6. This second tradition of African American biblical appropriation is offered as an alternative to "the *liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.*"

This naming was consistent with the black American community's way of appropriating the Bible so that emphasis is put upon God's response to black people's situation rather than upon what would appear to be hopeless aspects of African-American people's existence in North America. In black consciousness, God's response of survival and quality of life to Hagar is God's response of survival and quality of life to African-American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God's help.<sup>34</sup>

Williams contends that the God of the biblical text was not always a God of liberation. God is also a God of survival and quality of life, an equally powerful theological tradition in the Black Church. And while she does not completely negate the liberation emphasis, as in her assertion that "liberation is an ultimate, but in the meantime survival and prosperity must be the experience of our people," she cautions the Black community not to lose sight of the survival resources that have been an ongoing element of God's participation in their lives.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Cleophus LaRue asserts that the God of the Black Church and its ministry is "a God who is uniquely and unquestionably for [black people]... the sovereign God [who] acts in very concrete and practical ways in matters pertaining to their survival, deliverance, advancement, prosperity and overall well-being."<sup>36</sup> Williams and LaRue deepens our understanding of God's activity in the lives of black folk, sustaining the contextual focus that has been indicative of womanist and black theology and emphasizing the socio-political concerns of the Black Church.

God's concern for survival and wellbeing encompasses all who fall within the purview of the Black Church. Historically, the Black Church has responded to suffering and oppression with an unequivocal "no," as the collective voice of black people. At its

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>36</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 3.



best, the Black Church has remained resolute in its commitment to the God of liberation and championing the cause of black folk by demanding equal rights and equity in employment, education and housing without regard to race. In other words, the Black Church has been and remains a bold voice through which the salvific word of deliverance from racial oppression can be heard.

However, while focusing so intently on racial oppression, the Black Church has given little attention to the multifaceted systems of oppression that impact those who predominate local black congregations, that is, women. Consequently, the Black Church has contributed to the oppression of black women unwittingly by its failure to create open and liberating communities, and intentionally by its resistance to women's full participation in the life of the Church. The negation is amplified in the lives of non-heterosexual women. Sexism and heterosexism not only permeate American culture in general, but black American culture and religious life in particular. Numerous black men and women believe that women should occupy a subordinate role in the family and in society, which reflects an overwhelmingly conservative religious and cultural understanding of gender roles and worth. In many of our denominations and congregations, this is evinced by the continued denial and suppression of women called to ordained ministry as well as the silencing of women's voices through church polity, practice, proclamation and education. As a daughter of the church, I have often listened to sermonic renderings of *Eve* as the cause of humanity's fall, the enslaved woman Hagar characterized as the jealous other woman, and varying and sundry comments about the inferior nature, subordinate location, and irrationality of women. In response, I join my

voice with the voices of numerous other women who love the Black Church but find its inattention to and ongoing negation of women discouraging and intolerable.

Jacquelyn Grant maintains that the absence of black women's experience of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, imperialism) from traditional theologies and Black theology raises serious questions about the relevance of these theologies for the black community.<sup>37</sup> Frances E. Wood also grapples with the church's complicity in the oppression of black women and argues that the church has added to the burdensome yoke that black women must bear.<sup>38</sup> This is not to suggest a shift of focus away from racial oppression in order to address sexism, but rather to implore the church to adopt a more comprehensive understanding of oppression. That is, the Black Church must acknowledge the multifaceted and overlapping nature of oppression in the lives of black women and the church's complicity in sustaining systemic oppression if it is to remain a liberative ethos for black women and men. Sexism in the lives of black women, therefore, is not considered in isolation, but rather as a component of racial, economic and other forms of oppression. Women deserve and need worship contexts committed to God's liberating and salvific intent for all persons. This seems imperative if the Church is to create an ethos of hope over and against despair and hopelessness, bondage and dehumanization.

## **HOPE AND DESPAIR IN THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN**

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<sup>37</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 206.

<sup>38</sup> Frances E. Wood, "Take My Yoke Upon You: The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American Women," in *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil & Suffering*, Emilie M. Townes, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 37-47.

Black women have epitomized what it means to live and survive in a culture in which structural oppression has sought to cultivate the seeds of culturally induced despair; a culture which seeks to deprive them of the possibility of hope. From her earliest contact with the enslaving practices of European culture, the black woman has been racially and sexually objectified. During the antebellum era, black women, as were all Africans, were viewed as laborers, property and chattel. The slave holding community regarded them as mechanistic emotionless breast feeders, child rearers, tillers, planters, pickers, and servers. As Joan A. Martin argues, “in the antebellum, the labor of blackwomen, blackmen, and blackchildren was not only owned by someone else, but also more important, the vast majority of African Americans did not own themselves... others owned them; they were chattel.”<sup>39</sup> Stripped of the rights of human subjectivity, Black women, men and children were forced into the dehumanizing and exploitative system of chattel slavery.

Women within the slave community were also viewed as the object of white men’s sexual appetites and her reproductive power used as the source of ongoing slave production. Her body and her offspring were commodities to be sold, bought and traded at the will of those who possessed them. Katie Cannon, in *Black Womanist Ethics*, poignantly reminds us that “White men, by virtue of their economic [and legal] position, had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies” and notes the high incidence of sexual coercion evident in slave narratives.<sup>40</sup> Black women’s bodies were not simply women’s bodies as were their European counterparts; they were enslaved bodies, black bodies and

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<sup>39</sup> Joan M. Martin, *More Than Chains and Toils: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Katie G Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 36.

female bodies. Due to their triple status as chattel, black and female, the enslaved black woman was required to perform domestic tasks in the homes of slaveholders and manual labor in the fields alongside Black men. Because her body was black in a culture for which the color-line, more than any other aspect of culture, demarcated the boundaries between free and enslaved, the black woman was stigmatized as unworthy of womanhood, personhood or freedom.<sup>41</sup>

The devaluing of women and women's contribution to society was not unique to black women during the antebellum era. Enslaved black women experienced the powerlessness that all women experienced in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. But as black women, they also endured derogatory and fantastical myths about black women's and men's sexual desires and potency, which legitimized frequent rapes and abuses at the hands of white slaveholders. As slaves they were property and legally three-fifths of a person. As black, property, and legally less than full persons many slaveholders also considered them less than human—soul-less *things* that could be bought, sold and abused at will. To be black and female meant to be, as Frances Wood suggests, the “permissible victim” in American culture, the one whose oppression was of little consequence to most

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<sup>41</sup> While Africans were not the only groups who were considered subhuman or non-white in the U.S., they were the group systematically oppressed and perpetually denied enfranchisement because of their color. For example, Indians who were indigenous to the U.S. were stripped of their land and killed in alarming numbers during the colonization of the Americas. Relegated to reservations, they were marginalized in the land that had been their home for centuries. Post famine Irish immigrants to the U.S. were also racially subjugated and negated by British colonist, but their white skin privileged them among those who were in servitude. In *Irish on the Inside*, Thomas Hayden reports that “Noted British authorities and popular commentators described the Irish as subhuman, apelike. The Irish ‘became white’ in America by virtue of voting rights that Africans did not have, but at the same time they were subjected systematically to second-class treatment amounting to racial profiling.” Thomas Hayden, *Irish on the Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* (New York:Verso, 2001), 5. Cf. also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

and especially to those who violated her.<sup>42</sup> Black women who wanted to affirm their femaleness and blackness had to do so against the insignia ‘slave’ that obscured their beautiful black female bodies, diminishing their worth and denying their God createdness.

Black women’s survival and sense of *godness* required them to struggle against three stigmatizing characteristic: their femaleness, their status as slave, and their racial designation as black. This triple stigma of negation gave birth to stereotypical sexualized and racialized images that have persisted into the twenty-first century. These stereotypes, in the eyes of many, connote or represent all black women without regard for their particularity, uniqueness or individuality. Stereotypes code a group in such a way that persons outside of the group believe that they know all members of the group in question thereby shaping and sustaining cultural perception when left unchallenged. When stereotypes are negative or devaluing they stigmatize or mark the persons to which they refer as bad, unworthy, and polluted because of the category to which they are assigned, e.g. race, class, gender and sexual orientation. As stigmatized persons in U.S. culture, Black women have been *objectified*—thought to be indistinguishable from one another—and *devalued*—their contributions to culture thought to be of lesser value and their absence of little concern. It seems reasonable, therefore to suggest that objectification and devaluation are aspects of the structurally oppressive ethos in which *all* Black women exist.

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<sup>42</sup> Frances Wood uses the term “permissible victim” to refer to “those groups or individuals who can be harmed with little negative consequence befalling the perpetrator. The least permissible victim in U.S. society is a white, wealthy, heterosexual male.” Wood refers to all women as “permissible victims” without regard for ethnicity or race. Black women are included among those whom who are “permissible victims.” Wood, Frances, “Take My Yoke Upon You: The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American Women” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 46, n. 3.

Black women's objectification and devaluation is supported by the negative stereotypes—images and myths—that are woven into the fabric of U.S. culture. Negating images and myths shape cultural perception and support ideologies that contribute to black women's ongoing oppression. If accepted uncritically, they thwart the culture's ability to see black women's value, their cultural contributions and their efforts toward hope and human flourishing. Therefore, I explore here the historical emergence of negating images and myths in the lives of Black women, their relationship to prevailing cultural ideologies, and their power to legitimize and sustain systemic oppression.

### **Negating Myths and Images in the Lives of Black Women**

*It is easy to inflict pain indiscriminately upon others by the simple device of defining them as subhuman and therefore as nonmembers of the human family... Deny personality to human beings and the ethical demand no longer obtains...*

*When such a definition has social sanction and approval, all kinds of brutality takes place as a matter of course and there is no sense of ill-doing.*<sup>43</sup>

During the antebellum era, the white slaveholding nation in which black women sought to survive perceived them as the consummate *other*, and as *subhuman*. Far removed from white norms and European ideals of womanhood, U.S. culture envisaged the black women as an object of exploitation, *a nonmember of the human family*, as Thurman suggests, legitimizing her suffering and absolving themselves of guilt. The Emancipation Proclamation announced the end of slavery in 1865, but it was powerless to erase or eradicate the racialized and sexualized images that had already contaminated

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<sup>43</sup> Howard Thurman, "Suffering (1963)" in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 38-39.

the country's national consciousness. Instead, negating images of black women persisted, taking shape variously in each succeeding era.

The extent to which negating myths and images continue to pervade black women's existence demands careful examination. They must not be ignored or dismissed as ineffectual but rather revealed as destructive representations that distort cultural vision and consequently inhibit black women's ability to flourish and live with hope in U.S. culture. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins refers to negating stereotypes as "controlling images" and describes their role in justifying the ongoing oppression of black women.

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting existing symbols or creating new ones... These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.<sup>44</sup>

Controlling images not only shape how black women and other marginalized persons are viewed and regarded in the larger society, but they convince us that things are as they should be—that the current order is the only possible alternative. They distort our vision and create a kind of cultural myopia by which black women's suffering appears distant and obscure, almost non-existent in a world in which their objectification and devaluation are normative. Consequently, controlling images co-opt our imaginative potential and thwart our ability to conceive a world in which oppression might be eliminated. In other words, stereotypical images of black women, from their inception,

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<sup>44</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

were more than derogatory verbiage. They supported and sustained the racist and sexist cultural milieu in which black women lived and survived, beginning in the antebellum era and continuing into the present.

### **Antebellum Images and their Contemporary Derivatives:**

Young black women, like all black women and girls, experience the sting of negation and disaffirmation as they confront sexualized and racialized stereotypical images and myths that have persisted in U.S. culture since the antebellum era. Images such as the *mammy* and *jezebel* are almost archaic now (although advertisers appear unwilling to let go of the mammy on syrup and pancake packaging) but their offspring, the *black lady*, *welfare mother* or *welfare queen*, and *hoochie mamma* are equally potent reminders of black women's otherness in U.S. culture. Consequently, young black women today, no less than their counterparts in previous eras, live with the constant reminder that the culture perceives them through the lens of the negating images and myths that permeate the world in which we live. Also, unlike their antebellum mothers and sisters, young black women today live in a media driven world in which negating representations are routinely broadcast into homes and other venues throughout the globe. The sheer magnitude of images and the number of persons to which they are accessible intensifies the risk that negating myths and images regarding contemporary black women might develop into common vernacular for a national and global audience.

As noted above, negating images and myths have persisted for centuries. During the antebellum period, black women were characterized as manly, motherly, sexually erotic and promiscuous over against the image of sexual purity, virtuousness and lady



likeness that characterized white womanhood. Despite the obvious incompatibility of many of the myths and images that Euro-Americans perpetuated during the antebellum era and after with the actuality of black women's lives, they provided suitable justification for the ongoing exploitation of black women's bodies, labor, and reproductive capacity. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores Williams identifies three predominant images used to describe enslaved black women.<sup>45</sup> The first is the *mammy* image which represented black women as perpetual mother figures, asexual nurturers and nutrition providers who lived to serve the white master and mistress and care for their children. In her own family, however, the mammy was described as controlling, a disciplinarian, and a woman who dominated her male relatives, confirming the slavocracy's assertion that black families were inherently dysfunctional.

A second widely accepted image was the *work ox* or *masculinized woman* whose physical features and strength opposed the Euro-American standards of femininity and beauty. Because they were viewed as physically strong, black women were required to work in the field alongside black men, providing justification for the conflation of chattel and femaleness. At the same time, the masculinized woman was expected to perform domestic tasks in the slaveholder's home and was not exempt from sexual exploitation or child bearing.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the image of the *immoral woman* characterized black women as "loose, over-sexed, erotic, readily responsive to the sexual advances of men, especially white men."<sup>47</sup> She was most often the woman by whom white slaveholders or their sons

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<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 60-83. See also Earl, Riggins R., Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, & Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 113-114.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

fathered children, often characterized as *the other woman*, but a slave nonetheless.<sup>48</sup> Those who sexually exploited her purported that black women were lascivious and sexually insatiable, absolving themselves of ethical accountability as well as responsibility for their offspring.

As suggested above, these antebellum images were not lost when slavery ended but rather took on new form and significance in the years following. Collins identifies five images that survived slavery and/or derived from earlier antebellum images: the *mammy*, the *black matriarch*, the *welfare mother*, the *black lady*, and the *jezebel* or *whore* or *hoochie*.<sup>49</sup> Collins contends that the *mammy* image, the predominant image used to define black women as servants, was “created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service.” She also indicates that “the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, white people, especially those who employed black female domestic servants, came to expect that all black women would assume the role of mammy. As the normative expression of black womanhood the mammy image perpetuated the idea that black women were best suited for jobs that placed them in the service of white people, legitimizing gender and racial oppression and reifying the white power structure.

Closely related to the mammy image, the image of the *Black matriarch* arose during the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties, a period of “considerable Black

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Collins, 69-96. Cf. also, Douglas, Kelly Brown, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 72.

activism...[and] at precisely the same moment that the women's movement advanced its critique of U.S. patriarchy."<sup>51</sup> The Black matriarch, described as a strong, masculine working woman who leads the family and neither needs or desires a man, was indicative of the black women who failed to fulfill the traditional role as "women" in the family. Rather than assuming her role as mother, wife and keeper of the home, the black matriarch was charged with emasculating black men and held accountable for the elusiveness of the "American dream" in the lives of their children. The image of the Black matriarch also appeared during a time of intense impoverishment among black families. Given the patriarchal structure of U.S. culture and the dearth of black male heads of household, female-headed households were identified as the central cause of black impoverishment.<sup>52</sup> This, of course, was without attention to the political and economic inequities that sustained poverty and economic disparity in black communities and without appropriately holding black men accountable for their absence from the home. As a result, black women who were raising their children alone were expected to fulfill the role of *mammy* in the work place, sustain her family as head of household, and then demonized for not meeting Euro-American standards of motherhood/womanhood.<sup>53</sup>

A second image that derived from the mammy and matriarch image is the *Black lady*, "a hardworking Black woman professional who works twice as hard as everyone else... [They] have jobs that are so all consuming that they have no *time* for men or have forgotten how to treat them... Highly educated Black ladies are deemed *too* assertive—

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 75-76. See also Monynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 78.

that's why they cannot get men to marry them.”<sup>54</sup> Like the mammy and Black matriarch, the image of the Black lady portrays black women as inimical to acceptable female roles in a patriarchal society. She too is accused of emasculating black men or taking jobs that they rightly deserve, and although she is competent and confident, her adequacy as a woman, partner and a mother is closely scrutinized.

The *welfare mother* image finds its origin in the image of the *breeder woman*. She is represented as a poor, working- or under-class Black woman who receives financial assistance from the social welfare system that was opened to Black women in the nineteen-eighties.<sup>55</sup> By the mid twentieth century, manufacturing and agricultural jobs began to diminish in the U.S. leaving a “large number of undereducated, unemployed African-Americans ghettoized in U.S. inner cities, most of whom were women and children.”<sup>56</sup> Illegal immigrants willing to work for lower wages also entered the work force, resulting in numerous unemployed black laborers and factory workers who were inadequately prepared for the job market. Collins contends that “This surplus population no longer represented cheap labor but instead, from the perspective of elites, signified a costly threat to political and economic stability.”<sup>57</sup> The image of the welfare mother grows out of this context, representing childbearing black women as a liability and a threat to the wellbeing of U.S. culture.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 78. Collins contends that the *breeder woman* “portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than White women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this image provided justification for interference in enslaved Africans’ productive lives.” Characterizing enslaved black women as breeders and then forcing them into the role produced additional chattels for slave owners and the prospect of additional slaves should they deliver a girl-child.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Collins maintains that the welfare mother is “labeled a bad mother... She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring.”<sup>58</sup> The welfare mother image deteriorated into the *welfare queen*, characterized not only as a bad mother but as a “highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman... [who is] content to take the hard-earned money of tax paying Americans and remain married to the state.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, these poor black women symbolically represented what had gone wrong in America, and were blamed for the deterioration of the U.S. economy.

Social welfare or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was intended to address poverty in the U.S. and especially among children. Even though single mothers are the largest recipients of AFDC, the majority of welfare recipients have traditionally been white. However, despite the statistical data, the image of the young black mother as the primary recipient of welfare has been perpetuated since the mid nineteen-nineties and remains the dominant image. Patricia Williams contends that, as a result, class has been racially coded in U.S. culture such that “poor” has come to mean “black,” and “normative” has become code for “white.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, race rather than class has characterized the welfare debate in the U.S. even though the system was developed to address class/economic disparity.

The welfare debate in the United States has been driven almost entirely by the manipulations of racial rather than class images – primarily images of the endlessly reproductive, devouring wombs of black women – the ubiquitous myths of their ‘take-over’ bodies, so rolling with an engulfment of forbidden flesh, yet even that hyperbolic femaleness never breaking into the realm of the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997), 56.

feminine...[S]he is relentlessly figured as not just a bad mother but one who seeks motherhood only as a 'lazy' person's escape from her true place... This fearsome image of the poor black teenage pregnant 'welfare queen' has facilitated the removal of social benefits for all women: i.e., the replacement of traditional welfare programs with so-called workfare programs, as well as the denial of additional benefits to poor women who have children while on public assistance.<sup>61</sup>

Williams' comments are a poignant reminder of how thoroughly negative stereotypes permeate our cultural imagination and the extent to which our perception of reality can intentionally or unwittingly influence public policy and consequently the world that we create. What I am saying is that the power of racially coding an economic problem is that it absolves persons, communities and policy makers of the necessity of addressing the disparity that sustains poverty and thus keeps persons in need of public assistance. It blinds us to the need for solidarity, compassion and care for those who are victimized again and again by structurally oppressive economic systems. The result has been institutionalized racism, sexism and classism as well as the ongoing oppression of young black women and other vulnerable persons in our society.

Like all stereotypical controlling images, the *welfare mother* and *welfare queen* images stigmatize all black women of child bearing age, particularly young black women. The young black women with whom I spoke report that they are always aware that persons are likely to attribute to them the characteristics and attitudes that represent the *welfare mother/queen* and the *hoochie mamma*, and that they are always actively engaged in dispelling the myth. As I will discuss in chapter 3, their efforts to dispel negating myths give rise to other controlling images that appear necessary but are nonetheless

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

controlling, such as the *supra-model* whose quest is to become the indisputable model of acceptable.

Finally, the image of the *hoochie* or *hoochie mamma* or *whore*, has been an increasingly prevalent image of young black women since the nineteen-nineties and especially so in the twenty-first century. It is a derivative of the *jezebel*, a sexually aggressive unusually fertile wet-nurse, whose purpose was to nurse white children and fulfill the sexual appetites of the white slave owners. Collins contends that the *hoochie*, though derivative of the *jezebel*, “seems to be cut from an entirely different cloth. For one, whereas images of Black women as sexually aggressive certainly pervade popular culture overall, the image of the *hoochie* seems to have permeated everyday Black culture in entirely new ways.”<sup>62</sup> The *hoochie mamma* image was popularized by hip-hop culture’s gansta rap artists and those who control the music industry. She is most prominently represented in music videos as a scantily clad young black woman dancing to misogynistic and exploitative lyrics. For example, in their song “Hoochie Mama” 2 Live Crew is very explicit about her exploitation and sexual objectifications. She is considered a whore, a young woman or “girl” that is only good for sex; she is not a “good girl.” “Mama just don’t understand, why I love your hoochie ass, Sex is what I need you for, I gotta good girl but I need a whore.”<sup>63</sup>

In her critique of 2 Live Crew’s “Hoochie Mama,” Collins challenges the acceptance of disaffirming images of black women.

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<sup>62</sup> Collins, 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Hoochie Mama*, 2 Live Crew

[D]espite the offensive nature of much of 2 Live Crew's music, some Blacks argued that such views, while unfortunate, had long been expressed in Black culture (Crenshaw 1993). Not only does such acceptance mask how such images provide financial benefits to both 2 Live Crew and White-controlled media, such tacit acceptance validates this image. The more it circulates among U.S. Blacks, the more credence it is given.<sup>64</sup>

The hoochie mama image is no longer confined to U.S. Blacks, however, due to hip-hop's cross-cultural and perhaps national appeal. Consequently, the *Hoochie* image is not only given credence in the minds of Blacks, but in the minds of people throughout the U.S. and the world. As I have argued elsewhere, perpetuation of such images legitimizes the victimization of women and other vulnerable persons and places hip-hop at risk for committing what comedian Vince Morris describes as "lyrical genocide."<sup>65</sup> Genocidal lyrics recirculate negating sexualized and racialized images that consent to the annihilation and dehumanization of Black people in general and Black women in particular. Also, by exercising "freedom of speech" without thoughtful consideration of the capacity of words to create images and images to elicit mimetic behavior, genocidal lyricists legitimize negating representations of young black women and construct patterns of interaction reflective of their assertions.

More generally speaking, negating representations reinforce patterns of relationship that prevent persons from living as human subjects and from imagining a world in which the cessation of negation can become a reality. Therefore, the danger of all of the negating and controlling images that I have described is that when we adopt them as reliable representations of the world in which we live, we also consent to black

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<sup>64</sup> Collins, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Veronice Miles, "Living Out Loud in a World that Demands Silence: Preaching with Adolescents" in *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 156. I borrow the phrase "lyrical genocide" from a monologue presented by Vince Morris during an appearance of Russell Simmons' 2007 *Def Poetry Jam*, an HBO series.



women's objectification and devaluation, and thus their suffering and oppression. If accepted uncritically, negating images convince those who are oppressed that even as they struggle to survive and act for themselves under the conditions of oppression, the present order remains impervious to change. Therefore, their only recourse is to endure and/or adapt to the oppressive structure. Similarly, when those who benefit from structural oppression accept negating representations uncritically, they are likely to believe that their privileged social locations are justified and that change is unwarranted. Therefore they willingly or unwittingly perpetuate oppression. In either case, the result is that structural oppression remains unchallenged and a major contributor to culturally induced despair.

Hope, on the other hand, proposes a reality in which the lamentable realities of racist and sexist depictions of black women are unmasked and stripped of their oppressive powers. In so doing, oppression and despair no longer have the final word and black women can become active participants in creating life-affirming realities for themselves and other human persons. Emilie Townes contends that hope invites us to negate the nightmare and begin to live into the dream.

For hope lies in the midst of a lament that cries out for salvation that leads to healing. However, it is all-too-often true that we tinge our hope with skepticism. We seriously doubt the possibility of the very things we most want... For all that we dream about, we find ourselves content to live out the weary drama of the nightmare – to accept the is-ness of our lives as the ought and to find ways to short-circuit the hope found in possibilities and daring to reach beyond what we ever thought ourselves capable of. We forget or neglect the miracle of God working in us: that God takes our brokenness, the threads of our lives, and weaves masterpieces.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 179.

The amazing ambiguity of this kind of hope is that even as we experience the nightmarish realities of life, we chose to live in the present as though that for which we hope were already a reality. That is, as the nightmare persists, we determine ourselves to live with hope in the present and into the future because we sense God's presence, power and fidelity calling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in our own lives and in the world in which. We respond to structural oppression, therefore, not by settling for what *is* as the *oughtness* of our existence, but with acts of resistance and contestation so that we might redress negation and experience that which affirms life. Thus, it seems imperative that our pedagogical orientation embody strategies designed to strengthen young black women's acuity to the voice of hope and equip them with the tools necessary to unmask and name, identify and resist, cry-out and contest oppressive structures, wherever they exists.

### **IMAGE, POWER AND THE IMAGINATION**

Imagining alternatives to the present construction is challenging when the images that predominate our visual and acoustical horizon are constructed by those who possess power in our world and thus have a stake in maintaining the present order of things. The media, especially network television and its corporate advertisers, is the most powerful and prolific source of visual representations in U.S. culture today. Media images present and represent a world that has been created for us. Proffered by advertisers and big businesses that stand to amass great wealth should we accept their view of the world as the preferred shape of reality, those who control the production of images also seek to control what we can expect for our lives and our future—what we believe is possible.

Media sounds and images are everywhere, presumptuously defining the oughtness of our existence. They appear inescapable; prevalently, persistently and repetitively speaking, instructing, selling and re-presenting something of reality by way of television, billboards, music videos, electronic games, and the worldwide web; accessible twenty-four hours per day on desktops, laptops and pocket PC's, computer cafés, phones and other mobile devices, to name a few. Therefore, I explore here, the iconic and mimetic nature of images, their relationship to human imagination, and their ideological significance.

### **Image as Icon and Mimetic Model:**

In *Seeing Through the Media*, Michael Warren argues that most of the images that we encounter are iconic in nature in that they are not simply visual depictions or portrayals of some aspect of reality but representations that are accepted as true reflections of *the real world*.<sup>67</sup> He contends that “These images are pictures we see with our eyes rather than with our ‘mind’s eye,’ the imagination.”<sup>68</sup> They are images that we incorporate into our understanding and perception of the world in which we live without pausing to “think about them, understand how they work, [or] make judgments about their value.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the images that we encounter are iconic or representational due to their latent potential to shape patterns of thought and feeling in human persons relative to persons, places, things, narratives and ways of being in the world.

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Warren, *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), 123.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 140.

Most of the images that we encounter are also iconic because of their capacity to elicit mimetic behavior. Warren argues that human beings are mimetic by nature; that we tend to imitate behavior that we see in others. For example, religious groups use imagery—paintings, symbols, sculptures and other figures—as a means of reminding the viewer that they are a part of the tradition and “inviting [them] to imitate the qualities of the person or reality represented by the icon.”<sup>70</sup> More complex images, e.g. moving pictures with sound, and images with greater similarities to reality as we know it, possess greater mimetic potential, especially when we perceive similarities between the representation and ourselves.<sup>71</sup>

Even when we look at a single-frame representation, a photo of some person or place, we tend to mentally establish connections between what we see and what we already know... If the person is of the same sex or race or age or social status as ours, then we tend to make a connection between ourselves and the person. We do not say, “This person is me,” but rather something like, “This person is like me,” or “I am like, or *could be* like, this person.” What I am trying to get at here is the latent power of icons to trigger a way of imagining ourselves.<sup>72</sup>

Warren’s contention that images possess latent power suggests that when images are accepted without critique or “seen but not examined,” they shape ways of being and perceiving despite the viewers’ intent and without their awareness of the affect<sup>73</sup>.

Consequently, one of the dangers of mimesis is the likelihood that persons will not only imitate positive attributes but that they will take on the negative and destructive qualities and behaviors represented by the images. For example, Warren cites the correlations between the rise of violence in the U.S. and increased violence depicted in film and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>71</sup> See Warren, chapter 5, for a detailed discussion of three types of iconic images—single frame representations, graphic representations in sequential, internally coherent frames, and graphic representations in sequential, internally incoherent, but externally coherent frames—and their mimetic potential.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 135.

television, and between the rise in sexual activity among early adolescents and increased sexuality among adolescents depicted on television and theater screens as examples of the negative impact of mimesis.<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, the trajectory of Warren's argument suggests that persons may also imitate negative attitudes toward persons and ways of being with which they are less familiar, particularly when these persons and practices are repetitively and stereotypically presented as undesirable or unacceptable. For example, the media has historically represented black men as violent, dangerous, criminal minded and a menace to society, or black women as loud, volatile and sexually promiscuous. These representations elicit a range of responses that may account, at least in part, for the ongoing devaluation of black women and men in U.S. culture. Warren argues that "what we see tends to construct a way of seeing and can, even further, become institutionalized in patterns of interaction between persons. Patterns of images can code our way of seeing."<sup>75</sup> In other words, both positive and negative preconceived notions about persons or communities cloud our ability to notice actions or other characteristics that conflict with what we believe we already know. Therefore, a related danger of mimesis, especially when negating images of particular persons and communities are prevalent, is that positive representations become less believable than the dominant script. Negation suppresses alternatives, making it difficult for persons to incorporate affirming images into their understanding of reality and, consequently, more likely to dismiss or reject them as unreliable or an anomalous.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>75</sup> Warren, 132.

In addition to Warren's contention that mimetic behavior is determined by the familiarity and complexity of iconic images, I might add that frequency and constancy of exposure enhance the mimetic potential of media images as well. Frequency and constancy of exposure imply legitimacy and increase the probability that viewers might accept the representation as an accurate reflection of the *real world*. In other words, representations become self-validating when repetitively presented and when the social valuation attributed to persons and communities remains consistent across multiple contexts. Though unsubstantiated, they function as corroborating evidence or *proof* that this is the way that things are, suggesting that we should expect the same patterns of behavior in our day to day existence. What we perceive as *the real world* in effect distorts our ability to see or hear otherwise; acts as a sieve to filter out those elements that do not coincide with the known. Thus, images construct a particular epistemology or *way of knowing* that serves as a filter for what we *can* or *are permitted* to know.

The power of images to construct our way of seeing and engaging other human persons and the world in which we live raises crucial questions about power and the constructions of reality; questions about who controls what we *are permitted* to know and how we know it. By and large, those without power have little to no control over how they are presented in the media or the ensuing cultural perceptions. For example, images of blackness and of black women are, for the most part, not constructed by black women. They are constructed by those who possess power and who benefit financially and socially from the systems of oppression and domination that currently shape U.S. culture. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks investigates the prevalence and power of images with attention to media representation of blackness and black women. She argues that those

who control the production and dissemination of images in U.S. culture also possess the power to construct and sustain systems of racial domination.

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation and overall domination of all black people. Long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave. From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.<sup>76</sup>

Consistent with my comments earlier regarding repetition and constancy of representation, negating and racist images of blackness have passed the test of historical endurance. In other words, these images have remained consistent over time. Racist constructions of reality are deemed credible and normative, not simply because racist attitudes persist, but because those responsible for disseminating negating images of blackness possess the power to perpetuate these images as the dominant representation of blackness in the media. This is also true for sexist gender constructions. Power creates sustainability and credibility.

In “Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech,” Catherine MacKinnon, associate professor of Law at the University of Minnesota Law School, makes a similar case. She argues that to “have power” means that the constructions of reality that one proposes is accepted as credible while those “without power” are stripped of credibility despite their perspective on reality.

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<sup>76</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

Having power means, among other things, that when someone says, “this is how it is,” it is taken as being that way. When this happens in law, such person is accorded what is called credibility. When that person is believed over another speaker, what was said becomes proof. Speaking socially, the beliefs of the powerful become proof, in part, because the world actually arranges itself to affirm what the powerful want to see... Beneath this, though, the world is not entirely the way the powerful say it is or want to believe it is. If it appears to be, it is because power constructs the appearance of reality by silencing the voices of the powerless, by excluding them from access to authoritative discourse. Powerlessness means that when you say “this is how it is,” it is *not* taken as being that way. This makes articulating silence, perceiving the presence of absence, believing those who have been socially stripped of credibility, critically contextualizing what passes for simple fact, necessary to the epistemology of a politics of the powerless.

The dynamic relationship between power and construction of iconic images creates a dilemma for black women and other devalued and oppressed persons in American culture. When individuals or groups of persons, narratives or practices are repetitively represented in ways that devalue and disaffirm their existence, their presence is deemed problematic and their contributions to society less than adequate. When they voice opposition to or otherwise challenge the validity of negating representations, their voices are rejected as inauthentic. When their lives contradict the stereotype they are considered exceptions to an otherwise ironclad rule; not like the rest of them. In other words, Iconic images are not only laden with mimetic power but they also, when repetitively presented and re-presented by those who control the media, possess the power to influence the content and limits of our imagination. And, when the limits of our imagination are sealed, we silence and reject the voices of the oppressed. As a result, dominant and commonly accepted representations of reality prevail, creating, reinforcing and legitimizing structures of oppression and marginalization.

### **Image and the Human Psyche**



The repetitive use of iconic images and recognition of their mimetic potential is not unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As suggested above, images were commonly used during Christian worship in the medieval church with hopes that worshippers would adopt the attitudes and practices that the icon represented. Admittedly, the sheer number and variety of images, as well as their complexity and creativity distinguishes us from our medieval counterparts. One significant difference, however, has not to do with numbers or variety but with how persons understand vision and its relationship to the human psyche. In the present era, we have given little attention to the psychic influence of images, due in part to the regularity with which we encounter them. They are commonplace in our lives and appear innocuous. We are scarcely aware of their power to shape our way of seeing and being in the world, our values and sense of what is normative. Margaret Miles describes this oversight as urgent.

In *Image as Insight*, Miles contends that we not only imitate what we see but we internalize what we observe at a level distinguishable from cognition or consciousness. In other words, what we see transforms our way of seeing. She investigates the importance of vision and visual imagery in Western Christian worship and piety and suggests that our experience of images in the current era is similar to medieval women and men in that “both contemporary media images and historical religious images were experienced daily.”<sup>77</sup> Miles indicates that prior to the fourth-century Christians associated iconic images with pagan worship and had primarily excluded the visual arts from worship. By the fourth century, however, Christians began to incorporate images in

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 5. See also Margaret R. Miles, “Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and Other Works,” *Journal of Religion*, (April 1983), pp. 125-142.

worship but with attention to continuity across worship communities. They recognized that “a powerful tool is always double-edged, capable equally of providing valuable help and of promoting addiction to the tool itself.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore, images were not accepted uncritically but with an “awareness of a potential problem with the strong visual component in worship and piety, the danger that a worshipper could become attached to the image rather than to its prototype.”<sup>79</sup> In response, the Church developed texts that guarded against inordinate attachment to images and advocated the “critical use of images as an important aspect of Christian tradition.”<sup>80</sup>

While images remain powerfully present in our worship communities and larger society, Miles identifies three major differences between contemporary and medieval understandings of vision and thus the power of images. The first major difference has to do with our contemporary understanding of physical vision. Drawing from Augustine’s theory of vision, Miles explains that medieval persons understood physical vision as the process of taking an object, for good or evil, into the soul and retaining it in the memory.<sup>81</sup> The object, consequently, shaped the psyche or soul affectively, and determined one’s spiritual, physical and psychic make-up.<sup>82</sup> In other words, one’s life

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> In a related article, Miles indicates that “Augustine’s idea of the soul as initiating sensation and in turn being shaped by its objects must not be conflated with popular modern ideas of the self as a self-contained, relatively autonomous and distinct entity. ...Augustine’s ‘soul’ is primarily a partially centered energy, initially barely distinguishable from its cosmic, physical, and spiritual environment, which comes to be cumulatively distinguished and defined by the objects of its attention and affection” (129). When I suggest that physical vision shapes or affects the *psyche* or *soul*, I am suggesting that we internalize what we see at a level distinguishable from the cognitive and of which we are not always consciously aware. Cf. Margaret Miles, “Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine’s ‘De Trinitate’ and ‘Confession,’” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 63, No. 2 (April, 1983), 125-142.

<sup>82</sup> M. Miles, *Image as Insight*, 7. Miles indicates that “In the theory of vision described by Augustine, the most influential Christian author of the medieval and reformation periods, as fire within the body – the same fire that animates and warms the body – is collected with unique intensity behind the eyes; for an

was a reflection of what one had internalized by way of vision. Thus, the medieval belief in the “evil eye” cautioned against looking upon persons and things that are considered dangerous, maleficent or malevolent for fear that the evil that one beholds may become incorporated into the soul.<sup>83</sup> Persons who had the “evil eye” were believed to possess power to contaminate others by touching them or gazing into their eyes. The belief that evil can be internalized through vision is also evident in the African American folk belief that pregnant women can *mark* their children by attending too closely to or speaking evil of a particular persons or thing.<sup>84</sup> In either case, the visual process is thought to involve the transference of that which one beholds into the psyche, or into the physical body.

In contrast, Miles argues that modern theories and studies regarding vision have focused more upon the physiological mechanisms that make vision possible than the affective influence of physical vision.<sup>85</sup> She describes our unwillingness to recognize the relationship between iconic images and affect as a form of self-deception and contends that “Despite the constant bombardment of images for commercial and entertainment purposes, images that compete to catch the eye and thus are highly effective in catching the wallet, modern people prefer to think of themselves as disengaged voyeurs.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, images possess the potential to shape patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction—to gain one’s allegiance—with or without our consent. Again, Miles’ observation is significant given our interest in the power of negating images to sustain

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object to be seen by a viewer, this fire must be projected in the form of a ray that is focused on the objects, thereby establishing a two-way street along which the attention and energy of the viewer passes to touch its object. A representation of the object, in turn, returns to the eye and is bonded to the soul and retained in the memory.”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> To “mark” a child is to imprint them with the physical features or character of the person or thing looked upon.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 7.

structural oppression and thus contribute to culturally induced despair. Therefore it seems imperative that we consider not only the physical or mechanical aspects of vision but its psychic aspects as well. In this study, we ask how negating images contribute to and legitimize young black women's oppression in a society that touts itself as the bastion of freedom and equality. As suggested earlier, negating representations distort cultural vision and inhibit young black women's ability to flourish and live with hope.

We might also benefit from the interpretive practices of the Medieval Church relative to iconic images which marks the second major difference between modern persons' encounter of images and our medieval counterparts. Medieval persons encountered images in the context of worship and in dialogue with an "interpreting community." The images were not only interpreted through worship practices—sacramental rituals, reenactments and their accompanying gestures—but through written texts that explained the meaning that should be given religious icons. Miles argues that the "unity of word, object and gesture," and not the image alone, shaped the viewers understanding of its import in the worship context and to their lives.

The third significant difference between medieval and modern persons' visual experiences is "the tremendous increase in the quantity of images seen by a typical modern person."<sup>87</sup> Over the last four centuries we have seen the transition from limited access to the advent of still photography, moving pictures, television, and digital technology, and with it the most extensive exposure to visual images of any time in history. Miles suggests that "It is likely that our capacity for vision is—or will shortly be—congenitally fatigued by the sheer volume of images with which most modern

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<sup>87</sup> M. Miles, 9.

people cope.”<sup>88</sup> Whether or not this is true, the sheer quantity of images, especially in a media driven world, warrants intentionality in our investigation of how and to what extent media images shape our perception of reality. The proliferation of media images in our present age and the myriad possibilities for psychic influence suggests a return to the early church’s caution regarding images, not as elements of pagan worship, but as visual cues that shape our way of engaging other persons and the world in which we live in positive and negative ways. For our purposes, deconstructing the psychic and behavioral mechanism by which iconic images shape our perceptions of reality, in addition to dispelling negating myths about young black women, seems essential in our efforts to create a transformative pedagogy of hope that can address and redress culturally induced despair.

### **Image and Imaginative Potential:**

Although iconic images are seen with the eye, they are neither innocuous or insensate in content, nor static in function. Iconic images make statements about reality that influence the viewers’ attitudes, understanding of reality, opinions and actions. They generate information, impressions and sensations by which persons make meaning of their world and delineate possibilities. We internalize them, oftentimes without noticing, and sometimes startle ourselves by the feelings, attitudes and values that we hold without being consciously aware of them. Content and function converge at the level of imagination. As suggested earlier, repetitive exposure to and incorporation of images that negate and disaffirm black women and others who have been historically oppressed

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

and marginalized inhibits expectation and impedes resistance to hegemonic views of reality. As a result, negating images delimit our imaginative potential.

The imagination is the seat of possibility—the metaphysical ethos in which we dream our world into existence. At our best, we are able to conceive and envision possibilities and potentialities deemed improbable by the *isness* of our existence; to dream dreams that imbue us with creative possibilities for ourselves and for our world. Therefore, our ability to imagine a just and life-affirming world is really what is at stake. Paul Ricoeur maintains that our ability to imagine redeems us from an existence in which perpetuating the negation and domination of the present is the only alternative, and sets us on a new course. The imagination, he contends, transforms our *vision of the world* and opens us to redemptive possibilities for ourselves and for the world in which we live.

The imagination has a metaphysical function which cannot be reduced to a simple projection of vital, unconscious or repressed desires. The imagination has a prospective and explorative function in regard to the inherent possibilities of [human persons]. It is, *par excellence*, the instituting and constituting of what is humanly possible. In imagining [their] possibilities, [human persons] act as prophet[s] of [their] own existence. We can then begin to understand in what sense we may speak of a *redemption through imagination*: by means of dreams of innocence and reconciliation, hope works to the fullest human capacity... The imagination, in so far as it has a mytho-poetic function, is also the seat of profound workings which govern the decisive changes in our visions of the world. Every *real* conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images. By changing [their] imagination, [human persons] alter [their] existence.<sup>89</sup>

The imagination has a *metaphysical* function in that it is not delimited by that which already exists or seems probable from the evidence and a *prospective* function in that it considers and explores alternative possibilities. The imagination is our ability to dream beyond the boundaries of our present existence, opening the way for hope's work

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<sup>89</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 126-127.

in our lives. Hope-filled imagination transforms us from the inside out and energizes us for the kind of creative action necessary to bring that which we imagine to fruition—to become prophets of our own existence.

Ricoeur's contention that imagining has a prophetic function necessitates attentiveness to that which constitutes our imagination; the experiences and perspectives that shape our perceptions of reality. In other words, changing our imagination requires us to closely attend to the quality of our relationships with other human persons (family, friends, and persons in geographic, social, religious and cultural location), the sounds and images that fill our acoustical and visual horizons, the values, mores and practices that are important to us, their content and origin. Whose interest does our perception of the world serve or harm? To what extent does our image of the world reveal or mask possibilities; erect, support or eliminate barriers? Attentiveness affords us the opportunity to reconsider where we stand, assess the adequacy of our position, and embrace redemptive and transformative possibilities.

Similarly concerned with the power of the imagination, Walter Brueggemann, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, compels us to notice the difference between the world that has been imagined *for us* by the imperial powers of our time and “God’s imagination” (prophetic imagination). In other words, he reminds us that imagination in the hands of imperial powers can become a tool of domination rather than redemption, legitimizing and reifying oppressive social constructions. Therefore, he argues that the task of prophetic imagination is to challenge the *isness* and *oughtness* of our world; “*to bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and*

suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there.”<sup>90</sup> This is over against what he describes as the “royal consciousness;” a way of being in the world that demands “despairing conformity” to that which already exists and delimits our imaginative potential.<sup>91</sup> Repetitive exposure to negating iconic images, for example, inhibits our ability to consider alternatives and fuels the royal consciousness. When the royal consciousness prevails, life is perfectly scripted and both the powerful and those who are oppressed are encouraged to live within the boundaries of the world that currently exist.

Brueggemann warns that when there is no prophetic voice, prophetic imagining wanes and those who are disinherited, oppressed and dispossessed are easily ignored, which I hear as a summons to the church to more fully embrace its prophetic identity . Therefore, prophetic imagining is redemptive in that it speaks of a future in which prosperity abounds for those who have been denied a future, even though its actualization appears impossible. In addition, its redemptive function engenders hope. Filled with hope, persons and communities assume a subversive disposition toward the suffering and negation that defines much of the world in which we live.

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<sup>90</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 65. In Brueggemann’s discussion of the role of the prophet, he argues that the prophet’s task is to propose futures and possibilities that the hearer has either not been able to imagine or that have been suppressed so deeply that the hearer is no longer aware that they exist. Reflecting on U.S. culture, Brueggemann says, “The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The *imagination* must come before the *implementation*. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing...It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king [read reigning social structure] wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, xviii. Brueggemann contrasts the prophetic imagining of Moses with the imperial consciousness of Solomon. The Mosaic period was characterized by a concern for “matters political and social” and equally with “matters linguistic (how we say things) and epistemological (how we know what we know)” (21). Thus Moses was not simply concerned with social action, but with the “notion of God’s freedom...[and] the notion of human justice and compassion” (22). In contrast, Solomon, representing the “royal consciousness,” was concerned with thwarting revolution and proposing an image of reality that was stable and changeless. Therefore, he contends that the *modi operandi* of the “royal consciousness” and the imperial structures from which it draws its strength are to suppress *anticipatory imagination*, to deny entrance of the poor into prosperity, and to satiate the powerful and prosperous by prosperity (25-37, 60).



Hope, on the one hand, is an absurdity too embarrassing to speak about, for it flies in the face of all those claims we have been told are facts. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion; and one does that only at great political and existential risk. On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretensions of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question.

The subversive hope engendered by prophetic imagining stands over against the image of reality purported by the reigning social order or “royal consciousness” as the only possible alternative. Hope emerges when we are able to transcend the boundaries of what exists and imagine new landscapes. Peeling back the layers of our imaginative content; revealing that which constitutes and delimits our imagination potential, opens the way for change. Thereby, we experience the power of conversion and the energy necessary for transformative action in the world.

Surrendering to the reality that has been pre-ordained for us inhibits transformation and leads to repudiation. Repudiation denies possibility, diminishes expectation and anticipates failure, suggesting that justice and compassion are futile. When impossibility, negation and failure are the prevailing images both those who are negated and those who negate perceive and expect no good thing—*culturally induced despair*. When despair comes in contact with public policy, it sustains systems that are inequitable, oppressive, and imperialistic. Image and ideology converge to create cultural truths, myths or commonly held beliefs about the way that things are and should be. When hope abounds, however, alternative readings of reality become possible.

### **IMAGE, MYTH AND IDEOLOGY**

Gustavo Gutiérrez employs the term *utopia* to describe the alternative reading of reality that becomes possible when hope abounds. He argues that utopia connotes “a

historical plan for a qualitatively different society and to express the aspiration to establish new social relations among human beings.”<sup>92</sup> Utopia *denounces* the existing order and *announces* that which is to come; “it is a forecast of a different order of things, a new society.”<sup>93</sup> Utopia deems the ideology of oppression and domination inauthentic and engenders the creation of a more humane world. Or, as Kaplan argues in *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory*, “Utopia balances the conservative, integrating power of ideology by calling authority into question to show that a society need not be integrated in the way that it is.”<sup>94</sup> In its negation of oppressive ideologies and openness to new social arrangements, utopia gives way to hope.

Ideology, on the other hand, preserves and legitimizes the present order of things and “tends to dogmatize all that has not succeeded in separating itself from it or has fallen under its influence.”<sup>95</sup> Ideologies are more than mere beliefs or commonly held notions; they are presumed certainties about the way that things are. Ideologies assert with fervor that a particular set of ideas, whether rational or not, are legitimate and authentic representations of the world as it is and must remain. For example, Patricia Hill Collins notes that “despite scant empirical research, beliefs about Black women’s sexuality remains deeply held and widespread.”<sup>96</sup> Racialized and sexualized beliefs about black women support an ideology of oppression that has been perpetuated and legitimized by negating images and myths for centuries, and with increased efficiency in the current era.

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<sup>92</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised edition, (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 135.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 136. See “Education as Cultural Action: An Introduction,” in Louis M. Colonnese, ed., *Conscientization for Liberation* (Washington, D.C.: Division for Latin America, United States Catholic Conference, 1970), 119.

<sup>94</sup> David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press), 139.

<sup>95</sup> Gutiérrez, 137.

<sup>96</sup> Collins, 284.

Thus, I concur with Collins that it is one thing to experience exclusionary practices and negation in our schools, religious teachings, Black community and families and “quite another to see images of U.S. Black women as ‘hoochies’ broadcast globally in seemingly infinite variations.”<sup>97</sup> Not only does global dissemination of negating representations preserve and legitimate racist and sexist ideologies within the borders of the U.S. but it perpetuates the same ideology throughout the world.

Image, myth and ideology shape our imagination and consequently the quality of our relationship with other human persons, the earth and the Divine. Therefore, it seems reasonable that discerning hope-filled possibilities within a cultural context in which negating representations pervade black women’s existence might require us to delineate more precisely the relationship between image, cultural myths and prevailing ideologies. As suggested above, images shape our perception of reality by repetitively representing and legitimizing particular versions of *the way that things are*. When specific representations are accepted as true they shape our relationship with and attitudes about other human persons, ourselves, and the world in which we live. They inform the mores and practices by which we order our lives and assign value to persons and things within our culture. When image, myth and ideology converge, they create and sustain social conditions that legitimize the exploitation and oppression of particular persons and communities while justifying the rights of others to dominate, control and possess power and resources excessively and inequitably.

Two historical events illustrate the disparity that ensues when negating racialized and sexualized images, cultural myths, and prevailing ideologies converge. The first is

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 284.

treated in Sander Gilman's investigation of the process by which the racialized image of black women are conflated with the sexualized image of white women to create an essentialized image of black womanhood as sexually deviant, racially inferior, subhuman and pathological in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The second historical event is treated in Marlon T. Riggs' commentary on the emergence of racialized and sexualized images of black women in U.S. culture in the documentary *Ethnic Notions*. Riggs begins with images that were created in the antebellum period and traces how they have been sustained and reshaped in the current era.

In his article, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," Sander L. Gilman explores "the function of visual conventions as the primary means by which we perceive and transmit our understanding of the world about us."<sup>98</sup> Gilman indicates that visual images and art in particular consist almost exclusively of icons that represent rather than present reality. Gilman argues that iconic representations of reality shape and sustain particular ideologies, stereotypes and myths related to the person or class of persons portrayed. While he does not negate the mimetic power of images, he maintains that the "ideologically charged iconographic nature of representations dominates" and shapes our perception of persons and communities.

And it dominates in a very specific manner, for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. The resulting stereotype may be overt, as in the case of caricatures, or covert, as in eighteenth-century portraiture. But they serve to focus the viewer's attention on the relationship between the portrayed individual and the general qualities ascribed to the class.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12 (August 1985), 204.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Quoted fully, Gilman says: "Even with a modest nod to supposedly mimetic portrayals it is apparent that, when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly defined), the

From the observer's perspective, all persons who are members of the class to which the model is seen to belong are the same, resulting in a homogeneous image which becomes the prevailing stereotype for the group. Because they are "composed of fragments of the real world, perceived through the ideological bias of the observer," the perceived validity of stereotypes, myths and negating images is intensified.<sup>100</sup> For example, skin color and hair texture may represent a valid difference between the physical characteristics of many black and white women. But when the values "better" or "worse," "superior" or "inferior," or when tales about their origin are attached, observable differences diminish into stereotype and myth. Persons are not just imitating what they observe but their observations are epistemologically significant in that the portrayal and related stereotype represents a way of knowing.

Gilman investigates how an iconography of female sexuality in the late nineteenth century emerged as a result of conflating black women's images with prevailing ideologies and cultural myths about women and blackness, through illustrating a series of poignant and tragic events. Ideologically, racialized and sexualized images of black women were combined with those of sexualized white women, within an extremely racist and sexist cultural context. They were given credence by medical research and literature that purportedly proved the validity of commonly held myths and stereotypes about women in general and black women in particular. For example, Black figures were always present in the European art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often

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ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates. And it dominates in a very specific manner, for the representation of individuals implies the creation of some greater class or classes to which the individual is seen to belong. The resulting stereotype may be overt, as in the case of caricatures, or covert, as in eighteenth-century portraits. But they serve to focus the viewer's attention on the relationship between the portrayed individual and the general qualities ascribed to the class.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

depicted as servants and/or as the antithesis of the white figure. Gilman argues that their central function was to “mark the presence of illicit sexual activity.”<sup>101</sup> The white figure was generally nude or partially clothed and the presence of the black servant was suggestive of and reinforced the perception of blacks as concupiscent and sexually deviant; a perception that had persisted since the Middle Ages. Gilman also suggests that when the central female figure is paired with a black female, the association implies “their sexual similarity.”<sup>102</sup> Therefore, the association of the black and white female figures leads to an essentialized image of “woman” as sexualized female.

However, in a racist *and* sexist culture, objectification of women in general was insufficient. Gilman observes that the image of the black woman was conflated with the image of the prostitute to intensify the sexualized image of the black woman, and to create a sexually perverse and diseased image of white female prostitutes. White prostitutes were believed to be similar to black women in their overall physical makeup and in the form of their genitalia. Medical research was used to validate the assumption that, despite the prostitute’s superficial beauty, over time prostitution “affects the physiognomy of the prostitute just as it does her genitalia, which become more and more diseased as she ages.”<sup>103</sup> The pairing of the racialized black woman with the white female prostitute resulted in a sexualized woman whose body became the seat of eroticism and disease and the sexualized black woman as the most primitive of women and the source of corruption and disease.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 226.

Gilman argues that, like artistic icons, the medical conventions were “iconographic in that they represent these realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions which they employed.” In other words, the rule of conduct in medical research was influenced by cultural beliefs, visual convention and other aspects of culture. Thus, Medicine’s claim to *pure science* is challenged on the basis of its potential for confusing myth with fact and empirical observations with appropriating cultural biases. As a result, art and medicine come together to create and sustain the myths and stereotypes of the era.

Racist myths and stereotypes would not tolerate too close a similarity between black and white women. Therefore, in order to create and maintain a distinctive identity for white women and to support the existing myths of black sexual deviance, the society needed to prove the inherent differences between the two groups of women. Difference, of course, in a racist sexist culture meant different from whiteness as the normative expression of humanity, and blackness as its opposite and inferior expression. Gilman contends that “The relationship between the sexuality of the black woman and that of the sexualized white woman enters a new dimension when contemporary scientific discourse concerning the nature of black female sexuality is examined.”<sup>104</sup> Science sought to prove through empirical investigation, that black women were the direct opposite of white women, and as opposite, inferior to. Their guiding question: What are the observable physiological differences between white females and black females?

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 212

The black female had been labeled as more primitive and with stronger sexual desires than her white counterpart for centuries but the assumption “was dismissed as unscientific by the radical empiricist of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, scientists sought proof that white and black women were observably different, and “they found that difference in the distinction they drew between the pathological and the normal in the medical model.”<sup>106</sup> It should not come as a surprise that what was considered normal coincided most closely with observable characteristics in whites and pathological with observable characteristics in blacks. Similarly, social and medical conventions demanded that any deviations from white femaleness as normative must be considered pathological and inferior.

The European scientific community chose the *Hottentot female* or “Bushman” women as the essential representation of black women of African descent. Gilman indicates that “while many groups of African blacks were known to Europeans in the nineteenth century, the Hottentot remained representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female.”<sup>107</sup> Their decision was supported, in part, by medical literature that indicated the gross dissimilarities between Bushman women and white women. Stereotypical myths about black women’s sexuality and the physical characteristics of Bushman women were combined to create an essentialized image of the black woman as sexually lascivious, aesthetically unattractive, physically distorted and inferior in every respect. Gilman cites J.J. Virey’s study of race standards in the early

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 206.



nineteenth century as an example of how medical research was used to justify the negation of black women.

In this essay, Virey summarized his (and his contemporaries') views on the sexual nature of black females in terms of acceptable medical discourse. According to him, their "voluptuousness" is "developed to a degree of lasciviousness unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites." Elsewhere, Virey cites the Hottentot woman as the epitome of this sexual lasciviousness and stresses the relationship between her physiology and her physiognomy (her "hideous form" and her "horrible flattened nose"). His central proof is a discussion of the unique structure of the Hottentot female's sexual parts, the description of which he takes from the anatomical studies published by...Georges Cuvier. According to Cuvier, the black female looks different. Her physiognomy, her skin color, the form of her genitalia label her as inherently different.<sup>108</sup>

Cuvier's and Virey's characterizations of black females are some of the most blatant examples of exaggerating fragments of the real world—e.g. black women's skin color and physical features—to support the ideological biases regarding black women's sexuality and inherent worth. As suggested above, the perceived scientific validity of these claims intensified their plausibility.

Medical 'research' suggested that not only was the black female's sexual desire *primitive* but the form of her genitalia was also *primitive* or abnormal in relation to white women.<sup>109</sup> The European medical community was particularly fascinated with Bushman women's "steatopygia, or protruding buttocks." Gilman argues that if the medical community could prove that the sexual parts of black women were significantly different from that of white women, they could prove that blacks "were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan."<sup>110</sup> If

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 216.

they were not considered fully human, black women could be objectified or *thingyfied*; considered objects to be observed, studied and displayed. Because their inferiority was medically validated, those who objectified them believed that their actions were justified.

One of the most tragic examples of black women's objectification is the exhibition of a number of black women as the "Hottentot Venus" throughout Europe. Saartjie Baartman, also known as Sarah Bartmann, an indentured servant, first exhibited in London in 1810, is the most noted of the "Hottentot Venuses." Ms. Baartman was repeatedly displayed throughout Europe until she died in Paris in 1815.<sup>111</sup> Another woman, also called "the Hottentot Venus," was "the prize attraction at a ball given by Dutchess Du Barry in Paris" in 1829.<sup>112</sup> Of particular note were their buttocks but there was also much conjecture about their genitalia. Their bodies were used to satisfy the sexual fantasies and curiosities of their European observers with no regard for the women's humanity. They were not seen as women but were "reduced to [their] sexual parts."<sup>113</sup> bell hooks contends that "She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts... Their body parts were offered as evidence to support racist notions that black people were more akin to animals than other humans."<sup>114</sup> Shockingly, Ms. Baartman's objectification and dehumanization did not end at her death. Dianne Stewart reports that her body was autopsied and her genitalia, buttocks and brain pickled and placed on display.<sup>115</sup> Her remains were held at the Musée de l'homme in Paris until 2002

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Hooks, 62.

<sup>115</sup> Stewart, Dianne, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2005), 75.

when they were returned to South Africa.<sup>116</sup> Detached from her body and from her person, her genitalia became objects of research and observation and have been studied for years with little regard for Ms. Baartman's humanity.

Saartjie Baartman faced objectification and exploitation in life and death. The essence of her being was collapsed into her sexual organs, and her voice remains silent. As an iconic representation of black women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her objectification is paradigmatic of the manner in which black women have been objectified and oppressed throughout the ages. She is the black woman whose naked body was displayed on auction blocks without regard for her humanity, her hopes, desires, and feelings. She is the black girl-child who was sold away from her mother. She is the black woman who has been raped and abused with little notice or recourse—Frances Wood's *permissible victim*, the media's video queen and the voyeurs' delight. Her life and death is a memorial to our failure to resist and contest negating images—of our failure to embrace humanity as an ontological right for all persons.

The second example of how visual imagery and myth converge to create and sustain oppressive ideologies is illustrated in the emergence of racialized and sexualized images of blackness in U.S. American culture. As indicated above, Patricia Hill Collins refers to these images as “controlling images” and contends that they “are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.”<sup>117</sup> In his documentary film *Ethnic Notions*, Marlon T. Riggs explores how representations of black people and black culture were

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Collins, 69.

used to create and sustain a racist sexist ideology regarding persons of African descent beginning in the antebellum era and sustained into the twentieth century.<sup>118</sup> Riggs traces the development of the Mammy, Sambo, Pickaninny, Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Urban Coon and Uncle in the psyche of American culture, suggesting that there is little doubt that these images shaped prevailing attitudes about race as it related to black people in America. Overwhelmingly black people were portrayed with extremely dark faces, large wide red smiling lips, exaggerated noses, bulging eyes, awkward and shuffling mannerism, and large bodies (especially female images). These images were displayed on popular food items like syrup, pancakes and cream of wheat, as well as on laundry detergent, in children's books, advertisement, and as statuettes, and lawn figurines. They were the caricatures of black people that graced white peoples' homes, their dinner tables, lawns and countless other facets of their lives. They were also inescapable in the lives of black people, due primarily to their unavoidable participation in and economic dependence upon Euro-American culture, much of which entailed menial jobs in homes, farms and factories owned by whites. Not unlike the media images of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, these representations were persistently and repetitively present.

Riggs asserts that these distorted images of blackness are “the history of our national consciousness; a consciousness striving to reconcile the paradox of racism in a nation founded on human equality. A conscious coping with the profound contradiction through caricature.”<sup>119</sup> The use of caricature to justify racism and slavery by demonstrating that blacks are inherently inferior to whites (dehumanization and

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<sup>118</sup> Riggs, Marlon T. *Ethnic Notions*. Produced and directed by Marlon T. Riggs. 57 min. Berkly, CA: California Newsreel, 1986. Videocassette.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

objectification) in U.S. culture bears striking similarities to the European medical community's efforts to prove that black women were physiologically inferior and thus less human than white women. In both instances, psychologically and medically, distorting caricatures and misrepresentations of difference were used to resolve the contradiction that supported systemic oppression and an ideology that bequeathed to one group the right to enslave, oppress and brutalize another.

Riggs describes in great detail how these caricatures molded and mirrored the reality of racism in U.S. culture for more than 100 years. They not only reflected the racism and sexism that permeated U.S. culture, but they shaped a way of seeing, being and imagining. The Sambo character, for example, was a simple, docile, laughing black man who was portrayed as carefree, irresponsible, and childlike. He spent his days dancing and singing without a care in the world. T.D. Rice, an Ethiopian delineator, gave birth to the Sambo in 1820 as Jim Crow. He blackened his face, tore up his clothes and performed an exaggerated version of a dance called the Jim Crow.<sup>120</sup> Rice's performance was an instant success, even among whites who had no contact with or knowledge of black people. They accepted the shuffling, dancing, childlike image of the Sambo as a reliable representation of black personhood. Soon, groups of delineators were performing together giving birth to minstrelsy and the Sambo as an enduring icon in American culture. Riggs indicates that eventually black actors like Bert Williams, a preeminent black face artist, were able to bring some humanity to the characters. Yet Williams, who spoke impeccable English, was required to include the stereotypical

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Legend goes that Rice was imitating a crippled black man that he had seen the night before. Choreographer Leni Sloan explains that "The *jim crow* was a dance that started on the plantation as a result of dancing being outlawed in 1690. Dancing was said to be crossing your feet. So the slaves created a way of shuffling and sliding to safely glide around the laws without crossing their feet."

language of black face in his shows as a means of reinforcing the distorted images that had already shaped the American psyche.<sup>121</sup>

The minstrel error began at about the same time as the abolitionist movement in the U.S., and the Sambo image and its female counterpart, the mammy, became one of the most powerful ideological forces in the politics of slavery in the South. As discussed earlier, the *mammy* was characterized as asexual and the physical antithesis of white womanhood; faithful at all cost to her master and mistress but as controlling and emasculating in her own family.<sup>122</sup> The Sambo and Mammy images suggested that blacks were incapable of living within the parameters of a normal and well adjusted family. Ethiopian delineators did not limit their caricature of black life to southern plantation life, however, but also targeted northern blacks who were already enjoying a degree of freedom. Zip Coon, the Sambo's northern counterpart, was portrayed as a *Dandee* and a buffoon whose attempts to imitate white culture were pointless and severely inadequate. Zip Coon repudiated the notion of racial equality. These images reinforced the notion that slavery was the only possible alternative for persons of African

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<sup>121</sup> Even though Bert Williams played for the Court of England, he was not permitted membership in the American Press Club and could not enter without a white sponsor. Eventually Williams was able to remove most of the overtly racist jargon from his show. However, even when black face was gone, other aspects of the caricatures were still present, especially in cartoon—the endangered black child, the shiftless and shuffling black man, the mammy—Bugs Bunny in blackface; *Little Black Sambo*, moving pictures. These all shaped young minds into accepting them as absolutely normal.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. Regarding the asexual characterization of the mammy image, Riggs contends, “She’s presented almost as the antithesis of the white lady and the person who does not have the qualities of fragility and beauty which would make her of value in the society...If the mammy were to be a sexual being she—which of course in reality she was—but if she were to be that in myth... she would become a threat to the mistress of the house. She would become a threat to the entire system, because she would then be capable of being desired by the master of the house. We know from reading the diaries and the letters of slave mistresses that this is very often the case and created much disruption, much friction, in this happy plantation system that the planners wanted to project.”

descent and assuaged white peoples' fears that their actions were malevolent, racist and dehumanizing.<sup>123</sup>

Pat Turner of the University of Massachusetts explains that the Sambo image “mirrored the prevailing belief that slavery was good for the African because he was docile, inferior and happy to serve. Because of their inferiority, slavery was a good thing. Thus arose the images of the happy slave on the plantation—a benign and beneficent institution.”<sup>124</sup> In other words, the persistent assertion that blacks required the care and guidance of the whites supported an ideology of racism and provided those who opposed the abolition of chattel slavery a foundation for their argument. However, while the slaveholding community adopted this flawed ideology, they were also well aware that they could not run their plantation with a *Sambo*. One would hope that their pragmatic needs might have curbed their appetitive desire for the iconic Sambo, but the ideology of racism proved more powerful.

Minstrelsy also functioned as a cathartic for recent immigrants to the U.S. who were Non-African, white skinned but economically oppressed. They soon discovered that becoming an American demanded that they create an identity for themselves that was distinctively white *and* in opposition to all things African. In the process of creating a distinctively white identity, many immigrant groups either abandoned or submerged their cultural practices and identities. Therefore, Thandeka suggests that minstrelsy was a “glimpse of the ‘common man’ as he tried to handle the shame, loss, regret and rage

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. Riggs suggests that “Together, Zip Coon and Sambo provided a double edged defense of slavery: Zip-coon, proof of blacks’ ludicrous failure to adapt to freedom, and Sambo, the fantasy of happy darkies in their proper place.”

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

produced by his new inferiority as a free but dependent worker whose behavior must conform to the expectations of his white boss.”<sup>125</sup> In effect, these delineators and the audiences that supported them depicted themselves in black face. Therefore, the Sambo image was not only politically efficacious but functioned as a cathartic for those who were racially white but deemed culturally and economically inferior. Consequently, economically oppressed whites’ need to claim an identity for themselves in a racist society strengthened both the ideological and epistemological efficacy of these images. They not only supported slavery as the proper social order but constructed a way of knowing that translated the distorted images of black men and women into fact.

Larry Levine of the University of California, comments on the power of images to shape perceptions of reality, and to reveal the innermost desires, and I would add fears, of those who create and consume them.

Black’s don’t really look like that so why is it so appealing to people to think they look like that, to pretend they look like that, to look at icons that look like that. You look at them often enough *blacks begin to look like that even if they don’t*...So that they’ve had great impact on our society. They actually tell us both about the inner desires of the people who create and consume them and also they tell us about some of the forces that shape reality for a large portion of our populations.<sup>126</sup>

These comments are poignant and illumine a potential danger in that they not only emphasize the power of icons to distort reality and sustain prevailing ideologies, but they reveal the extent to which persons might go to secure their own social locations and positions of power.

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<sup>125</sup> Thandeka, *Learning To Be White* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 57. Although Thandeka suggests that the shame that the Irish sense of inferiority was “new” others suggest that their struggle with inferiority began much earlier than their arrival on the shores of the U.S. Cf. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, and Thomas Haden’s *Irish on the Inside* for a detailed discussion of Irish assimilation in U.S. culture as well as minstrelsy in the lives of post famine Irish Catholic immigrants.

<sup>126</sup> Riggs, emphasis added.



With the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865 blacks believed that a new day was on the horizon, but their hopes were betrayed as the racialized ideology that permeated the slavocracy persisted. Instead of entering American society as “co-workers in the kingdom of culture,” as W.E.B. Du Bois had advocated, black women and men were systematically locked out of job opportunities, education and housing because of laws and ideologies that recast them as dangerous and unreliable.<sup>127</sup> George Fredrickson of Stanford University suggests that those who wanted to “reestablish firm white control, maintain white supremacy by any means possible, used the arguments that what had happened was that blacks, no longer under the benign, beneficent or kindly guidance of whites, were reverting to savagery.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, the Sambo and Mammy images gave way to violent and sexually promiscuous images necessary to support and adapt the prevailing ideology of black inferiority to its new political context.

In the political arena, public officials manipulated white peoples’ “fears about the so called black menace.” Black men were characterized as brutes who wanted to ravage white women and destroy the foundations of society, while the image of black women as a sexually promiscuous breeding work ox persisted. Riggs argues that the films such as *Birth of a Nation*, adapted from Thomas Dickenson’s book, *The Clansman*, only served to heighten white racial fears and ensuing violence.

Described by President Woodrow Wilson as ‘History writ enlightening,’ *Birth of a Nation* captured on film the classic caricature of blacks following Reconstruction. Here emancipation was viewed as a tragic mistake. It had ended slavery and let loose blacks’ wildest passions. Brute Negroes played by whites in

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<sup>127</sup> Du Bois, 3. Stated more completely, Du Bois writes, concerning the marginalization and oppression of the *Negro*, “This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the Kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.” See chapter 1 of *The Souls of Black Folk* for a complete discussion.

<sup>128</sup> Riggs, *Ethnic*

black face, pursued white virgins. These images were guaranteed to incite racial violence, but more, they justified it.<sup>129</sup>

In other words, *Birth of a Nation* not only reinforced the notion that blacks were violent but legitimized public executions, lynching, as a defense. The practice of lynching, most prevalent in the early twentieth century, was viewed as the white man's effort to eradicate the society of the menacing evil that was about to overtake it—the violent and dangerous black man and the sexually lascivious black women. The recent exhibition of lynching photographs and post cards, *Without Sanctuary*, adds credence not only to the fact that lynching existed but of its normative status in much of white America's collective psyche.<sup>130</sup>

Black children were also lynched. They were portrayed in story books, film and on greeting cards as *Pickaninnies* with exaggerated “Negroid” features, animalistic and brutish behavior and always in danger. As an example, Riggs references “The Gater and the Pickaninny” (1903), a one minute film which comically depicts a black child being eaten by an alligator and then rescued by a black man.<sup>131</sup> The adult counterpart to the Pickaninny was the Urban Coon, portrayed with exaggerated “Negroid” features, dressed in a suit, carrying a switchblade, playing dice, or gambling; a variation on the persistent theme of blacks as childish, entertaining and vicious. Similarly, black World War II servicemen were portrayed as childish and entertaining. The characterization of black people as dangerous and subhuman justified the violence perpetrated against them, their

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,” was an exhibition co-presented by Emory and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in 2002. The photographs were exhibited at the Martin Luther King Jr. National historic Site from May 1-December 31, 2002. They have since been published in the book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, John Lewis, ed. (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palm Publishers/Twelvetrees Press, 2000).

<sup>131</sup> Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*.

murder, the elimination of laws that afforded voting rights and the erection of laws (Jim Crow laws) that mandated segregation and separation.

In the aftermath of these characterizations blacks discovered an American psyche that had been deeply shaped by the notion that blacks were ugly, savage, dangerous (physically and sexually), and happy servants, as well as stereotypes about black people's inherent abilities in music and sports. These images supported an ideology of racism, domination and oppression, suggesting that blacks were indifferent to poverty, subservience, and segregation, and that their greatest joy came in serving white people. One-hundred years after the Civil War, these old images began to dissipate as black people demanded their rights and expressed their discontent with American racism. And while the more extreme images have all but disappeared, many of them took on new form in the mid-twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries, as has been discussed previously. Riggs suggests that these images are “rarely contested or offset by more positive and affirming portrayals, [and] they have left wounds that have yet to be healed. Their perpetuation says something about our hopes and dreams.”

Our hopes and dreams, or as I indicated above, our *ability to imagine a just and life affirming world* for ourselves and other human persons is our greatest concern. These two examples expose the synergism that results when image, myth and ideology converge; a synergistic mechanism designed to sustain the present order of things—marginalization, objectification, inequity, and suffering. When left unchallenged, the ideology of oppression persists and finds expression in concrete practices, policies and behaviors. That is, controlling images make oppression appear normal, as per Collins, legitimizes oppression and delimits our ability to imagine life affirming alternatives.

Structural oppression, when accepted as normative by those who benefit from the present order of things *and* those who are oppressed, makes one vulnerable to culturally induced despair.

Nonetheless, the possibility of hope remains in the present no less than in the past, denying despair its desire to have the final say. Hope emerges again and again in those who surrender to the redemptive power of the imagination; who have *by means of dreams of innocence and reconciliation*, per Ricoeur, open themselves to the voice of hope. Or, as Alice Walker asserts:

And if this were the end of the story, we would have cause to cry out...But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we Black American women are.<sup>132</sup>

Walker's comments are suggestive of another mechanism at work in our world; another way of knowing that leads to wholeness and wellbeing as opposed to despair and hopelessness. As such we attend closely to what exists and seek to uncover an epistemology that might enliven our souls and help us hear that voice of hope that is always speaking. We garner our strength from those who dare dream; from those who dare speak, paint, dance, and sing an alternative reality into existence. And in that strength, redemptive possibilities for all of humanity emerges.

This redemptive imagining is evident in dreamers like Sojourner Truth, who spoke an alternative reality for black women into existence through her interrogative

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<sup>132</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 341.

assertion: *Aint I a woman?* Rosa Parks lived that which she imagined when she refused to give up her seat and move to the designated area of disempowerment at the back of the bus. Countless mothers and grandmothers have painted new versions of reality on the canvas of our existence by being bold and resilient and daring to dream in spite of the harshness of their lives. And as they dreamed, they discovered that the power of the imagination is in its ability to create images of hope and wholeness and to energize us toward creative action, in the face of the evidentiary images that suggest otherwise.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

This investigation, stated most succinctly, is about how human persons might learn to live with hope within the concreteness of their everyday lives. I have described *hope* as that which creates within us yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of God's Spirit assuring human persons of God's presence, power and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. Hope negates oppression and suffering as normal and inevitable for our lives and asserts that a new reality is possible. I have also suggested that in order for us to live with hope we must offer a responsive "yes" to God's "yes" for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God's ongoing work of creating a just and humane world for ourselves and for all persons. We offer our "yes" in concert with numerous others, hoping that the pitch and timbre of our "yes" might transform the discordant sound of suffering into the harmonious possibility of wellbeing. That is, the unique form of our "yes" within the context of our broader culture (pitch) and its quality with reference to our relationship with God, other persons and the created order (timbre) has the potential for eliminating distortion or falsehood and creating enduring change in our world.

How does one say "yes" amid the cacophony of distorting voices that insist that wholeness is beyond our grasp or outside of the realm of possibility? How might young black women and others who have been relegated to the margins respond "yes" to God's "yes" for creation and resist the negating voices that insist that they accept suffering and oppression as inevitable for their lives? I approach this investigation encouraged by

twenty-two young black women whose hopes and dreams are full of transformative potential; women who were willing to tell their stories, name the insufficiency of their world and disclose their hearts desire for wholeness. Their “yes” is barely audible amid the cacophony of negation and distortion that inundates our acoustical and visual horizons. I ask these questions, therefore, and simultaneously listen for their voices.

These are the difficult and important questions that frame this investigation and my suggestion that hope is a matter of pedagogical import. This investigation, therefore, is both an attempt to hear young black women’s stories and to take an initial step towards creating responsive pedagogical strategies. That is, I want to help young black women hear the voice of hope and live responsive to that voice amid the cultural distortion that can lead to culturally induced despair.

In the previous chapter I indicated that culturally induced despair is born of persistent and repetitive cultural negation intended to devalue and disempower those who experience suffering and oppression. Culturally induced despair sustains the perception that the present order is changeless and that newness is improbable, rendering God’s fidelity to a just and humane world suspect. This chorus of despair invites us to sing along. It invites us to accept that the present is the only possible social arrangement and to concede that disproportionate prosperity and privilege for some and the marginalization of others is both normal and changeless.

Young black women live within the tension of hope’s declaration of possibility and this chorus of despair. That is, young black women, as discussed in chapter 1, are incessantly confronted with images, myths and ideologies that seek to define them and

manage the extent to which they are able to live with hope. Therefore, I am interested in how images, myths, and ideologies that recur within the larger U.S. culture, familial and friendship relationships, and religious communities distort and/or enhance young black women's ability to imagine hopeful realities and ways of being in the world. How do young black women interpret these representations and to what extent do the negating aspects of the culture impact how they image or view themselves, how they engage their world, and their ability to survive and flourish with hope? How might we, young black women and others, sharpen our acuity to the voice of hope and dampen the incessant intrusion of distortion that seeks to co-opt our imaginative potential?

To help me answer these questions, I have invited twenty-two young black women between the ages eighteen and thirty to share their experiences, life stories, and insights so that I might learn how they experience life in U.S. culture and how they speak about hope and its efficacy in their lives. I have conducted ethnographic interviews as a tool to help me hear their stories and draw from them important themes that can contribute to a pedagogy that is responsive to their questions, concerns and needs. The women's stories, therefore, are essential to my pedagogical construction.

The ethnographic interviews are an important component of a more comprehensive cultural analysis which draws upon a broad range of existing scholarship, documentaries, and other investigations to explore the complexity of black women's lives in U.S. culture. Deconstructing the historical and contemporary form and function of negating and disaffirming images, myths, and ideologies in the lives of young black women is particularly important to this analysis, as suggested in Chapter One, because of their prevalence in U.S. culture and potential for impeding our ability to imagine



alternatives. These two methods of inquiry, the ethnographic interview and engagement with existing scholarship, contribute to a comprehensive cultural analysis of hope and despair that regards black women as subjects and affirms their experiences across the generations.

With such a vibrant and diverse group of dialogue partners—the women, the scholars and film maker—it seems reasonable that they not only speak with me but that they engage each other in mutually critical dialogue. Therefore, I have employed a dialogical paradigm in which the existing scholars and the young black women talk back to each other. I have listened closely for how these dialogue partners push and pull, confirm and challenge, test and expand what the other has to say with hopes of discovering strategies that can contribute to a *pedagogy of hope*. The interdisciplinary and interdialogical nature of this approach also enrich the cultural analysis by disclosing important questions, themes, inconsistencies and pedagogical intimations that might have otherwise remained concealed within the domain of their discrete disciplines.

The cultural analysis is essential to identifying contextually significant pedagogical strategies that can nurture and sustain young black women in hope. Therefore, the final component in this methodology, interpretive theory-building or pedagogical creation, is concerned with how, given what we now know, preachers and Christian educators might partner with young black women as they discern a way of being that is responsive to God's "yes" for their lives. In other words, the final phase of my methodology is intended to respond to some of the questions evoked from our dialogue with young black women, scholars who have already contributed to the conversation, and Christian communities desiring to minister with young black women.

It also seems important, given my emphasis upon preaching and Christian Education, that I enrich the dialogue by identifying connections and drawing upon existing theories and practices in Homiletics and Christian Education, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five. Similarly, a pedagogy intended to catalyze hope as responsiveness to God's ongoing work of creating a just and humane world seems incomplete without a consideration of existing theologies of hope and how they influence and shape pedagogy in Christian communities. I explore this in Chapter Four. As a consequence, I intend to help Christian communities speak in resonances of hope that young black women can readily identify and appropriate for their day-to-day lives by creating pedagogical approaches that can deconstruct negation, reveal possibilities and alternatives, and create transformative experiences. The methodology, therefore, involves four distinct but related components. The first three components are specifically concerned with the cultural analysis of hope and despair in the lives of young black women: (1) *ethnographic interviews with young black women*, (2) *survey of existing scholarship*, and (3) *mutually critical dialogue between the various contributors to the cultural analysis*. The fourth component is *interpretive theory building*, which entails the creation of pedagogical strategies drawn from the cultural analysis of hope and despair and best practices in Homiletics and Christian Education to the end of catalyzing hope in the lives of young black women.

### **CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF HOPE AND DESPAIR**

I want to know what young black women know, how they know what they know and how it has influenced their ways of living and being in the world. I want to genuinely and attentively hear their voices with hopes that they might teach me

something about how they navigate the sometimes treacherous terrain of their lives, and how they live with hope in the midst of it all. I want them to experience the affirmation that is possible by the power of their own words and the knowledge that someone is listening attentively and conspicuously. I want them to know like I want to know “more and in greater depths than is considered ‘good’ for one” because what we come to know together may well change our lives.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, my methodology begins with knowing and reflecting on the possibility of knowing differently.

In her reflections on womanist epistemology, N. Lynne Westfield, draws our attention to a portion of Alice Walker’s definition of *womanish*: “Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one.” In other words, Black women want to know more than the powerful deem appropriate; more about the world in which we live, the possibilities that have been concealed, and our own inherent worth as persons created in the image of a Creating God. Womanist epistemology challenges the notion that “other people, specifically White folks and Black men, better determine what knowledge is, what we are to know, what we need, what we think and how we are to be and become in the world.”<sup>134</sup> But most importantly it affirms Black women as creators of knowledge and as persons capable of determining the course of their own lives, which Westfield calls “self-determination.”

In addition to affirming Black women as agents of reality, Westfield argues that their desire for increased and deeper knowing “is a testament to the indomitable spirit of

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<sup>133</sup> Nancy Lynne Westfield, “‘Mama Why...?’ A Womanist Epistemology of Hope” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 128-139.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

Black women and our seemingly limitless quest for and ability to create hope.”<sup>135</sup>

Therefore, womanist epistemology is an epistemology of hope “grounded in the notion that change, reframing, re-thinking, re-imagining, re-naming, re-structuring, re-conceiving—birthing anew, is not only possible but also necessary.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, womanist epistemology acknowledges the suffering and oppression of the present but refuses to be determined by it, for to live without hope is to live in existential deadness. Therefore, womanist epistemology promotes a way of being that rejects coerced silence, and a way of understanding that will not settle for the inevitability of oppression. It “pushes preestablished boundaries,” sacred and secular, so that Black women might affirm the validity of their own voices and experiences. In this investigation, my intent is to affirm that young black women’s voices matter with hopes that they might embrace the power of self-determination; of creating a life-affirming future for themselves and others.

Black women invested in self-determination, in controlling our own destiny, must also recognize the necessity of ethical practices and decision making. Westfield argues that “knowing, at its best, expands to include issues of ethical reflection.”<sup>137</sup> Knowing demands that young black women consider not only how they might care for themselves but what it means to offer care to others and for the planet that is our shared domicile. This is consistent with my suggestion that living with hope is concerned with responding to God’s fidelity and with creating a life affirming reality for ourselves and for all persons. Therefore, Westfield encourages a “both/and” vantage point and approach to decision making, suggesting that it “allows Black women to explode *old paradigms of*

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

*hopelessness* and set about the creation of new worlds of liberation, forgiveness and redemption.”<sup>138</sup> Liberation, forgiveness and redemption are held in tension as black women discern how they want to live in relation to those who desire their wellbeing as well as those who have done them harm, what that means for their own quality of life, and how their responses contribute to the creation of a new reality.

### **Cultural Analysis and Ethnography**

I agree with Westfield that creating a new reality demands that we consider new possibilities for our lives, what it means for us to live together as human community and with all of creation. In this investigation, I want to “explode old paradigms of hopelessness” and help young black women discern the possibility of a new reality. It seemed reasonable, therefore, that young black women would be among my primary conversation partners and that their first-hand accounts would undergird this investigation. Therefore, I have conducted ethnographic interviews as a means of strengthening my acuity to their voices and their unique questions, concerns and yearnings.

The ethnographic interview is an important and powerful research approach for several reasons, not the least of which is that it is a qualitative research method that emphasizes dialogical engagement and learning from the women rather than studying

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 135 (emphasis added).

them or simply gathering information. As Spradley suggests, the essence of ethnography is that rather than “collecting ‘data’ about people, the ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them. Linda Thomas, in “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm,” also urges womanist scholars to engage black women outside of the scholarly community as “living human documents” by employing ethnographic methodology. Ethnography “can bring the experience and knowledge of the marginalized to the center by standing aside to let the community speak for itself.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, ethnography afford womanist scholars the opportunity to enrich their cultural, literary and historical analysis with black women’s stories of joy and struggle today; to discover connections and tension between their scholarly reflections and the lived experiences of contemporary black women.

Womanist scholarship has relied heavily upon the black women literary, narrative and historic traditions as sources for hearing black women’s voices and exploring the complexities of their lives. These sources have been invaluable in black women’s effort to tell their stories, deconstruct the world of suffering and oppression in which we live, and model strategies of survival, resistance and human flourishing. However, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, their stories are not always consistent with those of living women who struggle against the ferocity of oppression in their everyday lives. Black women’s lives are complex and rarely conform to a single story line. Ethnographic interviews, focus groups and broader ethnographic investigations, afford womanist and others the opportunity to deepen our engagement with women of all ages and races, learn from their experiences and create strategies and interventions that can lead to human

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<sup>139</sup> Thomas, Linda E., “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm”, *Cross Currents*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 1998-1999, 488.

flourishing and wellbeing. In this investigation, I wanted to hear young black women's voices with hopes that they would help me learn something about their deep yearnings, joys and struggles.

Hearing their voices is difficult in the present cultural and theo-scholarly milieu. Although their images are prevalent in the broader culture, as the media assumes the role of expert witness regarding young black women's significance in U.S. culture, what we hear and see of them is overwhelmingly negative and disaffirming. Too often their stories are presented with the intent of reifying systemic oppression and convincing the viewing audience that we are powerless to change things. Theological inquiry, including womanist and black feminist, has given even less attention to ascertaining their stories, considering the idiosyncratic shape of oppression in their lives, or responding to the unique questions and concerns with which young black women grapple. Rather, the voices of young black women between eighteen and thirty are either absent or indistinguishable from the broader category "black women" or "African American women." Similarly, while there are investigations in which black youth are the foci, young black women between eighteen and thirty are still absent.<sup>140</sup> Ethnographic interviews with young black women are essential to this investigation precisely because of the dearth of research in which their stories are offered, my emphasis upon womanist epistemology, and my intent toward creating pedagogical strategies that can awaken and nourish their ability to live with hope.

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<sup>140</sup> Cf. Evelyn Parker's *Trouble Don't Last Always* in which she explores spirituality among African American youth and the possibility of "emancipatory hope." Also, Kiri Davis' documentary film *A Girl Like Me*, <http://www.kiridavis.com/>, in which she chronicles the lives of teenage girls who are struggling with issues of identity and racism in U.S. culture.

First-hand accounts afford womanists and others an opportunity to contextualize our investigations with attention to the unique “situation” of young black women’s lives. Edward Farley defines a *situation* as “the way various items, powers, and events in the environment gather together so as to require responses for participation. In this sense, any living, perhaps any actual, entity exists in situations.”<sup>141</sup> Young black women’s stories and insights reveal the complex nature of their “situation” and the unique array of responses that they must make as a matter of survival. For example, while young black women “share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent,” as Patricia Hill Collins asserts, they are also uniquely located in U.S. culture by virtue of their youth and the stereotypes, images and myths (positive and negative) that shape cultural perception. The places and spaces in which they live also include their kinship and friendship relationships as well as their religious affiliations and social networks. These relational and physical contexts “gather together” to constitute a unique *situation* for young black women and call forth distinctive ways of being in the world. Their expressions of hope and of culturally induced despair are among these responses. That is, how and in what form young black women hear the voice of hope, if they sense it at all, and how they respond is influenced by the “situation” of their lives. Therefore, my use of the ethnographic interview invites young black women to explore the various contexts that constitute the “situation” of their lives, with specific attention to the larger U.S. culture, kinship/friendship relationship and religious affiliation, in an effort to gain insights about how and to what extent these contexts nourish their ability to live with hope. These insights are invaluable to my efforts

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<sup>141</sup> Edward Farley, “Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward, Stephen Patterson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000) 119-127.



towards creating contextualized pedagogical strategies that can address and redress culturally induced despair and strengthen young black women's acuity and responsiveness to the voice of hope.

An important bi-product of the ethnographic interview is that the process itself has the potential for affirming young black women's moral agency. I have invited women whose voices are often silent to speak with the assurance that they were making an important contribution to the cultural analysis of hope and despair and to a constructive response to culturally induced despair. It was important to me that they not leave the interview believing that they were simply test subjects but that they understand that they were making an explicit and important contribution to this emerging pedagogy of hope. Therefore, they could see themselves as teachers and expert consultants. My attentiveness to their stories suggested that their experiences were important; worth speaking about and worth being heard.

### **Interview Structure and Questions:**

Their stories are worth telling and worth hearing. I structured the interview sessions so that the women and I could engage in a conversation or dialogue loosely guided by a set of questions, rather than approaching the process as an information gathering exercise. I wanted to learn from the women's individual experiences as well as "tap the cultural knowledge" that only they could help me understand as an important source for my pedagogical construction.<sup>142</sup> Learning from the women rather than simply

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<sup>142</sup> James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 32. Cf. George W. Noblit and R. Dwight Hare, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 12. They suggest that qualitative research seeks "an explanation for social or cultural events based upon the perspectives and experiences of the people being studied." The

gathering data demanded that I allow for flexibility in the interview format. In other words, where possible, the order of the questions followed the flow of the conversation, creating a more organic participant guided format. As Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz indicates regarding her conversations with Hispanic Women, “I have freely mixed techniques used for focused interviews, free story interviews, case studies and life histories.”<sup>143</sup> While I asked all of the women a general set of questions, I embellished, clarified or added to the questions as was necessary to help the women tell their stories in as much detail as possible and reflect upon the complex nature of their lives. The questions are also intentionally open-ended to enhance the conversational and consultation qualities of the interview and to minimize the concerns about providing the “correct” answer. The general dialogue format is as follows:

- Talk some about yourself and what it means for you to be a young black woman in U.S. American culture.
- What are the cultural images that have contributed most to your understanding of what it means to be a young black woman?
- Describe other sources/experiences that have contributed to your self-understanding.
- Describe how you think others view you and other young black women in your age group.
- Describe what it means for you to live in or experience hope.
- Describe what it means for you to live in or experience despair.
- How has your experience in U.S. culture been a source of hope or despair in your life?

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women’s stories reveal the nature of hope and culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women in U.S. culture.

<sup>143</sup> Ada María Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha: In the Struggle—Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 67.

- How has your experience in the church been a source of hope or despair in your life?
- Describe other significant sources of hope and of despair in your life.
- If you could say one thing to the Black Church concerning its ability to create and sustain hope in the lives of young black women, what would you want it to know?

The questions were overall intelligible and required minimal clarification.

However, questions with the phrases “U.S. culture” or “U.S. American culture” required repeated clarification. As discussed in Chapter One, the historical and ongoing oppression of black women has been legitimized and perpetuated by negating images, myths and ideologies woven into the fabric of U.S. culture and sustained over a prolonged period of time. The media in the U.S., especially commercial media, has been a significant purveyor of these negating representations. Therefore, it seemed important to ask the women to reflect upon their *situatedness* in U.S. culture and its impact upon their ability to live with hope. My intent in using the phrases “U.S. American culture” and “U.S. culture” was to connote a shared cultural context or at least a sense of shared citizenship by all persons who reside within the borders of the United States of America without regard for race, gender, sexual orientation, or other demographic social constructions. I began our conversations, therefore, under the assumption that the women understood themselves as members of U.S. or American culture and that these constructs were familiar to them. However, I discovered that this verbiage was not common vernacular for most of the women with whom I spoke and that many of them did not, even after greater reflection, consider themselves members of or agents in the creation of U.S. or American culture.

Most of the women asked me to clarify what I meant by U.S. culture, and generally more than once. I was intentionally vague in my response, most often indicating that I meant the United States as a nation, because I became curious as to whether or not the women understood themselves as member of U.S. culture, and if not, how they defined U.S. culture. What I discovered was that their images of U.S. culture included the white political establishment, white peers, white employers, teachers and decision makers, everyday white-folk, the media and the government. In other words, they most often defined U.S. culture as “white America” or some group of people or constructs that influenced their ability to live well but over which they had no control.<sup>144</sup> U.S. culture was outside of themselves and beyond their sphere of influence and, with few exceptions, a source of negation and limitation, which at times included older adult Black women and men, the Black Church and affluent Blacks. Their sense of alienation and separation from the entity U.S. culture requires further exploration and confirms my sense that hope in the lives of young black women demands deconstruction of the negating cultural cues that inundate their visual and acoustical horizon and a re-visioning/re-imaging of the world in which they live with attention to images of hope.

### **Interview as Pedagogical Practice:**

Because the intent of this investigation is to develop a pedagogy that can sustain young black women in hope it seems reasonable to consider the pedagogical significance of the interviews themselves. The interviews were pedagogically significant, as suggested above, because our conversations affirmed young black women’s moral agency by inviting them to become my teachers and expert consultants. The dialogical

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<sup>144</sup> Interview 1034.

nature of the interviews is also pedagogically significant in that our conversation not only provided the women an opportunity to tell their stories but to gain insights regarding that which releases them to and inhibits them from living responsive to the voice of hope. For example, one young woman realized while speaking passionately about her mother's ability to provide for their family in difficult times that her mother's resilience has been an image of hope that energizes her when her own struggles seem insurmountable. The dialogical shape of the interview, therefore, permitted the women to think critically about or *name* the world in which they live and, as a result, unearth resonances of hope and the distorting noises of culturally induced despair.

Paulo Freire defines dialogue as “the encounter between [human persons], mediated by the world, in order to *name* the world.”<sup>145</sup> In dialogue with each other, human persons “name”—unveil and demythologize—that which inhibits freedom and sustains oppression.<sup>146</sup> Naming perceptually transforms the world so that oppression is no longer perceived as a “closed world from which there is no exit, but as a *limiting situation* which they [those who are oppressed] can transform.”<sup>147</sup> This perceptual shift or new way of seeing the world is a first step towards liberation but is not itself “a sufficient condition for liberation.”<sup>148</sup> The change in perception, Freire argues, “must become the motivating force for liberating action.”<sup>149</sup> Authentic dialogue, therefore, embodies critical reflection **and** liberating action. Consequently, Freire contends that dialogue is an “existential necessity” for liberation.<sup>150</sup> That is, dialogue as the process of

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<sup>145</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999, c. 1970), 69.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

*reflecting on the world (naming the world) in order to change it—action and reflection—* is an absolute necessity for existential freedom.<sup>151</sup>

Together the women and I began the process of naming the world in which they live—their existence in U.S. culture, their religious communities and their familial and friendship connections—and discerning the extent to which this world (or these worlds) influence their ability to live with hope. We uncovered aspects of their existence that functioned as limiting situations as well as those that sustained them in hope. I listened closely for how the women described the limiting situations, the power that they attributed to them and how they ordered their lives in light of the situation. This seemed important because Freire contends that “it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers.”<sup>152</sup> In other words, limit-situations distort our ability to envision liberating possibilities and suggest that our only alternative is to endure the oppression with which we are confronted. Therefore, one aspect of creating a pedagogy intended to enhance young black women’s ability to live with hope is a consideration of strategies that can reveal and deconstruct limit-situations to the end of perceiving possibilities for transformation.

Perceiving transformative possibilities also requires constructive strategies that can strengthen young black women’s acuity to the voice of hope and engender responsive

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<sup>151</sup> Freire’s formulaic description of the dialogical process is Action + Reflection = praxis. Therefore, he is arguing that liberating praxis results when human persons engage in critically reflection about the world in which they live together, unveiling the mechanisms that create and sustain oppression, and then make concrete decisions about the how they might affect liberation.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 80.

liberating action. Therefore, while I agree with Freire's paradigm, I might also argue that the perceptual shift that he describes requires greater emphasis upon those experiences, relationships and representations that remind us of God's presence, fidelity and just intent for creation now and in times past, and that catalyze hope. Freire asserts that hope is an *ontological need* without which "it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world."<sup>153</sup> Similarly, he contends that authentic dialogue requires hope, that sense of "incompletion" and constant search for a more just reality.<sup>154</sup> Hope, in other words, is essential to the ongoing struggle for justice, but hope alone cannot transform the world. Hope "demands an anchoring in practice...in order to become historical concreteness," Freire argues and I agree.<sup>155</sup> However, what seems missing in Freire's pedagogy, given hope's significance to the liberative process, is an emphasis upon naming those aspects of our existence that engender and sustain us in hope.

The major thrust of Freire pedagogy is deconstructive—naming and disempowering or demythologizing that which creates oppression and limits human agency. Therefore I want to add to Freire's emphasis upon deconstruction an equally strong impetus toward naming and valuing those experiences, relationships and representations that are life affirming with the intent of engendering hope-filled imagination in the lives of young black women. For example, young black women today are participants in an exciting historical moment in which Michelle Obama, wife of the newly elected president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, will become the

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<sup>153</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996, c.1992), 8.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

first black woman to assume the role of the nation's *First Lady*.<sup>156</sup> How might her identification with the iconic construct *First Lady*, as well as her many attributes create a perceptual shift for girls and young women today who have experienced the sting of racial and gender oppression? What I am suggesting is that young black women's lives are not completely defined by oppression and limitation but are also shaped by experiences and relationships that sustain them in hope. Thus, the pedagogy that I propose seeks to acknowledge that young black women live at the intersection of hope-filled possibilities and culturally induced despair, and places greater emphasis upon naming and valuing experiences, relationships and representations that enhance their ability to live with hope. Images of hope, when unearthed and intentionally engaged, can function as countervailing representations for young black women who experience negation and alienation in the broader context of U.S. culture as well as other aspects of their existence.

### **Interview Setting:**

The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings mutually agreed upon by me and the consultant so that the women could begin to see themselves as agents in this process rather than case studies. I had initially intended to conduct the interviews in each woman's home but most of them preferred a neutral location outside of their individual homes. I always offered to meet them at their homes, but most of the women declined. Choosing a neutral location minimized distractions and interruptions, distanced the women from the connotation attached to "home" (both positive and negative), and

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<sup>156</sup> The interviews for this project were conducted near the beginning of the presidential campaign and do not include the women's reflections regarding the significance of the first black president and first lady of the United States of America.



seemed to provide a space in which the women could be fully present for the interview. In some ways, the interview setting created a safe enough space, a transgressive space devoid of distractions, in which the women were able to reflect upon intricate details of their lives without the requirement that they qualify or defend their responses. I interviewed a total of twenty-four women however the electronic audio files were inadvertently lost for two interviews. I appreciate all of the women's contributions, yet only twenty-two of the records were usable for this investigation. Of the total number of women interviewed, three were interviewed at their own homes, five were interviewed at a public library (a suggestion offered by one of the participants), four in the educational building of a local congregation, four in a university conference room, and eight at private homes provided for the specific purpose of conducting the interviews. On two occasions I interviewed 4-6 women successively and a host provided snacks and opportunities for conversation during the transitional periods between interviews. In these instances, the interview process was communal in nature, permitting the women to experience themselves as members of a community of women who were sharing their stories.

The women were also able to experience the power and regenerative efficacy of telling their own stories. These stories revealed life-affirming possibilities, salvific openings too often concealed beneath the everydayness of their lives but made tangible as they embraced the power of speaking for themselves. The women freely shared their joys and struggles and several commented that our conversations helped them reflect on aspects of their lives to which they had given only minimal attention in the past. Several of the women shared intimate details about their lives, and in some cases details that they

had explicitly decided they would not share, and processed pain that had remained unarticulated in large part. Others indicated that they were initially hesitant about talking to me and that they were not sure what to expect, but that at the end of the conversation they were thankful that they participated. That the opportunity to tell their own stories was life-affirming is also evident in the fact that several of the women recommended friends or family members as additional consultants. Therefore, although I had initially intended to talk with ten to fifteen women the number of consultants included in this investigation grew to twenty-two.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity:**

Anonymity was also an important consideration as regards location and the formal structure of the interview. Not only were the women speaking with me in locations in which they were less likely to be identified as sharing sensitive information, but each woman was given a consent form to read and sign before the interview began which ensured them that their names would remain anonymous and that the information would be presented with as few identifiers as possible. The consent form also provided a description of the project, potential risks, a statement about confidentiality, and anticipated benefits of the study. I signed each consent form in the presence of the consultant, indicating my agreement with the terms that had been set forth for the interview and for use of the stories with which they were gifting me.<sup>157</sup>

All of the interviews were audio recorded in an effort to maximize accurate representation of the women's life-stories and insights. Each of the women were

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<sup>157</sup> Cf. attachment A, *Informed Consent Form*.

provided a copy of the audio recording (a digital file) and, where possible, a written transcript of the interview for their review and comments. The audio recordings were catalogued numerically rather than by name and a numerical index maintained in a separate location. Therefore access to the women's demographic information was limited to me as the primary researcher and the Institutional Review Board whose responsibility it was to ensure that the women's rights were safeguarded. Some of the interview recordings were transcribed by persons not directly related to the study, but again the record was identified numerically rather than with other demographic information.

My first contact with most of the women was at the time of the interview. They were recruited through church announcements and by recommendation of colleagues, friends and family. Four of the women were either family friends or persons with whom I have a long term pastoral relationship. All of the women were aware that I was an ordained minister and divinity school professor. On the one hand, my pastoral relationship and friendship with some of the women made it possible for me to probe deeply as a bond of trust already existed between us. On the other, wisdom suggested that I should remain cognizant of the possibility that some of the women may be concerned with giving the right answer or an answer that would ensure my "success," and that others may experience anxiety about talking with a preacher/pastoral-figure. I addressed these concerns by reminding the women and emphasizing that they were serving as my teachers and expert consultants and that I genuinely wanted to hear their stories and learn from them. When some of the women asked if they had given me what I was asking for I reiterated that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that their stories were the most important aspect of our conversation.

In order to ensure that the women understood the questions and to further minimize anxiety, I asked clarifying questions and rephrased my questions as necessary to make them intelligible. I also wanted to provide the women the time and space necessary to tell their stories, therefore, no time limits were placed on the interviews. Other efforts to minimize anxiety and to create a space safe enough for the women to tell their stories included moments of silence, reflective listening and responding (restating the participants' response for clarification purposes), and avoidance of responses that implied valuing such as 'good', 'bad', 'right.'

Although I was initially concerned that the women may be reticent about talking with me, I discovered that as the conversation progressed, most of the women with whom I spoke became increasingly willing to share openly. Several of the women commented that they felt comfortable talking to me and that they felt especially affirmed because they were talking with a woman. As one young woman indicated about female preachers, "it touches the heart when a woman is telling you because we know they feel what we went through."<sup>158</sup> She continues by indicating that, while men can speak about what they have observed, "it's not as deep as a woman looking in your eye and saying 'I see.'"<sup>159</sup> Her comments and others, as well as the women's willingness to tell their stories, led me to believe that we were able to transcend, at least to a reasonable extent, perceived barriers or stereotypical expectations that would have prevented them from talking with a preacher/pastor.

### **Demographic Information:**

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<sup>158</sup> Interview 1035

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The women in this study are young black women between eighteen and thirty who reside in the southeastern portion of the United States, and who have had some contact with the Black Church. Several of the women were interim residents, such as college students, who had relocated to the area within the past 3-5 years, thus the geographic reach of this investigation is much broader. I collected data about their marital status, employment, education, religious affiliation and worship habits. I did not specifically ask the women to identify their ethnicity, as I assumed that all of the participants would have been U.S. born young black women who identified as African[-]American or Black American. This was an oversight on my part, as I discovered that there were distinctive cultural differences among the participants. Three of the women were first generation Haitian Americans whose parents were born and reared in Haiti. These three young women consider themselves Haitian American, strongly identify with their Haitian roots and are attuned to the distinctive joys and struggles associated with being young black Haitian women in U.S. culture. Consequently, they not only grappled with what it means for them to be young black women in U.S. culture, but also with the similarities and differences that they perceive between themselves and young black women who identify as Black American or African[-]American.

As for their religious orientation, all of the women in this investigation identified themselves as Christian affiliated with protestant denominations, including but not limited to Baptist, Methodist (AME, CME, UMEC), Lutheran, and independent protest churches that identify as non-denominational. Of the twenty-two participants, eighteen indicated that they attend worship weekly, one indicated that she attends twice per month, one indicated holidays and special events, and two indicated that they attended as a child

but do not attend now. Of those who attend regularly, three indicated in the course of their interviews that they are actively involved in a ministry of the church such as the choir or youth ministry.

Several of the women indicated that they had access to women's ministries within the context of their congregation, including mission groups, bible studies, and occasional social gathering, but the women in this investigation attended sporadically if at all. Most of the women, as I will discuss in the next chapter, indicated that they found these ministries inadequate to provide guidance or support in the areas that are most important to them including relationships (dating and marriage), sexuality, educational and career endeavors. They also questioned the extent to which they would be able to speak honestly and openly without being judged or having their stories shared outside of the group. It follows from these comments that their greatest need as regards the church is that their faith communities would meet them where they are and engender honest and open dialogue about their joys and struggles. There were striking similarities among the women regarding the role that they wanted the church to play in their lives despite their level of participation in the church, socio-economic location or chronological age.

All of the women were young adult women between eighteen and thirty, high school graduates and, with the exception of one, either working or enrolled in an educational institution. One young woman's medical complications preclude her ability to work or attend school at this time. Three of the women were between eighteen and twenty-two, eight were between twenty-two and twenty-five, and ten were between twenty-six and thirty. The nine women who reported an income reflected a salary range between \$10,000-\$48,000 per year, with a mean salary of \$26,000 and an average of \$26,

817. The remaining eleven women either did not report a salary or were unemployed at the time of the interview. High school was the highest educational level attained for six of the women, two were community college graduates, eight were graduates of four-year institutions, two of technical, business or other specialized schools, and four had either completed or were currently enrolled in a graduate or professional school. None of the participants were seminarians.

With the exception of one person, all of the women were unmarried; one was divorced, eighteen were single and four were involved in committed relationships. Six of the women were mothers and the number of children ranged from one to five. Four of the women owned their homes, ten rented, five of them still live with their parents and four live with others. All of the women spoke English as a first language and none of them indicated any difficulty with the language used on the informed consent, demographic information sheet or during our conversations.

The young women with whom I spoke represent an extremely diverse group who share the common experience of being young black women in U.S. culture but who view the world through the lens of their unique ethnic socio-cultural and religious experience. Each interview reflects a distinctive timbre, some evoking the sorrowful sweetness of lament, the pungent pain of abuse and abandonment, and the blandness of institutional blindness. Yet they also embody the joyful jubilation of barriers broken, goals achieved and dreams no longer deferred, the revitalizing remembrance of mothers, grandmothers and sister-friends whose lives speak words of hope, and the vivifying vigor of broken silence and voice and speaking their own stories as an act of creation and salvation. And for that, I am thankful.

## Cultural Analysis and Existing Scholarship

Existing scholarship is the second major contributor to the cultural analysis of hope and despair in the lives of young black women. Though I draw upon the contributions of scholars from various disciplines throughout this investigation, scholarship that addresses the role of social, familial and religious relationships, institutional affiliations and social constructions as sources of hope and/or despair in the lives of young black women constitute two distinct but related groups. The first is comprised of womanist and black feminist scholars who are explicitly concerned with black women's objectification and negation in U.S. American culture and the multidimensional nature of oppression in their lives. The second group consists of those womanist and black feminist scholars who are specifically concerned with hope in the lives of black women. Their scholarly reflections contribute to a thick description of the cultural context in which young black women live, its historical emergence and the life-affirming possibilities therein. I also add depth and breath to the cultural analysis by augmenting the womanist and black feminist investigations with numerous theoretical and theological reflections on hope, despair, human imagination, transformation, proclamation and education.

My engagement with the first group of scholars contributing to the cultural analysis is reflected in Chapter One under the general headings *Hope and Despair in the Experiences of Black Folk* and *Hope and Despair in the Experience of Black Women*. These two sections explicate the historical emergence of negating images, myths and ideologies in the U.S. and the role that they play in creating and perpetuating racism, sexism, and economic oppression in the black community. The second section is focused



more intently on the lives of black women and explores the role that negating images, myths and ideologies which are woven into the fabric of U.S. culture have played in perpetuating suffering and objectification in the lives of black women. In other words, negating images and myths shape cultural perception and support ideologies that contribute to black women's ongoing oppression. Therefore, womanist and black feminist scholars have interrogated the historical experiences of black women and the complexity of their lives as enslaved, black and woman beginning with the post emancipation era and extending to the contemporary era. They draw insights primarily from the narratives of enslaved women, memoirs, the black women's literary tradition and their own experiences as black women in U.S. culture. I also support their insights with two historical investigations, Sander Gilman's investigation of the objectification of black women's bodies with particular attention to the exploitation and desecration of Saartjie Baartman, and Marlon T. Rigg's documentary film exploring negating representations of blackness in U.S. culture and their ideological import.

In addition to the broader cultural analysis, womanist and black feminist scholars have interrogated the role of the black family, community and religiosity. Their reflections on Christianity in the lives of black women and its unique expression in the Black Church highlight its positive contributions as well as aspects of the faith that reinforce the negation and oppression found in the larger society. Similarly, they explore both the extent to which the black family and community have been complicit in the oppression of black women as well as their role in creating a life-affirming ethos in which women might grow and become agents of their own reality. The womanist and black feminist scholars included in this investigation also emphasize the necessity of

discovering strategies for survival, resistance and human flourishing; strategies that inform my pedagogical construction. Again, the narratives and literature of black women as well as their own experiences provide these scholars a rich fund of articulated joys, sorrows and important life lessons from which they are able to draw their theories, pedagogies and practices.

The second group of scholars contributing to the cultural analysis includes womanist and black feminist scholars who are more explicitly focused on hope in the lives of black women, and their critical discourse with other twentieth and twenty-first century scholars who explicate theologies of hope. I explore and to some extent create this dialogue in Chapter Four with particular attention to nine major theological voices of which four are womanist or black feminist scholars. I also challenge and confirm their assertions with wisdom drawn from my conversations with the young black women with whom I have consulted. As in the first group of scholars, black women's literature and personal experience contribute significantly to womanist and black feminist theological constructions. In other words, their theories are grounded in and drawn from black women's historical and ongoing experiences of joy and struggle.

Womanist and black feminist scholarship's reliance upon black women's literature is both gift and a source of concern as regards the present investigation. As suggested earlier, the black women's literary tradition, slave narratives and historical experiences have been invaluable in black women's effort to tell their stories, deconstruct suffering and oppression in their lives and model strategies for survival, resistance and human flourishing. However, their stories and thus the theological assertion that they inform are not always consistent with the stories that contemporary women who struggle

against the ferocity of oppression in their everyday lives tell. Therefore, it seems important that I consider the scholarly assertions in dialogue with the first-hand accounts of the young black women with whom I have consulted.

A related challenge as regards the present investigation is that with the exception of Evelyn Parker's exploration of hope in the lives of black teenagers, the voices of young black women are essentially unheard in most of the extant investigations. Thus, given the dearth of youth voices in existing scholarship, the qualitative nature of the investigation and the absence of studies in which women between eighteen and thirty are subjects, I will remain cautious regarding the extent to which I attempt to make generalizable claims. This is consistent with Parker's assertion in *Trouble Don't Last Always* that her research "is not generalizable to other populations of African American adolescents, but rather serves as a catalyst for [her] analysis and constructive reflections on ministry with black youth." Similarly, insights from the interviews in the present investigation serve as a catalyst for pedagogical construction and are not generalizable to other young black women. I am not asking them to create a theology or pedagogy of hope. Rather, I am listening for connections and intersections between the lived experiences of young black women and ongoing theological discourse with the intent of ascertaining a theological foundation for living with hope in light of the despairing realities of life.

### **Cultural Analysis and the Mutually Critical Dialogue**

The survey of the literature in chapters one and four as well as the previous section on womanist epistemology and ethnography constitute the first and second

methodological move in the cultural analysis. The final aspect of the analysis is what I have called *mutually critical dialogue* between existing scholars and the young black women with whom I have consulted. As indicated above, I have employed a dialogical paradigm intended to listen closely for how the existing scholars and the young black women with whom I have consulted push and pull, confirm and challenge, test and expand what the other has to say. My hope is that the mutually critical dialogue will disclose important questions, themes, inconsistencies and pedagogical intimations that might have otherwise remained concealed within their discrete domains.

The mutually critical dialogue begins with comparing the responses from the twenty-two consultants in an effort to translate what they have told me and to create a thematic synthesis. The specific approach that I use to bring their accounts together and interpret what they have told me is meta-ethnography. Meta-ethnography was developed by George W. Noblit and R. Dwight Hare and is detailed in their publication, *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*.<sup>160</sup> They indicate that their approach is “one way for interpretivists to derive understanding from multiple cases, accounts, narratives or studies.”<sup>161</sup> Meta-ethnography is “an inductive and interpretive form of knowledge synthesis” that offers a paradigm for interpreting or *translating* multiple accounts in dialogue with each other and creating a synthesis.<sup>162</sup> It is inductive because rather than testing the data or interviews for evidence of a predetermined response (deductive), the interpretation is drawn from the evidence [the interview]. It is interpretive in that it seeks to make sense of a particular social phenomenon and its

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<sup>160</sup> Noblit and Hare, *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

implications for our existence.<sup>163</sup> In the present investigation, I seek to make sense of how young black women live with hope in the face of negating images, myths and ideologies that have the potential for creating culturally induced despair.

Meta-ethnography offers a paradigm for making sense of the stories and insights that I have collected; to glean from their collective wisdom additional insights that might inform my pedagogical construction. Noblit and Hare contend that meta-ethnography “seeks to go beyond single accounts to reveal the analogies between the accounts. It reduces the accounts while preserving the sense of the account through the selection of key metaphors and organizers.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, meta-ethnography is less concerned with an extensive report of discrete accounts or with creating an aggregate account that can be broadly generalized. Rather, meta-ethnography seeks to discover commonalities and differences between the consultant’s responses in light of the “key metaphors” or themes that reflect the purpose and intent of the investigation.

Key metaphors are organizers or themes that elucidate the purpose and intent of the investigation. They reveal how and to what extent the various stories relate to each other and answer questions about why these accounts are being synthesized.<sup>165</sup> In the present investigation I employ four themes that are important to the overall pedagogical task of creating strategies that can address and redress culturally induced despair as well as strengthen young black women’s acuity to *the voice of Hope* and sustain them in their efforts to *live with hope* within the various cultural contexts in which they live. These organizers or themes are metaphorical in nature because they reveal likenesses

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.13.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 28.

(commonalities and differences) between the women's stories that, as suggested above, might inform the pedagogical strategies. The accounts in the current investigation are being synthesized, therefore, in order to discern the extent to which the various cultural contexts in which young black women live support their ability to *live with hope*, with specific attention to their experiences in the broader U.S. culture as well as within their familial and friendship networks and their worship communities.

I have identified four themes to assist me in synthesizing and analyzing the women's responses, drawn from my reading of the literature and my own questions about hope in the lives of young black women:

- *Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships that contribute most to the women's understanding of what it means to be a young black woman.*
- *Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships that contribute most to culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women.*
- *Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships that contribute most to young black women's understanding of hope and their ability to live with hope.*
- *Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships within the context of their worship communities that contribute to or diminish young black women's ability to live with hope.*

Identifying the major themes was an initial step toward synthesizing the women's accounts. The next step is translating the sense of the various accounts "into one another."<sup>166</sup>

Translations are especially unique syntheses, because they protect the particular, respect holism and enable comparison. An adequate translation maintains the central metaphors and/or concepts of each account *in their relation to other key metaphors or concepts* in that account. It also compares both the metaphors or

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 28

concepts and their interaction in one account with the metaphors and concepts and their interaction in the other account.<sup>167</sup>

The process of translating the accounts involved listening to the women's responses to each of the points of inquiry and for the relationship between various aspects of their responses. I also listened closely for commonalities and differences between the women's responses to each of the points of inquiry and for whether or not there were similarities among the women as regards the relationship between the various points. For example, I explored whether or not the women's responses revealed commonalities regarding whether or not the images that contribute to young black women's self understanding and also influence their ability to live with hope.

Discovering the commonalities and differences between the women's responses and between the points of inquiry involved listening to recording and reading each of the interview transcripts repeatedly. I also listened for themes and insights that may not have been anticipated in my initial inquiry and have noted them in my presentation of the women's responses in Chapter Three. Noblit and Hare describe this aspect of a meta-ethnography as "the repeated reading of the accounts and the noting of interpretative metaphors."<sup>168</sup> They also advise "extensive attention to the details in the accounts, and what they tell you about your substantive concerns."<sup>169</sup> Listening for commonalities and differences and for how they respond to my substantive concerns [points of inquiry] was aided by the fact that the data was gathered using ethnographic interviews with a standard set of interview questions for all of the women.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 28

Another important characteristic of meta-ethnography is that the commonalities and differences are presented metaphorically or as analogies and not as generalizable data.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, rather than suggesting absolute agreement between the consultants such as “young black women agree that their relationships with their mothers have been a source of hope,” I have used language that suggests an analogous relationship between what the women have to say, such as “while several of the women indicate that their mothers have been sources of hope, how their mothers nurtured hope varies significantly.” As suggested above, the data are not generalizable to other groups of young black women. However, their responses, in dialogue with the existing literature, provide a rich fund of insights and wisdom to guide the pedagogical construction.

The final two phases in meta-ethnography include *synthesizing the translations* and *expressing the synthesis*. Synthesizing the translations involves “making a whole into something more than the parts alone imply.”<sup>171</sup> After listening to all of the interviews and translating them into each other, I identified emergent themes and pedagogical intimations that can inform my pedagogical construction. I have also translated the themes that emerged from the women’s responses into the themes identified in the womanist and black feminist theoretical constructions. The comparisons focused primarily upon expressions of hope in the lives of black women in literature and historical accounts, and expressions of hope in the lives of the young black women with whom I consulted. For example, I discovered a tension between the literature’s emphasis upon black women’s agency and representations of hope, and the reticence about speaking that appeared evident in some of the women’s stories. A second major area of

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 28.



comparison with existing scholarship involves the influence of negating images, myths and ideologies upon young black women's ability to live with hope.<sup>172</sup> Finally, I looked for commonalities and dissimilarities between existing scholars and the women regarding the intergenerational nature of hope as well as the importance of intergenerational relationships between women. Expressing the synthesis, therefore, involves a presentation of the women's responses and emergent themes as well as those themes drawn from the mutually critical dialogue between the women and the literature. The interview responses and the mutually critical dialogue with the literature are discussed in detail in chapters three and four.

#### **INTERPRETIVE THEORY BUILDING**

The final phase of the methodology involves identifying and creating the elements of an adequate pedagogy of hope drawn from the cultural analysis of hope and despair and the theological and pedagogical exploration. As I synthesized the translation and expressed the synthesis in Chapter Three, each of the key metaphors or organizers revealed secondary themes that represented commonalities and differences between the women as regards their responses. Each of the themes revealed important clues about the women's perception of reality and the meaning that they make for their lives in light of their participation in U.S. culture. Organizing their responses thematically also permitted me to ascertain several patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction that the women found significant for living in the present and into the future—their patterns for living. As a result, I discovered that their perception of reality and the corresponding

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<sup>172</sup> See full explication in chapter 4.

meaning that they attribute to the world in which they live and themselves in it significantly influenced their patterns for living.

Insights from the synthesis are presented and analyzed in detail in Chapter Three and are provided here in outline form:

Theme One: *Young, Black and Female*—Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships that contribute most to the women’s understanding of what it means to be a young black woman.

- Cross-Generational and Intra-Generational Models
- Unveiling Negation
- Trying to Get Away from the Stereotype
- Living Within the Tension
- Strength, Strength, and Strength So I Won’t Break Down
- Living With Vulnerability

Theme Two: *Staving Off Culturally Induced Despair*—Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships that contribute most to culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women.

- Negating Media Representations
- Dearth of Role Models
- Personal Failure and Lack of Accomplishment
- Social Distress

Theme Three: *Resonances of Hope*—Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships that contribute most to young black women’s understanding of hope and their ability to live with hope.

- Descriptions of Hope
  - *Hope is a Wish that will Someday Come True*
  - *Hope as Inner Desire and Human Effort*

- *Hope as Inner Desire, Human Effort, and Faith in God*
- Sources of Hope
  - *Friendship and Kinship Relationships*
  - *Faith in God and Prayer*
  - *Personal Determination and Experience*
  - *Cultural Images and Icons*

Theme Four: *Hope, Culturally Induced Despair and the Black Church*—Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships within the context of their worship communities that contribute to or diminish young black women’s ability to live with hope.

- Source of Hope in the Black Church:
  - *Testimonials and Wise Counsel:*
  - *Affirmation and Encouragement:*
  - *Questionable Source of Hope:*
- Sources of Despair in the Black Church:
  - *Judgment and Punishment:*
  - *Discord and Disunity:*
  - *Sexism and Disparate Treatment:*

As suggested above, organizing the women’s responses thematically also revealed patterns for living. The women’s stories revealed eleven patterns for living, variously embraced, by which they live in the present and into the future. Their patterns for living respond to the women’s overall sense of the world and shared experience of being young, black and female in U.S. culture. Their stories also confirm that young black women are not a homogenous group, despite the prevalence of stereotypical assertions to the contrary, and reveal the contours and nuances of their unique experiences and ways of being in the world. Therefore, while many of the women embrace similar patterns for

living there are also instances in which only one or two women evince a particular pattern. Patterns for living include (1) *becoming cross- and intra-generational models*, (2) *nurturing and sustaining life-affirming relationships*, (3) *representational preoccupation*, (4) *indifference and disengagement*, (5) *hard work*, (6) *strength*, (7) *inert concern*, (8) *personal determination and reliance upon God*, (9) *disappointment and doubt*, (10) *cognitive distancing*, (11) *silence and distance*. I discuss the patterns for living extensively in Chapter Three.

Throughout my conversations with the women I also listened closely for resonances of hope in their descriptive language and ways of being in the world. Three major descriptions of hope emerge: *hope as a wish that will someday come true*, *hope as inner desire and human effort*, and *hope as inner desire, human effort and faith in God*. Although much of their descriptive language departs significantly from the language that frames this investigation, I was able to discern resonances of hope or hope-filled intimations in several of their responses. Thus, the patterns by which young black women live in the present and into the future and their reflections on hope yielded important pedagogical intimations that informed the pedagogical model.

The first pedagogical intimation concerns the women's descriptive language for hope the need for theological reflection and suggests that a the pedagogical model might afford young black women opportunities for theological reflection and biblical interpretation in dialogue with their own life experiences and struggle against culturally induced despair that affirms God's presence, power and fidelity to a just and humane existence for young black women and other oppressed persons and that amplifies the value of human persons to God's ongoing redemptive work. In other words, theological

reflection in addition to proclamation of the Gospel message as an embodiment of hope seems essential to our pedagogical endeavor.

The second intimation is drawn from the insight that young black women learn who they are and of what they consist in shared communal context. Therefore, pedagogy in the lives of young black women might include woman-centered and wisdom-oriented approaches that are relational, communal, storied, and cross-generational. Finally, in response to the insight that the meaning that young black women make for their lives is inordinately influenced by structural oppression, a pedagogy of hope might include strategies that can help young black women name and deconstruct that which creates distortion and culturally induced despair as well as discern and embrace alternatives that embody resistance, contestation and creation.

Insights from the theological discourse in Chapter Four augment and deepen the pedagogical intimations and reveal potential strategies that might inform the shape and content of the pedagogy. Theological insights include (1) *the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope*, (2) *emphasizing the power of lament* and (3) *remembering our formative stories into the present moment*. Given the power of images in the lives of young black women to construct their perception of reality and consequently their patterns for living, envisioning new possibilities for living and replacing oppressive ideologies with theologies that affirm their wellbeing seems warranted. Therefore a pedagogy might illumine the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope that can affirm God's presence, power and fidelity to just, liberating and restorative action in the world and that invites human participation in God's ongoing redemptive work. The second insight responds to the women's reticence

about expressing their discontent and suggests that a pedagogy of hope might encourage and create opportunities for lament—name oppression, articulate its impact upon our lives as individuals and community and participate in dismantling oppressive structures. Finally, theological reflection reveals that a pedagogy of hope might help the black community reclaim the practice of remembering or telling and retelling our formative stories with attention to narratives from various sources, including *personal and familial, biblical, cultural and ethnic, and the Christian faith tradition*. As a pedagogical practices, retelling our formative stories remind young black women and others that they walk with the God of creation and with generations of women and men who *hoped against hope* until they hoped the present generation into existence. We too must remember their stories into the present as we learn to live with hope in the present and hope the next generation into existence through our active involvement in God's ongoing work of redeeming the world.

The insights and pedagogical intimations drawn from the cultural analysis and theological discourse are provocative, and give birth to a pedagogical model that might guide worship communities as they endeavor to address and redress culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women, strengthen their acuity to the voice of Hope and enhance their ability to live therein. Theories and practices in Christian Education and Homiletics also inform the pedagogical model. The model includes four elements or pedagogical commitments that are organic in nature and integral to the process of creating pedagogical practices by which one might learn to live with hope. They derive from concrete experience and a robust interdisciplinary scholarly dialogue and are foundational for the pedagogical practices. The four elements of our pedagogical model

are best described as pedagogical commitments that are essential to creating strategies intended to enhance one's ability to live with hope: (1) *Imaginative*, (2) *Transformational*, (3) *Dialogical* and (4) *Relational*.

*Imaginative* as a pedagogical commitment emphasizes the importance of the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope that exposes oppression as fallacious and inimical to God while offering humanity an alternative vision of reality and of what might be possible for the world in which we live. *Transformational* is concerned with evoking change; with creating strategies by which young black women and their worship communities might unearth and resist that which delimits their ability to live with hope so that they might experience themselves as free for alternative ways of being and relating in the world. *Dialogical* engagement emphasizes the necessity of cross- and intra-generation dialogue so that young black women and their communities can grapple with the complexities of their lives together. *Dialogical* also implies critical reflection or thinking critically about the world in which we live in order to create life-affirming relationships and discern ethical actions that are indicative of hope. *Relational* entails a commitment to supporting young black women as they discern the power and value of their own voices so that they might freely share their gifts with the communities in which they live, and experience themselves as creative agents in the world.

As foundational elements, these four pedagogical commitments are intended to guide the development of and evaluate the adequacy of potential pedagogical practices and related strategies. Thus they give birth to practices that are designed to create opportunities for hope and human flourishing in the lives of young black women and others. They also support my contention that to live with hope becomes possible in

shared communal contexts, a cross-generational community committed to creating imaginative, transformational, dialogical and relational experiences in which all those who gather can discern meaning for their lives and create patterns for living in the present and into the future that are consistent with and responsive to God's presence, power and fidelity to just, liberating and restorative action in the world. In the present investigation, I propose three pedagogical practices that might advance our efforts toward addressing and redressing culturally induced despair and enhancing young black women's ability to live with hope, however, the practices are not exhaustive. They can be expanded, deepened and added to as practitioners deem appropriate. What remains important, however, is that the practices and their related strategies embody each of the four pedagogical commitments. Proposed pedagogical practices include: (1) *Remembering Our Stories into the Present Moment*, (2) *Repentance and Reconciliation*, and (3) *Lament and Re-Creation*.

This pedagogical model, discussed extensively in Chapter Six, remains attentive to the complexities of young black women's lives and their location at the intersection of their deep desire for wholeness and wellbeing and the ferocity of oppression that they experience in various facets of their lives. Their words capture our imagination as they cry out for someone who will listen and walk with them as they discern meaning for their lives. They are young, black and female, students, workers, daughters, sisters, mothers, and aunts. They are gift and gifted and they have words that are worth hearing. They are God's marvelous creation, if we... if they... could only know it; know it in the deep place from which we draw meaning, life and breath. Their stories and the stories of untold others; their stories and the faithful reflections of women and men who dare speak



about hope; their stories and those of us who endeavor to preach and teach; their stories and my story and our stories converge and therein something new is born. It is in the midst of that dialogue, as we push and pull in one direction or the other, as we hear each other and seek to be heard that this pedagogy comes into view. Untested as it is, I pray that it will indeed become a pedagogy of hope for persons and communities who so deeply desire to say “yes” to God’s “yes” for our collective existence and avail themselves to God’s ongoing creation to a just and humane world for all persons.

## CHAPTER THREE

**SAFE SPACES FOR OUR STORIES**

*Safe spaces for our stories  
Holy places where we can tell them  
where our someone selves can hear them  
where our someone selves can bear them*

The power and life affirming efficacy of telling one's own story filled the spaces in which we talked, opening doors for expression and for attentive listening. As indicated in the previous chapter, twenty-two young black women are helping me discover how they make sense of the world in which they live. That is, how they live with hope in the face of negating images, myths and ideologies that have the potential for creating culturally induced despair. Their stories provide new insights as well as challenge and confirm what scholars have already described. Therefore, I invite you to join me in listening to what they have to say, in anticipation of the new vistas that their words may reveal. In the pages that follow, I do not attempt to provide an extensive report of discrete accounts or to create an aggregate report. Rather, I discuss commonalities and differences among the women as they grapple with the questions to which I invited them to respond. Identifying commonalities and differences deepens the cultural analysis of hope and despair and provides specificity to how the women perceive the world in which they live. Their perceptions also provide insights regarding that to which a pedagogy might respond.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the methodology for synthesizing and analyzing the women's stories is meta-ethnography. Meta-ethnography is concerned with ascertaining

commonalities and differences between various accounts in light of *key metaphors*. Key metaphors are organizers or themes that elucidate the purpose and intent of the investigation. They reveal how and to what extent the various stories relate to each other and answer questions about why these accounts are being synthesized.<sup>173</sup> The accounts in the current investigation are being synthesized and analyzed in order to discern the extent to which young black women's participation in U.S. culture, their familial and friendship networks and worship communities support their ability to *live with hope*. I synthesize and organize the women's responses under the following thematic subheadings: *Young, Black and Female; Staving Off Culturally Induced Despair; Resonances of Hope; Hope, Culturally Induced Despair and the Black Church*.

I begin the conversation by presenting the women's responses with minimal interpretive notes. Their insights are complex and at times paradoxical, pushing and pulling within a single response. Therefore, I further organize their responses by identifying secondary themes. I conclude the chapter with a substantive analysis of the women's responses to ascertain images, myths, ideologies and relationships that contribute to the "patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction" by which young black women live in the present and into the future—*patterns for living*.<sup>174</sup> I also evaluate the adequacy of these patterns to enhance young black women's ability to live with hope. Finally, I draw insights from their responses and from the analysis that might strengthen our pedagogical endeavor.

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<sup>173</sup> Noblit and Hare, *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 28.

<sup>174</sup> Miles, Veronica, "Living Out Loud in a World That Demands Silence: Preaching with Adolescents" in *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 140.

## YOUNG, BLACK AND FEMALE

*It's hard at times to be black and to be a woman*<sup>175</sup>

The first theme elucidates commonalities and differences between the women regarding *cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships that contribute most to their understanding of what it means to be a young black woman*. The women identify two significant experiences that influence their understanding of what it means to be young, black and female in U.S. culture. The first is their relationship with *Cross-Generational and Intra-Generational Role-Models* as detailed under the first sub-heading. The second is their experience of Cultural Negation and Oppression from the larger society in which they live, expressed thematically under five sub-headings (1) *Unveiling Negation*, (2) *Trying to Get Away from the Stereotypes*, (3) *Living Within the Tension*, (4) *Strength, Strength and Strength*, and (5) *Living With Vulnerability*.

### **Cross-Generational and Intra-Generational Models:**

The women identify an array of positive figures or positive role-models that contribute meaningfully to their formation including their mothers, fathers, grandparents, other family members, mentors, teachers, counselors, church members and public figures. These role-models affirm their sense of identity as young, black and female as well as exemplify the quality of life and relationship to which they aspire. The women name several different role-models who exemplify the quality of life to which they aspire:

My grandmother and seeing the position that she held in the church, and teaching me how to behave as a young lady inside and outside the church.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Interview 1025.

I would say my mom kind of setting an example for me of what is expected of me, black people mainly, about how we have to try to contribute to our community, as well as stay close with family and also maintain some independence. Also, going to an HBCU....<sup>177</sup>

It wasn't like my mom or sister... it was... my guidance counselor...some of my teachers and coaches... They helped me get to know what it means to be a black woman.<sup>178</sup>

My mom, she works, she didn't finish school, she didn't go to college... She carries herself very proud she doesn't let anyone stop her from doing what she wants or doing what she knows is right... Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth ...I also attended an HBCU.<sup>179</sup>

My mom, ... she is definitely a role-model! She's a worker, she's family oriented, she has her career... I look up to her.<sup>180</sup>

The women also identify cultural and historical exemplars, including Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice, Michelle Obama, Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks, Lauren Hill, Jill Scott, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Several women speak communally about role-models and describe their cultural and ethnic heritage as integral to their identity and sense of connection to the black community.

As a result of these exemplars, several of the women are also committed cross-generational and intra-generational role-models concerned with ensuring that youths and other young black women know what they must know in order to live with hope. For example, one woman's experience as a public school teacher for a year convinced her that young black women need alternative images in order to negate racialized and sexualized media portrayals of young black women.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, another young woman with three younger sisters asserts that young black women have an "obligation to pass the

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<sup>176</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>177</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>178</sup> Interview 1030.

<sup>179</sup> Interview 1034.

<sup>180</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>181</sup> Interview 1038.

torch and keep going; to educate our sisters and our children, if we have children, about how important it is to be a black woman and to have a voice, especially now days.”<sup>182</sup> A middle school teacher who tries to make sure that she is a positive role-model for youth asserts, “My role as an African American woman is to be a mother figure for my African American students, both male and female, especially the females.”<sup>183</sup>

As noted above, although cross-generational and intergenerational role-models and exemplars are powerful sources of affirmation in their lives, the women overwhelmingly describe the world in which they live as a structurally oppressive ethos in which cultural negation is a prevailing theme. They have felt and continue to feel that they are viewed negatively by persons outside of their racial, ethnic, and gender group, due in large part to negating representations prevalent in U.S. culture and propagated by the media. One should not be surprised, therefore, that, when describing what it means for them to be a young black woman, concepts such as “struggle,” “overcome,” “fight,” “adversity” and numerous others are used that reveal the need to defend oneself against violence. Such expressions are common vernacular for many of the women. Again, negation and oppression as thematic in the women’s lives is expressed in five major ways.

### **Unveiling Negation:**

*I feel like it means we have a lot of struggle to go through, like black women are known to be single parents, be on welfare, hard to get jobs,*

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<sup>182</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>183</sup> Interview 1014.

*and that kind of stresses you out with every day life and with your kids and stuff.*<sup>184</sup>

The struggle and stress that this speaker describes is but a single line in a prolonged litany of negating experiences in the lives of many of the women. One young woman indicates that people see her and other young black women as “not making the most out of life and having kids sitting and waiting on a check... not finishing school.”<sup>185</sup> Another young woman laments that she is perceived “as the stereotype of the black female who has not accomplished those things that would help her develop better in society... stereotypes of taking care of somebody when you can’t even take care of yourself... of depending on taxpayers, even though I don’t.”<sup>186</sup> Similarly, another young woman describes the culture’s perception of young black women as “lazy, baby-maker, hoochie.”<sup>187</sup> “I think we’re viewed as like ‘baby mamas,’ you know, child support, food stamps... I don’t think we’re viewed in the best light unless we’re an actress or a movie star,” asserts another young woman.<sup>188</sup> Yet another woman says, “I think black women are viewed as the ones always having a lot of children, uneducated... and trying to go through the welfare system [or] not doing a lot of things.”<sup>189</sup>

This assumption is shared by women across socio-economic and ethnic lines. For example, a Haitian American college student describes her experience as a middle and high school student attending a predominately white magnet school: “I never felt like they saw me or any of my black friends in the same way as themselves... I felt like they

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<sup>184</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>185</sup> Interview 1012.

<sup>186</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>187</sup> Interview 1019.

<sup>188</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>189</sup> Interview 1024.

thought that we were being favored by coming to their school.”<sup>190</sup> Although she views herself as intelligent, well respected and a good Christian, this experience and others have taught her to exercise caution among whites. Similarly, another Haitian American student describes her existence as a life of “adversity” and believes that persons outside of her racial and ethnic groups assume that she’s not educated and that she has children: “It makes me feel bad because I think people are going by what they see [in the media]... I hate that they would judge people so quickly and they don’t even know you.”<sup>191</sup> A college graduate with a masters degree struggles with the notion that she has earned her degree, is gainfully employed, a home owner, and works hard to become a member of mainstream America, yet she still faces discrimination and is viewed stereotypically:

It’s a little hard trying to get away from the stereotypes that we have been labeled with for years, but I’ve tried to work hard to overcome those stereotypes of what people think of young black women... I am 26, I’m single, I don’t have any kids but when people approach me sometimes first thing they ask me is how many kids do you have and they are shocked to hear that I don’t have any. ...It makes me feel bad.”<sup>192</sup>

### **Trying to Get Away from the Stereotypes:**

*I think that I should have more respect for myself than non-black women...  
I think you should hold yourself to a different standard... try to change the  
stereotype...*<sup>193</sup>

*Some people have that stereotype that we’re not good enough... so I try  
my best to do above, far above, what other people may think.*<sup>194</sup>

*I’ve tried to work hard to overcome those stereotypes of what people  
think...*<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>191</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Interview 1024.

<sup>194</sup> Interview 1026.



Again and again, the women with whom I spoke expressed their discontent and desire to overcome negating stereotypes. “Why is it so important to me? I don’t know [but] I feel that it’s important that they change the way they think,” says a graduate student.

I think that it's reflected in society. So that makes me feel that maybe I'm not as important. ...I mean you're viewed as a sex symbol, and nothing more than that. You're viewed as someone who's loud and angry. Those aren't favorable characteristics... So I have all this working in my head, and when I walk into a room full of white people, I'm thinking this is what they think. So now, I have to be something other than that... [so that] the next person after me, they might not, hold those stereotypes against them or prejudge them. So all of that is worth it.<sup>196</sup>

Another graduate student agrees, “I don’t think that they automatically assume that I’m a student, that I’m a college graduate,” she says.<sup>197</sup> She has not experienced overt disrespect but remains conscientious about her self-presentation because she believes that how others interact with young black women “comes with how you present yourself.”<sup>198</sup> “I feel like maybe if your hair is not groomed nicely or... your clothes are not what people expect to see from an educated person,” she continues, non-blacks may view her and other young black women in a diminished and somewhat negative light.<sup>199</sup>

Young black women are “prejudged” says a military reservist who returned from active duty in 2007.<sup>200</sup> She believes that the level of regard for young black women begins at a deficit in the military, requiring them to disprove the stereotypes before they can begin to earn a basic level of respect or advance. Similarly, a college student laments, “We’re black, so we’re already at a disadvantage, and we’re women, so we’re

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<sup>195</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>196</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>197</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Interview 1033.

definitely at a second disadvantage. That's just what you've grown up to know."<sup>201</sup> Another young woman laments, "I feel as if I'm some one who has to fight against stereotypes."<sup>202</sup> She describes herself as God-fearing, determined, loving, a sincere friend and family oriented, yet she constantly *fights against* negating representations "because American culture doesn't portray a black woman in the way [that] I like to see myself. It's a constant struggle, I feel, to present myself in an image [so] that I feel [like a person who belongs] inside in this culture."<sup>203</sup> She is not alone: "People are always watching you thinking that you're going to act like what's on TV. ...I don't see it as a big deal; it's just the way it is...But sometimes it's difficult ... You just have to keep trying even though it's discouraging."<sup>204</sup>

### **Living Within the Tension:**

In addition to those who seek to controvert negating representations, others live within the tension of having come short of their own and others' expectations for their lives and a sense of powerlessness about changing how they are perceived by persons outside of their racial, gender or ethnic group. One young woman indicates that some young black women are "not making the most out of life" and fit the stereotypical image. "I agree because it is true; I disagree because it is not all women. I agree a lot...about 60 percent...I see myself in some of the images but not a whole of them, a couple of them, but not in a bad way."<sup>205</sup> She is a high school graduate and gainfully employed but sees reflections of herself because she is also a single mother of five. She also believes that

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<sup>201</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>202</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Interview 1034.

<sup>205</sup> Interview 1012.

when “white people” see her artistic hairstyle they characterize her as “ghetto” and expect to hear someone “talking loud, cursing... Then I come along and they say ‘uh oh, here comes another one.’”<sup>206</sup> She holds out little hope that these perceptions will change and articulates indifference: “what ever they see is what ever they see; I’m not going to go out of my way to make them see what they don’t see.”<sup>207</sup> She also perceives herself as contributing nothing to the larger society—“I’m just here.”<sup>208</sup>

Another young woman suspects that she too is viewed stereotypically because she has two “daughters out of wedlock and without a full degree.”<sup>209</sup> The “stereotype of the black female who has not accomplished those things that would help her develop better in society,” is a challenge for her because she worries that it may be descriptive of her life.<sup>210</sup> She is also gainfully employed, holds a technical degree, only received public assistance for a short time and works hard to “better” her situation. Nonetheless she describes herself as “struggling to survive” both physically and emotionally and believes that many young black women in her situation share this experience.<sup>211</sup>

### **Strength, Strength, and Strength So I Won’t Break Down:**

Strength emerges as a necessity for young black women as they seek to survive and thrive in a negating ethos. As one young woman who was raised by her grandmother and witnessed both parents die of AIDS between her 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade years asserts, “I’m

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

a strong black woman... I need some strength *so I won't break down*.<sup>212</sup> Breaking down or being broken down is not an alternative for many of the women with whom I spoke, as their lives appear predicated upon their ability to live as “strong black women.” Several of the women identify God as their predominant source of strength and suggest that God alone is reliable. For example, one woman who survived sexual abuse without the support of her mother contends that she must be “continuous hard working, no breaks; can't depend on anyone but God.”<sup>213</sup> Although she continues to heal emotionally, she feels that her ability to survive thus far has made her stronger. Another young woman, rejecting the stereotypical image of young black women as dependent upon public assistance, compares herself to the biblical figure Hagar who depended upon God alone: “I don't ask anybody for anything, I work everyday, I'm not on any kind of assistance.”<sup>214</sup>

Whether they evoked the name of God or not, many of the women believe that they must survive with little or no help from others. For example, a college student whose parents were minimally supportive of her educational endeavors describes herself as “head strong” and “extremely determined” to reach her goals.<sup>215</sup> Another college student suggested that she perform better than persons outside of her racial group and describes herself as “a strong black woman... trying be successful in life just like

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<sup>212</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>213</sup> Interview 1035. The sense that God alone is reliable in their lives is shared by several of the women. This sentiment is consistent with Delores Williams' assertions regarding survival in the lives of black women and their reliance upon God for strength and survival resources. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams rereads the biblical woman Hagar's story in light of black women's experience in U.S. culture and asserts that “Hagar has ‘spoken’ to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people... Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, *with only God by her side*.” Cf. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 33.

<sup>214</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>215</sup> Interview 1039.

everybody else.”<sup>216</sup> Still another asserts that she is “strong enough [and] determined enough to...jump hurdles that I have to jump, the same hurdles that anyone else would have to jump... I just need the opportunity. That's what I need.”

The reality of being left to struggle alone or abandoned in times of distress necessitates strength of another form as evinced in three of the women's stories of being sexually molested and their sense of abandonment by their mothers. One young woman asserts that God gave her strength to “not have a victim mentality and [to] beat the odds.”<sup>217</sup> Her mother was addicted to cocaine and her father was an alcoholic. She was raised by her grandmother and sexually abused by a family member. She attributes her ability to survive to God's presence in her life: “God just had a covering over my life.”<sup>218</sup> Now, she desires to “be comfortable enough to tell my testimony without feeling that people are going to judge me.”<sup>219</sup> Another young woman recounts three instances in which she was touched inappropriately by adult men—a pastor, a teacher, and a cousin. She was initially afraid but eventually told her mother about the incidents. Her mother responded by watching her daughter more vigilantly but did not confront the perpetrators. She continues to struggle with her mother's failure to advocate for her but discerns the necessity of strength from her mother's explicit admonishment that her daughters not replicate her experience: “My mom got on her knees and she said... ‘whatever you do, finish and get your education, because I do not want any guy talking to you the way

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<sup>216</sup> Interview 1026.

<sup>217</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

that...your dad talks to me.”<sup>220</sup> She expresses empathy for her mother yet endeavors to surpass her mother’s level of strength.

Some of the women sought to imitate the cross-generational strength that was passed on to them from exemplars and role-models who had survived and achieved much in the face of adversity and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. These exemplars of strength—father, grandparents, aunts, mentors, and public figures—encourage them toward their best becoming with hopes that they might achieve more and make greater strides than had been possible in previous generations. Two of the women suggest that strength demands self-sacrifice. For example, one woman, evoking the image of barren biblical women, indicates that women must be strong enough to “persevere and smile... and still have that hope that you are talking about.”<sup>221</sup> She asserts that “God wants women to be strong” which she describes as possessing a meek and humble character despite loss, grief, or negation.<sup>222</sup> A second woman, admires her grandmother’s strength and asserts, “You are just there to keep the peace....The man is considered the head of the household, and he provides, but you take care of everything else.”<sup>223</sup>

### **Living with Vulnerability:**

Strength as an attribute for black women was not accepted uncritically, as two of the women who grapple with the complexity of holding together strength and vulnerability in a culture that equates strength with independence attest. One young woman suggests, “you have to be strong for not only yourself, but your family while

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<sup>220</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>221</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Interview 1015.

other people may or may not be looking down at you,” highlighting the example that her mentor set for her.<sup>224</sup> Her mentor, a single mother, taught her that as a “strong woman you’re gonna go through a lot of B.S... [but] you have to keep your family strong no matter.”<sup>225</sup> Additional reflection, however, led this young woman to think more critically about the tension between vulnerability and strength. As a result, she maintains that strength is important but “We are vulnerable, very vulnerable, even though I know we don’t want to be portrayed as vulnerable, we just got to be realistic... we’re strong yet very vulnerable at the same time, so we balance things, and that’s what makes us beautiful.”<sup>226</sup>

Another young woman describes a ‘strong black woman’ as being “the support system for the family. You’re always giving; you’re always that unconditional love.” She too acknowledges the difficulty of appearing strong at all times. She recounts her experience of becoming a single mother and feeling that she “just couldn’t do it.” She just could not be the mother, the primary bread winner, support and keep the family together, and resist the negating stereotypes alone. This became expressly clear for her on a particularly hectic day, “I finally had a chance to go take a shower that day and I broke down and cried because you just don’t realize how much consistent giving, not just laying around and having time to think things completely through... and even sexually being submissive,...to be that person to count on.”<sup>227</sup> She felt that it was her duty to become all things to all people in her family connection and ultimately *broke down and cried*.

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<sup>224</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Interview 1013.

## STAVING OFF CULTURALLY INDUCED DESPAIR

The second theme describes the commonalities and differences between the women regarding cultural images, myths, ideologies, experience or relationships that contribute most to culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women. As described in Chapter One, culturally induced despair draws its energy from persistent and repetitive cultural negation intended to strip persons of their value within the broader cultural context in which they live—structural oppression—and convince them that they are powerless to challenge or change the oppressive structures that encompass their lives. The women’s stories reveal several sources of culturally induced despair, thematically discussed as (1) *negating media representations*, (2) *dearth of role-models*, (3) *personal failure and lack of accomplishment*, and (3) *social distress*.

### **Negating Media Representations:**

The women identify negating media representations as the greatest contributor to culturally induced despair. Seeing themselves represented negatively is so common in the world in which young black women live that the practice appears normative, says one young woman; so normative that she struggles to find words to express her feelings: “I mean it’s common now, that’s what you see on videos... that’s what you expect to see... So, I don’t know how I would feel about it...*It’s the norm so that’s what they do.*”<sup>228</sup> Similarly, another young woman indicates, “I know music is a big thing, the music industry and the way women are portrayed in videos and the music lyrics, I think that’s a

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<sup>228</sup> Interview 1023 (emphasis added).



negative thing... but it's been like that."<sup>229</sup> Another woman indicates, "I think we're viewed as always being on welfare, you know, always trying to get our hair and nails done, spending the government's money... the stigma is always going to be there until we have more people where they need to be."<sup>230</sup>

One young woman responds to my question about how the culture views young black women by indicating that hip-hop negates them: "The hip-hop culture views us as bitches and whores and ragamuffins; I guess all of the things we see on TV. You know the culture views women I guess in general [negatively]... [T]he gyrating... butt shaking..."<sup>231</sup> Another woman protests, "the negative is the music...they're looking at us as though they're [we're] no good or a piece of trash and should not be treated with respect."<sup>232</sup> She too hates being referred to as a "bitch" or a "whore," descriptors she encounters far too often. Similarly, another young woman bemoans the degrading nature of music videos: "Most definitely the videos; what you see on TV, they degrade us. ...most of time [when] you see these video, you see predominately black women dancing in provocative clothing...for guys and stuff, and lately it's been shown a lot."<sup>233</sup> Negating images of young black women *are shown a lot*, echoes another young woman, who laments, "It's difficult because as hard as you try, they double it up on television. They double it up on the news."<sup>234</sup> "They never show a positive image of African American females. The women in the background in the videos are dancing half naked, and to me it is a degrading image of women... it portrays us as sexual objects," says another young

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<sup>229</sup> Interview 1025 (emphasis added).

<sup>230</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>231</sup> Interview 1014.

<sup>232</sup> Interview 1021.

<sup>233</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>234</sup> Interview 1034.

woman.<sup>235</sup> Still another indicates, “There's more of that than there are good parts. You see those rump-shaker videos and women doing a lot of degrading things... Just the way we're portrayed in the media, on news, or like regular media news.”<sup>236</sup> “I don't agree with it at all, and I don't know why it's out there,” says another young woman, “it's selling and they're not stopping.”<sup>237</sup>

Negating media representations also create obstacles as young black women attempt to navigate the social terrain. One college student recalls an experience that she and two other women shared after submitting an employment application at a daycare center. As she was leaving the building she overheard two “white girls” asking, “Did she come with those three ghetto black girls who came to fill out an application? Do they *really* think they're going to work here?”<sup>238</sup> Reflecting further, she says “I was like wow. I was already seen negatively, even though I was in school and my sister was in school and her friend was in school but, you know, I think they feel like all of us are like that.”<sup>239</sup> Another young woman bemoans, “If a person watches B.E.T., and that's the only way they see African American women portrayed, then they are going to automatically think... ‘she's only good for shaking her behind and being half dressed,’ ...of being a little play toy for men.”<sup>240</sup>

The women are not only concerned about how they are perceived in the larger society but about how they are regarded among black men. For example, one young woman suggests that “African American men portray us as being bitches because as

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<sup>235</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>236</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>237</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>238</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Interview 1015.

women we stand up for what we believe and we have a strong mind and a no nonsense attitude.”<sup>241</sup> Similarly, another young woman laments that “if we don’t feel that we’re respected by our own, there’s almost no hope in feeling that we’re respected by the general masses.”<sup>242</sup> “Its like guys are constantly influenced by what they see on TV,” bemoans another young woman “and they’re thinking that women are suppose to be like that.”<sup>243</sup> Speaking somewhat nostalgically, another woman says “I think that black men are losing respect for black women... It didn’t used to be like that.”<sup>244</sup>

Regarding the impact of negating representations, many of the women indicate ‘*it’s not about me!*’ For example, one young woman who expressed indifference to cultural negation indicates that video images may have “some sort of effect on the children” because children mimic what they see.<sup>245</sup> However, she feels certain that it has no effect on her. Another indicates, “I’m very set in my ways; there’s nothing [that] I can see on TV or anywhere else that’s going to [convince] me to be like that.”<sup>246</sup> Still another young woman vehemently declares “Oh no, no definitely not because if you... let something like that [media representations] get to you, then you really think that you are a ‘B’ and you think you’re worth nothing.”<sup>247</sup>

‘*It’s not about me!*’ also emerged as some of the women reflected upon their own practices vis-à-vis negating media representations. One young woman asserts, “I’m not resisting the hip hop culture and do my own thing there is no resistance to me being

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<sup>241</sup> Interview 1014.

<sup>242</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>243</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>244</sup> Interview 1019.

<sup>245</sup> Interview 1012.

<sup>246</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>247</sup> Interview 1022.

included to the hip hop culture.... I know when they're saying whatever they are saying I know that *they are not referring to me.*"<sup>248</sup> Similarly, another young woman contends that even though she watches music videos, "I don't think it affects me in who I believe myself to be."<sup>249</sup> However, as she continues her reflection, she is not as certain that she remains unscathed: "When its uncensored and you can hear everything that they're saying, I think that makes me question like who am I, what am I letting come into me; what am I letting myself hear, what am I letting myself be exposed to."<sup>250</sup> Another young woman responds, "I don't really get up set. Yes I do! Yes I do! I get upset when they call [us] out [our] names because I think we're more than that, you know what I'm saying, I think we're more than that!"<sup>251</sup>

In addition to its potential psychic impact, another young woman questions the veracity of complaining about negating representations while engaging in practices that tacitly support the same: "You can't say 'I don't want to be called that name' when you're still buying it and still listening to the rapper."<sup>252</sup> Another young woman insists that "if you're going to tell a black man not to refer to you as that [a bitch], it shouldn't be okay for your girl-friends to refer to you as that."<sup>253</sup> She indicates that being referred to as "bitch" makes her "feel low."<sup>254</sup> Negating representations are no laughing matter, another young woman admits, referring to *Flavor of Love* and *Charm School*, reality shows broadcast on VH1: "It's really not funny; it's really not... So once again when you

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<sup>248</sup> Interview 1014.

<sup>249</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>252</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>253</sup> Interview 1022.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

get out in the world, we have to try to stop people from thinking that that's the way it is."<sup>255</sup>

Questions about body image and aesthetic appeal also contribute to culturally induced despair, as illustrated by two of the women's discontent with the emergent emphasis upon 'thick' as the iconic image for young black women. One young woman's epiphany in response to a question about how media representations influence self-perception is instructive.

In a big way! I know that in some places people will tell me that I'm beautiful all day long, but still...the curves and all this stuff [are in]. But then I saw Lauren Hill, and I never really saw or felt what I felt until I saw [her] again on stage and she was thin, but she was beautiful! She's dark, and, you know, *it was just chills because I felt good about myself, you know, without even realizing that there was something there!* I was excited to see someone different, someone that looked kinda like me that seemed to be happy with herself—I don't know how she feels about herself but I think [she's beautiful].<sup>256</sup>

She had no idea that something was lacking until she caught herself *feeling good about herself*. Another young woman laments, "I know that the image of a woman in general is to be thin and beautiful. But now it's like to be the 'thick girl' [is in] because that's what black guys want. And that's been hard for women like me who are naturally thin... 'Skinny girls' have been forgotten."<sup>257</sup>

### **Dearth of Role-models:**

Repeatedly, the women express their discontent and concern that negating media representations not only shape public imagination but they compete with efforts to help young black women and girls discern alternatives for their lives. For example, one

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<sup>255</sup> Interview 1034.

<sup>256</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>257</sup> Interview 1031.

women says, “I know little girls now...they want to be video vixens. ...Even though we have things that confirm that you can be somebody, there are others that's like well, ‘you can be somebody but this is what you’re going to be.’”<sup>258</sup> Similarly, another young woman expresses concern that black girls may not have been exposed to the “images that I’m able to see.”<sup>259</sup> For example, the dean of the medical school that she attends is a black woman, “and the woman that was at FAMU [her undergraduate institution], she did everything—she was a professor, she was a researcher, she was a mother.”<sup>260</sup> Therefore, she worries that “if you were a young girl and you felt that the ‘video chick’ was one of your only options...it would be kind of hard if you didn’t know what other options there were.”<sup>261</sup> Another young woman, stressing the need for appropriate role-models, laments, “we don’t have enough and we don’t have the best role-models.”<sup>262</sup> Therefore, she worries that young black women and girls who grow up without appropriate role-models may struggle with low self esteem and hopelessness “if [they] truly internalize that feeling.”<sup>263</sup>

### **Personal Failure and Lack of Accomplishment:**

Personal failure and lack of accomplishment are third among the sources of culturally induced despair. Two of the women recount their academic struggles and are feverishly working to prove that they can complete their degrees. “I think that I can prove them wrong,” says one of the women, “I think that I can do it, so I’m going to keep

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<sup>258</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>259</sup> Interview 1028

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

doing it.”<sup>264</sup> Another young woman describes personal failure as “putting yourself into a pit and believing that you’re supposed to be there and there’s no way to get out”<sup>265</sup>

One young woman struggles with a chronic illness that prevents her from working or attending school, and even though she describes herself as a self-respecting person with goals and aspirations, she perceives herself as having fallen short. She says, “I never thought I would be in the situation I’m in and... I would rather be going to school or I *should* be finishing, I *should* have had a degree by now and a job.”<sup>266</sup> A mother of four describes her lack of accomplishments as the result her own *laziness*: “It’s possible; I just have to really want to do it...I can see it in my head how I want us to live, but for some reason... I get by, so it is enough when I know it’s not really... *I think it comes from laziness.*”<sup>267</sup> However, she has an epiphany while trying to discern what prevents her from accomplishing more: “It’s not because of the money its because of the kids I have four kids. *Oh Jesus, that’s what it is!*”<sup>268</sup> She continues, “What keeps me from having hope is like if I try to do something to better myself and it seems like there are no opportunities... I have opportunities but I can’t use it because of something else.”<sup>269</sup>

How do the women respond to personal failure? One response, as indicated above, is doubt and disappointment. Another is personal responsibility and determination, as one young woman asserts: “the only person that can hold you down is yourself, you know. If you aspire to do what you need to do then you’re gonna get it

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<sup>264</sup> Interview 1021.

<sup>265</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>266</sup> Interview 1024.

<sup>267</sup> Interview 1012 (emphasis added).

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

done.”<sup>270</sup> Another young woman indicates that she has learned that “just because I live the right way and I don’t curse people out and I’m a good person does not mean that I won’t go through things.”<sup>271</sup> Therefore, she remains strong and relies upon God alone. None of the women suggest that they would seek assistance from others.

While not all of the women recount experiences of personal failure, many of them expressed empathy for others who were struggling to find their way back from failure and appear to have given thought to how they might respond in a similar situation. They also indicate that they try to steer clear of “negative people”—people whom they experience as discouraging and a source of culturally induced despair. One young lady laughs, “Some people you don’t want to talk to when you’re down [because]...when you get off the phone you feel worse.”<sup>272</sup> Others respond with a resounding, ‘yes!’ Because they know that they are not impervious to failure, these young women suggest that it is important to surround themselves with persons who can strengthen them in times of distress.

### **Social Distress:**

Although the present investigation is concerned with the lives of young black women as a unique group within U.S. culture, their comments remind us that they are also concerned about the issues facing the larger society in which we live. A military reservist talked about the war in Iraq and the multiple deployments that many soldiers and their families have endured: “Especially when you look at the news and look at the

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<sup>270</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>271</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>272</sup> Interview 1015.



war in Iraq. ... You know, and it makes you think man, is there any hope for what is going on right now?... 'Cause it does cause despair, that situation."<sup>273</sup> Similarly, another young woman struggles with the U.S.'s profession "in God we trust" in light of the suffering of the Iraqi people: "Sometime I feel like America is going toward the whole believing in God thing because our president believes in God... But at the same time, it's kind of confusing because of the war that's going on in Iraq. There's no hope for them."<sup>274</sup> The war-like conditions on American streets also creates despair, as suggested by another young woman who expressed her distress over the frequent reports of murder in the news.<sup>275</sup> The women also identified the troubled housing market, poverty at home and around the globe, the rising statistic regarding HIV/AIDS among black women, the job market, and the rising cost of higher education as sources of culturally induced despair.

### **RESONANCES OF HOPE**

The third theme describes commonalities and differences between the women regarding *images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships that contribute to young black women's understanding of hope and their ability to live therein*. The metaphor is essentially concerned with identifying commonalities and differences among the women in two areas. The first concerns descriptive language with which the women define hope. Three descriptions of hope emerge: hope as a wish that will someday come true, hope as inner desire and human effort, hope as inner desire, faith in God and human effort. My second consideration is to identify the images, myths, ideologies, experiences

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<sup>273</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>274</sup> Interview 1027, The president to which she refers is George W. Bush.

<sup>275</sup> Interview 1034.

and relationships that sustain young black women in hope, variously defined. In response, the women reveal four major contributors— friendship and kinship relationships, prayer and faith in God, personal determination and experience, cultural images and icons.

### **Descriptive Language for Hope**

All of the women offered definitions of hope that I have loosely categorized under the three descriptive headings.

#### **Hope is a Wish that will Someday Come True:**

Five of the women described hope as their desire for a better future or something better than what currently exists. Although they are not certain about the means by which the change occurs, they are *hoping* for a mode of existence that is radically different from life as they experience it now. As one woman says, “To live with hope means to live for a better future for me and my children and my children’s children.”<sup>276</sup> Similarly, another young woman indicates that hope for a “black woman means that hopefully some day black women will be able to be more independent and not have to rely so much on the government; hopefully one day they won’t refer to each other as B’s.”<sup>277</sup> They both envision a different kind of world but do not perceive themselves or the Divine as actively engaged in bringing it to fruition.

Others describe hope as *blind faith* or *wishful thinking*, the sense that things will get better or wishes will be granted grounded upon nothing more than their sense that

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<sup>276</sup> Interview 1012.

<sup>277</sup> Interview 1022.

things are going to change.<sup>278</sup> “I believe that things are going to get better,” says one young woman.<sup>279</sup> Hope is wishing to “receive something that I really want,” says another, contending that strong desire eventually leads to results.<sup>280</sup> Another young woman asserts that her hope is grounded in faith in God and indicates that “everything happens for a reason and...that faith in God can make all things possible.”<sup>281</sup>

### **Hope as Inner Desire and Human Effort:**

Six of the women describe hope as a combination of deep desire or yearning and the human effort necessary to actualize that for which one hopes. For example, one woman’s contends that “Hope means that something better is going to happen... [but] it’s not just going to come; you have to make hope happen.”<sup>282</sup> Similarly, another young woman asserts that hope requires a person to make concrete decisions about how she wants to live into the future: “When I hear hope, I think about life changing for the better...so that [I] don’t go down the same path as [my] mother or grandmother. You can change your history and it will help change the world.”<sup>283</sup> Hope, in other words, is the desire and effort necessary to create the types of future for which one longs.

Several of the women also describe hope as that which fuels their efforts in the present. For example, one young woman asserts that “Hope is the thing that makes you go; that makes you live another day ...[I]t’s what you wake up for; it’s what you live

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<sup>278</sup> Thomas Long, “When Half Spent Was the Night: Preaching Hope in the New Millennium ” in *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 3 (1999): 11-20.

<sup>279</sup> Interview 1034.

<sup>280</sup> Interview 1021.

<sup>281</sup> Interview 1019.

<sup>282</sup> Interview 1024.

<sup>283</sup> Interview 1032.

for.”<sup>284</sup> She is convinced that life is meaningless without hope and that the sense of expectancy is the “incentive to try to want for more” and to do more.<sup>285</sup> Similarly, another young woman indicates that hope is “internal; pushing me, giving me that drive to go on and to finish and to accomplish my dreams and my goals.”<sup>286</sup> This was also true for another young woman who experiences hope as the inner strength that energizes her to strive another day.<sup>287</sup> Hope, therefore, is a combination of inner desire and human effort toward an affirming life in the present.

### **Hope as Inner Desire, Human Effort, and Faith in God:**

Nine of the women describe hope as the combination of inner desire and human effort grounded in faith in God. They assert that the desire comes from God and that faith in God fuels their efforts to live with hope. One young woman asserts that “God is the first thing that I thought of when you said ‘hope’ [because] He gives us power to do what we want... I think it’s internal just because I believe that I have the power to do what I need to do to reach my goals.”<sup>288</sup> Although she believes that she embodies hope she indicates, “I depend on God to let me know it’s possible.”<sup>289</sup> “When you’re going through bad times, you gotta have hope,” asserts another young woman, “you gotta go to work, go to school and have faith in God.”<sup>290</sup> “Hope is faith, dreams of a more positive

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<sup>284</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Interview 1026.

<sup>287</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>288</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Interview 1035.

side of what you're going through," she contends.<sup>291</sup> 'Yes,' echoes another, "hope comes from God and faith from inside, from me."<sup>292</sup>

Another young woman agrees, "In the sense that I have hope, that's just understood... I wake up in the morning with hope. At the same time, I have to operate in that feeling... My actions have to reflect that feeling."<sup>293</sup> One young woman describes *that feeling* as "that little voice inside that tells you its going to be ok...when you pray to God, even though you may not feel that He hears you... that little voice say[s] just be faithful and wait on Him."<sup>294</sup> "Desire, faith and hope" are bound together, says another young woman, because people need all three to accomplish those things to which they aspire.<sup>295</sup> She also believes that experiences can either enhance or diminish hope. Experience is important, says another young woman, especially if "you could focus on what He [God] has already brought you through and not so much [on] what you're going through now."<sup>296</sup> Therefore she describes hope as having "the faith in God even when it doesn't look right or even when it seems like there is no answer or... no end to the situation... God is still going to make a way somehow."<sup>297</sup> Therefore, hope means continuing to strive for that which she desires believing that the God who brought her through in the past "can bring me through this too; that's what hope means."<sup>298</sup> Not only does remembering God's historical fidelity sustain hope but another woman indicates that she must have an image—pictures, magazine articles, paraphernalia—to remind her of

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>293</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>294</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>295</sup> Interview 1030.

<sup>296</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

that for which she desires: “I have to have a picture...see where I am going and work hard to get to that point.”<sup>299</sup>

One young woman dichotomized faith and hope, asserting that she prefers faith to hope because faith is more akin to anticipation and action while hope connotes wishing and a lack of control over the outcome.

### **Sources of Hope in the Lives of Young Black Wommen**

The women identify four major sources of hope: friendship and kinship relationships, prayer and faith in God, personal determination and experience, cultural images and icons.

#### **Friendship and Kinship Relationships:**

The women’s relationships with their mothers figured most prominently among the relationships that sustain them in hope. For example, one young woman describes her mother’s resilience in the struggle against cancer: “My mom has had different bouts with cancer... but she gets through... that gives me hope.”<sup>300</sup> Another young woman wonders out-loud about her mother’s ability to care for them as a single parent with an unremarkable income: “I realize she didn’t have the college education, I always think back on how we really didn’t want for anything...and when I think about that and knowing what her income is I’m thinking, ‘how did she do that?!’ So there’s a lot of hope in that.”<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>300</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>301</sup> Interview 1028.

In addition to their mothers, some of the women identified other women in their families as sources of hope including grandmothers, sisters, aunts and fathers. “Family tends to give you some support and love,” one woman explains, “that nourishment [and] food for the soul.”<sup>302</sup> “My aunt is my source of hope,” says one young woman, “I don’t know who else, I really don’t.”<sup>303</sup> One young woman, who indicates that her source of hope is “just being able to talk to my mom who...is always a phone call away,” also names her grandmother as an important source of hope.<sup>304</sup> Sister relationships are also hope-inspiring, as one young woman tearfully describes: “Seeing my sister graduate, seeing her strive and continue on to get her BA... that’s hope for me.”<sup>305</sup> Two others agree that their sisters are images of hope.

A second significant source of hope is the women’s love for and sense of responsibility to their children. As one woman asserts, “I have to live for them [her daughters] and myself too, but especially for them.”<sup>306</sup> This mother’s sentiment is echoed by several others. “My child, my son, he made it possible for me to be able to have hope,” says another young mother, “to just be able to provide for him things that most children are not able to get and to be able to provide a good education.”<sup>307</sup> She and others believe that their families nurture them toward hope, thus they remain determined to do the same for their children. Another mother who had been told that she would not be able to have children describes the hope that giving birth engendered: “having been able to have a child, that gave me a lot of hope...even though people said this can’t

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<sup>302</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>303</sup> Interview 1012.

<sup>304</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>305</sup> Interview 1026.

<sup>306</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>307</sup> Interview 1022.

happen, everything lies in God's hands."<sup>308</sup> The ambivalence she felt about defining hope gave way to certainty that she experiences hope through her child, her relationship with her husband and her family.

In addition to family members and their children, several of the women indicate that they also have close friends with whom they can share their aspirations and struggles. They "try to link up with people who have the same goals... [because] your hope can rest heavily on who you are associated with."<sup>309</sup> Other kinship and friendship relationships include mentors as well as church women that nurture the women's identity as Christian women.<sup>310</sup>

### **Faith in God and Prayer:**

Faith in God and prayer also emerges as a very significant source of hope, as one young woman asserts, "My faith in God, that's my source of hope. It has to be."<sup>311</sup> Others offer similarly succinct responses, asserting that that hope comes from "faith in God,"<sup>312</sup> "faith keeps me going,"<sup>313</sup> "believing in God and believing that He can give me what I need and what I want,"<sup>314</sup> "believing in God and by me praying to Him for the strength to keep doing it."<sup>315</sup> "If not for trusting God," says one young woman, "I would

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<sup>308</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>309</sup> Interview 1030.

<sup>310</sup> See metaphor four for a discussion of the aspects of church life that nourishes hope.

<sup>311</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>312</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>313</sup> Interview 1014.

<sup>314</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>315</sup> Interview 1021.



be a sad, angry person just because of mistreatment that this culture has especially for black people. My faith in God is my refuge.”<sup>316</sup>

Many of the women augment faith with a strong devotional life and assert that prayer also sustains them in hope. “Praying gives hope, you know, just the idea that God is listening,” says one young woman.<sup>317</sup> “I pray a lot, and that gives me hope,” says another.<sup>318</sup> Similarly, another young woman asserts that “being able to talk to him on a daily basis...gets me through the storm, and I feel ten times better afterwards.”<sup>319</sup> Prayer assures her that God is listening and actively involved in her life. Answering her own interrogative, “What makes it possible for me to have hope?” another young woman agrees prayer “make[s] me feel like there’s possibility.”<sup>320</sup> Several of the women also experience hope by participating in worship contexts in which they sense something of God’s presence and activity. One young woman contends that “without a strong prayer life and my church friends and family...I would not have hope.”<sup>321</sup> Two others also agree that prayer, participating in Sunday school, preaching and Christian community has sustained her in hope.<sup>322</sup>

### **Personal Determination and Experience:**

Seven of the women identify their own sense of accomplishment or surviving personal hardship as sources of hope. As one women suggests “when you make an accomplishment, or if there is something that you want to do and it is done, that will

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<sup>316</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>317</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>318</sup> Interview 1024.

<sup>319</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>320</sup> Interview 1019.

<sup>321</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>322</sup> Interview 1014, Interview 1025.

increase your hope for the next time.”<sup>323</sup> She makes a distinction between living with hope and living a competitive life and suggests that when one wins a competition “the end result is the end result.”<sup>324</sup> Hope, on the other hand, creates “room to succeed in a different area.”<sup>325</sup> Another young woman who believes that hope wakes us up also asserts that hope “comes from accomplishments too, because it seems that you would have to succeed some of the time to know that [success] is possible; to know that hope is worth it.”<sup>326</sup>

Another young woman describes her experience of having overcome adversities in her life without adopting a victim mentality: “Wow!” she exclaims “I have gone through a whole lot of stuff in my life, my mom being on drugs, my dad still an alcoholic, and being abused sexually. ...[S]tatistics will say that I would have ended up on drugs or an alcoholic myself [but] God just had a covering over my life.”<sup>327</sup> She attributes her ability to survive and beat the odds to God’s presence and activity in her life. “The part that gave me hope,” she replies, “is that even though I went through so much and had so many negative things happen, people still look at me as a virtuous woman. I had to finally say one day, you can claim that for yourself.”<sup>328</sup>

Several of the women assert hope’s power to help one reclaim their sense of wellbeing, as one young woman describes when recalling the residual pain of ending a romantic relationship: “Hope comes from God and faith from inside... Hope comes from

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<sup>323</sup> Interview 1030.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>327</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

me overcoming the things that I've overcome in the past and believing."<sup>329</sup> In addition to one's own experiences, three of the women also believe that observing and learning from the experiences of significant others in their lives sustains them in hope.<sup>330</sup>

### **Cultural Images and Icons:**

When asked if there were sources of hope in U.S. culture the women responded with a resounding "No!" Of the twenty-two women with whom I spoke, ten indicated unequivocally that there were no sources of hope in U.S. culture. One woman, after a very long pause, exclaimed "I don't know if there are any. I don't know in the larger aspect of culture." Evincing the same thoughtful consideration, three other women responded that the question was difficult to answer and were not able to respond in the affirmative: "That's a hard question; well they really; I don't see it."<sup>331</sup> "That's a hard question for me... How does it play a part in hope? I don't think it does."<sup>332</sup> "Not for women, I really can't [answer], not for women. I really don't think so."<sup>333</sup>

Four of the women, however, were able to identify sources of hope. One woman highlights opportunities in the U.S. as compared to those in other countries: "The one thing that's just really real for us is how much opportunity we have in America whereas other black women in other countries...they may not have as many doors of opportunity as America offers."<sup>334</sup> Another indicates, "I realize that I can have the income or the job

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<sup>329</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>330</sup> Interview 1028, Interview 1014, Interview 1021.

<sup>331</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>332</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>333</sup> Interview 1035.

<sup>334</sup> Interview 1030.

that I want because education is a big thing here.”<sup>335</sup> A third woman identified testimonials from “successful people who have actually gone through things” as a source of hope.<sup>336</sup> One woman identifies improved race relations as a source of hope, highlighting the 2007 cancellation of the *Imus in the Morning Show* from MSNBC after Mr. Imus referred to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed ho’s”.<sup>337</sup> She indicates that such behaviors are “being shunned...so things like that are not being tolerated in public settings the way that it would have been in the past.”<sup>338</sup>

When speaking more generally about sources of hope outside of their kinship and friendship relationships, six of the women identify black female cultural icons. These women include musical artists Mary J. Blige, India Arie, Lauryn Hill and Jill Scott as well as Oprah Winfrey, media executive, entrepreneur and host of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, Condoleezza Rice, 66<sup>th</sup> U.S. Secretary of State, Halle Berry, first black female to win an Oscar for *Best Actress* in 2002, Fantasia Barrino, 2004 *American Idol* winner, and Debra Lee, president and COO of B.E.T. I might also note that these interviews were conducted before Barack Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America, thus First Lady Michelle Obama is conspicuously missing among the list of iconic female figures. However, informal conversations with young black women since the election suggest that Michelle Obama is a very significant symbol of hope in their lives. The women also identify less famous but nonetheless successful women who are

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<sup>335</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>336</sup> Interview 1036.

<sup>337</sup> The show aired on April 4, 2007 See article at MSNBC’s website, April 13, 2007: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17999196/> .

<sup>338</sup> Interview 1034.

“doing things that you would like to do... seeing them gives you the hope to know that it’s possible.”<sup>339</sup>

### **HOPE, CULTURALLY INDUCED DESPAIR AND THE BLACK CHURCH**

The final theme describes commonalities and differences among the women regarding *cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships within the context of their worship communities that contribute to or diminish young black women’s ability to live with hope*. This metaphor is essentially concerned with identifying sources of hope as well as sources of culturally induced despair that are unique to the worship communities with which the women currently participate or have participated at some time in the past. The women’s stories reveal two major sources of hope: (1) *testimonials and wise counsel*, and (2) *encouragement and affirmation*. Sources of culturally induced despair include: (1) *judgment and punishment*, (3) *discord and disunity*, and (3) *sexism and disparate treatment*. I also wanted to discover, as I move more intently toward pedagogical creation, the women’s deep yearnings, needs and expectations as regards their worship communities. Therefore, I offer their hope-filled musings and counsel to the Black Church.

#### **Source of Hope in the Black Church**

As suggested above, the women identify two sources of hope thematically represented as Testimonials and Wise Counsel and Affirmation and Encouragement. Also, four of the women suggest that while the church does contribute in some way to

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<sup>339</sup> Interview 1013.

their lives it does not engender hope, thus I discuss their responses under the subheading Questionable Sources of Hope.

### **Testimonials and Wise Counsel:**

Six of the women agree that testimonials—verbalized or acted-out—and wise counsel are important sources of hope in the lives of young black women and identify older adult women as important exemplars of what may be possible for their lives. For example, one young woman asserts that “in my church I see a lot of black women that are educated, successful, positive role-models, and that’s what I would want... I definitely think that’s what enhances hope in the lives of young black women.”<sup>340</sup> Another young woman recalls her experience at a women’s retreat in which some of the elderly women testified: “It’s looking at some of the elders, some of the women who have been in church for a long time ... they share their stories and have so much wisdom [so they] tell you ‘baby that ain’t nothing’ ... it gives you that hope.”<sup>341</sup> Another woman adds, “not even talking to them but just seeing them there, it’s strength to me.”<sup>342</sup> Similarly, another young woman indicates that elderly women have “lived the life that I’m living now. They’ve made it through and they’re good in health and they’re good in spirit and they have peace; that enhances my hope because that’s what’s to come.”<sup>343</sup>

In addition to elderly women in the church, two of the women highlight the importance of the “first lady” or pastor’s wife as an iconic image. As one woman indicates, “Our first lady is awesome ... [S]he give us hope because she’s a young African

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<sup>340</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>341</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>342</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

American and she's first lady."<sup>344</sup> Her efficacy as an image of hope for young black women is augmented by the fact that she is also young, black and female. Another young woman agrees and believes that the title is particularly important because it esteems women and because the church has not always portrayed women as "worth something" or valued women's gifts.<sup>345</sup>

### **Affirmation and Encouragement:**

Several of the women indicate that the church is a context in which they experience affirmation and encouragement as Christians and as young black women. "People are willing to talk to you about God, the Bible, and how it can influence your life," says one woman.<sup>346</sup> Similarly, another young woman indicates that people in the church encourage her to "keep praying and not let the devil stop you from doing what you want to do."<sup>347</sup> The church also nurtures young black women as they make decisions about the course that their lives will take. This is important, as one young woman suggests, "because you're finding yourself, you know, like going to school and you need that support within your church."<sup>348</sup> Another young woman describes the church as a village and explains that as a teenager she "had reinforcement from different family and friends from the church who were always encouraging us to do our best or encouraging us 'if you need me call.'"<sup>349</sup> This continues to be true in her life and she desires to do the same for others. Another young woman agrees but with the caveat that "the church creates hope for young black women who are trying to do things in a positive manner"

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<sup>344</sup> Interview 1032.

<sup>345</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>346</sup> Interview 1019.

<sup>347</sup> Interview 1021.

<sup>348</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>349</sup> Interview 1014.

but not necessarily for those who make mistakes.<sup>350</sup> Similarly, another young woman states that church offers “that warm family feeling, like people care about you more than normal—more than my own family sometimes.”<sup>351</sup> People struggle together, she asserts, and “come out of it [together] and that gives you a lot of hope.”<sup>352</sup>

“The aspect that enhances hope is basically providing a place for me to go worship and let out that stress... and not have to think about anything else,” says another young woman. At church people can worship God as well as “interact with other believers, establish relationships and focus on the message.”<sup>353</sup> Another young woman says that she appreciates the men’s ministry “doing things for the young ladies and calling us sisters, and lifting us up.” She and other young black women also express the sense of value that they experience when they contribute their gifts and talents to the church, whether in roles that were traditionally assigned to women, such as cooking and serving, or in leadership positions traditionally reserved for men.<sup>354</sup>

Five of the women identify clergy persons as important sources of affirmation and encouragement. Three identify their male pastors as persons with whom they can share their concerns and gain encouragement. As one woman indicates, “my pastor, I’ve been able to talk to him...because he doesn’t have a judgmental way of speaking.”<sup>355</sup> Two of the women also describe affirming relationships with female clergy. “Just having someone there...encouraging me, saying encouraging words,” says one young woman.

Another young woman asserts that she appreciates “women’s ministries, conferences,

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<sup>350</sup> Interview 1024.

<sup>351</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Interview 1015.

<sup>354</sup> Interview 1015, Interview 1029.

<sup>355</sup> Interview 1027.



seeing women preachers because it helps me hear.”<sup>356</sup> “A man can talk about a woman but it touches the heart when a woman is telling you because we know they feel what we went through. A man can say I’ve seen my mom or I’ve seen my sister...but it’s not as deep as a women looking in your eye and saying ‘I see,’” says another young woman.<sup>357</sup>

### **Questionable Sources of Hope:**

As noted above, four of the women indicate that the church makes little or no discernable contribution to hope in their lives. For example, one young woman indicates that she’s certain that “it’s there but it’s not enough to make such a huge impact.”<sup>358</sup> She believes that the church speaks words of hope but then retracts them by perpetuating sexism.<sup>359</sup>

Two of the women recall their experience in the *Red Circle*, a group for girls in churches affiliated with the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., and the encouragement and support they received from the women who mentored them. However, they struggle to identify sources for hope for women in their age group and finally concede, as one of the women articulate, “I guess no, other than the preacher preaching on Sunday [‘about how women shouldn’t be with a certain type of man’].”<sup>360</sup> Another young woman identifies the increasing relevance of sermons to everyday life as a positive move in the church but did not perceive the church as a context that engenders hope.<sup>361</sup> Yet another young woman who has attended church since childhood rates its positive influence in her life at

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<sup>356</sup> Interview 1035.

<sup>357</sup> Interview 1035.

<sup>358</sup> Interview 1023.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Interview 1028. She made the inserted comment just prior to this response while speaking about messages that appear directed toward young black women. Interviewee Interview 1012 recounts a similar experience.

<sup>361</sup> Interview 1034.

five on a ten point scale. She laments that she has “never been in church where they directly base the sermon towards women as individual black women.”<sup>362</sup>

### **Sources of Despair in the Black Church**

In addition to sources of hope, the women also identify three sources of culturally induced despair thematically represented as Judgment and Punishment, Discord and Disunity, and Sexism and Disparate Treatment. Three women suggest that the church is not a source of culturally induced despair but do not elaborate their response.

#### **Judgment and Punishment:**

Twelve of the women identify judgment and punishment, particularly in the lives of persons who “make mistakes,” as the most pervasive source of culturally induced despair in their worship communities. While they applaud the encouragement and support offered to those who conform to the church’s image of positive behavior—attending college, dressing appropriately, not becoming pregnant—they also lament the negation that those who miss the mark receive.

I think the church creates hope for young black women who are trying to do things in a positive manner. [But] if they’re doing something negative the church kind of shuns them away... For example, if a young woman... happens to get pregnant at an early age, instead of encouraging them to move on... it’s a policy at our church that if you get pregnant out of wedlock you have to stop doing the duties your were doing. But that’s not encouraging them to move on. ...I think that makes people feel worse than how they already feel.<sup>363</sup>

Another young woman sheds tears as she empathizes with young women who are required to confess to the church that they were pregnant and laments, “to me that’s

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<sup>362</sup> Interview 1022.

<sup>363</sup> Interview 1024.

embarrassing. No one wants to have to go through that.”<sup>364</sup> Another women reveals, that she has talked to single parents who are hesitant about attending church and who leave before the benediction “because they don’t want to feel ashamed.”<sup>365</sup> Still another young woman grieves for her grandmother who was dismissed from the church when she became pregnant at sixteen and did not return to the church until she was fifty, thus her granddaughter laments the church’s tendency to “point fingers and blame.”<sup>366</sup> One young woman who asserts that shunning exacerbates the problem muses, “it would be great if church had the resources where they could help out young women...but it’s lacking in that area.”<sup>367</sup> However she also believes that the community must rise above its own shame in order to support young mothers and indicates that young women feel “pressure to try to do the right thing because you don’t want to...make your church ashamed.”<sup>368</sup>

Single parenting is not the only area in which young black women feel judged by their worship communities. For example, one young woman feels that churches “talk down to them, young black men and women. Basically in some churches [though not her church] they believe that everybody’s having sex and that’s what they need to preach about.”<sup>369</sup> Another young woman decries the churches’ lack of relevance and judgment when attempting to evangelize persons in her age group: “One place that despair would come from is judgment.”<sup>370</sup> She suggests that young people need support but “feel that

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<sup>364</sup> Interview 1026.

<sup>365</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>366</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>367</sup> Interview 1023.

<sup>368</sup> Interview 1025.

<sup>369</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>370</sup> Interview 1013.

[Christians] are unapproachable [and] can't relate to the things that are going on now."<sup>371</sup> She recalls her experience of church folk knocking on doors in the subsidized housing complex in which she lived: "I don't know what it is because I grew up in the church, but it seems like they judge you... Why do we need to go to church? What makes you so much better than us?"<sup>372</sup> "They preach at you," she bemoans, "people already feel that they're outside, that there's this stereotype," and they do not want to be demeaned by the church.<sup>373</sup> Judgment is painful, as one young woman laments, "When you feel that you're being judged you almost can't open up. You start to have hope when you feel like you can talk to somebody."<sup>374</sup>

### **Discord and Disunity:**

Several of the women agree that the church should be a safe space or at least a space that is noticeably different from the larger society in which they live. They indicate that clergy misconduct, infighting, jealousy, discord, and disunity are "supposed to be outside problems. You're not supposed to have those kinds of problems in church. It's almost like you let that in and that's discouraging."<sup>375</sup> Another young woman describes a public disagreement between pastor and parishioners on the day that she returned to church after a prolonged absence: "That's where they give you the hopelessness. What is the use of going to church when I can see that out here everyday."<sup>376</sup> Three other women

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<sup>371</sup> Interview 1013.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>375</sup> Interview 1016.

<sup>376</sup> Interview 1012.

agree and pray for the day when the church might become the place of solace and refuge that they so deeply desire.<sup>377</sup>

### **Sexism and Disparate Treatment:**

This third source of culturally induced despair, sexism and disparate treatment, is reflected in one young woman's assertion that the church encourages men toward strength and women toward submissiveness.

You can possibly feel hopeless in the church, especially for young African American women because we're not always raised in an environment to have confidence in yourself; to not let people tear you down... So we can be easily knocked down. Not like men [who are told] you're going to be the head of your household, you're going to do this. So they put on all this armor, where as [women are told] you're going to be submissive...and hopefully you can do that, but if you don't it's OK because you're a woman. We don't have much armor on, so it's easier to be torn down.<sup>378</sup>

Another young woman agrees that the church makes women feel inferior and "that's not what God intended for us. So that alone demonstrates that the church does not raise us up at all."<sup>379</sup> Similarly, another woman asserts, "It's like they praise men so much and give them so much power... Men in church are like you have to worship me. Or you women came for me."<sup>380</sup> She lives within a tension and struggles to make sense of it all: "I mean I understand all that but there has to be a limit. You have to love yourself. You don't have to degrade yourself to respect your husband or respect your man. I think I just have a strong will to be against all that stuff."<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Interview 1029, Interview 1030, Interview 1032.

<sup>378</sup> Interview 1017.

<sup>379</sup> Interview 1023.

<sup>380</sup> Interview 1035.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

Sexism is not the exclusive domain of men, as one young woman notes, because church women often support the hierarchical structure evident in many of our churches. This problem confronts her as she seeks to be heard in a church in which the leadership is dominated by men and older women: “At my church they have women on board too but still, since they’re older black women they’re...set in their ways and may not want to change, even for the better... So I think it’s intimidation, if it’s all male leadership or if its older women.”<sup>382</sup>

### HOPE-FILLED MUSINGS

My final interview question asked the women to offer words of wisdom to worship communities interested in sustaining young black women in hope. Two important insights emerge. The first is that young black women need safe spaces in which they can engage in dialogue with female exemplars. The women repeatedly assert that they need female mentors and exemplars who are non-judgmental, willing to discuss difficult issues and reflect upon their own experiences, and able to offer wise counsel as they discern meaning for their lives. One woman believes that these mentors should be “women that you have a personal connection with and [who] will want to help you, because if they don’t want to help it’s like what’s the point.”<sup>383</sup> Another adds that mentors should be “somebody who’s a little bit closer to the age group so they can understand the mind set of the age group.”<sup>384</sup> She also advises that conversations take place in a neutral zone without the religious aura that church buildings imply and that the gatherings not follow a Bible-study model. Another young woman suggests that they

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<sup>382</sup> Interview 1031.

<sup>383</sup> Interview 1014.

<sup>384</sup> Interview 1028.

need female speakers and preachers who are willing to “talk about the problems they’re having. Maybe that could help [us] out somehow...give us hope just from talking.”<sup>385</sup> Still another echoes that they need women who can “talk to them on their level and... don’t be afraid to tell them your story. Don’t be ashamed to tell them what you’ve gone through.”<sup>386</sup> In addition to learning from exemplars, one woman suggests “we could teach each other so much... soooo much; it would be fun if there was a group that met regularly. That would be fun and really cool.”<sup>387</sup>

Many of the women indicate that they have numerous questions about relationships, marriage and education and desire gatherings in which they can speak openly yet confidentially: “Marriage and relationships are so big!”<sup>388</sup> “Let’s talk about the situations that we face in our lives from relationship problems to sex to how to deal with financial situations, how to improve our lives spiritually.”<sup>389</sup> “I mean like, relationship and education. But I think relationships, really, a lot of us would not get ourselves in some situations if we heard from someone else...”<sup>390</sup> “We definitely need people in our lives to talk to us and encourage us to get to the goal and achieve what we’re wanting to achieve. Ten others echo their desire for mentoring dialogue.

The second insight is that the church must embody an ethic of support, affirmation, and openness to young black women’s ideas, gifts and talents. The women articulate their needs as “support,” “encouragement,” “non-judgment,” “don’t dismiss us,” “prayer.” Thirteen of the twenty-two women echo these sentiments. As one

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<sup>385</sup> Interview 1029.

<sup>386</sup> Interview 1033.

<sup>387</sup> Interview 1028.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Interview 1027.

<sup>390</sup> Interview 1031.

woman's comment poignantly reveals, "I would want somebody or something that accepts our ideas and sees us for what we are today, and not judge us by what we wear... or what we say, or do. Don't dismiss us because we may not do what you think we should do or because of something that we should have done a long time ago."<sup>391</sup>

### **PATTERNS FOR LIVING IN THE PRESENT AND INTO THE FUTURE**

As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, I have synthesized and organized the women's responses to the interview questions thematically with attention to four key metaphors in order to discern the extent to which young black women's participation in U.S. culture, their familial and friendship networks and worship communities enable them to live with hope. The four major themes include *cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships* (a) *that contribute most to the women's understanding of what it means to be a young black woman in U.S. culture*, (b) *that contribute most to culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women*, (c) *that contribute most to young black women's understanding of hope and their ability to live with hope*, (d) *within the context of their worship communities that contribute to or diminish young black women's ability to live with hope*. The analysis that follows is intended to ascertain how the young black women in this investigation make meaning for their lives with attention to the patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction by which they live in the present and into the future (patterns for living) as well as evaluate the adequacy of these patterns for enhancing young black women's ability to live with hope. Finally, I want to ascertain insights from the analysis that might contribute significantly to our pedagogical endeavor.

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<sup>391</sup> Interview 1034.



**Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences and relationships that contribute most to their understanding of what it means to be a young black woman:**

As revealed in the preceding synthesis, the women's relationship with cross- and intra-generational models and their experience of cultural negation and oppression significantly influences the meaning that they make for their lives. On the one hand, many of the women extol the value of mentors and role-models who nurture their sense of wellbeing and exemplify the quality of life to which they aspire, indicating that they owe these significant others a debt of gratitude for all that they have given. On the other hand, all of the women, despite their socio-economic or ethnic location, describe the world in which they live as overwhelmingly negating and oppressive with few opportunities for affirmation. They describe themselves, therefore, as persons who must constantly fight against oppression, negation and disaffirmation if they hope to survive and thrive in U.S. culture. In other words, while young black women experience affirmation and support via significant relations that nurture their wellbeing, the ferocity of oppression exerts a more powerful claim as regards the meaning that they make for their lives. Consequently, their patterns for living are complex and at times paradoxical evincing young black women's struggle to discern meaning at the intersection of their deep desire for wholeness and wellbeing and the ferocity of oppression that inundates their existence. Five patterns for living come into view: *becoming cross-generational and intra-generational models, representational preoccupation, indifference and disengagement, hard work, and strength.*

Of the five patterns for living, the women's commitment to the practice of *cross-generational and intra-generational modeling* is most indicative of the power of caring mentors and role-models to nurture young black women's ability to live with hope.

Female family members were their most significant models—mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts—followed by fathers, grandfathers, teachers/professors, mentors and cultural icons who not only affirm their identity as young, black and female but also reveal life-affirming alternatives for living in the present and into the future. They spoke with great admiration about how these persons touched their lives, helped them grapple with important questions and supported them when they might have faltered. As a result, many of the women hope to do the same for others either as cross- or intra-generational models for other young black women, children and youth in the larger community or for their children, younger siblings and other relatives within their individual family units. Pedagogically, their experiences illustrate that caring exemplars can interrupt the flow of negation in the lives of young black women and create safe spaces in which they might question and reinterpret their world, confess their misgivings, express discontent, contest oppression, laugh, lament and find healing as they discern who they are and of what they consist.

This seems important because when asked to describe what it means to be a young black woman in U.S. culture, most of the women indicated that they approach life under the presupposition that the society in which they live views them negatively and deems them of little value to society. They describe U.S. culture as the white political establishment, the media, including those who produce and distribute hip-hop and rap music and videos, the government and white people or Euro-Americans in general. Most of the women are profoundly aware that they are members of two stigmatized groups and that their blackness and femaleness place them in a *deficit* position vis-à-vis other members of U.S. culture. Therefore, their angst is unambiguous as they describe the

challenge of living in a society in which they feel judged and scrutinized more stringently than others. The anxiety that they feel is evident in their commitment to changing cultural perception by convincing others that young black women are acceptable members of society.

For example, the women express frustration with negating stereotypes such as the “welfare mother,” “baby mama,” “hoochie,” “video vixen” and with the related cultural assumption that young black women are uneducated, loud, angry, sexually promiscuous welfare recipients content to ‘sit at home and spend the government’s money.’ That the women highlight these stereotypes is particularly poignant because seventy-three percent of women in this investigation did not have children, most had never received governmental assistance and all except one, a woman with a chronic illness, were either gainfully employed or students. Yet they all experience the sting of negation; the sense that they remain a devalued group in the eyes of the larger society in which they live, black men and various others in their own racial and ethnic groups. In response, many of the women self-consciously assume the role of representative young black woman or “*supra-model*” as a matter of survival for themselves as well as for future generations. In other words, they seek to controvert negating representations and change social perception by conforming to presumed societal norms regarding education, behavior and personal presentation (attire, hair, vocal tone). They also repeatedly emphasize their independence from governmental support or Welfare and assert their ability to survive without assistance from others, which seems indicative of the American work ethic and emphasis upon rugged individualism. Many of the women remain convinced that their hard work and exemplary behavior will liberate them from the ever-present weight of

oppression so that they might garner enough social currency to make them acceptable to the society in which they live.

These forces—cultural negation and devaluation, anxiety, desire for social valuation—combine and manifest themselves as *representational preoccupation*, a pattern for living by which young black women assume responsibility for changing cultural perception without challenging the social constructions and representations that perpetuate their oppression. I describe representational preoccupation as personal or communal anxiety about public perception combined with one's persistent efforts toward mitigating negation by convincing the public that they are viable members of society. The women's deep desire for social valuation distorts their ability to think critically about that which sustains their oppression and prevents them from affirming their unique value to U.S. culture, both individually and as a group. Their praxes, in other words, evince their deep desire to fit into a social construction in which social homogeneity is far more lucrative than cultural differentiation and diversity; a society that emphasizes sameness rather than each person's unique contributions to our world.

The result is that, rather than challenging the veracity of social constructions that deem young black women identical to each other they perpetuate their own oppression by conforming to its demands. Representational preoccupation reinforces the notion that young black women must work harder than others and that each person's mistakes, failures and negative characteristics, whether fictional or real, are rightly attributed to all who are young, black and female. Similarly, although many of the women indicate that they are viable members of society and disagree with the negating stereotypical representation with which they are confronted, representational preoccupation betrays a

more tenuous sense of social valuation. Representational preoccupation, in other words, is a destructive pattern for living that perpetuates anxiety and supports the oppressive structures that it intends to dismantle while also thwarting young black women's ability to contest negating representations, publicly articulate their pain and demand an efficacious response. In contrast, our pedagogical endeavor might embolden young black women toward deconstruction, resistance and contestation as well as emphasize the personal and communal value of blackness and femaleness.

Although all of the women describe their world as hostile, not everyone adopted representational preoccupation as a pattern for living. For example, one young woman acknowledges her location at the intersection of a culture that negates and devalues young black women and her own struggle to survive. Thus, she adopts *hard work* as a pattern for living, not because of representational preoccupation, but as a matter of survival as she seeks a more substantive existence for herself and for her children. Another young woman adopted *indifference and disengagement* as patterns for living and indicates that she does not feel responsible for making others see what they have no desire to see. In one respect, indifference and disengagement are resistance strategies by which she liberates herself from societal demands. However, indifference and disengagement also distances her from the broader culture, as per her assertion that she does not contribute anything negatively or positively to society, and robs her of the opportunity to claim the power of her own voice and experience herself as a creative agent in the world.

*Strength* emerges as a fifth pattern by which young black women seek to live in the present and into the future. Woven throughout their stories the women assert the

necessity of strength so that they might stand in the face of negation, sexual molestation, abandonment, doubt and fear with no one but God on their side, if God. This type of strength has been modeled by the many women who touch their lives, including those women who endured hardship but survived nonetheless, women who accomplished much in the face of oppression, women who kept their families together, women who remained in abusive situations yet encouraged their daughters not to do the same, women who shouldered the burden of family with little or no assistance from the men in their lives and women who live with hope and who nurture young black women toward the same. Young black women's descriptions of strength as a pattern for living, therefore, are complex and multivalent.

Some of the women's assertions of strength reflect what N. Lynne Westfield describes as *survival*: "hunkering down, rudimentary maintenance, the struggle to meet necessity."<sup>392</sup> Survival so defined evinces estrangement, isolation, insecurity, powerlessness, reticence and non-resistance and connotes withstanding or enduring the abuse, abandonment, negation, doubt and fear that has become all too common in the lives of black women. In this sense, survival as a pattern for living reinforces traditional notions that to be a woman is to remain silent and endure oppression and thwarts young black women's ability to dismantle oppression and discern life affirming alternatives.

Westfield's description of survival departs significantly from Delores Williams' emphasis upon survival and quality of life in the historical and contemporary experiences of black women. Williams emphasizes God's response of "survival and quality of life to

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<sup>392</sup> N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sister: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 7.

African-American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God's help."<sup>393</sup> Similarly, she asserts that "God, through Jesus, [gives] humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life."<sup>394</sup> In other words, survival as Williams describes it is not concerned with rudimentary maintenance or adaptation, but rather with the "ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life."<sup>395</sup> I want to hold these two conceptions of survival in creative tension. Therefore, while I agree with Williams' sense that God, via the way of being which Jesus proclaimed, has given human persons the ability to "build positive, productive quality of life," people often negate the very thing for which we so deeply desire. Westfield's description of survival sheds light on that tension in the lives of the women who gifted me with their stories, as "rudimentary maintenance" appears more prevalent in their lives than survival as positive quality of life.

In contrast to "rudimentary maintenance," Westfield's description of *strength* as resilience, resistance, contestation, and recreation is generative and re-generative in that it acknowledges the ongoing ferocity of oppression in the lives of young black women but refuses to accept negation and oppression as the inevitability of their existence. For example, the three women who indicate that they were sexually molested evince generative and re-generative strength in their ability to "reconstitute the self while in chaos" and ascertain life-affirming possibilities for themselves.<sup>396</sup> The mother who sustained abuse in her own life evinced re-generative strength for her daughter, though not for her own life. Generative and regenerative strength is also evident in the lives of

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<sup>393</sup> *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 6.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> Westfield, *Dear Sister*, 7.

cross-generation and intra-generational models in their concern for encouraging others toward their best becoming. Strength so conceived emboldens young black women to question, challenge, talk back, look beneath the surface, imagine alternatives and act in ways that subvert disaffirmation and oppression and lead to recreation.

**Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships that contribute most to culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women:**

The synthesis in light of this theme revealed that although they express discontent with and can name the sources of oppression in their lives, young black women also evince culturally induced despair in that they perceive themselves as powerless to challenge or change that which perpetuates oppression. They reveal four sources of culturally induced despair: negating media representations, a dearth of role-models, personal failure and lack of accomplishment and social distress. Therein, four patterns for living also emerge: *inert concern*, *personal determination and reliance upon God*, *disappointment and/or shame* and *cognitive distancing*.

*Inert concern* as a pattern for living responds to the distress that the women feel regarding social ills such as the war in Iraq, street violence, the troubled housing market, global poverty, job losses, rising cost of education, HIV/AIDS, and other global and domestic problems. Jonathan Kozol says of *inert concern*, “It seems to us as if, by recommending justice and propounding social transformation, we have advanced the one and staked our conscious for the other. It is an efficacious lie.”<sup>397</sup> That is, although the women in this investigation identify social ills as problematic and articulate the need for intervention, they rarely act. Rather their expressed concern replaces or acts as a

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<sup>397</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home* (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 161-162.



substitute for concrete ethical action. The women also evince inert concern as regards the social ills with which they are directly confronted. For example, while many of the women lament the dearth of role-models for young black women only a few discern their role in resolving the problem. Similarly, they express discontent with negating media representations, yet most remain reticent about challenging the institutions that perpetuate these representations. Our pedagogical task, therefore, might include strategies that emphasize naming and deconstructing social ills as well as discerning appropriate ethical action.

As regards personal failure and lack of accomplishment, many of the women respond with *personal determination and reliance upon God* while others express *disappointment and doubt* as they attempt to traverse waters that appear all too consuming. What seems common to their experiences, however, is that they believe that they must survive with minimal physical or psychic support, even from God. As noted earlier, this sentiment is consistent with Delores Williams' assertions regarding black women's historical reliance upon God for strength and for survival resources.<sup>398</sup> Thus, although they voice their pain and need for support within the safe confines of our conversations, they rarely articulate their pain to others, complain or seek support; they survive alone. Our pedagogical endeavor, therefore, might also embolden young black women to lament and give voice to their struggles within a shared communal ethos that is concerned with their wellbeing.

Nineteen of the twenty-two women identified negating media representations as the most potent source of culturally induced despair in their lives and contend that the

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<sup>398</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 33.

media—television, music, music videos, advertisements—distorts cultural perception and intensifies cultural devaluation of young black women. They also confirm my contention that repetition and constancy of exposure implies that negating representations are reliable and a normative expression of the way things are. As a result, negating media representations rob young black women of their esteem in U.S. culture, a phenomenon that I might describe as *representational disenfranchisement*. The women suggest that several media outlets are culpable, not the least of which are studios and artists that record, produce and distribute music and videos containing negating images and misogynistic lyrics, and television shows marketed to black audiences and network television. Negating representations are innumerable and appear impenetrable to young black women, leaving them dispirited and reticent about challenging or contesting that which sustains their oppression. In response, the women express outrage in the safe space of our conversation while working tirelessly to controvert negating representation in their public interactions.

In some instances, however, the women's outrage appears inconsistent with their practices because they also watch racialized and sexualized videos and listen to misogynistic lyrics. Although they appear concerned about public perception and about the adequacy of these mediums for children, the women who support these art forms suggest that they are savvy enough to not let "something like that" get to them and thus believe that they remain unscathed by negating representations.<sup>399</sup> They assert "it's not about me" or "they're not talking about me," a form of *cognitive distancing* intended to refute the power of negating representations as constitutive of their identity. However, an

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<sup>399</sup> Interview 1022.

antinomy comes into view when *cognitive distancing*, is considered in conjunction with *representational preoccupation*. That is, although they deny the formative impact of negating representations, their preoccupation with repairing their public image suggests a more tenuous sense of self than they appear willing to admit.

As I listened repeatedly to the women's responses, the tone and tenor of their assertions also suggested that 'letting something like that get to them'—acknowledging the pain, doubt and distress that negation can create—remains too costly an endeavor for young black women. 'Letting it get to you,' in other words, is inimical to the strength and endurance that young black women value so highly and may reveal areas of vulnerability that they would rather remain hidden. However, as we continued to talk, *cognitive distancing* gave way to reflective consideration as several of the women began to think more critically about how negating representations influence their perceptions of themselves and the world in which they live.

Negating media representations also create angst among young black women as regards body image and aesthetic appeal. With the advent of the "video chick" or "video vixen," *thick* or *curviness* as the iconic image for young black women has become increasingly popular. The privileged position that "thin girls" once enjoyed has diminished considerably, at least from their perspective, and "curvy girls" or "thick girls" are gaining popularity in the media. Thus, even though much of the fashion industry continues to promote *thinness* as the ideal for women, many young black women appear more concerned with how the attention to curves shapes standards of beauty within their own ethno-cultural contexts (read how they are perceived by black men). Although the women are well aware that beauty is socially constructed they remain beholden to the

construction and struggle to find their place in an ethno-cultural ethos in which they feel insecure and located among the unprivileged. Again, our pedagogical endeavor might include strategies that help young black women name, resist and contest negating media representations.

**Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences, or relationships that contribute most to young black women's understanding of hope and their ability to live with hope**

This investigation is primarily concerned with creating strategies than can address and redress culturally induced despair and sustain young black women in their efforts to live with hope within a broader cultural context that they perceive as hostile. Thus, their conceptions of hope are particularly important to our overall endeavor. Three major descriptions of hope emerge: *hope as a wish that will someday come true*, *hope as inner desire and human effort*, and *hope as inner desire, human effort and faith in God*. Their descriptive language departs significantly from the language that frames this investigation. I have described hope as that which creates within us yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of God's Spirit assuring human persons of God's presence, power and fidelity, and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. I have also suggested that to live with hope is to say "yes" to God's "yes" for creation by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world.

While many of the women agree that hope is an ontological necessity—necessary for human life—and that hope comes from God, their descriptive language is generally oriented toward the individual person rather than the broader community and evince no overt concern for justice. Two exceptions exist. The first are those mothers whose

responses reveal their expressed concern for their children's wellbeing. The second are the women who understood themselves as cross- and intra-generation models; those who expressed profound concern for the wellbeing of future generations and committed themselves to making that possibility an actuality. Most of the women, however, describe hope as that which energizes them to withstand cultural negation, overcome adversity, live from day to day, pursue their goals, acquire material possessions and ensure their children's wellbeing. Hope as that which compels human persons toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world was conspicuously absent.

The lack of communal emphasis implies that hope's significance and God's activity in the world are limited to individual needs without attention to our collective wellbeing. It also ignores the reality that young black women's oppression and the resultant culturally induced despair are communal concerns that demand a communal response. Thus it distracts young black women from noticing opportunities for dialogue and reflection upon the nature of our lives together, perpetuates the notion that they must live and survive with little or no support, and prevents them from discerning their role in God's ongoing activity toward justice and wellbeing, including their own wellbeing. These distractions engender representational preoccupation, anxiety, defensiveness and thwart young black women's ability to live with hope by defining the boundaries in which they are able to imagine their world and discern possibilities. For if young black women were to really know who they are and with whom they stand, human and divine, they might very well change the world in which they live and actualize their hopes and dreams. Our pedagogical endeavor, therefore, might encourage young black women to dream beyond the boundaries and take their place in God's ever unfolding drama.

The women's relationship with family, friends and mentors as well as their relationship with God are among their most significant sources of hope across the three descriptive groups. Consequently, their predominant pattern for living involves nurturing and sustaining those relationships. Many of the women express faith in God and augment that faith with a substantive devotional life and participation in their worship communities. They also nurture and are nurtured by strong friendship and kinship connections. As suggested in the first metaphor, role-models affirm young black women's sense of identity as young, black and female as well as exemplify the quality of life and relationship to which they aspire. They speak new truths, shape alternative vision, evoke memory and stand with young black women so that they might know themselves and live therein. The second is that the women who are also mothers indicate that their love and care for their children sustain them in hope. They not only provide for their children but desire their best becoming, evincing the generative hope that I discussed above.

**Cultural images, myths, ideologies, experiences or relationships within the context of the women's worship communities that contribute to or diminish their ability to live with hope:**

The women's responses to this final key metaphor reveal two major sources of hope and four sources of culturally induced despair evident in the communities with which they worship. Sources of hope include *testimonial and wise counsel* as well as *encouragement and affirmation*. Many of the women look to elderly women, other adult women and the "first lady" or pastor's wife as cross- and intra-generational models, a contention that is consistent with their earlier emphasis upon the necessity of role-models and exemplars. Several of the women also describe the church as an ethos in which they

can worship God, decompress, grapple with difficult questions and make important life decisions. One woman also indicated that she experiences affirmation from black men at church which seems especially important in light of the women's concern about black men's diminishing respect for young black women.

Female and male clergy persons and church leaders are also important sources of hope. Several of the women indicate that they seek counsel and direction from their pastors, all of which were male in this investigation. However, many of the women also maintain close relationships with clergy women in the worship community, attend women's conferences, and appreciate opportunities to hear female preachers. As one women's comments imply, women's voices break through the distortion that pervades young black women's imaginative horizon so that they might hear and receive that which affirms their wellbeing—"because we know they feel what we went through."<sup>400</sup> Pedagogically, therefore, clergy women might consider the efficacy of their preaching and teaching to create formational and transformational experiences that are sensitive to women's unique needs and concerns.

While most of the women identify sources of hope as well as despair in the church, four of the women indicate that the church makes little or no discernable contribution to hope in their lives. Two women, for example, indicate that the church, while attentive to the needs of children and teens, evinces little interest in young adults. The other two women could only identify sources of culturally induced despair. Nineteen of the women elaborate sources of culturally induced despair in the church among which

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<sup>400</sup> Interview 1035.

*judgment and punishment, discord and lack of unity, and sexism and disparate treatment* emerge as predominant themes.

Judgment and punishment are the most frequently identified sources of culturally induced despair, confronting young black women in numerous forms and diminishing their ability to contribute to and participate meaningfully in their worship communities. The judgment that young black women experience creates shame, anxiety and distance and as a result, many of the women do not experience the church as a safe space in which they can tell their stories, offer their gifts or seek assistance. The women are also gravely concerned about the church's lack of compassion and readiness to punish unwed mothers and others who do not conform to its standards of morality. They cite numerous examples in which they or others have been scarred by church policies or practices that explicitly or tacitly shame and blame single women and especially those who become pregnant. Shame is a powerfully oppressive and destructive mechanism suggestive of inadequacy or incompetence. That is, shame is distinctive from guilt in that guilt suggests that one has "transgressed a moral boundary."<sup>401</sup> Shame, on the other hand, suggests that one has failed to "reach a valued goal through lack of ability" or incompetence.<sup>402</sup> The shame that young black women feel, therefore, suggests that they have failed as members of the community and as Christians.

Worship communities also feel ashamed when its members transgress perceived moral boundaries because personal failure threatens the community's sense of moral competence and suggests that the community itself has failed, as one young woman

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<sup>401</sup> Salvatore R. Maddi, *Personality Theories: A Comprehensive Analysis*, sixth edition (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001, c. 1996), 133.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.



insightfully notes. Shame emerges, therefore, when preoccupation with being viewed as morally competent and perceived incompetence meet. When it is conceived, shame robs the community of its ability to offer compassion and care for those who are hurting in its midst. Thus rather than offering love and care they respond with judgment and punishment. For example, the women's stories reveal that some worship communities seek to regain their moral competence by shifting or transferring their shame onto those whom they deem responsible, including young black women. Overcoming shame requires humility—demands that worship communities name and relinquish their preoccupation with *rightness* and affirm their identity as an ethos in which the redemptive love of God is both proclaimed and practiced. Communities that seek to exemplify redemptive love can also nurture young black women in their ability to name and identify the shame that they experience and affirm themselves as God's marvelous creation.

Other sources of culturally induced despair include discord and disunity and sexism and disparate treatment. Several of the women long for worship communities in which interpersonal relationships are indicative of unity, reconciliation and mutual regard. They want to feel that they can trust their worship communities and therein find solace and refuge from the negation that they experience in other aspects of their lives. Many of the women also experience the church as a sexist institution that elevates the status of men, especially male leaders, and relegates women to a subordinate position. And while some of their worship communities include female clergy and deacons, the women indicate that often the female leaders function as *honorary men* and endeavor, no less than their male counterparts, to keep young women in their place by managing the

flow of their insights, gifts and talents. Sexism deprives young black women of voice and restricts their freedom to meaningfully contribute their gifts, talents and insights within the context of their worship communities.

The women's predominant patterns for living within their worship communities are *silence* and *distance*. Although they experience the church as a community rich in cross- and intra-generational models, few of the women indicated any significant relationship or dialogue with their exemplars. Instead, many of the women gain wisdom from a distance, drawing from their exemplars' testimonies and observable actions. They generally feel that the church is not interested in hearing their voices and addressing their questions, needs and concerns, and doubt the church's relevance to their ongoing struggle. Those who attend church regularly remain reticent about asking questions or offering suggestions as they do not experience the church as a safe space in which they can tell their stories, articulate their pain and offer their gifts without fear of judgment or being made to feel ashamed. Thus, they remain silent and distant, yet deeply desirous of more supportive and affirming worship communities. Our pedagogical endeavor, therefore, might remain attentive to young black women's need for safe spaces in which they can seek wisdom, question and offer their gifts without fear of judgment or rejection.

### **NEGATING REPRESENTATIONS AND CONTROLLING IMAGES**

In addition to the patterns for living discussed above, the women's responses confirm the ongoing prevalence of negating representations discussed in Chapter One as well as reveal additional representations that function as controlling images. Controlling images, you might recall, thwart our ability to recognize oppression and negation as

discontinuous with our efforts to live with hope. They not only shape and legitimize how young black women are viewed by others but distract them from creating a life-affirming reality by advancing representational preoccupation. As a result, negating representations delimit their imaginative potential, securing the boundaries in which they are able to image their world and discern alternatives.

The women reveal and confirm three negating representations already identified in the literature: “welfare mother” or “baby mama,” the “hoochie,” and the “superwoman.” They recast the image of the “welfare mother” and now refer to her as the “baby mama,” a twenty-first century renaming that they describe as a marginally educated, unemployed young black woman with multiple children, content to remain dependent upon governmental support and/or child support with little concern or contribution to the larger society in which she lives. The “hoochie” image persists as well, a young black woman who, in addition to her dependence upon governmental support (“baby mama”), is also boisterous and sexually promiscuous. The “superwoman” was less prevalent among the women with whom I spoke but present nonetheless. This was especially true for two of the women who describe black women as persons who are able to ‘do it all’ with grace and humility.<sup>403</sup> These negating representations continue to pervade young black women’s existence and give rise to three contemporary controlling images, the “supra-model,” “constant survivor” and “video vixen.”

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<sup>403</sup> See A. Elaine Brown Crawford’s reference to this image in *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). See also Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super-woman* (London: John Cader Press, 1979), Interview 107. Wallace describes her mother as the super-woman who was “able to cook, clean, take care of home and husband. She was always neat, never wore her hair in rollers, and was there for everyone, wherever and whenever they needed it.”

The *supra-model* is born of young black women's quest to present themselves in an acceptable manner to persons outside of their racial, gender and ethnic group.

The *supra-model's* quest is to controvert negation and be seen as a viable member of society. Therefore, she is not only a good person, but an exemplar of cultural ideals. She experiences discrimination, but believes that if she works hard; if she can move ever closer to societal norms regarding dress, hair, emotiveness and vocal expression; if she can look and behave like "everyone else," nay better than everyone else, she will be viewed as their equal. Although she rarely challenges the 'powers that be,' she is always aware that negating representations are close at hand. Vigilance is her watchword.

She is the overly acceptable model who lives within the tension of her identity as young, black and female and the need to conform to what others deem acceptable.

The "constant survivor" came into view as the women asserted the necessity of strength in order to endure adversity with none but God on their side. They evoked the "strong black woman," an image to which numerous black women aspire and accept without critique, as a means of distancing themselves from other negating representations. Historically, the black community has named our ancestral mothers, those women who survived the ferocity and brutality of slavery and hoped the present generation into existence, as "strong black woman" and rightly assert that enslaved black women *and* men required an incomprehensible measure of strength in order to survive. This is not to say that they all lived with strength, as black people have lived within the tension of regenerative strength and non-resistance throughout history. The "constant survivor" is problematic precisely because, when accepted as normative for black women's lives, it negates the complex and multivalent nature of young black women's existence. It also appeared more prevalent than generative and regenerative strength among the women whose stories frame this investigation. In other words, while some of

the women evince strength that gives birth to resilience, resistance, contestation, and re-creation, many of their responses evince estrangement, isolation, insecurity, powerlessness, and non-resistance.

The “constant survivor,” though cast as generative and regenerative strength, is a contemporary controlling image that keeps young black women preoccupied with adapting to the oppressive systems which currently exist, delimiting their ability to perceive alternatives for themselves and for the world in which they live.

The *constant survivor* is a black woman who endures in the face of abuse, abandonment, negation, psychic and physical pain, doubt and fear. She has learned that black women in general and young black women in particular are deemed of little value to society yet remains persistent in her efforts to accomplish her goals and stand strong. She works hard, depends on nobody but God, if God, requests little or no support from others, cries in silence, and tells her story to no one. She does not admit vulnerability and remains determined to endure and not break down. She loves, she gives, she nurtures but rarely receives; she prays, she lives, alone, abandoned, estranged.

The “constant survivor” was most pronounced in the women’s assertion of strength as a means for enduring oppression and their reticence about seeking assistance.

Finally, the “video chick” or “video vixen” is a controlling image born of the women’s discontent with negating media representations as well as their struggle with body image. While tracing the historical emergence of negating representations of black women in Chapter One, I discussed the European scientific community’s preoccupation with the *Hottentot female* or *Bushwoman* as an essentialized representation of black women of African descent. They argued that these women were “the epitome of...sexual lasciviousness and stress[ed] the relationship between her physiology and her physiognomy,” and were particularly fascinated with their voluptuousness and protruding

buttocks.<sup>404</sup> Modern day music videos have embraced, with renewed interest, the image of black woman with well endowed buttocks thus reasserting the myth of black women as hypersexual and lascivious. They perpetuate this image via ‘thick girls’ cast in provocative choreography and revealing attire in order to highlight the buttocks, breast and curves. As a result, the “video vixen” or “video chick” emerges.

The “*video vixen*” or “*video chick*” is a hypersexual “thick girl;” a scantily clad young black woman who dances provocatively, is sexually promiscuous, tolerant of being called a bitch, whore or other derogatory names and willing to do whatever is required to earn money and secure a career. She is shrewd and intentional in her pursuits with little concern for the residual impact that her actions have for other young black women.

As discussed above, most of the women responded to this image with cognitive distancing—*it’s not me*. Some of the women perceived the “video vixen” as a woman without alternatives, expressed compassion for her and a concern for ensuring that black girls not succumb to this “life-style.”<sup>405</sup> However, others perceive the women whom they characterize as “video vixens” as intentional in their efforts toward fame and fortune. Although the women remained reticent about challenging negating media representations they also engaged in cognitive distancing as their major defense against being associated with this image.

As we move more intently toward pedagogical construction, the women’s responses, patterns for living and pedagogical intimations as well as the negating representations that they confirm and indentify will contribute significantly to our efforts toward creating strategies that can address and redress culturally induced despair as well

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<sup>404</sup> Gilman, Sander L., “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12 (August 1985), 213.

<sup>405</sup> Interview 1015, Interview 1017, Interview 1014, Interview 1028

as strengthen young black women's acuity to the voice of hope. In the next chapter I will consider hope as a subject of theological discourse with attention to the increasingly complex nature of the conversation as womanist, liberation theologians, biblical scholars, Christian Educators and Homiliticians add their voices to this ever expanding dialogue. These voices enrich the discourse and influence the final shape of our pedagogy and related strategies.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## EXPLORING THE THEOLOGICAL TERRAIN

*“To live with hope means... to live for a better future; yeah, a better future for me and my children and my children’s children... Hopelessness means basically you don’t see a future; you don’t see anything better for yourself; you don’t see a way out...”<sup>406</sup>*

*“I think hope is a lot of things. It comes from within. I think it has to do with kind of what you want in the future and what you feel as though you want to happen later on or...what you think an outcome from a particular situation will be. I think hope has to do with your faith and what you believe in...what you yearn for... It’s a strong personal burning desire that you have within.”<sup>407</sup>*

*“I think it’s cultivated but I think it’s cultivated from your surroundings, your upbringing, your hope for the future or desire or willingness to be better or to do something bigger and better.”<sup>408</sup>*

*“Hope means that...something better is going to happen... [And] hope for me would be doing the things that I’m supposed to do to make the situation better.”<sup>409</sup>*

*“God is the first thing that I thought of when you said hope. I just think about since He gives us power to do what we want... God put you here for a reason. So a lot of my hope comes from there.”<sup>410</sup>*

*“I think hope means that you have to get strength from your inner self.”<sup>411</sup>*

*“Hope is a second chance.”<sup>412</sup>*

*“Hope to me means that you have the faith in God even when it doesn’t look right or even when it seems like there is no answer or that there is no end to the situation that you may be facing, that God is still going to make a way some how. And that is what hope really means to me.”<sup>413</sup>*

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<sup>406</sup> Interview 1012

<sup>407</sup> Interview 1014

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Interview 1024

<sup>410</sup> Interview 1028

<sup>411</sup> Interview 1029

<sup>412</sup> Interview 1031

<sup>413</sup> Interview 1033



Over the past several years many of us have experienced the growing ambiguity and painful realization that what we might expect of the future has reached a level of uncertainty that evokes more questions than answers. We want to believe that all is well but we cannot help but sense the unwellness that pervades our lives and our world. Suffering abounds in the lives of persons and communities throughout the world who struggle to survive in the face of genocidal regimes bent on annihilation, unjust governments, wars and rumors of war, hunger, poverty, disease and natural disaster. Environmental distress and the ongoing depletion of our natural resources threatens our global wellbeing, reminding us that we are interconnected and raising serious questions about our stewardship and ability to live as human family.

Our world cries out for wholeness, says the prophetic unknown poet of “Reflections on Wholeness.”<sup>414</sup> “Can you hear it wailing, crying, whispering?” the poet asks, as he, as she reminds us that there can be no cessation of the cry until each one has been included in the whole.<sup>415</sup> If we are willing to answer ‘yes’ to the poet—‘yes we hear their suffering cries’—then we might also say ‘yes’ to the possibility of creating a just and life affirming future for ourselves and for all of creation. The cry for wholeness calls us together as human family, reminding us that creating the best life for ourselves requires us to consider where we fit in the greater whole—consider our relationship to all other human and non-human entities with whom we share the earth. Thus, I concur with the young mother who understands that “To live with hope means to live for a better future,” not only for ourselves but for the many whose lives we touch. And if hope has

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<sup>414</sup> “Reflections on Wholeness” in Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 110.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

anything to do with repairing lack or creating new possibilities in the face of the damage that has already been done, then “Hope is a second chance.” It is a second chance for us to live justly as a daily praxis; to resist and contest structural oppression and hope a new reality into existence.

The destructive potential of the present and the necessity of hope are compounded in the lives of young black women. Not only do they hear the cry of global and domestic suffering, they experience the ferocity of racism, classism, sexism and economic disparity as an ongoing reminder of our collective unwellness and dreams that may well remain deferred. Therefore, they live and survive within the tension of their hope-filled dreams and the socio-cultural barriers intended to prevent them access to their greatest aspirations. This is no more evident than in the comments of one young woman who indicated that “Hopelessness means basically you don’t see a future; you don’t see anything better for yourself; you don’t see a way out.”<sup>416</sup> Although she desires to live with hope, she feels that her attempts to do so are wrought by obstacle upon obstacle. For example, she indicates that “I can go to classes or whatever, but I can’t go because I can’t get childcare for him [her 2 month old son]...So I didn’t even register for the class. So I’m hopeless in the sense because my other kids have child care and I can’t get it for him, so I’m like *whatever*.”<sup>417</sup>

“Whatever” is indicative of culturally induced despair, an insidious embodiment of hopelessness intended to conceal possibilities and create adaptation to what already exists. And while I would like to suggest that her “whatever” is an isolated response, it is

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<sup>416</sup> Interview 1012

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

but one manifestation of a deeper malady that is pervasive in U.S. culture. Repeatedly, those who are most vulnerable are made to feel as though barriers to their wellbeing are linked together in what seems like a never ending cycle of destruction, robbing them of the very future that they so desperately desire. When left unchallenged, these despairing cultural situations make us believe that the present order is impervious to change and that a new reality is beyond our grasp, which in turn creates stagnation and forecloses the possibility of a life-affirming existence. Hope, on the other hand, negates culturally induced despair and creates anticipation. It encourages us to dream; to envision just and life-affirming possibilities and participate in making that vision a reality.

Hope or living with hope is an existential necessity, therefore, if we are to bring suffering to an end and move toward a life-affirming reality for ourselves and other human persons. Or as Paulo Freire argues, “Hope is an ontological need;” necessary for human existence.<sup>418</sup> My own sense, and the descriptive language that I have used throughout this investigation, is that hope connotes both the never ceasing ministry of the Spirit announcing and revealing God’s intent toward wholeness and wellbeing and *our responsive action* in light of God’s presence with us and fidelity to our wellbeing. That is, *Hope is that which creates within us yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of God’s Spirit assuring human persons of God’s presence, power and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world.* Thus hope is always present with us, speaking though distorted by the cacophony of negating and oppressive cultural assertions. These negating assertions often render the voice of hope incomprehensible and inaudible and thwart our ability to live responsive to

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<sup>418</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996, c.1992), 8.

the voice of hope. Pedagogically, then, our task is to discover strategies and create possibilities for a hope-filled existence—to help us live with hope. *To live with hope*, therefore, is to say *yes* to God’s *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God’s ongoing creation of a just and humane world.

The necessity of hope seems urgent, not only in our global and national communities but also in the uniqueness of young black women’s lives. Therefore, in this chapter I will explore existing theologies of hope with the voice of young black women in mind and with the intent of ascertaining connections and intersections between their lived experiences, yearnings and aspirations and the theological discourse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I approach this dialogue, not in defense of one or the other theological argument but listening carefully for points of connection and clarification that might guide our efforts toward a pedagogy of hope that can dispel the “whatever” of young black women’s existence.

### **THEOLOGIES OF HOPE: TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES**

Hope as a central theme in theological and public discourse has become increasingly important in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as theologians, activists, political leaders and every-day women, men and children struggle with the inadequacy of the world in which we live and the necessity of hope. In the past century, the theological discourse has expanded exponentially as women, non-heterosexuals, African Americans, Africans, Asian, Hispanics, Latin Americans, and others add their voices to the dialogue. Their voices disrupt and deepen the dialogue as they challenge the hegemony of western

theology and introduce us to sociocultural and religious contexts as well as perspectives and insights that have cross-cultural and possibly universal implications.

Significant theological voices of our time include womanists scholars Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, A. Elaine Crawford and Evelyn Parker, Black theologian James Cone, Western theologian Jürgen Moltmann, Latin American theologians Rubem Alves and Gustavo Gutierrez, and Western biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. Numerous others in religious education, homiletics, theology, biblical studies and ethics are also making important contributions to this ongoing exploration of hope and its efficacy for creating a just world. It is within this expanded discourse that the voices of the young women with whom I spoke and others begin to shape and add new dimensions to our understanding of hope, helping us think again about what it means to live with hope or to have Christian hope in the concreteness of our existence.

### **Womanist Conceptions of Hope**

A. Elaine Brown Crawford's *Hope in the Holler* definitively introduces the voices and perspectives of Black women into the discourse on hope with particular attention to the distinctiveness of hope in the lives of women who have “suffered victimization through sexual abuse or physical violence.”<sup>419</sup> The black women’s literary tradition, a rich source through which black women have given public expression to their joys, sorrows, hope and dreams, informs her theology of hope—*hope in the Holler theology*—

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<sup>419</sup> A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xii.

and undergirds her assertion that hope in the lives of black women is their “passion for the possible in their lives.”<sup>420</sup> In other words, hope is their resilient determination to survive and thrive in spite of and in the midst of the negating and disaffirming realities of life.<sup>421</sup> She employs *womanist textual analysis* as her primary methodology for engaging the narrative and unearthing the extent to which sociohistorical context, content and intent or “theo-ethical implications” are related. As a result, she discovered that the sociohistorical “*context* out of which these narratives arise informs and influences their content”—what is written and how it is written—and that the context revealed something of the nature of hope in the women’s lives.<sup>422</sup> She also argues that the women’s intent in narrating their stories was to reveal “how hope functioned in [their] lives to move them beyond the Holler to actuate their personal and communal potential.”<sup>423</sup> The narratives, in other words, empowered black women to raise theological and moral questions, propose alternatives and live into a new reality—*move beyond the Holler*.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., xii. Crawford’s description of hope as the “passion for the possible” is drawn from Patricia L. Hunter’s definition of passion. Cf. Patricia L. Hunter, “Women’s Power—Women’s Passion,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspective on Evil and suffering*, Emilie Townes, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 192-193. Concerning the black women’s literary tradition, Crawford quotes Katie Cannon and suggests that “The black women’s literary tradition... ‘is the best available repository for understanding the ethical [and theological] values Black women have created and cultivated in their ongoing participation in this society.’” Cf. “Womanist Perspectives Discourse and Canon Formation,” in *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: continuum, 1995), 69-76, and the Introduction to Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 2-6.

<sup>421</sup> Crawford finds cords of resonance with Black Theology, Feminist Theology and womanist theology, however, she suggests that most of the existing theological conception reflect one-dimensional analysis that do not “elucidate the context of oppression or the emergence of hope for black women” (8). Black Theology is limited, she argues, in that “it has primarily responded to Moltmann’s notion of hope as its starting point, but second and even more important, its critique has primarily been based on the experience of racism” (5). Similarly, she suggests that Feminist Theology is limited because of its exclusive focus on sexism, and Womanist Theology because it has not “sufficiently explored expressions of hope from the voices of victimized African American women” (10)

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

The *Holler* is Crawford's guiding metaphor for African American women's expression of hope; their refusal to succumb to or settle for abuse and negation, and their assertion of life-affirming possibility for themselves and their children.

The Holler is the primal cry of pain, abuse, violence, separation. It is a soul-piercing shrill of the African ancestors that demands the recognition and appreciation of their humanity. The Holler is the refusal to be silenced in a world that denied their very existence as women. The Holler is the renunciation of racialized and genderized violence perpetrated against them generation after generation. The Holler is a cry to God to "come see about me," one of your children.

The Holler reveals that all is not right with the world and calls upon God and humanity to alleviate suffering and create new possibilities. Therefore, Crawford beckons us to hear the Holler and sense black women's "passion for the possible in their lives" in the narratives of sexually and physically abused black women from three eras, *slavery*, *emancipation* and *contemporary*.

Crawford's investigation reveals that as the context of abuse changed, the focus of hope also changed. For example, in slavery the women's hope was directed toward freedom of self and community with greater emphasis upon the community.<sup>425</sup> During the Emancipation era and throughout the Civil Rights period the women's *passion for the possible* was directed toward public issues and concerns with little attention to the violence and abuses perpetrated against them individually.<sup>426</sup> In the contemporary era, however, as more rights were attained for black people in general as well as for women, "black women began to write about the oppression from within their own communities

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

and churches.”<sup>427</sup> In other words, as the community began to enjoy greater stability, black women were able to focus more intently upon their own wellbeing and unmask the violence and abuses that shaped much of their existence.

Abuse was evident in each historical era and influenced “the content of their narratives and the function of hope in their lives.” Although hope functioned differently in each historical period, three characteristics remained consistent. Crawford argues that their hope “was the mirror image of the suffering of black people. That is, just as abuse has been *maldistributed, enormous, and transgenerational*, so has black women’s hope.”<sup>428</sup> In other words black women’s *passion for the possible in their lives* had to be big enough (enormous) and in greater proportion relative to others (maldistributed) so that they could withstand the seemingly insurmountable abuses in their lives and “cling to a modicum of dignity in the face of degradation.”<sup>429</sup> The narratives in all three eras also revealed that mothers, aunts and grandmothers from each generation both received hope from the previous and passed their *passion for the possible in this life* on to their daughters, sons and communities, engendering and sustaining the *transgenerational* character of hope.<sup>430</sup>

Crawford offers two additional insights. The first is that the women’s conception of hope was grounded in faith in God or Jesus Christ, and the second is hope’s this-worldly orientation. As regards the first, when comparing the historical narratives with womanist theologies of hope, Crawford identifies christocentrism as the most consistent

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 59 (emphasis added).

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 60.



similarity between them. Whether the women experienced “victimization or valor, Jesus Christ is the empowering force in the lives of African American women.”<sup>431</sup> During slavery, their theology was *incarnational* in that Jesus was “an Almighty friend who affirmed their humanity, empowered them to speak against injustice, and enabled them to experience freedom in the thrall of bondage.”<sup>432</sup> During emancipation, the women expressed “Immanuel theology,” God as *divine presence* or *with them*.<sup>433</sup> God as Immanuel empowered them to endure and overcome the harsh realities of their lives and emboldened black women to lift their voices publicly “on behalf of the marginalized of American society.”<sup>434</sup>

Immanuel Theology remained prevalent throughout the emancipation, post reconstruction and urbanization eras. However, in the contemporary period, black women’s *Holler* also resounded from within the black church, community and home as black women sought life-giving and transformative possibilities for themselves and others.

As African American women obtained more “freedoms”...the content of the narratives turned toward writing more intimately about healing the psychological pain of abuse, and only secondly the theological disruption. The passion of life is focused on self-actualization, then community renewal through personal introspection, therapy, and a new appropriation of the gospel.<sup>435</sup>

Similarly, contemporary narratives evinced a “quest for *autonomy and equality* inside the community as well as the larger society.”<sup>436</sup> The *Holler* resounding from black women’s literature was no longer a response exclusively directed toward the larger culture but

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 103. For full discussion, *cf.* pp. 103-104.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 110

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 111

addressed every aspect of their existence. Crawford describes this theological orientation as “Hope in the Holler theology.”<sup>437</sup>

“Hope in the Holler theology” is indicative of the *this-worldly orientation of hope* that Crawford unearths from the narratives. She argues that the hope revealed in black women’s literature “was not primarily an eschatological notion seeking fulfillment in the ultimate Kingdom of God. Rather, hope had a strong this-worldly function that countered the this-worldly abuse and victimization of slavery.”<sup>438</sup> However, she also grapples with the limitations of a theology of hope oriented exclusively in the *now*.<sup>439</sup> For example, Crawford considers Karen Baler-Fletcher’s caution regarding the “promise and the problems of working to bring about the vision of a revolutionary NOW hope of the reign of God on earth.”<sup>440</sup>

Fletcher is rightly concerned that the sufficiency of the vision is largely dependent upon its creator and intended audience. She argues that “There are instances where visions of the Kingdom of God are more profane and violent than they first appear to those who believe in them and feel included in them,” noting theological conceptions that suggest that poverty is the result of individual sins as an example.<sup>441</sup> Similarly, she draws our attention to the “racialized notions of slave owners” who believed themselves to be inherently superior to persons of darker hue and thus rightly entitled to own them.<sup>442</sup> As an alternative, Fletcher proposes that hope is at once future, present and historical “as

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 103. Cf. Karen Baker-Fletcher and KASIMU Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodis God-Talk* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 283-84.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

each moment lived in faith moves from future to present time and past time.”<sup>443</sup> In other words, hope is not exclusively oriented toward the future but maintains the tension between the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and concrete expressions of hope in the world as it currently exist. Crawford concludes, therefore, that “for black women and womanist theologians hope is primarily concerned with this world.”<sup>444</sup> However, I might suggest that Fletcher’s argument and caution are much more nuanced than the conclusion that Crawford offers. That is, Crawford’s *hope in the Holler theology* remains profoundly this-worldly and does not anticipate the Kingdom of God, as I read her.

The theology of hope which Crawford proposes is provocative in several respects, not the least of which is her attention to the sociohistorical context, content and intent of the narratives that inform her theology, as well as her description of hope as the *Holler*. Therefore, I want to consider the efficacy of *hope in the Holler theology* for the present investigation. Three immediate differences between the studies emerge. The first is that Crawford derives her theology of hope from the black women’s literary tradition in dialogue with existing womanist conceptions of hope. My investigation, while also engaging existing womanist conceptions of hope, draws insights from direct interviews with young black women who speak about the presence and function of hope in their lives. The second, of course, is that Crawford sets out to develop a *womanist theology of hope* while my intent is to consider how one might express and learn hope in the concreteness of their lives—a first step toward a *pedagogy of hope*. The pedagogy, however, is grounded in a theological conception of hope which I want to discern from a mutual critical dialogue with existing theologies and the women that I have interviewed.

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 103.

Finally, Crawford is specifically concerned with black women who have experienced physical violence and abuse. Violence and abuse were not thematic for the present investigation, yet three of the women described having experienced sexual abused. Therefore, I want to remain sensitive to the problem of sexual and physical abuse in the lives of young black women.

I find several points of connection between the themes that Crawford unearths and the women's thoughts on hope in this investigation. The most prominent is her description of hope as transgenerational as all of the women with whom I spoke named their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, women in the church and teachers as persons who contributed significantly to their ability to live with hope and their sense of what it means to be young, black, and female. They describe these women as *strong black women*—cross-generational icons of womanhood and strength—who are able to stand tall and do miraculous things with few resources and despite the obstacles that they face.

When describing the women to whom they look for hope and strength, the young women frequently noted their faith in God. Likewise, they spoke about their own faith in God as a source of hope and strength. For example, one young woman asserts that “God is the first thing that I thought of when you said hope. I just think about since He gives us power to do what we want...God put you here for a reason... so a lot of my hope comes from there.”<sup>445</sup> Repeatedly the women expressed that God, faith in God, or trust in God engendered hope in their lives. I might also note that the great majority of them used “God” as their expression of religious faith rather than “Jesus” or “Christ” which may be reflective of a shift in popular religious thought away from God as confined to a

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<sup>445</sup> Interview 1028

specific faith tradition and toward a more general notion of God as divine presence. In many respects the women's theological orientation seemed reflective of the "Immanuel theology" that Crawford noted in the emancipation narratives. Rather than focusing on "self actualization, then community renewal through personal introspection, therapy, and a new appropriation of the gospel," as Crawford discovered in contemporary narratives, the young black women in this investigation continue to ground their hope in a God who is with them in times of trouble.<sup>446</sup> What has remained consistent over the ages, however, is that black women's hope is grounded in faith in God, pace their various expressions of that faith.

Another aspect of Crawford's theology that both resonates and raises important questions in the current investigation is her definition of hope. Her description of hope as black women's *passion for the possible in this life* expressed most noticeably in their *Holler* is provocative. The literary tradition from which she draws her conception seems replete with women who spoke their concerns and continually resisted the negating and annihilating reality of their lives. That their narratives are available to us today is a testimony to their resilient determination to create a life-affirming future for themselves, their daughters and their communities. As a descendant of those women, I am forever grateful.

I agree with Crawford that the literary narratives are vehicles through which women articulate their *Holler* as well as pass their *passion for the possible in this life* on their daughters and other women. However, while the women with whom I spoke expressed a desire for a life-affirming future for themselves and their children, they

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 88.

appeared reluctant to cry out against oppression.<sup>447</sup> They were able to name their oppression and to describe the negating impact that it had in their lives, but they often felt powerless to do anything about it or cry out against it. For example, they overwhelmingly named negating sexualized images of black women in rap and music videos as oppressive and disaffirming. They expressed concern that the images and lyrics shape how others view them and, at times, how they view themselves. However, their *Holler* was tentative at best. Rather, many of them attempt to controvert negating representations by presenting themselves in a socially acceptable manner or becoming a *supra-model*. In other words, several of the women attempt to conform to cultural norms with hopes that those who negate them might someday value them and affirm their wellbeing. Others sought to cognitively distance themselves from the characters in music videos, music lyrics and other negating representations as a means of escaping or fighting against negating stereotypes. None of the women suggested that they should require more of the music industry or hold the artists accountable for what they produce, reflecting a sense of powerlessness and acquiescence to the present as a concretized and changeless reality. Therefore, I might describe their responses as a “silent cry” rather than a full blown *Holler*.<sup>448</sup> That is, although they can name their oppression their cry

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<sup>447</sup> As noted earlier, young black women are not a homogenous group, therefore, the responses of the particular group of young black women whose stories frame the current investigation are not indicative of *all* young black women. Other young black women, such as activists, may have responded differently and evinced the agency to *Holler*, as per Crawford’s construction of hope.

<sup>448</sup> I borrow the metaphor “silent cry” from the title of Dorothee Soelle’s *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Soelle indicates that the metaphor, in its original use, is from the late Middle Ages and is a “mystical name for God” (6). It describes the “one who also cries in us” as we seek to hear the cry of injustice and suffering in the world (6). The women’s testimonies reveal their sense of pain and suffering,—but they are not yet able to *Holler* like the women who wrote their pain and then engaged in acts of resistance and contestation. Perhaps this really is the cry of God within waiting for human persons to give it public expression.

remains absent and their imaginative potential thwarted as they seek strength to endure rather than resist and contest negation.

The struggle to dream and imagine alternatives in the face of cultural negation is not a problem exclusive to the young black women with whom I spoke. Evelyn Parker observed a similar dynamic in her investigation of hope in the lives of African American youth. In *Trouble Don't Last Always*, Parker, a religious educator whose research focus is Christian spirituality in adolescents, also maintains that hope negates and stands in opposition to that which forecloses possibility and limits our ability to live into God's vision for the world. Therefore, she explores the extent to which African American adolescents experience and articulate an understanding of *emancipatory hope*. Parker defines *emancipatory hope* as expectation *and* human participation in dismantling oppressive structures: "Emancipatory hope is *expectation* that the forms of hegemonic relations—race, class, and gender dominance—will be toppled, and to have emancipatory hope is to *acknowledge one's personal agency* in God's vision for human equality."<sup>449</sup>

Emancipatory hope is grounded in a liberative vision of the Kingdom of God in which human persons "act as God's agent bringing in God's vision of equality for humankind." Hope enlists us into the work of "pursu[ing] personal and communal freedom and agency in transforming economic, political, and racial oppression in the global society."<sup>450</sup> Thus, Parker maintains that to live with hope is to live with expectation and agency. However, she discovered that when confronted by negating and

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<sup>449</sup> Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. *Cf.* also, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* for an explication hope and its efficacy in educational theory and practice.

oppressive structures in numerous forms, the youth in her study struggled to find connections between their pious assertions about God and their ability to overcome oppression. She argues that “Within the polyphonic environs of black adolescents lie, religious culture, media culture, school culture, and family, are all struggling for power to shape the consciousness of adolescents.”<sup>451</sup> It seems that the media won the day because the youth most often mimicked the media’s “defeatist attitude for confronting racism” rather than that of their religious faith.<sup>452</sup> Parker describes this as *ventriloquation of media culture* and argues that it has led to “fragmented spirituality in African American youths.

“Fragmented spirituality” is evinced by a marked inconsistency between their belief in a powerful and transforming God and their level of hope regarding God’s power to dismantle racism.<sup>453</sup> She also argues that “their fragmented spirituality is historically inconsistent with the spirituality of African Americans of years past.”<sup>454</sup> Or, as per Crawford, transgenerational hope was absent. Even though African American history is replete with images of hope, especially as regards racial oppression, the youth in her study still evinced a degree of hopelessness regarding its cessation. Instead, they appropriate the media image of reality as reliable.

Ventriloquation of media culture, as Parker reveals, prevents persons from becoming agents of their own reality and leads to hopelessness and defeatism, particularly as it relates to injustice, oppression and dehumanization. Hopelessness and

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 37.



defeatism inhibit creative action and domesticate human imagination. That is, we lose our ability to imagine outside of the boundaries that oppressive structures have constructed for us. When persons are not able to conceive alternatives they inadvertently perpetuate the same unjust and oppressive systems that initially distorted their understanding. Therefore, Parker proposes “oppositional imagination as a way of knowing, self worth, loyalty, moral agency and holy indignation” as strategies that can encourage black youth to rely upon and ground their hope in God’s transformative power rather than the media.<sup>455</sup>

I will return to Parker’s strategies in the final chapter. However, I want to reiterate here that the *Holler* of black women’s literature and historical narratives has not been as common in studies in which young black women and youth speak for themselves. Rather they are less likely to voice their discontent and evince a level of powerlessness that leaves us wondering how everyday women might embody the kind of “rugged determination” that Crawford found so prevalently woven throughout the narratives from the black women’s literary tradition. Where is their *Holler*?

Ethicist Emilie Townes’ womanist reflections on hope may prove a helpful response to these questions. Townes also grapples with the problem of silence regarding cultural negation and inadequacy in *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*. She exposes what she describes as “the tragic consequences of an inadequate health-care system that we all endure and its particular impact on the lives of African Americans and the mission and ministry of the

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 148.

church in light of this,” and proposes an ethic of care.<sup>456</sup> She exposes the prevalence of racism, sexism and classism in health care detailing the appalling results of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the state of African American women’s health and the impact of HIV/AIDS on the African American community as indicative of the crisis. In each case she demonstrates that rather than naming and seeking to resolve the health care crisis, the community either remained silent or, as in the case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, sought to defend the government and medical community.

A more recent example is the crisis in African American women’s health. Townes negates the notion that African American women are solely responsible for their lack of health insurance as well as the notion that their health concerns are the result of unhealthy dietary practices alone. She argues that “We cannot fight for our lives in isolation—our health is a cultural production in which we all participate. As such, we must recognize the biological, social, environmental, and economic conditions that surround us and have profound impacts on our health.”<sup>457</sup> In other words, the health care crisis is a communal problem and demands a communal response.

Thus, Townes calls for a *communal lament* or communal outcry by which communities “name problems, seek justice and hope for God’s deliverance.”<sup>458</sup> Drawing valuable insights from the practice of lament in Judah as revealed in Joel’s prophecy and from Walter Brueggeman’s scholarship regarding grief and lament, Townes emphasizes

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<sup>456</sup> Emilie Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 24.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the “formfulness” of communal lament.<sup>459</sup> That is, lament gives form or voice to suffering and demands a response. Therefore, Towns urges communal lament because of its power to help communities “see the crisis as bearable and manageable” and reveal possibilities for change.<sup>460</sup> In this respect, communal lament strips suffering of the aura of changelessness and becomes a subversive and hope-filled act of negating injustice and publicly processing pain in anticipation of a new reality.

Although Townes does not construct a systematic theology of hope, she does describe hope as the ability to envision the future; as a dream so powerful that it should compel us to cry out against injustice.

...we have dreams that can be more powerful than the nightmares  
 possibilities more radical than the realities  
 and a hope that does more than cling to a wish  
 or wish on a star  
 or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its teeth  
 after dining on a meal of disaster and violence  
 we live in a challenge that should compel us to cry out in a communal lament  
 that is brimming with hope  
 hope, that anticipation of a future that fulfills God’s plans  
 and is based on God’s covenant of faithfulness  
 and the very resurrection of Jesus, the living Christ...<sup>461</sup>

Townes poetically argues that hope is more than wishing or idly sitting by and observing the suffering that inundates the lives of persons throughout our world. Rather our hope in God and the future which God has planned should evoke lament so strongly that it propels us to act. Our lament, therefore, is not sorrowful and despairing but hope-filled. As a result, Townes argues that we find hope “in the midst of a lament that cries

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 23. For an extended discussion of the formfulness of lament and grief *cf.* “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 31, no.3 (July 1977), “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 59, and *Hope Within History*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987).

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 178.

out for salvation that leads to healing.”<sup>462</sup> In other words, as with Crawford’s *Holler*, communal lament evinces hope by naming oppression and demanding a just response.

As I suggested above, however, most of the women with whom I spoke did not cry out. Townes suggests that we “all-too-often... tinge our hope with skepticism. We seriously doubt the possibility of the very things we most want.”<sup>463</sup> I believe that the young women in this study have *tinged their hope with skepticism*; that as much as they express discontent with the negating images and myths that encompass their lives, they doubt the possibility that the situation can change. In Townes’ construction, when one accepts that suffering and injustice cannot be changed it is tantamount to forgetting, or worse, neglecting “the miracle of God working in us.”<sup>464</sup> If this is true then a pedagogy of hope might create opportunities for young black women to remember that the God of Hope is standing with them or in them in the midst of their suffering, empowering them to resist negation and participate in this communal lament. In other words, hope “enables us to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging present. It makes it possible for us to see the world, not only as it is, but as it can be.”<sup>465</sup> I might add that hope enables us to draw strength from the past as well, transgenerational hope, as per Crawford, so that we might hold past and future together in service of the present. Therefore, it seems important that the women in this investigation learn how to maintain a hope-full tension between seeing and lamenting the negation in their lives and imagining and anticipating new possibilities. Therein, they may find the courage to *Holler*.

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 179

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 180.

### Human Suffering and the Veracity of Hope

The *Holler* is an expression of hope but it is not itself “hope.” That is, while the *Holler* negates pain and suffering, it appears that the impetus to *Holler* in hope rather than in hopelessness has its origin in another source. Similarly, I affirm the necessity of communal lament and want to discover processes by which persons might learn the value of publicly expressing their pain and its efficacy for living with hope. Thus, hope considered pedagogically is concerned not only with the actuality of the *Holler* or *lament* but with that which leads from painful outcry to hope-filled contestation, protest or resistance—that which leads to an active and generative hope. That is, hope that energizes us toward creative action. Therefore, given young black women’s reticence about voicing their discontent, I want to discover theological language or *God-talk* by which to speak about hope, its power to negate suffering and help us embrace a life-affirming reality for ourselves and others.<sup>466</sup> In other words, if hope is about “faith in God even when it doesn’t look right,” as one young woman indicated, then it seems important that I ground my pedagogy of hope in a Christian theology of hope that affirms God’s historical and ongoing involvement in human history, negates human suffering, and supports a life-affirming vision of reality.<sup>467</sup> I am convinced that hope so conceived and practiced can eliminate the silence of “whatever” and energize young black women and others toward resistance and creative action in history.

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<sup>466</sup> I borrow this concept from Delores Williams who describes Christian theological language as “god-talk.” Cf. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 1.

<sup>467</sup> Interview 1033.

I commence the search with these questions in mind: How might a Christian theology of hope respond to the ferocity of suffering and negation in the lives of young black women and eliminate the silencing mechanisms that keep them reticent about voicing their discontent and desire for a life-affirming future? How does Christian theology conceive hope, its relationship to human suffering, and the possibility of a new reality? And what has God to do with hope and the elimination of the suffering that inundates our existence? Four of the most prominent voices in this conversation are Jürgen Moltmann and Rubem Alves, who develop systematic theologies of hope, Delores Williams whose nascent theology of cross and resurrection offers an alternative to traditional theologies of redemption, and Walter Brueggemann, whose theology of hope is grounded in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and God's historical fidelity to God's plan for creation.

### **Eschatological Hope and the Suffering of the Present**

In *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* Jürgen Moltmann is concerned with “how to get beyond the general existentialism of the post-war era and how to acquire future perspectives for building a more just, more peaceable and more humane world.”<sup>468</sup> He writes during the post-war era of the 1960's and suggests that his writing is an inquiry “into the ground of the hope of Christian faith and into the responsible exercise of this hope in thought and action in the world.” In response, Moltmann redefines *eschatology* as “the doctrine of the Christian hope” and elucidates the tension between an eschatology limited by that which

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<sup>468</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), 8.

is already and always present, and an eschatology which rejects the limitations of the past and present and is open and oriented toward a future that is new and unexpected.<sup>469</sup>

Arguing against the traditional notion of eschatology as the doctrine of last things, Moltmann contends that “There can be no ‘doctrine’ of the last things, if by ‘doctrine’ we mean a collection of theses which can be understood on the basis of experiences that constantly recur and are open to anyone.”<sup>470</sup> In other words, eschatology as the ‘doctrine’ of last things suggests a thesis or logical truth about the future that remains authentic despite historical circumstances. Therefore he argues that “there can be no *logos* of the future, unless the future is the continuation or regular recurrence of the present.”<sup>471</sup> Moltmann characterizes this understanding of eschatology as the “epiphany of the eternal present;” the suggestion that a pre-determined future is breaking into human history and bringing it to its final crisis.<sup>472</sup>

In contrast, Moltmann contends that Christian eschatology as the doctrine of the Christian hope is concerned with announcing the future of Jesus Christ.<sup>473</sup>

Christian eschatology does not speak of the future as such. It sets out from a definite reality in history and announces the future of that reality, its future possibilities and its power over the future. Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and *his* future. It recognizes the reality of the raising of Jesus and proclaims the future of the risen Lord.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 39. Moltmann argues that this conception of eschatology is prevalent among early 20<sup>th</sup> century dialectical theologians like Karl Bart and Rudolph Bultmann. He also contends that the idea that a predetermined future is breaking into human history “makes the eschaton into a transcendental eternity, the transcendental meaning of all ages, equally near to all the ages of history and equally far from all of them” (39-40).

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

The future of Christ was initiated by the resurrection which evinces the ongoing exposition, confirmation and expansion of God's promises.<sup>475</sup> Therefore, to speak of Christ and his future is to speak words of hope and promise regarding "who he will be and what is to be expected from him."<sup>476</sup> What we might expect of Christ has been illumined in advance by the promises of God, historically given to Israel and made universal through the resurrection: "the *promise of the righteousness of God, the promise of life as a result of resurrection* from the dead, and *the promise of the Kingdom of God* in a new totality of being."<sup>477</sup> Therefore, Moltmann argues that "The real language of Christian eschatology...is not the Greek *logos*, but the *promise* which has stamped the language, the hope and the experience of Israel."<sup>478</sup>

Eschatology as the *doctrine of the Christian hope* speaks to God's historical and ongoing faithfulness to the promises, evinced most noticeably in the history of ancient Israel. Not only does the history of God's fidelity to the promises reveal the trajectory of God's faithfulness but discrete historical events also evince God's presence on the road to the future to which the promises point. That is, they reveal something of who God has been, will be and where God might be found. Therefore, Moltmann argues that to know God is to "re-cognize" God in light of God's historical faithfulness to the promises.<sup>479</sup>

God's fidelity to the promises is God's self confession of covenant and promise; God's self revelation. Yet he also argues that God "remains superior to any fulfillment

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 117.



that can be experienced” because the future is still outstanding.<sup>480</sup> The resurrection, as do other hope-filled historical events, represents the ongoing *exposition, confirmation and expansion* of the promises but ultimate fulfillment awaits God’s eternal reign and defeat of all opposition.<sup>481</sup> Even the coming lordship of Christ, Moltmann maintains, “has an eschatologically provisional character in which it serves the sole and all-embracing lordship of God.”<sup>482</sup> God’s fidelity to the promises anticipates Christ, but his future is bound to the final revelation and lordship of God.<sup>483</sup>

The latency between promise and fulfillment keeps human persons focused and moving toward the future.<sup>484</sup> Therefore, Moltmann argues that the promises stand ahead of history “as a sort of *primum movens*” that initiates history.<sup>485</sup> They bind the believing person to the history of promise, drawing us toward the future.<sup>486</sup> The unfulfilled nature of the promises “keeps the hoping mind in a ‘not yet’” which creates unrest or intense yearning for fulfillment.<sup>487</sup> This *not yetness*, therefore, becomes the impetus for human participation in the history of hope.

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid. Moltmann argues that “The resurrection has set in motion an eschatologically determined process of history, whose goal is the annihilation of death in the victory of the life of resurrection, and which ends in the righteousness in which God receives in all things [God’s] due and the creature thereby finds salvation.”

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 102. Stated fully, Moltmann argues that “The whole force of promise, and of faith in terms of promise, is essentially to keep men (*sic*) on the move in a tense *inadequatio rei et intellectus* as long as the *promissio* which governs the *intellectus* has not yet found its answer in reality. It is in promise, which keeps the hoping mind in a ‘not yet’ which transcends all experience and history...” His suggestion that *the understanding of the knower must be adequate to the thing to be known* implies that the impetus for movement toward the promises of God is that they have not yet been comprehended by *the knowers* who continually anticipate or seek their fulfillment.

Moltmann distinguishes hope grounded in the promises of God from utopian views of reality. He argues that utopian views of the future are humanly constructed and derived from that which already exists and the possibilities therein.<sup>488</sup> Eschatology as *the doctrine of Christian hope*, on the other hand, perceives a world that is “full of all kinds of possibilities, namely all the possibilities of the God of hope.”<sup>489</sup> That is, hope is not predicated upon what exists in the present but upon the promises of God.

Hope anticipates the future. Moltmann argues that hope is born of the contradiction between “the resurrection and the cross”—the contradiction between the promised and anticipated future and the reality of suffering, death and evil in the present engenders hope.<sup>490</sup> Thus people of faith “believe and obey on the ground of our hope in the overcoming of these contradictions by God.”<sup>491</sup> We live, that is, with confidence that God will ultimately resolve the contradiction. Awareness of the contradiction draws persons “into the conflict between hope and experience.”<sup>492</sup> The promises reveal the incongruity between the present and the promised future of Christ, creating an “interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise” to which one may either respond with hope or resignation.<sup>493</sup> Within this conflict one perceives the reality of suffering and death, and in faith “strains toward the future.”<sup>494</sup> Thus Moltmann argues

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 18. The cross represents the “god-forsakenness of all things, and with the cross we can recognize the real absence of the Kingdom of God in which all things attend to righteousness and peace” (223). The resurrection points toward the “new creation;” the promised and hoped-for future of Christ.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 19.

that hope is not only born of contradiction but grounded in Christian faith—faith in the God of promise.<sup>495</sup>

Faith acknowledges the suffering of the present while “following the Christ who was raised from suffering, from god-forsaken death and from the grave.”<sup>496</sup> When faith is grounded in the risen Christ, it negates the power of oppression and “gains an open prospect in which there is nothing more to oppress us.”<sup>497</sup> That is, rather than denying or suppressing the reality of suffering, faith grounded in the resurrection negates the power of suffering to thwart our confidence in God’s ultimate deliverance.<sup>498</sup> In response, faith *can and must* expand into hope.<sup>499</sup>

The relationship between hope and faith is reciprocal in that “faith in Christ gives hope its assurance... [and] hope gives faith in Christ its breadth and leads it into life.”<sup>500</sup> Faith perceives that which is possible and its hope becomes a “passion for what is possible (Kierkegaard), because it can be a passion for what has been made possible.”<sup>501</sup> The passion which hope engenders creates unrest such that Christian persons “will never be able to reconcile [themselves] with the laws and constraints of this earth, neither with

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid. 20. Stated more fully, Moltmann suggests that “in the Christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy. Without faith’s knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man finds the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps him on that path. Thus it is that faith in Christ gives hope its assurance. Thus it is that hope gives faith in Christ its breadth and leads it into life.”

<sup>501</sup> Ibid. Though similar to Crawford’s suggestion that hope is black women’s “passion for the possible in this world,” what is possible for Moltmann is grounded in the resurrection and the promises and not in human experience.

the inevitability of death nor with the evil that constantly bears further evil”<sup>502</sup> To the contrary, believing persons take the promises of the past into their “own eschatological future as disclosed by the gospel and give them breadth.”<sup>503</sup> As a result, believing persons “enter into the history that is determined by the promised and guaranteed *eschaton*, and we expect from it not only the future of the present but also the future of the past.”<sup>504</sup> In other words, they anticipate a future in which the God who has been faithful in the past will remain faithful into the future.

The Christian Church both anticipates and proclaims the promises of God and the coming of God’s Kingdom, as did Jesus, thus exerting an *existential ethical demand* upon hearers today.<sup>505</sup> The mission of the church, in other words, is “not merely propagation of faith and hope, but also historic transformation of life. The life of the body, including also social and public life, is expected as a sacrifice in day-to-day obedience.”<sup>506</sup> The church must reveal the “god-forsakenness...[and] real absence of the Kingdom of God” in the cross, as well as the power of the resurrection to point us toward the new creation.<sup>507</sup> Christians, therefore, *suffer* in anticipation of the future—the “coming lordship of God” and the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises—and resist conforming to the *world* so that they might transform oppressive institutions and structures that order our existential reality.<sup>508</sup> Moltmann argues that Christian hope “will therefore endeavour (*sic*) to lead our modern institutions away from their own immanent tendency towards

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 223

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 222. By ‘suffer’ Moltmann intends ‘unrest’ that results from the contradiction and not corporeal suffering.

stabilization, will make them uncertain, historicize them and open them to the elasticity which is demanded by openness towards the future for which it hopes.”<sup>509</sup> Hope demands human participation in alleviating the suffering and oppression of our world and leading it toward the future which God has promised. In other words, the Church is well aware that “the world is not yet finished but is understood as engaged in history.”<sup>510</sup> Thus he compels the Christian Church to live into the hope which the resurrection proclaims and disclose the possibilities of the future to the world in which we live.

To summarize, Moltmann redefines *eschatology* as the “the doctrine of the Christian hope” emphasizing the power of the resurrection to set the history of Jesus Christ in motion.<sup>511</sup> The resurrection announces Christ’s still outstanding future and the continuation of God’s promises, and reconciles human persons to God. Hope, therefore is our faithful anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promises. Proclamation of the promises and the resurrection creates unrest as regards the suffering of the present such that anticipation is translated into active participation in transforming our world. The church “transform[s] in opposition and creative expectation the face of the world in the midst of which one believes, hopes and loves.”<sup>512</sup> What we can expect of the future and of Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises which compels the Church to live with hope—expectation—and act in the direction of the promises of God.

Moltmann’s theology of hope is compelling in its assertion that hope is faithful anticipation of the promises of God which stand in contradiction and opposition to the

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., 330.

suffering of the present, as well as his assertion that God's fidelity to the promises is without question. Moltmann also affirms that hope is not predicated upon what seems possible in the present but upon what is possible with God. That God keeps faith with God's promises and that hope can transcend that which exists in the present is particularly important in the lives of young black women who are repeatedly confronted by oppressive structures that appear impenetrable. While God's fidelity to the promises is compelling, Moltmann also argues that fulfillment of the promises finds ultimacy in the eschatological future of Christ and not in concrete human experience and therefore cautions us to not confuse fulfillment of the promises with the alleviation of suffering in any one instance or historical period. Fulfillment awaits "the sole and all-embracing lordship of God."<sup>513</sup> Moltmann argues, therefore, that the latency between promise and fulfillment intensifies hope or creates yearning that keeps persons moving toward and seeking to understand the *not-yet fulfilled* promises of God.<sup>514</sup>

This seems problematic for those whose existential situation is inundated by constant negation and corporeal suffering. I might argue that the prolonged latency between promise and ultimate fulfillment, rather than intensifying hope or sustaining the search for the promises, could lead to a sense of abandonment by God, fear, anxiety or hopelessness. One's decisions as regards hope, therefore, may not be a simple matter of obedience or disobedience, a dichotomy which Moltmann draws, but also deeply influenced by their prolonged suffering and lack of discernable alternatives. This is not to assert that hope is impossible in contexts of prolonged suffering but rather to suggest that learning to live with hope and believing that God remains faithful is a complicated

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 102.

matter. Therefore, while I take Moltmann's caution regarding historical claims of fulfillment seriously, I am also concerned that the multi-millennial gap between promise and fulfillment may leave those who suffer in the present, like young black women and others, with little recourse for changing their existential situation. In other words, he does not help them consider transformative possibilities or express their discontent in the present. As another alternative, I might suggest that we give greater attention to God's historical *exposition, confirmation and expansion* of the promises as a sign of God's fidelity to their actualization, while not ignoring the fact that historical fulfillment is intermediate in nature and not ultimate.

For example, Thomas Long agrees with Moltmann that Christian hope is not based on historical evidence but "on the promise that whatever the future may hold, God is, in ways often hidden, shaping all human life redemptively and bringing all things to fulfillment in Christ."<sup>515</sup> However, he also offers a helpful caveat when he asserts that God "who has loved us and saved us in the past will give us grace sufficient for the *present* and continue to be our savior in the future."<sup>516</sup> In other words, his inclusion of the present seems to suggest that God's activity is not limited to preparing a future for us but includes God's fidelity in the present. James Cone also agrees with Moltmann's basic tenets and offers a similar caution as regards suggestions that historical struggle is "an end in itself."<sup>517</sup> He admits that the struggle for justice is wrought with obstacles and can

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<sup>515</sup> Thomas Long, "When Half Spent Was the Night: Preaching Hope in the New Millennium" in *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 3 (1999): 13

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

<sup>517</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 132. Cone agrees with Moltmann's overall contentions regarding the future of Christ, but reads Moltmann in light of the black community's historical struggle against oppression. Therefore, he also maintains a tension between Moltmann's future actualization of the promises and the necessity of their concrete historical expression.

create fatigue yet he affirms the necessity of the historical struggle for liberation.<sup>518</sup>

Therefore, he argues that the historical struggle for justice evinces Jesus' involvement in human history and his intent toward redemption and maintains a stronger tension between ultimate fulfillment of the promises, as per Moltmann, and God's ongoing involvement in the historical *now*.<sup>519</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez similarly advocates the historical struggle for justice and agrees that situational liberation is not synonymous with the ultimate fulfillment of God's kingdom. However, he also critiques Moltmann's eschatological orientation of hope and asserts that "despite all his efforts, Moltmann has difficulty finding a vocabulary both sufficiently rooted in human concrete historical experience, in an oppressed and exploited present, and yet abounding in potentialities—a vocabulary rooted in the possibilities of self-liberation."<sup>520</sup> On the one hand, he affirms Moltmann's contention that remembering that the future is promised by God "keeps us from any confusion of the Kingdom with any one historical stage, from any Idolatry toward unavoidably ambiguous human achievement, from any absolutizing of revolution."<sup>521</sup> On the other hand, he contends that social praxis demands utopian thought. Utopia "refers to a historical plan for a qualitatively different society...[ and] the aspiration to establish new social relations among human beings."<sup>522</sup> Utopia is a *denunciation* of oppressive social constructions and "an annunciation...of what is not-yet but will be; it is the forecast of a different order

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid. Cone argues that "the political power of the oppressors often creates fear in the hearts of the oppressed" and deters them from continuing their struggle.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised edition, (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 124.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 135.



of things, a new society.”<sup>523</sup> When conceived in light of the gospel, utopia *forecasts* a just and humane world—announces the Kingdom of God—and leads to concrete social praxis in the present.<sup>524</sup> Thus, Gutiérrez’s conception of utopia and Cone’s comments regarding the struggle for liberation are important to the current investigation because pedagogically they offer intermediate or penultimate images of hope that can mobilize and embolden young black women to contest negation and participate in the historical struggle for a just and life-affirming world.

In addition to the problem of latency there remains a tension between Moltmann’s theology of the cross and much of the theological language in the Black Church. In the African American religious tradition, Jesus’ suffering on the cross has most often represented God’s solidarity with those who have suffered throughout the ages, and the resurrection has signaled God’s liberating power and faithfulness. For example, James Cone indicates that in Jesus’ death, God “is not merely sympathetic with the social pain of the poor but becomes totally identified with them in their agony and pain.”<sup>525</sup> JoAnne Marie Terrell, also conceives Jesus as the one who suffers with the oppressed and suggests that on the cross “God, in Christ, shed God’s own blood” *once and for all* for humanity.<sup>526</sup> She finds this conception of the cross an important reminder to abused women that God has not abandoned them. Rather than *god-forsakenness*, she asserts that “the cross is about God’s love for humankind in a profound sense...because the drama

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 136. Gutiérrez borrows the idea of denunciation and annunciation from Paulo Freire. He indicates that “According to Freire, between the denunciation and the annunciation is the time for building, the historical *praxis*. Moreover, denunciation and annunciation can be achieved only *in praxis*. This is what we mean when we talk about a utopia which is the driving force of history and subversive of the existing order. If utopia does not lead to action in the present, it is an evasion of reality.”

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> Cone, 175.

<sup>526</sup> JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 124.

[of the cross] testifies to the exceedingly great lengths to which God goes to advise the extent of human estrangement.”<sup>527</sup> She also emphasizes the importance of the empty cross as that which signals “the possibility of our own resurrection” from suffering.<sup>528</sup> Delores Williams, also writing from the perspective of black women and their historical experience of violence agrees that the cross signals possibility but is concerned with the violent connotations of theologies that suggest that human persons are redeemed as a result of Jesus’ death on the cross. Therefore, she re-conceives the cross as that which represents the misuse and abuse of human power to keep history closed and to negate God’s “ministerial vision” for the world, and the resurrection as God’s ongoing fidelity to a life-affirming reality.<sup>529</sup>

Although Cone, Terrell, and Williams reflect significant difference in their conception of the cross, what remains consistent is that they attribute meaning to the cross that does not foreclose history but rather opens the way for God’s ongoing participation in human history. The cross is not *god-forsakenness* but is rather God in solidarity with humanity (Cone and Terrell) or not concerned with God’s activity at all but with human malevolence (Williams).

A theology of the cross and resurrection remains an important consideration for a Christian theology of hope. Therefore, we are left with the question of how we might speak about redemption in our efforts to awaken young black women to hope-filled possibilities for their lives. In chapter one I explored the insidious and violent nature of negating images, myths and ideologies in the experience of African American women. I

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<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>529</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

also suggested that hope in the lives of young black women demands redemptive images of reality and of God's involvement in our lives that can energize us toward creative action. Therefore, William's re-visioning of redemption and elimination of violence as the condition for salvation is compelling and warrants further discussion.

### **A Womanist Re-visioning of the Suffering Savior**

In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams constructs a theology of redemption in which the cross is indicative of the sinful use of power to destroy God's *ministerial vision* for the world and the resurrection represents "the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it."<sup>530</sup> God's *ministerial vision* is concerned with "righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit," which also makes human persons participants in bringing forth the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, therefore, is an image of hope that signifies what we can expect of God, ourselves and world in the light of God's *ministerial vision*.

Delores Williams' theology of cross and resurrection and attention to *ministerial vision* emerges out of her reflections on the negating effect of surrogacy in the lives of black women, paradigmatically represented by the biblical story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21.<sup>531</sup> Through a rereading of Hagar's story, Williams delineates clear parallels between the experience of coerced surrogacy, motherhood and wilderness in the life of

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 149-150. Williams constructs her theology via a "womanist hermeneutic of *identification-ascertainment*" which involves an analysis of her own faith journey (subjective), the faith journey of the black community and religious tradition (communal) as well as a determination regarding "the biblical events, characters and circumstance with whom the biblical writers have identified *and* those with whom the biblical writer have not identified, that is, those who are victims of those with whom the biblical writers have identified" (objective).

Hagar, an enslaved woman in the home of Abram and Sarai, and “the predicament of motherhood; the character of surrogacy; the problem of ethnicity; and the meaning and significance of wilderness experience” in the lives of African American women.<sup>532</sup>

In the biblical narrative, “Hagar is introduced as the solution to a problem confronting a wealthy Hebrew slave-holding family composed of Sarai (Hagar’s owner) and Abram, Sarai’s husband.”<sup>533</sup> Sarai is barren and could not bear children to Abram. Of the options available to her to resolve her problem, Sarai chooses to give her Egyptian slave-girl to Abram to marry and to bear children in her stead, which Williams characterizes as “coerced motherhood” or “coerced surrogacy.”<sup>534</sup> After Abram impregnates Hagar, he gives her back to Sarai who “treated her so badly that she ran away from her” (Genesis 16:6b).

Hagar leaves the home under duress on two occasions, making her “the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.”<sup>535</sup> On the first occasion she runs to the wilderness where she meets God whom she names *El Ro’i*, the God of Seeing. God instructs her to return to Sarai and Abram’s home with the promise that her and her son Ishmael’s descendants would be too numerous to count. On the second occasion, Abram expels Hagar and Ishmael from the home with no money and very little food and water to sustain them. With their resources depleted and Ishmael near

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 8. Space does not permit a full treatment of William’s reflections on *wilderness* and *ethnicity*.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 16. Although Sarai was within her legal rights to use Hagar as her surrogate, other legal options were also available: “Nuzi law, which the ancient Hebrews were believed to have often followed, stipulated that the husband of a barren wife could adopt a male slave from his household who would then become heir to the family fortune and see to the master’s welfare in his old age... But regardless of the choice exercised, as far as Hagar is concerned the law guarantees that these slave holders will have complete authority over her body and its reproductive capacities.”

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 19.

death, the *God of Seeing* again finds Hagar in the wilderness and “renews the promise made to Hagar” in her first wilderness experience. God shows her a well of water and she and Ishmael survive. Williams argues that in both instances, initially in the birth announcement and promise of wellbeing and again at the well of water, “God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before”<sup>536</sup> In response, Hagar takes the initiative to liberate herself, making full use of the vision and resources that God has given her.<sup>537</sup> The story concludes in Genesis with Hagar finding a wife for Ishmael, Ishmael becoming a great nation, and intimations that Hagar may have founded her own tribe, the Hagarites.<sup>538</sup>

Williams’ rereading of Hagar’s story leads her to assert that God’s concern for Hager was survival and quality of life and not her liberation, and to raise questions about God’s historical and present involvement in the lives of African Americans.<sup>539</sup> She challenges the liberationist readings of biblical texts championed by Black Theology and identifies a woman-centered parallel tradition of biblical appropriation which she describes as the “*survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.*”<sup>540</sup> Making use of this model, Williams discloses that like Hagar, African American women experienced coerced surrogacy in the antebellum South as surrogates

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., 32. Cf. Williams exegetical notes on the founding of the Hagarites on p. 22, 32-33.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>540</sup> Williams indicates that since “Hagar’s story has been appropriated so extensively and for such a long time by the African-American community...her story must be the community’s analogue for African-American women’s historic experience” (3-4). This tradition runs parallel to the *liberation tradition* of Black Theology in which the Hebrew exodus and election experience have been paradigmatic for black life, and is particularly attentive to the voices of female slaves and others who “are not woven into this biblical story of election and exodus” (147). She also questions whether or not Black Theology has overly identified with Israel’s election and liberation, making them less able to see that “non-Hebrew female slaves, especially those of African descent, are not on equal terms with the Hebrews and are not woven into this biblical story of election and exodus” (147).

for slave-holders' wives as wet nurse and "mammy" for their families, as surrogate men forced to labor in the *Big House* and in the field alongside black men, and "in the area of sexuality...in which slave women were forced to stand in place of white women and provide sexual pleasure for white male slave owners."<sup>541</sup> As in the case of Hagar, they had no choice in the matter and often times bore children to their slave-owners with little or no support for their wellbeing. After emancipation, the reality of poverty and racial oppression required black women to "choose to continue in two surrogate roles: that of substituting female power and energy for male power and energy, and that of mammy."<sup>542</sup> As a result, women found their place in the workforce alongside black men and bore the stigma of mammy, the stereotypical strong authoritative female figure discussed in chapter one.

Williams' identification of surrogacy as a "negative force in African American women's lives" evoked important questions about the character of surrogacy in traditional theological discourse regarding redemption.<sup>543</sup> Specifically, she is concerned with the notion that humans have "been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in the place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself."<sup>544</sup> Therefore, she asserts that it is "fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy."<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid. Cf. 62-67 for extended discussion.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 81. Specifically, Williams explores "the question of whether Jesus on the cross represents coerced surrogacy (willed by the Father) or voluntary surrogacy (chosen by the son) or both."

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 162.

In response, Williams develops a theology that makes use of “the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman’s world to show black women that their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus’ life and death.”<sup>546</sup> Rather than a theology that attributes sacramental qualities to surrogacy, Williams wants to assure African American women that they are saved “by Jesus’ life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the *death of identity* caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethics and world view.”<sup>547</sup> Therefore, she re-conceives redemption, with Jesus’ ministry of healing the body, mind and spirit as her focus.

Williams’ reflections on Luke 4:18-19, a foundational text in liberationist readings of redemption and salvation, reveals its survival and relational implications. She argues that this “text suggests that the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans *life* – to show redemption through a perfect *ministerial* vision” that was female-male inclusive.<sup>548</sup> Thus Jesus’ words and actions were intended to right relationships through raising the dead, casting out demons and “proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly.”<sup>549</sup> In other words, he sought to restore those who were separated from the community by physical or emotional infirmities, rid people’s minds of the “destructive forces prohibiting the

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 164. Williams asserts that theologians have been trying for centuries “to make the Christian idea of atonement believable by shaping theories about it in the language and thought that people of a particular time understood and in which they were grounded” (162). She illustrates this point by providing an overview of Origen’s, Anselm’s, Abelard’s, and Calvin’s theories of atonement and how they responded to the thinking of their time.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., 164. Cf. 270, footnote #37.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid., 164-165.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid., 165.

flourishing of positive, peaceful life” and by inviting all persons to participate in the transformative work of creating a new reality.<sup>550</sup> That is, God’s invitation to participate in the ministerial vision of right relations, through Jesus, was God’s gift to humanity.<sup>551</sup>

Many readily embraced Jesus’ vision for the world, but others rejected it. Thus, William’s argues that “The response to this invitation by human principalities and powers was the horrible deed the cross represents – the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life in relation that Jesus brought to humanity.”<sup>552</sup> Unlike Moltmann’s claim that the cross represents “god-forsakenness,” Williams rejects the idea that God either sacrificed Jesus or required him to sacrifice himself for sinful humanity. Rather, the cross represents the destructive use of power to destroy the *ministerial* vision and thwart humanity’s ability to imagine a world in which we might live in loving and life-giving relationship with each other and with God. As Williams suggests, “The cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo.”<sup>553</sup> The resurrection, on the other hand, attests to the inability of evil to destroy God’s ministerial vision: “The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God’s spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it.”<sup>554</sup> The resurrection and God’s

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<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 165.



ongoing presence with humanity—*the flourishing of God’s spirit in the world*—evinces God’s faithfulness to the *ministerial* vision. God redeems humanity, therefore, not from inherent sin, but from sinful oppressive structures and social arrangements that inhibit human flourishing. Rather than suggesting that human persons are inherently sinful and in need of deliverance, Williams implies that sin is rooted in oppressive social structures that prevent persons from living in life-affirming relationship with self, others and God.<sup>555</sup>

Williams grounds her redemptive theology in Jesus’ life of proclaiming and inviting persons to participate in God’s *ministerial* vision rather than in his death on the cross. She argues that we are saved or redeemed from suffering and oppression “by Jesus’ life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used” to help people begin to see themselves and their world in light of the gospel message.<sup>556</sup> God redeems humanity through Jesus by “giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life.”<sup>557</sup> That is, God gives us *ministerial* vision so that we might discern “the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life.”<sup>558</sup> As a result, humans become participants in the transformative ministry of creating social relations and material conditions that can promote human flourishing and wellbeing. God redeems and empowers us by offering us the vision to see resources necessary for survival and quality of life, by the continual *flourishing of God’s spirit in the world*, and by giving us the temerity and capacity to live therein.

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<sup>555</sup> Williams offers very little detail about her conception of sin, therefore, I infer this understanding from her comments regarding Jesus’ resistance to temptation on p. 166. What she does suggest, however, may imply an anthropology in which humans become agents of their own reality in partnership with the God who provides “resources for positive, abundant relational life.”

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

In Williams' theology, redemption is both gift and responsibility, vision and practice, which also has implication for a conception of the Kingdom of God. She argues that the Kingdom of God is a metaphor of hope in that it reflects the concrete embodiment of God's relational intent.

Hence the Kingdom of God theme in the *ministerial* vision of Jesus does not point to death; it is not something that one has to die to reach. Rather, the Kingdom of God is a *metaphor of hope* God gives those attempting to right relations between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else.<sup>559</sup>

As a metaphor of hope, the Kingdom of God asserts that something new is in the process of *becoming*. It connotes an emerging reality and an image of possibility upon which we can ground our ongoing struggle for survival and quality of life.

Hagar's story and Williams' redemptive theology invites black women to participate in creating the reality in which they want to live, making full use of the resources that God offers. That is, in many respects, Williams calls black women away from victim status and toward participation in their own deliverance, with God's help. Therefore, when she speaks about the *means* by which we struggle, she argues that "the design and character of the means of the struggle are governed by black women's communication with God through prayer, by their faith in God's presence with them in the struggle, by their absolute dependence upon God to support resistance and provide sustenance."<sup>560</sup> In other words, she cautions black women that as we struggle for survival and quality of life, that we do it in "radical obedience to what they understand to be God's word speaking to their struggle." Our struggle, as was Hagar's and our

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 165-166 (emphasis added to "metaphor of hope").

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 177.

foremothers', is a struggle in partnership with the One who has been and remains faithful to the struggle.

William's re-visioning of the cross and resurrection seems important for young black women who struggle against suffering and oppression and who remain reticent about *hollering* or voicing their discontent in several respects. The first, of course, is that she reads Hagar's story and constructs her theology with black women as theological subjects. Their voices are heard and the negating experience of surrogacy and their history of oppression are paramount. For example, rather than describing the crucifixion as a sacrifice preordained/ordained by God, Williams describes it as humanity's sinful and abusive use of power to foreclose the future and sustain the existing social order, leaving open the possibility of critique and negation of abusive social arrangements in the present. Therefore, young black women who endeavor to follow Jesus or live as Christ are liberated from the notion that they must endure suffering as a sign of faithfulness to God. That is, rather than conceding that *this is just the way that it is*, or worse, resigning themselves to *whatever*, the cross so conceived sheds light upon the malevolent and sinful nature of oppression and God's intent toward our wellbeing. On the other hand, however, her theology is in contention with the tradition of the Black Church, as suggested above, and may not be readily received.

For example, James Cone argues that God enters human history as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah via Jesus. Jesus' death, therefore, "was a sacrifice: 'Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his

mouth' (Isaiah 53:7 RSV)"<sup>561</sup> God takes on the pains of the oppressed and fully identifies with their suffering, which liberates them to fight against suffering and oppression. The resurrection evinces God's victory over suffering as that which determines the future and reveals God's ongoing presence in the world.<sup>562</sup> Nonetheless, "the war against evil and suffering is still going on."<sup>563</sup> Therefore, Cone argues that the oppressed must continue to "fight against suffering by becoming God's suffering servants in the world."<sup>564</sup> As God's suffering servants they can live assured that God remains faithful to the struggle and will "come again fully to consummate the freedom already given in Jesus Christ."<sup>565</sup>

Cone's theological orientation is typical of that to which I have been exposed in the Black Church. In my experience, however, these theologies have often encouraged women and others to endure suffering as that which is proper to their existence rather than freeing them to struggle against suffering and injustice—'*Jesus suffered and so must we.*' Terrell's assertion that Jesus suffered *once and for all* is much less prevalent and Williams' conception of the cross is all but absent. Similarly, the "strong black woman" image so greatly affirmed among black women appears as another iteration of suffering as proper to our existence. As suggested above, the young black women in this investigation rarely asserted their right to live free of suffering or to challenge that which oppressed them. Rather, they sought God's strength to endure suffering.

*Now Lord, don't move my mountain,  
Just give me the strength to climb;*

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<sup>561</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 175.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

*And Lord, don't move this stumbling block  
But lead me all around!*<sup>566</sup>

This lyrical petition images God as the One who will strengthen us to endure suffering but does not simultaneously suggest that God can empower us to transform the negating situation. Rather, this popular song of the church draws attention to the immovability of the mountain and suggests that we climb—accept its inevitability—or perish. Therefore, I cannot help but wonder whether or not these young women's resignation to endure suffering is not related to a sense that God requires us to suffer or that there is religious or perhaps social merit in enduring suffering (though Cone does not assert this).

Williams offers another alternative. When Jesus' crucifixion is viewed as the result of human malevolence, the wrong that was done remains open for critique and negation. In the process of naming the social ills that led to Jesus' crucifixion, young black women are also made free to name, negate and resist their own oppression. Rather than a Jesus who "never says a mumbling word," the Jesus of Williams' theology is actively engaged in proclaiming and effecting change in the day-to-day lives of human persons and in resisting the evil with which he is confronted.<sup>567</sup> This has practical social implications in that it leaves open the possibility that young black women might also engage in the practice of naming, negating and resisting oppressive social situations and social arrangements, not as a secular endeavor, but in partnership with God and in accordance with God's *ministerial* vision.

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<sup>566</sup> Jackson, Mahalia. "Lord Don't Move That Mountain." *Mahalia Jackson: The Forgotten Recordings*. 2005, Middlesex, UK: Acrobat Music Limited, CD2:15.

<sup>567</sup> Drawn from the lyrics of an African American spiritual, "I Know It Was the Blood for Me" (unpublished and author unknown).

In addition to liberating the crucifixion from surrogacy and introducing God's *ministerial* vision, Williams' image of the resurrection confirms God's ongoing involvement in human history and thus in the lives of young black women. The resurrection reminds us that God's *ministerial* vision is still alive and active in our world; that God's intent for right relations and human flourishing has not changed. Therefore, the Kingdom of God in the *ministerial* vision offers an image of hope—a hoped-for reality—that begins in the concrete experiences of human persons in the present. The Kingdom of God is a reality that is coming into being in the present, whose emergence is enhanced when human persons embrace the ethical thought and action that God has given us to create a just and life-affirming world.<sup>568</sup> Thus young black women can begin now to advocate and create right relations within themselves, among other human persons and with God in anticipation of the emerging Kingdom. I want to emphasize *and God* in Williams' theology as she is not suggesting that human persons can create the Kingdom of God alone or that we can redeem ourselves. Rather she is asserting that the Kingdom emerges as human persons faithfully embrace the way of being and relating to which God invites us in the *ministerial* vision.

The primary limitation of Williams' theology is that it is unfinished and leaves many questions unanswered. For example, the question of Jesus' divinity seems unresolved vis-à-vis Christian theology. Also, even though she asserts that liberation

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<sup>568</sup> Although I am addressing hope and suffering from the perspective of young black women it is also important to note that Williams invites all persons to embrace God's *ministerial* vision. This includes persons who may not have experienced suffering and oppression in their day to day lives but who want to live in right relations with others. In these instances, persons are called to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed. Dorothee Solle, in *Suffering*, also offers a helpful description of what it means to suffer in solidarity with others. In *The Silent Cry*, she argues that compassion (*compassio*) "arises in the immediacy of innocent suffering and from solidarity with those who have to bear it" (139). Cf. Solle, Dorothee, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), Solle, Dorothee, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

may be ultimate, she emphasizes survival/quality of life as most indicative of God's activity in the lives of African Americans. I might suggest, as I have in a previous paper, that survival and liberation are not dichotomous but rather aspects of a larger movement toward a new creation. Concerning hope and her suggestion that the Kingdom of God is "a metaphor of hope," I look forward to greater clarification regarding the Kingdom's relationship to hope and a more detailed treatment of hope in general. Nonetheless, her reading of the cross and resurrection is compelling because it offers young black women the freedom to *holler*—to name, negate and resists suffering—and asserts God's desire for relations that promote human flourishing, affirms God's ongoing involvement in human history, and invites us to work in partnership with God toward that end.

### **Hope and God's Historical Fidelity**

Williams' affirmation of God's historical and ongoing involvement in our lives is also shared by Rubem Alves in *A Theology of Human Hope*, and Walter Brueggemann in *Hope In History*. I believe that they might also encourage young black women to *holler* with confidence that God remains faithful to creating a just and life-affirming world, which Alves would call humanization, and that they are subjects in God's historical project. Rubem Alves, a contemporary of Moltmann's and also writing in the nineteen-sixties shares Moltmann's concern about the suffering and inhumanity of the world, and draws attention to the failure of technology and theology to adequately redress the problem.<sup>569</sup> However, rather than looking to the ultimate fulfillment of hope, Alves proposes a new language of hope for the community of faith that acknowledges human

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<sup>569</sup> Alves, Rubem A., *A Theology of Human Hope*, (New York: Corpus Publications, 1969).

suffering and leads to the emergence of human consciousness in search of freedom or *humanization* in the present and into the future.<sup>570</sup> Therefore, his theological conception is grounded in God's ongoing activity in history *in spite of* human frailties and limitations, and the existential imperative that persons and communities participate in creating a more *human* world.<sup>571</sup>

Walter Brueggemann, writing in the late nineteen-eighties and concerned about the tendency of Christian persons to “hold to a religious hope that is detached from the realities of the historical process,” argues that we must understand hope from the perspective of God's *purpose* or *plan* for the world.<sup>572</sup> Therefore, he emphasizes the historical emergence of hope and contends that hope is “the resilient conviction that the processes of historical interaction are to be understood in relation to some overriding purpose that prevails in odd but uncompromising ways.”<sup>573</sup> That is, human hope is grounded in the *plan* of God. As does Williams in her re-visioning of redemption, Alves and Brueggemann seek to expand our conception of hope as not only that which will be fully actualized in the eschatological future, but as a present reality in the lives of human persons and communities.

### **Humanization, Hope and the Vocation for Freedom**

I begin our discussion with Rubem Alves who contends that hope is essential to the process of humanization and the necessity of creating and sustaining a more *human*

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>571</sup> Alves prefers “human” to describe his concern for humanization, as opposed to the more commonly used “humane.”

<sup>572</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Hope Within History*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 3.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 2. He also asserts that this conviction is most often “expressed as ‘plan’ in some of the most eloquent affirmation of the [biblical] text,” as in Jeremiah 29:11-14 and Isaiah 55:8-9.



world.<sup>574</sup> Therefore, he seeks a language of faith that can sustain us in hope and create transformative possibilities. Alves initiates his reflections on hope by revealing a new type of consciousness that is aware of the reality of poverty and exploitation in the world and understands itself as powerful to change the world which he calls “proletariat consciousness.”<sup>575</sup> The *proletariat consciousness* is evinced in persons who experience themselves as a part of a larger community or masses in their recognition of oppression and concern for humanization and freedom.<sup>576</sup> It is an “ecumenical phenomenon, which unites peoples from the Third World with blacks, students and other groups of the affluent nations.”<sup>577</sup> As a form of human consciousness not “delimited by national, economic, social or racial boundaries,” therefore, the proletariat consciousness affords persons the opportunity to unite across boundaries for a common cause.<sup>578</sup> Persons who are proletariat are critically aware of the political powers that seek to keep history closed and inhibit them from creating their own history.<sup>579</sup> Unlike the “oppressed consciousness,” proletariat persons analyze the impact that domination has had on their existence and respond by resisting domestication, silencing and paralysis and committing themselves to liberation.<sup>580</sup> Therefore, Alves develops a theology of hope that supports

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<sup>574</sup> Alves prefers “human” to describe his concern for humanization, as opposed to the more commonly used “humane.”

<sup>575</sup> Alves, 6.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid. Alves reveals evidence of the proletariat consciousness in three groups: (a) the masses of impoverished peoples of the *Third World*. *Third World* is an expression of “refusal to be boxed into the ideological classifications which the Cold War created. They did not belong to either of the two worlds—East or West. Theirs was a Third World, the world of poverty, the world of the have-nots. They were underdeveloped” (7). (b) North American blacks who “came to realize that they were not simply poor. *They were made poor...* [as] the consequence of a colonial relationship”(8). (c) Students in the U.S. during the 1960s that became conscious of oppression and embraced activism (9).

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 12.

his concern for humanization and that creates the kind of human consciousness that can critique and resist oppression and lead to concrete historical action.

As opposed to a theology of hope grounded in eschatology, per Moltmann, Alves argues that “*hope is not derived from an ahistorical idea of the perfect society; it is rather simply the positive shape which the negation of the negative and inhuman of the present takes.*”<sup>581</sup> When one negates the present as the final shape of the world, one’s “consciousness then projects itself in the direction of the future, giving birth to hope.”<sup>582</sup> Similarly, the proletariat consciousness is constituted by the dialectic between negation and hope—the negation of the present situation of “pain, suffering, injustice and defuturization” and hope toward the future born of that negation.<sup>583</sup> Alves argues that hope is born, not of an a priori promise, therefore, but when human persons experience pain and dehumanization in the present and apprehend the causal relationship between their suffering and the socio-political structure of the world. Similarly, Paulo Freire maintains that in order to “surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its cause, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.”<sup>584</sup> Hope, therefore, as the positive shape which the negation of negativity takes requires critical awareness of the negating situation.

Hope born of the negation and deconstruction of suffering creates a new self understanding or consciousness. Persons experience themselves as subjects in the world;

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>584</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 29.

as those who possess the power necessary to create their own history.<sup>585</sup> History can become more human, therefore, when persons use their power to end suffering and create a new tomorrow rather than to perpetuate the present order. Thus he urges all persons to become proletariat in the world so that the “vocation for freedom” might become their priority.<sup>586</sup>

However, Alves reveals a tension when the proletariat consciousness is considered within the context of a Christian theology of hope. On the one hand, he affirms the necessity of creating a more human world and agrees the proletariat person evince the kind of human consciousness that understands itself, not as impotent, mute and submerged, but as powerful to change the world in which we live. On the other hands, he is concerned that for the proletariat consciousness, politics becomes “the new gospel, the annunciation of the good news that, if [humanity] emerges from passivity and reflexivity, as the subject of history, a new future can be created.”<sup>587</sup> In other word, Alves is concerned that the paradigm of humanization so conceived is properly political humanism—humanism based upon humanity’s freedom to re-create the world. Even more, Alves maintains that this paradigm reflects *humanistic messianism* in that it believes that humans can change the world by the power of humans alone; an assertion

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<sup>585</sup> Alves, 16.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., By “vocation for freedom” Alves is referring to participation in the ongoing efforts toward humanization. He will argue later that messianic humanism’s faith in the God who delivers *in spite of* is central to this vocational emphasis (*cf.* 75-84). Here, however, Alves is emphasizing all persons, those who are poor, oppressed and dominated and those who participate in and perpetuate oppression must become *free human beings; free for* the creation of a world in which all persons are subjects of history not victims of objectification. The closed world of the present not only creates reflexivity in those who are victimized, but the consciousness of the victimizers is also reflexively determined (colonized) by the reification of the present.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

that history invalidates more often than not.<sup>588</sup> Thus he concludes *humanistic messianism* is inadequate to reconcile human liberation from a historical perspective. Rather, he contends that history bears out the “historical experience of freedom and liberation ‘in spite of,’ when all subjective and objective possibilities of freedom immanent in history had been aborted.”<sup>589</sup> Therefore, he argues that “liberation ‘in spite of’” or *messianic humanism* is more indicative of human experience and God’s involvement in history.<sup>590</sup>

Alves develops his argument in favor of messianic humanism by way of a lengthy discussion of the relationship between the language of political humanism and that of technology and theology. However, given the limits of this discussion and our previous engagement with Moltmann’s theology of hope, I will limit my reflections to a brief treatment of Alves’ critique of Moltmann’s theology of hope.<sup>591</sup> Alves maintains that the consciousness of the community of faith in Moltmann’s theology is similar to that of political humanism in its “refusal to admit that history has come to a close...and [its] belief that we do not have to think and behave as functions of a given system.”<sup>592</sup> Human persons are liberated from the restrictions imposed by oppression and are made free to live responsive to “the hope which the divine promise creates.”<sup>593</sup> Although he affirms Moltmann’s openness of the future, Alves also refutes three of Moltmann’s assertions.

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<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>591</sup> Alves’ argument in favor of messianic humanism is very lengthy and is advanced in opposition to the language of technology and theology. Theologically, he treats Existentialism, Karl Barth’s theologies of *crisis* and *election*, and Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of hope extensively. He challenges the adequacy of each for creating a theology of hope that is conversant with political humanism. Cf. 17-55 for a full discussion of Alves’ critique of technology, Existentialism and Karl Barth.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

The first is Moltmann's claim that hope is born of the contradiction between the present world of suffering, represented in the cross, and the promises of God and his assertion that the word of promise makes one aware of the inadequacy of the present.<sup>594</sup> Political humanism, to the contrary, asserts that one's humanness and corporeal experience of pain makes one aware of inadequacy, thus inadequacy is "simply a reflection of the inhumanity of the situation."<sup>595</sup> In response, the human conscious stretches toward the exploration of the unfinished character of [one's] reality, looking for possibilities that will eliminate the negativity of [the] present."<sup>596</sup> In other words, inadequacy compels persons to seek alternatives.

Secondly, Alves argues that Moltmann's assertion that the promises of God are the *primum movens* stands outside of history.<sup>597</sup> If the promises initiated history, he argues, then there can be no history without consciousness of the promises and of the resurrection of Christ. Further, he maintains that if the cross stands for the *god-forsakenness of all things*, then the world can only become history by a totally new *creation out of nothing*—"an act of 'creatio ex nihilo,' an act, however, that never become history, and that is made present to us only in the form of promise."<sup>598</sup> Alves characterizes this conception of hope as transcendent, always ahead and pulling history toward the future, but never actually entering history.<sup>599</sup> He also argues that Moltmann's future orientation depoliticizes hope in that it loses the political character of what must

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<sup>594</sup> Ibid., 59. Alves argues that Moltmann's conception of hope describes a future that is made open through "reflection" rather than through concrete action in history.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid., 61. He indicates that hope is "always elusive, always ahead, never present, never history, always act, never being, only apprehended in the proclamation of the word" in Moltmann's theology.

be done to maintain an existence that is truly human.<sup>600</sup> In contrast Alves argues that history is not becoming progressively more open but that humans must *make* history open through “confrontation with the powers that keep it captive.”<sup>601</sup> This is paradigmatically represented in the cross and resurrection. The cross, therefore, is indicative of the destructive powers that seek to keep human history closed, in agreement with Williams, and the Resurrection represents freedom’s conflict with historical oppression. That is, the resurrection is *the positive shape which the negation of the negative takes*. Therefore, history was set in motion by the “dialectic of freedom, as it is incarnated in the world’s sufferings, and which, as a consequence, gives birth to negation, hope and action.”<sup>602</sup> That is, hope is born of the dialectic between cross and resurrection; between the world of suffering and our hope for a new tomorrow.<sup>603</sup>

Finally, political humanism challenges Moltmann’s suggestion that the Christian Church is the vehicle through which the promises of God are announced, the apostle of hope.<sup>604</sup> Alves asserts that it “is simply...not true that the Church has been the midwife of the future,” citing instances in which the church has failed in its proclamation and participation in creating a new tomorrow. Rather he includes secular movements committed to humanization as purveyors of hope alongside, and at times in the absence of religious communities.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> Ibid., 64. Alves argues that Moltmann’s hope reflects a philosophy of life or *Weltanschauung* that “sees the world as an open process. The given, therefore, is a process open to the future possibilities of righteousness” (64).

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid., 66.

At the conclusion of his critique of theology, technology, and political humanism, Alves affirms theology and political humanism as appropriate dialogue partners for the construction of a language of faith with humanization as its central concern. Therefore, he explicates the language of messianic humanism as an alternative for Christian communities and others who are committed to humanization and who want to maintain a strong grounding in Christian theology.

### **Towards a New Language for the Community of Faith**

Alves' critique of the language of theology and political humanism reveals that despite their points of contention, many Christians share political humanism's concern for freedom; "its negation of the inhuman in the present, its openness to hope, its concern for the transformation of negation and hope into history through political action."<sup>606</sup> Therefore, he seeks to create a language of hope that can add to the promises of political humanism while not abandoning the language of the Church with the intent of constituting a new community with a new consciousness committed to the task of human liberation or the "*vocation for freedom.*"<sup>607</sup>

The new language, *messianic humanism*, asserts that humanization and liberation are made possible by "a power which, being free from history, and therefore not being

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid., 69. Alves explains, drawing from Gerhard Ebeling's *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), that "languages are expressions of a certain spirit... This means that in order to be truthfully spoken, the spirit of the language must be expressive of the spirit of the man who speaks it." Therefore, his attention to the language of the community of faith has to do with the need to identify a language that authentically reflects the spirit of the faith while at the same time the spirit of the person who speaks it. He indicates that many Christians struggle to find this kind of continuity: "They find themselves caught by the contradiction between, on the one hand, the spirit of the language of faith they were taught to speak, and, on the other, their own spirit, dominated by the vision of and passion for human liberation." Therefore, Alves intends to create a language of hope that is reflective of the faith and of the human passion for humanization.

exhausted by the statistical-quantitative possibilities that history displays, is ‘free for’ history and therefore creates possibilities which could not be dreamed of by the means of calculation.”<sup>608</sup> In other words, humanization is possible by the God whose activity in human history is not predicated upon what seems historically possible or efficacious; the God who acts *in spite of* seemingly insurmountable circumstances, human frailty or negligence.<sup>609</sup>

Alves grounds this new language in Israel’s historical deliverance from slavery in Egypt and contends that their deliverance cannot be understood based solely on what seemed possible to their existential situation. As Alves suggests, “the yoke of slavery was heavy” and they could not conceive the possibility of freedom. Thus, Alves maintains that they were “forced to be free.”<sup>610</sup> They did not seek their own deliverance but were *made free* by the delivering power of God *in spite of*. As history progressed, their recollection of God’s historical deliverance *in spite of* created a new understanding of what might be possible for their lives and “offered a new ground of hope in the present.”<sup>611</sup> In other words, Israel’s limited view of reality began to change and a new language that affirms God’s deliverance *in spite of* emerged.

Messianic humanism reveals that their experience of liberation in the past was the “clue” to the possibility of liberation in the present, securing them in hope.<sup>612</sup> Thus Alves describes messianic humanism as “a language that refers to what is possible in history from the perspective of the historical experience of the community *with* the power

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<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid., 91.



of efficacy ‘in spite of.’”<sup>613</sup> It is language about God; language that identifies God with God’s liberating power. Israel’s perception of reality changed and they began to “think in the present from the perspective of the possibilities of humanization which that past experience had created.”<sup>614</sup> However, rather than absolutizing the past or relativizing the future, they maintained a dialectical tension between past and present.

That is, Israel brought to its remembrance of the past “its experience of suffering and joy of the present.”<sup>615</sup> At the same time, remembering the past forced “the present to remain open” to the probability of God’s activity *in spite of*.<sup>616</sup> When the dialectic between past and present is maintained, human persons become free for history; free to learn and draw strength from the successes and failures of the past as well as discern new possibilities for living into the future. Thus Alves argues that the practice of remembering, only as it serves the present, is a “liberating possibility.”<sup>617</sup> As a result, the consciousness of ancient Israel was a consciousness of *hope against hope*; a consciousness of a people “created in the past by the power of God” who acts *in spite of*.<sup>618</sup>

Alves maintains that the same consciousness was evident in the New Testament Church. Therefore, when Jesus proclaimed the Gospel, he was announcing “the immediacy of that political reality of power in which liberation was possible and offered: The Kingdom of God. The Gospel is thus the annunciation of the historical reality of the

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<sup>613</sup> Ibid., 90. Alves indicates that messianic humanism was “born out of the experience of historical efficacy not as the result of the power of [humanity] but as given to [them], efficacy as grace, efficacy ‘in spite of.’”

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 91.

ongoing politics of God, which expressed power that invades history.”<sup>619</sup> That is, Jesus’ liberating and delivering activity *in spite of* evinced God’s “politics of liberation,” confirming Jesus’ messianic designation.<sup>620</sup> Jesus identified himself completely with “God’s messianic activity,” as did his followers, and expanded God’s historical impetus for freedom to the *now* of first-century Palestine.<sup>621</sup> Consequently, the consciousness of the New Testament Church also attested to the liberating historical event in which messianic humanism was born and God’s delivering activity *in spite of*. Alves maintains that God is still delivering *in spite of* and encourages persons today to adopt the language of messianic humanism as the language of faith that is responsive to our desire for humanization and our reliance upon God as the primary agent of deliverance and humanization.<sup>622</sup>

Pedagogically, Alves’ assertion that God delivers *in spite of* and his attention to the remembrance as a liberating possibility is persuasive when considered in light of the present investigation because of its potential for revealing God’s fidelity to humanization in the biblical witness as well as in the experiences of persons and communities throughout history and into the present. Therefore, a pedagogy of hope might help young black women remember their cultural and familial stories with attention to those situations in which God’s intervention *in spite of* seems evident. Similarly, a pedagogy of hope might help young black women read the biblical text in dialogue with their own joys and sorrows, as Williams does with Hagar’s story, in an effort to unearth parallels

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<sup>619</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., 90. Specifically, Alves argues that in Israel’s history and today, God exercises “transcendent freedom which [is] wholly determined to be for a new [humanity], a new time, a new earth.”

that engender hope, negate suffering, and reveal God's deliverance *in spite of*.<sup>623</sup>

Attention to pedagogy might also afford young black women opportunities for celebrating the life-affirming aspects of their relationships with self, with God and with other human persons as well as garner strength from testimony and/or other rituals that evoke memory and emphasize wellbeing as normative for their existence. What I am suggesting is that messianic humanism's declaration that God delivers *in spite of* offers young black women and other silenced persons an opportunity to recall and rehearse God's activity in the past as an indicator of God's presence with and for them in the present and into the future.

### **Enriching the Language**

Walter Brueggemann's theological conception of hope deepens Alves' assertion that remembering the past can create liberating possibilities in the present by drawing attention to Israel's liturgical practice of remembering their formative narrative and its efficacy for creating concrete historical praxis. Not only did they remember God's deliverance *in spite of* (Alves) but the rehearsal of their story afforded them the opportunity to publicly articulate their pain and negate suffering and oppression as normative for their existence.

Brueggemann argues that Israel's faith formation, their sense of identity, took place under the "liturgical prism of liberation" as demonstrated in the Exodus narrative.<sup>624</sup> By "liturgical" Brueggemann means "the public process carried on in a sustained and regular way in the community, whereby the community appropriates its

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<sup>623</sup> One example of this is Anne Wimberly's "story-linking" approach to Christian education.

<sup>624</sup> Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, 10.

normative and its governing metaphors.”<sup>625</sup> In other words, as the community told and retold their formative story they also recalled, constructed and reaffirmed their shared identity as a people “*enmeshed but nonetheless destined for freedom.*”<sup>626</sup> Rehearsal of the story permitted “each new generation to appropriate it and to participate in its peculiar angle of vision.”<sup>627</sup> The Exodus narrative revealed a God who delivers despite historical circumstances or human participation and exposed *Pharaoh’s world* as inauthentic and vulnerable to the power of God. Therefore, Israel’s faith formation created a way of perceiving reality that led to the *critique of ideology*, the *articulation and embrace of pain* and the *practice of social imagination* as transformative practices.

The *critique of ideology*, the dismantling or deconstruction of the contrived world of the empire in light of their formative story, is evinced in Israel’s insistence that even though they were *enmeshed* in the empire, “*we do not belong to Pharaoh’s world.*”<sup>628</sup> As Brueggemann explains, each generation of Israelites begins life fully aware that they have been claimed by a stable and productive imperial world that “generates food and bestows life for all its adherents.”<sup>629</sup> They understand that they lived in a contrived world and that their enslavement was deliberate, as per Alves’ contention that *Third World* and African American peoples were not simply poor but “made poor” by the powers that ordered their existence. They know no world prior to the empire and concede that it possesses the power to shape their existential social reality, yet they do not “accept that locus as proper or normative... for one knows without being told that they belong,

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<sup>625</sup> Ibid.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 11. Brueggemann cites Exodus 1:2-14, 5:7-9, 17-19, Exodus 6-10 as evidence of Israel’s critique of ideology. Cf. pp. 13-16 for full discussion.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

not to the empire but to YHWH.”<sup>630</sup> Thus, rather than settle for the inevitability of enslavement they recall their formative story and affirm repeatedly that YHWH is the agent of their deliverance, dismantling, deconstructing and delegitimizing the power of the empire. Therefore, their frequent and regular liturgical enactment (communal remembrance) of YHWH’s activity on their behalf strengthened each new generation to resist the empire’s seductive and insidious assertion of invulnerability and to critique its ideology and social construction.<sup>631</sup>

In addition to the *critique of ideology*, their liturgical practice led to the *public processing of pain*, “an intentional and communal act of expressing grievance which is unheard of and risky under such an absolute regime.”<sup>632</sup> As the narrative indicates, they cried out, announcing that they would “no longer bow before the imperial ideology because the slaves had noticed that the ideology did not square with the reality of pain in their own lives.”<sup>633</sup> That is, they expressed their pain publicly and communally, which Brueggemann characterizes as subversive and revolutionary.<sup>634</sup> Brueggemann argues that when “persons experience their pain privately and in isolation, no social power is generated... [but] when there is a meeting, there is a social anger which generates risky, passionate social power” (Towne’s *communal lament*).<sup>635</sup> In ancient Israel, the people

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 13. This idea is similar to my suggestion in chapter 1 that *Repetition and constancy of exposure increases legitimacy in the eyes of the viewer and increases the probability that the representation will be accepted as an accurate reflection of the real world*. Although I use it in the negative sense to demonstrate the mimetic power of negating images, myths and ideologies, the pedagogical premise remains that the things to which we regularly participate possess the potential to shape our understanding and way of being in the world.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid. He clarifies that the revolutionary act is not that one experiences pain but rather the public processing of pain.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid., 17. He also suggests that the fear of this kind of social power is also why every regime prohibits social assembly

take the initiative by articulating their discontent and ultimately YHWH secures their deliverance. Strengthened by this new found power—the power of communal lament—the Israelites form “a counter community around an alternative perception of reality.”<sup>636</sup>

While Brueggemann agrees with Alves that the ancient Hebrews did not make themselves free, he reads the narrative from a different angle of vision. He draws attention to their corporeal experience of suffering and public outcry, asserting that even though they were not crying out to YHWH or to any one in particular, YHWH “received, resolved and honored” their pain.<sup>637</sup> In other words, although they articulated their pain and critiqued ideology—they *hollered*—the decisive factor in their deliverance was not their own effort but YHWH, the “liberating agent outside the system who turns out to be reliable and powerful.”<sup>638</sup> Yet, human effort was not completely absent. Brueggemann maintains that while their faith could not be formed without YHWH, it was also grounded in their “recognition of and communal articulation of the pain that belongs inevitably to the social process where our faith are both evoked and crushed.”<sup>639</sup> As a result of these subversive acts, the critique of ideology, the articulation of pain, and YHWH’s response, Israel assumes a new identity which liberates them to imagine the possibility of a new reality.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid. The civil rights movement and protests of the 1960s and the resultant social power seem a fitting example of the necessity of publicly processing pain.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid. Brueggemann suggests that the critique of ideology and the public processing of pain are dialectically related with no clear indication of one element’s primacy over the other. They each reinforce and evoke the other. However, he also indicates that his “sociological inclination is that critique of ideology come first” (19). While this construction is tempting, I might rather agree with his suggestion that the relationship is dialectical and not hierarchical as it seems feasible either could evoke the other.

Brueggemann's attention to story and remembering serves as an important reminder to the Black Church and community of the formative possibilities and necessity of keeping our historical story alive. Story as an emphasis also resonates with teaching and preaching in the Black church in which the story of God's liberating power in the past is linked to the historical experiences of African Americans. Linking the Exodus narrative and our own story of deliverance from slavery, for example, has been an important formative reminder that God remains active in the concreteness of human life and affirms a just and liberating existence. Anne Wimberly describes this practice as *story-linking*, "a process whereby we connect parts of our everyday stories with the Christian faith story in the Bible and the lives of exemplars of the faith outside the Bible" as a means to discerning ethical liberating action or Christian vocation.<sup>641</sup> The Black Church might also intensify its liturgical practice of remembering and re-appropriating story by focusing more intently upon creating links between the experiences of historical and contemporary women and biblical narratives, as Williams does with Hagar's story, in an effort to help young black women and other vulnerable persons discern life-affirming alternatives.

Brueggemann's construction also reflects something of a paradigm shift for the Black Church in that rather than suggesting that persons (typically women) should endure suffering without complaint and hope for God's deliverance (I might call this *wishing* rather than *hoping*), Brueggemann encourages those who experience pain as well as those who ascertain the inadequacy of the present social arrangement to publicly articulate their discontent. They can and should cry out to God to move the mountainous limitations that

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<sup>641</sup> Cf. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 39.

they face as a reflection of their reliance upon God and confidence in God's fidelity to a just and humane existence. For young black women, publicly articulating pain suggests that they do not have to remain silent amidst the negating myths, images and ideologies that inundate their lives, but can voice their discontent—holler, lament, cry-out—in anticipation that God will *receive, resolve and honor* their cry.<sup>642</sup>

In Brueggemann's construction, the *critique of ideology* and the *public processing of pain*, therefore, lead to the final element in Israel's faith formation, *the release of new social imagination* metaphorically represented as the "Kingdom of God."<sup>643</sup> The Kingdom of God represents a new social order in which justice and freedom are the norms and which stands in opposition to and judgment of "every other social construction of power and authority."<sup>644</sup> It "enable[s] those who have not hoped for a long time to hope, those who have not imagined for a long time to imagine."<sup>645</sup> In other words, Israel's practice of deconstructing the social order and giving voice to their pain enabled them to "design and implement alternative scenarios" that had been incomprehensible before they knew themselves as God's people who were destined for freedom.<sup>646</sup> This new social imagination was evinced liturgically in Miriam's and Moses' anthems of conquest in Exodus 15:1-18, 21, then politically as they travel toward Sinai, and finally legislatively as they sought to make "God's covenant kingdom concrete."<sup>647</sup> That is,

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<sup>642</sup> Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, 18.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid., 22. As a paradigm for a pedagogy that can secure young black women in hope, though I agree that the image of the *Kingdom of God* is ultimate, I might also consider incorporating Gutiérrez's suggestion of intermediate images—utopian images—as penultimate and realizable possibilities in the present.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid. He also contends that "the metaphor, 'Kingdom of God,' stands at the center of the social imagination of Jesus."

<sup>645</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., 22, 23. As an example of concrete political and economic practice, Brueggemann cites accounts of how Israel ordered its community in Canaan as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. Included in this



ultimately new social imagination should energize the dreamer toward concrete historical praxis that is reflective of God's ongoing activity in human history.

Faith formation that leads to hope, therefore, does more than create a dream or new image of reality. It embodies the communal liturgical and social praxes of deconstruction, public expression of pain and new imagination in accordance with God's ongoing activity in the world and with the intent of creating concrete historical change. This kind of faith formation constitutes a new community of persons who are radically reliant upon God, and who understand that their individual wellbeing is intimately connected to the wellbeing of the entire community. Therefore, Brueggemann describes hope as "the resilient conviction that the processes of historical interaction are to be understood in relation to some overriding purpose that prevails in odd but uncompromising ways."<sup>648</sup> Persons see themselves and their world through the *prism of freedom* as normative for their lives and are convinced of God's fidelity to its actualization. Thus, in agreement with Alves, Brueggemann maintains that "hope is relentlessly historical and history is cunningly hope-filled."<sup>649</sup> That is, hope reminds us that the way things are in any historical period is provisional and that God is always opening up new historical possibilities.<sup>650</sup>

Those of us who want to live with hope, therefore, "must take care not to surrender our imaginative power to any pretension of absoluteness," as no empire or

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new ordering were laws concerning the year of jubilee, cities of refuge, hospitality for runaway slaves, and non-exploitative payments of wages to the poor (23).

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>650</sup> Ibid., 80.

social construction is impervious to change.<sup>651</sup> Rather, Brueggemann argues, hope emerges among those who articulate their pain and who discover “again and again that hope and new social possibility come in the midst of such grief.”<sup>652</sup> His attention to the necessity of articulated pain also leads Brueggemann to suggest that “hope does not appear among the oppressed silent sufferers” who cannot speak their hurt or imagine alternative possibilities.<sup>653</sup> Specifically, he argues that “Where grief is denied and suffering is kept isolated, unexpressed and unprocessed in a community, we may be sure hopelessness will follow.”<sup>654</sup>

I might amplify “*a community*,” as the articulation of pain may need to occur in a venue that is outside of the reach of the oppressing entity. For example, enslaved Africans in the U.S. articulated their pain and expressed their discontent at meetings in the brush harbors, hidden from the purview of the white slaveholding community. The young black women with whom I spoke, while reticent about expressing their discontent in public, freely articulated their pain in the safe space of our interview which may have also been an *until* space for them. This is also true of other persons and communities whose articulation of pain could lead to intensified oppression, such as lesbians, gays, and other persons who do not identify as heterosexual. I agree that dismantling oppressive mechanisms ultimately demands public action and will require those who are

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid., 87. It is unclear whether or not Brueggemann is suggesting that those who suffer in silence are *hopeless* or that prolonged suppression and silencing can lead to hopelessness. This is especially confusing given his earlier assertion that hopelessness is most evident among the prosperous: “Because hope has such a revolutionary function, it is more likely the failure to hope—hopelessness—happens among the affluent, the prosperous, the successful, the employable, the competent, for whom the present system works so well. We are the ones who are likely to be seduced into taking the present...too seriously and to equating it with reality” (81).

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

oppressed to articulate their pain and critique of ideology in the larger public sphere. Until that time it seems feasible for them to cry-out in spaces that are safe-enough in anticipation of communities in which resonances of hope echo God's life-affirming intent for creation.

### **Hope and the Spirit of God**

The relationship between hope-filled human action and God's activity in human history seems dynamic in that while the human cry for deliverance evokes God's notice (Brueggemann), God's presence and activity on our behalf also compels responsive human action. The response to which Brueggemann invites us, as I will discuss in the next section, is to participate in the "history-making" process. Similarly, Alves invites human persons to become involved in God's time; the time initiated by God and to which we have access by the presence of God's Spirit in the world.

To involve ourselves in God's time is "to participate in a present that determines itself for the creation of a new tomorrow."<sup>655</sup> That is, "In the now we have the presence of the future made historical through God's action."<sup>656</sup> God's presence in the historical *now* engenders the future and keeps history moving forward. God is neither confined to the past accessible only by remembrance nor situated in the future awaiting our arrival. Rather, "God's actions in every moment create an explosiveness that is both present and

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid. Alves also indicates that "when the language of messianic humanism refers to the will of God...it is rather indicating that because time expresses the pressure of the spirit, of freedom, as it seeks its goal, it can never be stopped. Therefore every present must be experienced as time-toward-the-new-tomorrow. The new tomorrow is thus the sole determination of the present. God is thus experienced as the presence of the future. He is freedom, in history, which makes it transcend its present form toward a new possibility of human liberation" (94).

<sup>656</sup> Ibid., 96.

negates the present.”<sup>657</sup> In other words, God is actively involved in our *now* transforming history and creating possibilities while also negating the negativity of the present.

The Spirit of God, God’s self-expression to humanity, is present with us in every moment, and penetrating every aspect of human existence.

Because God acts, “every situation is pregnant with ultimate possibility; every moment is made explosive by the presence of an infinite power.” ...[Humanity] and creation are thus pregnant, having within themselves a new life, a new tomorrow, engendered by the Spirit which, in the words of Paul, dwells in you (Rom. 8:11). It is because the Spirit is present that the reality of the presence of the future, the groaning of travail and the reality of hope are created. We hope, we are determined for the future because we are pregnant. We are “infected” with the presence of the future.<sup>658</sup>

In other words, while the church may be one expression of God’s presence in the world, the Spirit creates yearning and anticipation throughout creation. The Spirit creates restlessness and yearning for a world characterized by human freedom and the cessation of suffering, not in the eschatological future but in the historical *now* of our existence.<sup>659</sup>

This yearning negates the negativity of the present and compels human persons to respond, giving birth to the future “amid the history where [humanity] is living.”<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid. Cf. Paul Sevier Minear’s *Eyes of Faith: A study in the Biblical Point of View*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946) 16. Also, note that contrary to Moltmann, Alves argues that it is not hope that creates the pregnancy but humanity’s impregnation with the Spirit that creates hope. Cf. p. 179, footnote 25.

<sup>659</sup> Alves’ conception of the Spirit differs significantly from Moltmann’s, as suggested in footnote 96. For Moltmann, the Spirit opens the way to the future, but by future he intends “eternal life” and not concrete human history. That is, Jesus’ resurrection points us “towards life in the Spirit and towards the eternal life that is the consummation of all things.” Therefore, life in the Spirit “lies before us” and awaits the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises. We hope for and await, therefore, the redemption of the body and all of creation. (Cf. Moltmann 212-14)

<sup>660</sup> Alves, 96. Thomas Long similarly asserts that the Church is not “an organization founded by Jesus” but rather “an expression of God’s future arrived prematurely in the historical present. It is a work of the Spirit.” Cf. Long, Thomas, “When Half Spent Was the Night,” 13.

Therefore we are not moving toward the future but, in partnership with God, engendering the future “in the womb of the present.”<sup>661</sup> Human persons become *midwives* in that our actions are “intended to help history give birth to the new tomorrow which now make it groan, suffer and hope as does a woman in the pains of childbirth.”<sup>662</sup> For example, Jesus’ proclamation that the Kingdom of God is at hand was true in that God’s liberating action in Jesus’ *now* transformed lives in the present and pressed toward the not yet determined future.<sup>663</sup> Therefore, participation in God’s time is an act of human freedom and intentionality made possible by the emergence of human consciousness determined by faith in God’s deliverance *in spite of*.<sup>664</sup>

Alves argues that God, as the presence of the future, confronts that which seeks to keep the future closed—“unfreedom”—and extends the possibility of hope to those whose consciousness has been domesticated by oppression.<sup>665</sup> In other words, when the oppressed are no longer able to remain negative toward the present, God suffers with them and joins them in negating negativity, assuring them that their “personal negation of the negativity in history is not a lonely voice.”<sup>666</sup> The cross embodies the image of God as Co-sufferer as well as the One who negates negativity and creates possibilities. This dual characterization of the cross—the God who suffers and the God who negates

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<sup>661</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., 109. Alves argues that the history of un-freedom, which he characterizes as “the fall,” reveals that when ancient Israel became uncertain about the future they acted in fear rather than in response to God politic of freedom, which bred pride and love of self (*amor sui*) without regard for others, and thus injustice and oppression. This kind of fear is most evident in nations and governments that raise their will to power “to the status of law...[and] behave as though they were the embodiment of truth and justice and that, therefore, they are destined to eternity.”

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., 118.

negativity—leads Alves to suggest that “Suffering is...the mother of hope.”<sup>667</sup> That is the cross reflects hope because it reveals and negates the powers that seek to keep history closed while simultaneously preparing the way for the liberating possibility of the resurrection.<sup>668</sup>

The resurrection subsequently infused history with “‘the life-giving spirit’ (I Cor 15:45), One who was making [humanity] and the world alive again for hope and for the future.” The Spirit freed humanity *for* the future and is the presence of hope in our lives and in our world.<sup>669</sup> Therefore, the resurrection is not only a historical event but it is our clue to “what we can expect from history, as being penetrated, liberated, made alive by God’s freedom for history.”<sup>670</sup> It also identifies what we can expect of ourselves as those whose lives are likewise infused by the Spirit.

The reality of the Spirit’s presence and efficacy in our lives is shared by Anne Wimberly who maintains that Christian persons sense a “deep inner yearning...to move beyond external and internal barriers that block their experiences of positive relationships with God, self, others and all things.”<sup>671</sup> Williams names the flourishing of God’s spirit in the world as that which represents the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it.<sup>672</sup> In other words, it seems that human persons are energized to live with hope not only by remembering that God delivers *in spite of*, but by the presence and creative activity of the Spirit in our lives. The impetus for hope, in other

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<sup>667</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>671</sup> Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 20. Wimberly does not use the word “Spirit” but does characterize this yearning as internal and as reflective of a deep desire for Christian vocation.

<sup>672</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

words, comes from God's presence in the world and in our lives, as well as from practices that help name, deconstruct, negate and redress that which prevents us from living with hope. Thus I describe *Hope* metaphorically as *that which creates within us yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of God's Spirit assuring human persons of God's presence, power and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. To live with hope* or experience hope in its active and verbal sense is to say *yes* to God's *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world.

### **To Live With Hope**

How are we to live with hope? Brueggemann argues that hope enlists persons into the "history-making" process; the ongoing practice of imagining and revealing new possibilities and working in cooperation with God toward their actualization. History-makers "believe passionately that there is a fiber of justice and righteousness that persists in the historical process and in public life, which finally cannot be violated, mocked or nullified."<sup>673</sup> When confronted with incongruence between God's justice and righteousness and the concrete reality of injustice and suffering, "History-makers raise inescapable questions about the shapes of power and well-being in history" in an effort to disclose the truth and open up new possibilities for the exercise of freedom.<sup>674</sup> History-

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<sup>673</sup> Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, 61.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. His thoughts on history-making were evoked by three factors: (1) a PTA experience with his son as the children provided on-liners about American history that reflected an uncritical acceptance of American ideology, its purported successes, and omission of its mistakes, failures and abuses of power; (2) the realization that his own education was similarly uncritical, and (3) the omission of the histories of the "people who *suffered* but who never held office and so never made the lists to be recited" (50-52). This leads him to assert that history-making is less concerned with the time-line of particular events or with the headlines (one-liners). "The real historical process...has as its function to disclose, to open, to reveal, to

makers stand with “the God of *kerygma*” who demonstrates fidelity to the promise of a just and humane world, and whose message is transformative and relentlessly hope-filled.<sup>675</sup> As with messianic humanism, history-makers evince faith in a God whose activity is not determined by historical circumstance but who freely resolves to give a future and a hope that seems incomprehensible to those who concede that the present is the only reality possible.<sup>676</sup>

Similarly, Alves argues that “in order to participate in the politics for a new tomorrow it is necessary to participate in the suffering of today.”<sup>677</sup> That is, messianic humanism invites us to enter into God’s ongoing suffering “in and for the world.”<sup>678</sup> As a result of this newly constituted consciousness, we begin to move and act in a new ways.<sup>679</sup> Our actions are “intended to help history give birth to the new tomorrow which now makes it groan, suffer and hope as does a woman in the pains of childbirth.”<sup>680</sup> Rather than acting in fear, we act as those whose hope is born of suffering yet grounded in God’s politic of freedom. Hope makes us “free from the past” and free for the future, as the past reminds us of God’s historical fidelity to humanization.<sup>681</sup> In other words, those whose consciousness is constituted by messianic humanism are always involved in

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permit the exercise of free choice and the practice of new possibility—precisely the things excluded in the ideological account of time-line and headline” (56).

<sup>675</sup> Ibid., 73. The “God of *kerygma*” is the God who promises and announces a message intended to transform the world. As an aspect of this discussion, Brueggemann identifies five elements of hope in Old Testament literature: (1) The “God who makes promises and who keeps them” in Genesis (the God of *kerygma*), (2) The God who announces “*a new social order*” in the prophetic texts of the eighth to sixth century B.C.E., (3) the apocalyptic literature’s emphasis upon dreaming “large dreams about the powerful purposes of God”, (4) emphasis upon the “Kingdom of God, the rule of God, the ordering of life according to the purpose and will of God” in prophetic and apocalyptic texts, and (5) the anticipation of the “Messiah who is to come” among Jews and Christians. Cf. 73-80.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid., 136



the work of transforming history. Thus Alves concludes his reflections by suggesting that “The transformation of history according to hope is possible, thus, only when imagination remains faithful to the earth, to the concrete objective and subjective conditions of the historical present.”<sup>682</sup>

### HOPE-FILLED MUSINGS

*“I think hope is a lot of things. It comes from within. I think it has to do with kind of what you want in the future and what you feel as though you want to happen later on or...what you think an outcome from a particular situation will be. I think hope has to do with your faith and what you believe in...what you yearn for... It’s a strong personal burning desire that you have within.”<sup>683</sup>*

I want to conclude this chapter where I began, with the women whose experiences inform this investigation and whose heart-felt expression of hope and uncertainty are indicative of the many who strain to hear the voice of hope amid the cacophony of negating assertions, images and social constructions. Their testimonies reveal the insidiousness of “whatever” as well as their deep *yearning and personal burning desire* for a life-affirming reality. I discovered that they were not alone in their “whatever;” that the black youths in Parker’s investigation also articulated faith in God but failed to discern God’s power and activity when confronted with cultural negation. So, I went in search of theological language that might help them—help us—remember that God is with us and desires our wellbeing; language that can embolden us to *holler* and engage in *communal lament*; to act in ways that create possibilities. I have responded extensively throughout the chapter and will only highlight a few insights in this conclusion.

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<sup>682</sup> Ibid. 167-168.

<sup>683</sup> Interview 1014.

As discussed above, I discovered threads of connection among the theologians and with the young women that offer rich possibilities for creating pedagogical strategies that can strengthen young black women's acuity to the voice of hope and embolden them to act. Crawford, Townes and Brueggemann helped us re-conceive the meaning of complaint and encourage us to name and articulate our pain as a practice of faith in God's ongoing presence and involvement in human history and as an expression of social power to negate oppressive systems and mechanisms. Williams, Brueggemann, Townes and Alves also reminded us that living with hope is not a solo endeavor but the work of persons and communities together as they engage in social action, enact the liturgy and create safe spaces for lament and celebration.

Throughout this investigation we also discovered and reaffirmed God's intent for a just and life-affirming existence for humanity and all of creation, both in the eschatological future, as Moltmann might argue, and in the concreteness of our everyday lives. For example, Williams' re-visioning of the cross creates a conceptual frame for creating a redemptive theology that does not perpetuate violence or mimic the historical negation that black women have experienced. Williams, Alves, and Brueggemann assert, and I agree, that God is involved in the *nowness* of our existence, making God's presence known in historical action and via the presence of God's Spirit (Williams, Alves). As I have suggested above, it is imperative that young black women experience hope as a present reality and not as something that is distant and inaccessible.

Brueggemann and Alves' attention to the constitution of human consciousness, therefore, is particularly important in light of my attention to pedagogy and to human imagination. In other words, they offer support for my suggestion that persons can learn

to live with hope in that they both assert that human consciousness is grounded in a particular understanding of God and God's activity in the world. Therefore, I resonate with Brueggemann's contention that we must guard our imaginative power and avail it to that which sustains us in hope rather than to the destructive mechanisms that seek to keep us bound.

As we move more intently toward a consideration of pedagogy, I feel confident I will be able to ground our strategies and practices in life-affirming liberatory theological language that creates wholeness. Hope encourages us to dream and eliminates our reticence about hollering on our own and others' behalf. We hear the beckoning cry for wholeness emanating throughout the cosmos and we say *yes* to God's *yes* for creation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**KERYGMA, DIDACHE AND THE GOSPEL OF HOPE**

*I'm goin' to lay down my burdens,  
 down by the riverside  
 down by the riverside  
 down by the riverside  
 I'm goin' to lay down my burdens,  
 down by the riverside  
 Ain't goin' to study war no more  
 Well I ain't goin' to study war no more, ain't goin' to study war no more,  
 study war no more, study war no more...*

2. *I'm goin' to lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside...*
3. *I'm goin' to put on my long white robe...*
4. *I'm goin' to put on my starry crown...*

Living without hope seemed unthinkable to our African ancestral mothers and fathers as they professed through hope-filled psalms that the time would come when the shackles of oppression would be broken and their war-like existence brought to an end. Even as they surrendered their bodies to the ferocity of chattel slavery, their hearts longed for a place of wholeness. And in response, they sang. In fields of sorrow and pain, in secret meetings and hidden spaces, amidst tears and screams, smiles and laughter, these women and men asserted “I’m gonna lay down my burdens down by the riverside and *study* war no more.” Drawing upon the biblical imagery of the prophets Micah and Isaiah, they *hoped against hope* that they would cross the river that led to freedom; a place where the battle would be over, where swords, shields and slave garments would be discarded and where they would *learn* a way of being alternative to the embattled existence that

encompassed their lives.<sup>684</sup> The atrocities of chattel slavery were intended to teach them the impossibility of a liberating reality, but “Down by the Riverside” and other *Negro Spirituals* reveal the tenacious hope that “propped them up on every leaning side” and would not permit them to settle for suffering and oppression as the oughtness of their existence.<sup>685</sup>

Energized and hope-filled, they negated the permanence of the present and articulated an emerging future: “I’m *goin’*” to lay down my sword and shield... I’m *goin’* to put on my starry crown, down by the riverside.” “*I’m goin’*” suggested that the future was in the process of becoming and they were already moving toward it. They anticipated this future so strongly that it evoked song and dance; imagined it so clearly that at moments they felt as though they existentially lived in it. This is not to suggest that they were somehow anesthetized against physical and psychic pain, but that their “capacity to create futures by acts of *anticipatory imagination*” sustained them in the midst of their suffering.<sup>686</sup> They anticipated, hoped for, trained and studied for an existence in which freedom would become a reality.

Something amazing happened between their corporeal experiences of chattel slavery, an ethos in which there were no discernable alternatives, at least not for enslaved Africans, and their ability to imagine new possibilities. They yearned for and anticipated

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<sup>684</sup> The specific references include Micah 4:3, “And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they *learn war* any more,” and similarly stated Isaiah 2:4 (NRSV). The Hebrew  $\text{לָמַד}$  is translated “learn” in the NRSV and KJV, “train” in the NIV and “know” in the NJPS (New Jerusalem Publication Society) translations. In each case, the suggestion is that war has been a course of study which of necessity would be eliminated and replaced by universal peace.

<sup>685</sup> The phrase “propped them up on every leaning side” is drawn from the African American religious tradition in which persons during prayer would ask God to “*prop us up on every leaning side*” or be their support in times of suffering, pain and existential struggle.

<sup>686</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xviii.

something new. Where did they get the idea that they could live free when their enchained and naked bodies were sold on auction blocks, when their children were sold away from their mothers, and bruised and beaten bodies defined their reality? How could they imagine a life-affirming future when the present seemed inimical to life and resonances of hope were all but absent in their day to day existence? Perhaps they remembered through legend, story or experiential encounters, a time when they had lived free and dignified lives; perhaps they remembered through stories that they told and retold in the slave quarter, fields and hidden meetings in the brush harbors. Perhaps as they experienced the pain of the whip or sensed the inevitability of death, something in their souls reminded them that though their bodies were abused, they were no less human than the men and women who considered them chattel, though their enslavers never told them so. Maybe, as they came to know the God of the biblical text and the people whose stories are told there, they discovered their own story and with it possibilities for a radically different way of being in the world. Whatever happened, it seems that generation after generation they chose to live, to survive, and in time, to fight for their freedom. They chose to pass on to each succeeding generation a vision that may never be realized in their life time, yet that they were hoping into existence for their children's children. What I am saying is that in order for them to live with hope they had to call forth their past *and* imagine that which they had never experienced within the bonds of slavery; to rehearse that which they only knew because it happened for someone else *and* envision that which they only knew because they felt it in their souls. They had to remember something old and live for something new, even though that for which they hoped had not become the actuality of their lives.

The act of hoping revealed the possibility of new life and reminded them in the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”<sup>687</sup> Hoping awakened them to the never ceasing testimony of their own consciousness or spirit; a consciousness constituted by critical awareness of the suffering of the present, a life affirming vision of the future, and faith in God’s ongoing presence, power and activity in the world. In other words, they heard, sensed, felt the voice of hope in the face of the despairing realities of life, and it created in them a song; a song by which they emphatically professed, *I ain’t gonna study war no more!*

How does one train for and study for a just and life affirming reality when their society repetitively reminds them that the life for which they hope is beyond their grasp? In this chapter I will investigate the process by which one learns to hope in light of the despairing realities of life, giving specific attention to the epistemological and pedagogical significance of hope-filled proclamation and education in the context of the Black Church. In other words, I will discuss the efficacy of preaching and teaching to evoke what Walter Brueggemann calls “anticipatory imagination” and create a way of knowing and being that is grounded in hope.<sup>688</sup> The assumption that undergirds this investigation is that the primary task of preaching and church education involves (1) helping human persons imagine and anticipate a just and life affirming reality for themselves and others in which love of God, affirmation of their own God createdness, and love of neighbor are the normative expression of human existence, and (2) creating

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<sup>687</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” in *The Voice of Black America: Major Speeches by Negroes in the United States, 1797-1971*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). King spoke these words at the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the S.C.L.C. in Atlanta on August 16, 1967. The phrase was borrowed from the sermon, “Of Justice and Conscience” by abolitionist and Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker in 1853. Parker said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; *the arc is a long one*, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see *I am sure it bends towards justice.*” Theodore Parker, “Of Justice and Conscience,” in *Ten Sermons of Religion*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Company, 1853).

<sup>688</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, xviii.

transformative experiences that invite and inspire them to participate fully in bringing that reality to fruition.

### **PEDAGOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND LEARNING HOPE**

In the preceding chapters, I describe *Hope* metaphorically as that which creates in human persons yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of the Spirit assuring us of God’s presence, power and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. To *live with hope*, therefore, is to say *yes* to God’s *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God’s ongoing creation of a just and humane world. The language that I use to describe *hope* in this writing is intentionally religious and “draws on the symbols and images” of the Christian tradition.<sup>689</sup> Maria Harris, in her exploration of teaching and the *religious imagination*, contends that “religion provides a way to speak about, qualify, distinguish, deepen, and direct imagination.”<sup>690</sup>

My attention to pedagogy is particularly concerned with how we might evoke images of Christian hope and energize persons to live accordingly. This is consistent with my thesis that a pedagogy of hope drawn from a contemporary cultural analysis of despair, the wisdom of young black women, educational and homiletical theory and practice, and theology can address and redress culturally induced despair as well as awaken young black women to the voice of Hope and nurture their ability to live with

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<sup>689</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1987), 16

<sup>690</sup> *Ibid.*



hope. A detailed discussion of hope and its pedagogical significance, therefore, seems important.

Why a pedagogy of hope? The answer becomes clear when we consider that Hope is not something to be “had,” but rather a disposition of the human spirit; a personification or presence of the Spirit in each person reminding us of God’s fidelity, presence and power. It is the spiritual tug that we sense; the holy indignation that we feel; that yearning for a just and life affirming existence for all persons that confronts us as truth. Hope, when we are able to sense it, inspires and energizes us toward a life responsive to God’s will. Of course, the problem is that negating images myths and ideologies, distort our ability to hear Hope’s assertion of God’s presence, power and fidelity. When accepted as authentic, they not only negate and devalue particular persons and communities while justifying the rights of others to dominate, control and possess inordinate power, but they shape our perception of reality and convince us that our efforts toward a just and life-affirming reality are futile. That is, negating representations teach us that living *for* a just and life affirming existence for all persons—living with hope—is beyond our grasp. The heart of a pedagogy of hope, therefore, is discovering how one might learn to live with hope when that which is present socially, politically and religiously appears changeless.

In the pages that follow I will discuss the efficacy of pedagogy and epistemology to strengthen young black women’s acuity to the voice of Hope with attention to Hope’s relationship to the gospel message. I will also explore the role of preaching and Christian education as conduits of hope as we move more intently toward the pedagogical model and related practices.

### Learning in United States Culture

In Chapter Three many of the women whose stories shape this investigation attempted to controvert or disprove negating representations by presenting themselves as the *supra-model* or becoming the *constant survivor*. The women were able to name their oppression and identify its source. Further, they were nurtured by trusting others and many expressed trust in God; yet they evinced culturally induced despair, perceiving themselves as powerless to challenge or change that which perpetuates their oppression. Rather than living with hope, they resigned themselves to the task of disproving negating representations and enduring oppression as though it were impervious to change, which they defined as being *strong black women*. They also employed cognitive distancing (it's not about me) or indifference to the negation that surrounded them. These responses characterized their predominant patterns for living in the present and into the future.

Learning to live with hope releases those who are oppressed from the burden of proving themselves worthy and empowers them to embrace a way of being that is consistent with God's intent for a just and life affirming world. This necessarily involves transformative pedagogies that can, as Linda Thomas asserts, "[tear] down myths that have paralyzed communities, and recreat[e] truths which have been buried in annals that contain vast sources of knowledge."<sup>691</sup> Similarly, Maxine Greene suggests that "our transformative pedagogies must relate both to existing conditions and something we are trying to bring into being, something that goes beyond a present situation."<sup>692</sup> Thomas'

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<sup>691</sup> Thomas, Linda E., "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm", *Cross Currents*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 1998-1999, p. 494.

<sup>692</sup> Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 51.

and Greene's comments support my assertion that an adequate pedagogy of hope must begin with a contemporary cultural analysis of despair and its influence in the lives of young black women—*existing conditions*. Accordingly, I've investigated the problem of culturally induced despair and its relationship to structural oppression. As I stated earlier, culturally induced despair draws its energy from persistent and repetitive cultural negation intended to strip persons of their value within the broader cultural contexts in which they live—structural oppression—and convince them that they are powerless to challenge or change the oppressive structures that encompass their lives. My investigation revealed a cultural pedagogy in which an ideology of negation, sustained and legitimized by negating representations (images, myths, caricatures), repetition and constancy of exposure (pseudo-proof, normalcy), scientific complicity (medicine, education, sociology), and imitative social practices, has influenced the shape of our laws, mores and social conventions. Their synergistic relationship has legitimized young black women's oppression in U.S. culture. I might call this a pedagogy of despair or a pedagogy of negation in that it has the potential, when left unchallenged, to create or contribute to culturally induced despair.

When viewed from the perspective of the broader community's perception of young black women, the epistemology at work is that persons create/acquire knowledge or learn through indirect contact via images, myths/stories, and caricatures that are repetitive and constant and that correspond with authoritative ideologies. Repetition and constancy of exposure to these images often convince persons that negating representations reflect the actuality of young black women's existence, as discussed earlier. Knowledge, therefore, is socially constructed and power exerts an undeniable

influence over what one is permitted to know. This is particularly evident in Larry Levine's suggestion that in particular cultural contexts, even when the evidence disproves the negating stereotype—"blacks don't really look like that"—participation in the context itself alters one's ability to see otherwise: "you look at them often enough blacks begin to look like that even if they don't."<sup>693</sup>

The same epistemological assumption is at work when this pedagogy is considered from the perspective of young black women, but the effect is different. Young black women today, as in previous generations, have learned that they must survive and struggle in a negating ethos if they are to survive at all. Similarly, they have discovered that while they may thrive economically and in certain social and religious contexts, they repeatedly meet another situation in which they must struggle to be seen, heard, valued and accepted as full and equal members of society. The women with whom I spoke revealed that oftentimes the communities from which they anticipate a word of hope, including churches, contribute to their negation and silencing, either by ignoring their voices or perpetuating some of the negating myths and images that they experience in the broader culture. They do not feel free to express themselves; they conceal their gifts and wide range of interests, for fear that they will not be accepted or fit the supra-model image—yet another delimiting image with which they must contend.

Although most of the young black women in this investigation know themselves as persons who have value, who are strong, creative, intelligent, beautiful, they are in a constant battle to overcome or break through the barriers that negating cultural myths and

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<sup>693</sup> Riggs, Marlon T. *Ethnic Notions*. Produced and directed by Marlon T. Riggs. 57 min. Berkley, CA: California Newsreel, 1986. Videocassette.

representations erect. They are tasked with proving again and again that they are worthy of remaining inside the wall that is often rebuilt immediately after they breach it. They have learned to anticipate struggle, despite their many gifts. In response, many remained resolute in their determination to stay in the struggle, if not each day at least most of the time. Others appeared to have conceded the fight and are doing what they can to survive and resist complete annihilation. Still others spoke their hopes and dreams as an act of resistance in the meantime—until they are able to physically fight for themselves—oftentimes because they are fighting for their children at the present time. All of them wept for their sisters who can't seem to fight at all or for whom the road seems too rough, as evinced by the young woman whose tears, more than her words, reflected the *tear* in her heart for her kinswomen as herself.

Heartbreak was not the end or full reflection of their stories, however. Many of these young women have also come to know themselves through story, myth, image, and relationships within caring communal/familial contexts or “holding environments” concerned with their wellbeing.<sup>694</sup> I described this dynamic as a *shared communal ethos* in an earlier publication. That is, cross-generational dialogical communities that can “provide space for inquiry and reinterpretation, confession and contestation, laughter and

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<sup>694</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 342. In his discussion of communal ideologies that promote diversity, Kegan argues that “Any ‘community of ideology,’ whether it is a culturally embedded community, and thus less visible (such as the induction of those favored by the culture into the professions), or a community of counterdominant ideology and thus necessarily visible (such as induction into feminism or Afrocentrism), can serve as a support or a holding environment for evolving the fourth order of consciousness.” Although adolescence is included in Kegan’s third order of consciousness, the concept of a “holding environment” appears appropriate to my discussion of a shared communal ethos.

lament” as persons discern meaning for their lives.<sup>695</sup> The communities that enrich young black women’s lives included their families, especially their kinswomen, church women, friendship connections and “gylanic zones” in which they experience themselves as partners with other women *and* men rather than as persons destined for negation and domination.<sup>696</sup> These familial and friendship relationships helped many of them dispel negating myths and representations and create new stories and images by which they might survive and resist negation in their journey toward *hoping*.

Linda Thomas describes this approach to knowledge creation as inclusive construction of knowledge: “inclusive construction of knowledge denotes exploring sources that culturally may be vastly different from our own epistemological points of departure.”<sup>697</sup> Thomas speaks specifically about the ways in which Eurocentric male constructions of knowledge have been given primacy and urges womanists to engage women outside of the realm of academia as sources for unearthing new paradigms for knowledge construction. For example, theoretical constructions grounded in rational thought and universal claims has predominated much of the theological discourse for centuries. Womanists, feminists and others expand and deepen the dialogue by considering the contextual significance of their theological and theoretical claims and

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<sup>695</sup> Miles, Veronice, “Living Out-Loud in a World that Demands Silence: Preaching with Adolescents,” in *Children, Youth and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, Mary Elizabeth Moore, Almeda M. Wright, eds. (St. Louise: Chalice Press, 2008), 148, 151.

<sup>696</sup> I appropriate *gylanic* as a way of talking about social constructions from Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. I use *gylanic zones* here to describe social constructions or gatherings of persons in which women and men regard each other as partners rather than subordinate and superior members of a predetermined hierarchy. Cf. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, 1995), 105. Eisler proposes *gylany* as a “real alternative to a system based on the ranking of half of humanity over the other.” She employs *androcracy* to describe a “social systems ruled through force or the threat of force by men.” In contrast, *gylanic* social systems are grounded in a partnership model that frees “both halves of humanity from the stultifying and distorting rigidity of roles imposed by the domination hierarchies inherent in androcratic society.”

<sup>697</sup> Linda Thomas, 494.

they often develop their theories in dialogue with specific communities and the unique questions and concerns that they bring to theological discourse.

The women in this study shared their stories and spoke about their joys and struggles, yearnings and dreams, concerns and commitments on their own terms and with their own words. Their words deepen our understanding of the contextual significance of knowledge creation and the power of community to *prop us up* when difficult life situations seek to push us down. For this, I am grateful. They offer valuable insights into how they have come to know themselves and their world and provide important clues as to how we might proceed toward a pedagogy that can address and redress culturally induced despair and awaken and sustain persons in hope. For example, we have learned from them that a pedagogy of hope in the lives of young black women might include a relational, imaginative, communal, storied approach that, in addition to deconstructing that which negates hope, reveals possibilities and makes use of resources within their own communities that can affirm the voice of *Hope* in their lives. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Six.

### **Pedagogy and Epistemology**

Pedagogy is the process or approach that we employ to deconstruct negation, reveal possibilities and alternatives, and create transformative experiences. Therefore, pedagogy is not limited to the particular discipline *education*, but is rather the process employed in many forms and venues to express and invite consideration of some concept, idea, or imaginative construct. It is concerned with creating a way of knowing that is responsive to how persons come to know what they know. How one comes to know

what one knows is also an epistemological question, therefore one's pedagogy or approach to education implies a corresponding conception about knowledge creation.

Thomas Groome describes epistemology as the “philosophical discipline which studies the nature and source of knowing and the reliability of claims to knowledge.”<sup>698</sup> Epistemology is concerned with the process by which we come to know ourselves and the world in which we live, and the reliability with which what we have come to know and how we've come to know it enhances our ability to live and thrive as valued members of society. Epistemology, therefore, raises questions about the source and limits of knowledge, the subject of intense western philosophical debates for millennia, as Groome notes.<sup>699</sup> I make no claims to resolving those debates in this exploration. However, I do want to take seriously Groome's contention that those who are concerned about promoting a way of knowing must make important decisions about the epistemological position that they will take with specific attention to “the nature and purpose of our enterprise and the context within which it takes place.”<sup>700</sup>

Groome is urging practitioners and others to consider how our understanding about how people come to know within a particular context can guide and support our

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<sup>698</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 139.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid. Groome suggests that the differences in philosophical thought “can invariably be traced, at least in part, to differences in epistemologies.” Noted among the Western philosophical schools are the rationalists, empiricists, idealists, realists, positivist, and skeptics (140). Describing the lines of debate Groome indicates that “the opposing sides in the epistemological debate can be labeled as rationalism versus empiricism, and as idealism versus realism, both groupings being variations on the same theme. Is knowledge ‘from within’ (rationalism) or ‘from without’ (empiricism)? Is knowledge a reflection of what actually exist in reality (realism), or is it determined by the universal and innate ideas of the knowing subject (idealism)?” Cf. footnote #4, p. 150 for an extended discussion of the philosophical debate.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid., 140.



educational strategies or pedagogies.<sup>701</sup> I too am concerned with the contextual implications of learning and knowledge creation. For example, the spiritual with which I introduced this chapter suggests that enslaved black peoples in the context of the U.S. learned that an alternative to their war-like existence was possible through the practice of singing. These songs most likely emerged out of the secret meetings that I described earlier, the brush harbor gatherings in which enslaved Africans were able to reflect upon their situation and imagine new realities. Singing supported that reflective process and became a repetitive practice by which the words that they sang could become engrafted in their imagination—a kind of “liturgical catechesis” in which the practices themselves constituted a way of knowing.<sup>702</sup> In other words, they sang the world for which they hoped, imagining that that which seemed impossible could become an actuality. The spirituals were more than mere entertainment or distractions from the harsh realities of life. They were professing and contesting songs imbued with images and semantic ideations (coded messages and meaning) that posited a new reality. Singing became one of the elements in their broader *pedagogy of survival and hope*—the means by which anticipatory imagination was kept alive within the context of suffering.

What does the context in which young black women live have to do with what they learn and how they have come to know what they know? Young black women are coming to know themselves and the world in which they live within the context of U.S. American culture. They are confronted daily with the ongoing ferocity of racism and sexism in the U.S., evident in negating ideologies, images, myths, social practices and

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<sup>701</sup> Attention to context, in my understanding, also acknowledges that persons may learn differently in different contextual situations, so that there are *ways* of knowing and not just a single *way*.

<sup>702</sup> Byron Anderson, “Liturgical Catechesis: Congregational Practice as Formation” in *Religious Education* 92, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 349-362.

mores that continue to represent black women as persons of diminished value undeserving of an equitable and life affirming existence. These representations reinforce again and again that the way that things are is the way that things ought to be in the lives of black women in the U.S. Or, to evoke Patricia Hill Collins' comments regarding controlling images again, knowledge creation regarding young black women "make[s] racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life."<sup>703</sup> In other words, when negating representations are accepted as true and allowed to persist without contestation, they reliably create the kinds of imaginative constructs and human interactions that sustain and legitimize oppression. Contestation and resistance, however, creates a new angle of vision and leaves open the possibility of re-creation and new imagination. What I am saying is that when negating images are contested and replaced with images of hope, they enhance our ability to create a life-affirming existence for ourselves and others. Therefore, when developing a strategy that can awaken and sustain young black women in hope within the context of U.S. culture, one might consider strategies, practices, songs, stories, etc that can help them deconstruct cultural images, contest that which inhibits their ability to survive and thrive, and prophetically imagine the life for which they hope. Pedagogy is how we do it.

### **Pedagogy and Christian Hope**

To suggest that one can imagine their world differently is a broad assertion and one that encompasses a wide range of world views. The vision to which I refer here,

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<sup>703</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

however, is grounded in the biblical witness and the Gospel which Jesus proclaimed. As I will discuss below, the Gospel is a declaration and affirmation of hope; gospel of *Hope*. Preachers and church educators who want to catalyze hope in the lives of young black women must maintain a rich dialogue with the world of the Bible and its witness to the Gospel, God's involvement in human history, and with young black women and the particularity of their experiences in U.S. culture. That is to say, they must announce a world in which the God who has been faithful in the past remains faithful into the future, while bringing the unique experiences of young black women to bear upon the Church's profession of faith. Therefore, proclaiming the Gospel requires the church to live responsive to two important imperatives in the biblical text. The first is Jesus' repetitive beckoning for humans persons to "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near" (Matt. 4:17). The church must adopt a disposition of repentance; acknowledging its own failure to live fully into the Gospel as it discerns in each new era how it might live and what it must proclaim. This includes repentance regarding its participation in and legitimization of young black women's negation and oppression, as well as other historical social and religious injustices. The second imperative is adherence to Jesus' mini-sermon in Luke 4:21, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This statement calls the church toward a renewed commitment to living fully into the gospel message and an ongoing assessment of its adherence thereto. I will address the latter commitment first, as it emphasizes the importance of the former and a foundation upon which it might rest.

### **Grounded in the Gospel**

The Gospel is not simply an idea but rather the imaginative construct that constitutes the church. It consists in the church's ongoing practice of loving God and

neighbor and its commitment to a just and liberating existence for all persons—the Shalom of God. Living into the Gospel demands a vision of reality that is alternative to the world of suffering and oppression that exist in the present and a relationship with God and other human persons reflective of that reality. Therefore, the power of the Gospel is, in part, its efficacy to deconstruct and reveal the dichotomy between the present state of things and God’s promise of shalom. Simultaneously, the Gospel proclaims God’s ongoing fidelity to the promise, disclosing a future that directly contradicts that which already exists. Consequently, proclamation of the Gospel creates dissonance, unrest and frustration with the present in anticipation of the shalom of God as a tangible reality. The Gospel envisions and announces a future in which war (read structural oppression and suffering) as the prevailing subject matter of our lives is replaced with the kind of merciful justice that guarantees a humane and life affirming existence for all persons.<sup>704</sup> This is the life for which my ancestors yearned in the melodious yet emphatic assertion that their war-like existence must come to an end. This is the Good News that they proclaimed.

The Gospel is evinced throughout the biblical witness, including and perhaps most notably in Jesus’ call for repentance and announcement of the kingdom of God (Mk 1:15, Matt 4:17). Jesus urges his followers to repent (*metanoēō*); to remorsefully turn away from the ethic that had ordered their lives and toward a radically new ethos and ethic in which love of God and neighbor would become the normative expression of human existence. This call was urgent because, as Jesus says in Mark: “The time is [has

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<sup>704</sup> I qualify my use of justice because I am aware that the rhetoric of justice is frequently used as a euphemism for domination, revenge or punishment, as in the U.S. justice system in which people of color, especially Black and Hispanic men, are disproportionately represented in prison populations.

been] fulfilled,” ὅτι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς, “and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mk 1:15, NRSV). Jesus’ call for repentance was more than a revolutionary assertion that the kingdom of God had come during his historical period or calendar year (chronos). The kingdom was near because God deemed this the appointed time—the favorable and right moment (kairos) for the emergence or birth of God’s kingdom. It is as though the God of creation, whose moans and groans had been audible throughout the earth, was about to give birth to a new day and new way of being. This would be a moment pregnant with possibility. Jesus’ assertion that the time “has been fulfilled” suggests a divine promise about to be actualized in the present, while also enlisting human persons to participate in bringing it to fruition; midwives for the kingdom. And if the kingdom was indeed born these many years ago, it seems imperative that those of us who live today continue the work of rearing and raising the kingdom until it reaches its fullest. Thus Jesus’ call for repentance and announcement of the kingdom is an articulation of divine promise that exerts a claim upon the lives of those who receive it.

The nearness of the kingdom compelled Jesus to not only proclaim but actively participate in actualizing the kingdom. His life and ministry reflects a tenacious commitment to setting right what had gone wrong with his society by liberating those who had been relegated to the margins of society and challenging the structures of power that ordered their existence. Barbara Lundblad suggests that “It’s impossible to travel very far in the Gospel without bumping into stories, images, encounters and teaching through which Jesus is shaping a new community. This is a community in which water is

thicker than blood, family is redefined, lepers are touched and outcasts sit at the table.”<sup>705</sup> Jesus was claimed by the very Gospel which he proclaimed. Quoting ethicist Larry Rasmussen, Barbara Lundblad describes Jesus’ commitment to the Gospel: “Jesus sees what others do not yet see. ‘Jesus= faith in God is constitutionally restless. He has an incurable eschatological itch. He lives from a dream, the Kingdom, or world, of God, and he is committed to the discipline of seeing that dream become a fact.’”<sup>706</sup> I believe that the Gospel continues to call those who hear it to participate fully in the ongoing work of actualizing the kingdom of God.

The word *gospel* (Gr., euaggelion) is indicative of the proclamations of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. However, if we can accept that the Gospel is God’s *good news* and just intent for creation, I would argue, with Stephen Farris, that the Gospel can be found throughout the biblical witness. In *Preaching that Matters*, Farris suggests that “The Bible as a whole is good news: it is a confirmation of God’s undeserved love for all people.”<sup>707</sup> While I might qualify Farris’ statement to acknowledge that there are many tragic and grievous stories in the Bible that were never adequately resolved, I agree that the trajectory of the biblical text points toward justice, health, wholeness and prosperity as the inheritance of all persons.

In this light, we perceive the Gospel as God’s *good news* among biblical prophets like Isaiah, Micah, Amos and others who declare that suffering and oppression are not the final shape of our world and actively anticipate a time of renewal. Amos admonishes us

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<sup>705</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>707</sup> Stephen Farris, *Preaching that Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 93.

to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”<sup>708</sup>

Isaiah and Micah envision a time of universal *shalom*; a future in which swords will be beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, and nations will live in peace with one another in a multi-ethnic polytheistic religious milieu.<sup>709</sup> In response to the allegorical question “What does the Lord require of you?” the prophet Micah declares that God has told us what is good, and that good thing requires us “to do justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>710</sup> The Gospel is woven into the liturgy in Psalm 82 as the psalmist sings of YHWH’s imperative that the divine council “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”<sup>711</sup> And in numerous other scriptures, we perceive and sense the Gospel, declaring God’s concern for those who suffer and summoning human persons to say *yes* to God’s *yes* for creation.

These images powerfully informed Jesus’ life and ministry, giving form and substance to his announcement of a new reality. For example, In Luke 4:18-21, Jesus speaks in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. He reads from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” and then proclaims, “Today this scripture has been *fulfilled* in your hearing.”<sup>712</sup> His assertion that the

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<sup>708</sup> Amos 5:24.

<sup>709</sup> Micah 4:3, Isaiah 2:4. Micah includes these words regarding the nations at peace: “but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever” (Micah 4:4-5, NRSV).

<sup>710</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>711</sup> Ps. 82:4-5.

<sup>712</sup> Luke 4:18-19, 21.

scripture is being *fulfilled* implied, as in Mark 1:15, a divine promise or prediction about to be realized in the present and signaled a fundamental change in the order of things.<sup>713</sup> This brief sermon revealed God's commitment to justice and condemnation of the disparity that existed between the poor and the privileged, then and now. The community's initial response was joyful reception of their kinsman who had proven himself such a powerful teacher. But joy soon gave way to anger and some in the town sought to throw Jesus off of a cliff. This response has always seemed a bit strange to me but, in light of *fulfilled* (B80Δ T̄) as a divine summons, it becomes clear that Jesus' suggestion that *the scripture has been fulfilled* exerted a claim upon the lives of those who heard it. *Fulfilled* demands an active human response to divine intent—it requires something of us. And, if we are among the privileged, it requires a decision as regards those privileges afforded us because of our birth or social standing that are simultaneously denied others.

The text from which Jesus read invited those who possessed money, position and power to a new way of living and being in relationship with their neighbors, but they largely rejected the invitation. It also and perhaps most explicitly offered new life for those who had been relegated to the margins of society; an offer that continues into the present. *The year of the Lord's favor* must still become a reality for numerous oppressed, negated and disinherited persons throughout the world. This includes young black women. The Gospel announces a time of restoration for young black women; a time

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<sup>713</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. William Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979). This lexicon describes the Gr. B80Δ T̄ (fulfilled): "of fulfillment of divine prediction or promise." He further describes *fulfillment*: "The active *bringing to fulfillment*, partly of God who brings his prophecies to fulfillment...partly of men who, by what they do, help to bring the divine prophecies to realization." I use fulfillment as indicative of divine process and as a summons for an active human response.



when negating and disaffirming representation will be eliminated and the wholeness which is inherently theirs might be fully realized. The Gospel also summons young black women to participate in actualizing its vision—to fulfill the Gospel—by imagining and actively working toward a life-affirming future for themselves and others. The Gospel is *fulfilled*, therefore, by our responsive love to God and God’s creation; a soulish affirmative response to divine promise and activity in the world, despite the evidence to the contrary. In so doing, we link our will to God’s will as an expression of love and obedience to God.

### **Gospel Fulfillment and Knowing God**

Throughout this investigation, I have suggested that we imagine life-affirming possibilities for living in the present and into the future for ourselves and others. I stress this dual commitment because of our tendency in the U.S. to emphasize benevolence without the corresponding requirement of compassion, as a way to satisfy our own need to see ourselves as good people, on the one hand, and an extremely individualistic material-oriented utilitarian tendency (we give to those who can give something back to us) on the other. To the contrary, I want to emphasize our interconnectedness and mutual dependence upon each other and our shared dependence upon the earth and its resources. Therefore, I agree with Dr. King and others who believe that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>714</sup> We are not and cannot be whole until all of

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<sup>714</sup> King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963) in Flip Schulke and Penelope McPhee, *King Remembered*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 276.

creation, human and not, are well. Therefore, we live into the Gospel because we seek our own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of others.

To live into the Gospel or fulfill the Gospel is to love and obey God. This implies knowledge of the One to whom we've pledged our allegiance. Therefore, Thomas Groome, in *Christian Religious Education*, investigates the relationship between knowing God and our concrete practices in the world. In his consideration of the Hebrew verb *yada* and the Greek verbs *ginoskein* (*ginosko*) and *eidenia* (*oida*), Groome suggests that both the Hebrew and Greek understanding of "to know" are more concerned with a way of living and relating that is consistent with God's activity in the world than with intellectual engagement. Regarding the Hebrew *yada*, Groome suggests that it "is more by the heart than by the mind, and the knowing arises not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience."<sup>715</sup> He also indicates that there is no corresponding word in the Hebrew for the English word "intellect." Thus, to know God entailed one's obedience to the will of God: "Knowledge of the Lord demands active *acknowledgement* of the Lord, and that in turn requires obedience to God's will. In fact, God is not *acknowledged* and thus not known unless God's will is done by the person in response to the experience of God."<sup>716</sup> The use of *yada* in reference to human persons carries a similar relational and experiential meaning, thus to know a person is to engage them intimately and desire their wellbeing as our own—to *love our neighbor as ourselves*.<sup>717</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> Groome, 140.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid., 141. Groome references Gen. 4:1, 25, Num. 31:18, Judges 21:12 as illustrative biblical texts.

The New Testament's use of "to know" also emphasizes a relational and experiential process. "To know" implies "relationship with, acknowledgement of, and submission to the will of God."<sup>718</sup> Thus, with attention to Paul and John's gospel, Groome contends that knowing God in the New Testament is closely connected to loving, obeying, and believing God.

In the biblical sense, then, to know God is a dynamic, experiential, relational activity involving the whole person and finding expression in a lived response of loving obedience to God's will. Without loving action God is not known. Without such action any other kind of knowing is, in the biblical view, no more than foolishness.<sup>719</sup>

Groome's reflection on knowing leads him to posit a "shared praxis way approach to Christian religious education."<sup>720</sup> However, what is most compelling for me is the idea that living the Gospel or living responsive to God's will requires a loving and obedient relationship with God and a loving relationship with other human persons. As Groome indicates in reference to I John 4:11, "Thus for John to know God is to be in a relationship of love with God, to be aware of that love, and to respond by loving our neighbor."

This kind of love is central to my understanding of what it means to live the Gospel. We live the Gospel in community with other persons, always aware that our being in the world has communal implications. Therefore, living the Gospel implies an ethical commitment to justice and wholeness for all persons. We also live the Gospel aware of our own God createdness and the love of God that sustains us while rejecting the destructive influence of those who would deny it. This is especially important for

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<sup>718</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>719</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>720</sup> Groome defines share praxis as "a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith" (184).

young Black women and others who have experienced cultural negation and devaluation. It is imperative that they understand themselves as God's wondrous and valued creation, beloved of God in whom the potential for wholeness already exists. Thus, the Gospel invites us to love ourselves and, as kinswomen/men, those who are our neighbor. In so doing, we learn to live with hope and anticipate a world in which wholeness is no longer the exception but the norm.

### **Answering the Call of the Gospel with a Definitive Yes**

The Gospel that Jesus proclaimed is a Gospel of Hope. It confirms Hope's assertion that the God who has been faithful in the past remains faithful to us as individuals and as human community in the present and into the future. It calls us to loving and obedient relationship with the One who wills our collective wellbeing, and that of the earth as our shared domicile. Therefore, the Gospel becomes *embodied theology* for those of us who answer its call. To answer its call is to offer a definitive *yes* to its invitation and commit ourselves to live as though the world which it announces were already a reality; to become living testimonies and exemplars of what it means to exist in just and life-affirming relationship with God's creation. When we embody the Gospel we also bring "*to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there.*"<sup>721</sup> The Gospel calls us back to and helps us remember a life that we once knew but have somehow forgotten; helps us sense the yearning of our own consciousness, though we had never been able to explicitly articulate it, and remember it into the present moment. Jesus' "repent for the Kingdom of God has come near" does just that. It invites persons

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<sup>721</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, 65.

and communities to remember *again* God's fidelity to and for creation and encourages us to match our commitments to God's intent for the world.

The Christian Church is not exempt from Jesus' call for repentance. As a human institution with divine intent, the Church is called and bears the responsibility with speaking words of hope and healing in the face of the ongoing ferocity of suffering in our world. Given the prevalence of suffering and negation in the lives of black women, answering that call entails ending its association with and attachment to attitudes, practices, ideologies and theologies by which the church either intentionally or unwittingly participates in creating or legitimizing the very suffering and oppression that it hopes to eliminate. In other words, Jesus' call to repentance requires the Church to take a sober look at its practices and proclamation and humbly confess its complicity in the ongoing ferocity of oppression.

As I suggested earlier, the Black Church, has championed the cause of liberation from oppression and maintained a dual commitment to the spiritual and socio-political wellbeing of black women, men and children. I also asserted that these commitments converge at the point of the community's suffering and God's liberative action on their behalf. This has been most effectively expressed in the church's steadfastness in fighting for black peoples' deliverance from racial oppression and political disenfranchisement. Yet, the need for a comprehensive understanding of oppression which acknowledges the multifaceted and overlapping nature of oppression in the lives of black women and the church's complicity in sustaining systemic oppression and contributing to culturally induced despair remains. I revisit these comments because black women's primary experience with the Christian faith has been their relationship with black churches, as was

true of the young black women with whom I spoke. Therefore, I want to emphasize the importance of repentance in the life of the Black Church and for black congregations who want to strengthen and sustain young black women's acuity to the voice of hope.

Repentance requires the Black Church to not only name what has been done to the black community by outsiders, as in its naming of racial and economic oppression. Its also requires the church to name its own oppressive use of power and its complicity in the un-wellness of Black women. That is, repentance requires the Black Church to embrace new interpretive readings of biblical texts and struggle with the sociological and theological dissonance between life as experienced in first century Palestine as well as before the Common Era (BCE) and life as experienced in the twenty-first century, including the legal status of women, gender roles, familial relationships and church polity and practices. Repentance demands intentionality about redressing subordinating practices, attitudes and representations that create vulnerability to physical and psychological abuse, incest, rape and myriad other violent crimes against women and girls. Repentance calls the church to stand in solidarity with women and girls by telling and retelling their stories in dialogue with biblical and historical women, welcoming their voices as they tell their own stories—as they preach, teach, testify, be the church in all of its diversity and beauty. And yes, repentance requires those who populate the Black Church, the women and men in its pews, pulpits and classroom, to take courage, speak and call forth the just and life-affirming reality for which we deeply yearn. In other words, repentance requires the Black Church and others to take our assertions about *one bodyness* seriously—we are one body in Christ—and *turn away from*, that is, *repent of*

practices that destroy our collective body and turn toward those that enhances our communal wellbeing.

Repentance, therefore, reflects humility to God and evinces a loving and obedient relationship with the One who wills the wellbeing of creation. Therefore, through the act of repentance and with remorse for its actions, the Black Church can begin the process of repairing the brokenness to which it has contributed, and as a consequence, mending the breach between itself as a liberating institution and the women who occupy its pews. As suggested above, repentance reminds us of who we are and of the radical and reconciling possibilities inherent in the Gospel of Hope. Thus this new angle of vision invites the Church to embody a life affirming relationship with the women in its midst and with the numerous others who have been relegated to the margins of our social and religious institutions. Pedagogically, therefore, repentance names the reality of oppression and makes the world—in this case the worship communities that we call church—open for transformation. For example, as a repentant body, the Black Church might embrace its potential as a conduit of hope by deconstructing ways of being, relating and governing that subordinate women to men as well as by welcoming the gifts of women, girls and others who have been relegated to the margins as essential to its life and ministry.

The transformative power of repentance is evocatively articulated in one of the much beloved psalms in the Black Church, Psalm 51. This melodious confession offers us the language by which we might begin to speak words of repentance: “I acknowledge my transgression and my sin is ever before me.” Acknowledging transgression implies more than simply listing the wrong that has been done. Acknowledgement names the transgression explicitly and reveals how it has function in our individual and communal

lives; how it has sustained oppressive attitudes and practices and prevented us from living fully into the life-affirming possibilities of the Gospel.

For example, the continued reification of sexism in the Black Church—the devaluation, disempowerment and marginalization of women—negates the prerogative and power of God to speak prophetically to and through our daughters as well as our sons, as God spoke through Phillip’s daughters, or to raise up women like Hagar, Deborah, Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam and others as exemplars of what it means to live in faithful and obedient relationship with the Divine. In other words, the ferocity of sexism denies the freedom of God to act outside of the predetermined narrow and exclusionary institutional boundaries that many churches have erected, rejecting the voice of God that speak through and to women and negating the power of God therein.

Sexism also selectively devalues the female in whom God’s breath resides while overvaluing maleness; negates that which God calls good and reduces her to rubbish or perpetual servitude. In this respect, sexism is not only oppressive but it is sinful. Sexism robs persons and communities of joyfully experiencing the myriad ways by which God acts in our lives and in our world, thus thwarting the church’s vocational impetus. Therefore, it seems essential that the Black Church and other Christian communities acknowledge the oppressive and life-denying attitudes and practices that permeate our existence so that we might live in loving and obedient relationship with God. For the Black Church, acknowledging transgressions signals our readiness for new ways of being and relating and our openness to the God who eliminates barriers, expands borders and empowers us to walk the liberating and hope-filled life which we proclaim.



## TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN KERYGMA AND DIDACHE

My attention to repentance in the previous section takes seriously the Church's identity as Body of Christ and its ongoing ministry of proclaiming or announcing the Gospel. The Church is more than a context or spatial location in which young black women might discern the voice of Hope. It is a living and breathing organism in which the hope-filled message of the Gospel might be revealed and made comprehensible. Two of the ministries through which the church proclaims the Gospel are preaching and teaching. That is, the church embodies and re-presents the Good News with hopes of inviting and inspiring persons to live into the reality to which it bears witness. It lives and breaths the Gospel; gives it flesh and reveals the radical possibility of a world in which love of God and neighbor might become a reality. The church proclaims the Gospel.

Although the church has always maintained that its central ministry is proclamation of the Gospel, people have not always agreed on the form appropriate to its propagation, especially as regards preaching and teaching. This is especially true when considering preaching and teaching as aspects of that ministry. Initially, the distinction between the two was negligible, as is evident in the biblical writers' characterization of Jesus as Rabbi/teacher *and* as one who proclaims/announces the Good News. But as the church became more organized and its ministries more clearly delineated, preaching and teaching as separate and distinct disciplines became more pronounced. Proclamation, especially as regards spoken biblical interpretation, was definitively identified with ordained clergy and the function of preaching. Teaching was most often associated with functions like catechism and transmission of biblical and doctrinal information and was

rarely associated with any specific ecclesial office. Before long, the complementary relationship that preaching and teaching had once enjoyed became fractured and, in time, compartmentalized into distinctive disciplines and offices. Preaching became the more noticeable and highly regarded ministry of the church and Christian education was viewed as subordinate and supportive.

As I will discuss in the pages that follow, the relationship between preaching and Christian education has been through several transitions which led to a degree of tension between the two. Scholars and practitioners have sought to resolve the tension by appealing to the vernacular common to their discipline, and in recent years have begun to see the efficacy of relaxing the lines of demarcation. Christian educational practitioners and scholars like Maria Harris, Chuck Foster and others contend that the church educates in everything that it does, including its preaching. Similarly, scholars and practitioners in homiletics like Barbara Brown Taylor and Thomas Long maintain that everything that the church does is a form of proclamation, including Christian education. I am drawn to both ideas. In other words, I am suggesting a dialogical and holistic relationship between preaching and church education. When considered holistically, preaching and teaching ebb and flow together as mutually supportive ministries and leave open the possibility that both Christian education and preaching might embody aspects of *kerygma* and *didache*. If we are willing to consider this possibility, then the distinction between teaching and preaching has not to do with the content or intent of the message, but with the unique and sometimes overlapping forms by which they present and re-present the Gospel.

A holistic and dialogical view of Christian education and homiletics invites practitioners and scholars to draw upon the most effective practices in each discipline to the end of a comprehensive approach to evoking hope in the lives of young black women. For example, Christian education's emphasis upon dialogical engagement and critical reflection may strengthen preachers' ability to create reflective and conversational opportunities in what has been essentially monologue as per form. Similarly, homiletics' emphasis upon biblical interpretation and preaching to the whole person may aid Christian educators in developing educational strategies grounded in Scripture without being prescriptive and that appeal to the emotive and intuitive consciousness. Preaching and Christian education might also draw energy from exploring together themes that are already integral to both disciplines, such as the importance of transformation and the power of the imagination. I believe that movement in this direction has already begun. Preaching and Christian education should also continue their vibrant dialogue with biblical studies, worship, philosophy, rhetorical studies, educational theory, communication and others as they continue to explore transformational, inspirational and imaginative means by which to express the Gospel.

I begin this discussion by providing a brief overview of historical events that led to the fractured relationship between preaching and Christian education, and then highlight efforts in the current era to value the unique contributions that each offers to the church's overall ministry. I will conclude this chapter by describing more specifically what a holistic and dialogical view of Christian Education and Homiletics might entail, as we move toward the specifics of a pedagogy of hope in the lives of young black women.

### Mapping the Historical Discussion

Preaching and teaching as important aspects of the church's life and ministry is unambiguously illustrated in the writings of the fourth century Church father Augustine of Hippo. In *De doctrina christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*) Augustine contends that "There are two things on which all interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn and the process of presenting what we have learnt."<sup>722</sup> In the fourth book of this treatise, which he originally called "*On Christian Teaching*," Augustine broadens his educational theory to include the educative significance of preaching. Therefore, he explores Scripture "presentation" with specific attention to preaching and the transformative possibilities therein. Although he indicates that this writing is not an explication of "the rhetorical rules," he contends that preachers should make use of rhetoric when presenting biblical interpretation because rhetoric gives conviction to "truth."<sup>723</sup> He cautions that rhetoric is not morally neutral—that words convey moral value and can shape our ways of being in the world—but that rhetoric can, when used to expound truth, inspire listeners to respond accordingly. Therefore, one should not "expound the truth in such a way as to bore our listeners, cloud their understanding, and stifle their desire to believe."<sup>724</sup> Rather, the eloquent preacher has the responsibility to "instruct, delight, and move their listeners," giving primacy to instruction.<sup>725</sup>

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<sup>722</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1987, c1958), book four, p. 100.

<sup>723</sup> Ibid.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid., 117.

One could argue, based on Augustine's assertion that this is not a treatise on rhetoric, that his attention to instruction is in effect a negation of rhetoric. But a close reading reveals that Augustine wants to maintain a creative tension between the subject matter that is being taught and the manner in which it is communicated. Therefore, while he is insistent that instruction is "a matter of necessity," he also maintains that eloquence and style are provocative and perhaps essential if the preacher/teacher wants to communicate well.<sup>726</sup>

It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners. He then added: 'instructing is a matter of necessity, delight a matter of charm and moving them a matter of conquest'. The first of these three, the need to instruct, relates to the subject-matter of our discourse, the other two to the style we use. A speaker wishing to instruct should not think that he has communicated what he wishes to communicate to the person he wishes to instruct until he is understood. Even if he has said what he himself understands, he should not yet think that he has communicated with the person who fails to understand him; but if he has been understood, then, no matter how he has spoken, he has communicated.<sup>727</sup>

Augustine's assertion that instruction is a "matter of necessity," is grounded in his belief that persons must know what must be done before they can do it.<sup>728</sup> Yet he also argues that "instruction" is not synonymous with "telling" or "saying." Effective instruction requires attention to manner of presentation or pedagogy. Rather than preaching sermons that leave hearers unresponsive or confused, Augustine urges the preacher that their presentation must enhance understanding or knowing and create transformative experiences.

The teacher, then, will avoid all words that do not communicate; if, in their place, he (*sic*) can use other words which are intelligible in their correct forms, he will

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<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

<sup>727</sup> Ibid, 117-118.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid., 118.

choose to do that, but if he cannot—either because they do not exist or because they do not occur to him at the time—he will use words that are less correct, provided that the subject-matter itself is communicated and learnt correctly.<sup>729</sup>

Again, Augustine sustains the tension between content, style and communicative intent in an effort to ensure that the hearer understands what the teacher wants to convey. The preacher has not communicated until the hearer understands. Hearers experience delight and transformation when instruction in the “truth” is understandable: “the truths themselves, as they are *revealed*, do produce delight by virtue of being true.”<sup>730</sup> That is, preaching that is attentive to the educational import of the task is concerned with revealing “truth” rather than simply transmitting it. Therefore, the primary task of the preacher is to instruct or teach “the subject-matter of our discourse” so that it is intelligible and accessible to the hearer. Stated differently, the preacher is concerned with pedagogy; with *expressing and inviting persons to consider some concept, idea or imaginative construct*, or as Augustine might suggest, inviting persons to consider the “truth” so that it might “result in action.”<sup>731</sup> In other words, teaching/preaching anticipates concrete action.

Augustine is not concerned with presenting preaching and teaching as distinctive disciplines, but rather with helping preachers/teachers consider the power of combining skillful biblical interpretation with intelligible and comprehensible instruction. Therefore, he urges those who stand to teach or preach to endeavor to speak “truth” in a manner that makes Christian concepts and principles accessible and intelligible to the hearer, so that

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<sup>729</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>730</sup> Ibid., 118, emphasis added.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid., 119. Augustine argues that “If one is giving instruction on the sort of topic in which belief or knowledge is sufficient, consent is nothing more than the acknowledgement that what is said is true. But when one is giving instruction about something that must be acted on, and one’s aim is to produce this action, it is futile to persuade people of the truth of what is being said, and futile to give delight by the style one uses, of the learning process does not result in action.”

they might know how to live. He uses preacher, teacher and speaker interchangeably throughout his discourse, making little distinction among the three.

Augustine's interchangeable use of teacher/preacher/speaker and his attention to praxis reflects the Gospel writers' characterization of Jesus as teacher and proclaimer of the good news of God. The synoptic gospel writers make little distinction between Jesus' identity as one who proclaims the good news, teacher/Rabbi, healer and fulfiller of prophesy. Although their descriptive language and ministry emphasis varies, they all seem to agree that Jesus was a preacher/teacher/prophet/ healer come from God. Matthew, for example, repeatedly collapses proclaiming and teaching in reference to Jesus and the work of his disciples. In 4:23 he writes: "Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." Similarly, the rather prolonged sermon teaching commonly referred to as *the Sermon on the Mount* that follows 4:25 (Matthew 5-7), though most often described as a sermon, is more appropriately characterized as a teaching, per Matthew 5:2 and 7:28-29. Again, in Matthew 9:35, 11:1, 10:7 Jesus is reported as teaching in the synagogue, proclaiming the good news *and* curing diseases and sicknesses. Mark also describes Jesus as a powerful teacher and healer who came to *proclaim the good news of God* ("Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God" [1:14]), and to admonish his followers to do the same.<sup>732</sup> Luke describes Jesus as teacher and fulfiller of prophecy whose mission is to proclaim good news to the poor (4:18).<sup>733</sup> Overall, the synoptic gospels reflect no discernable difference between Jesus' role as teacher and preacher, but rather seem to suggest that the teachings and the signs

<sup>732</sup> Cf. Mark 1:14-15, 4:1-2, 6:6,21, 34, 7:7, 8:31, 13:1 14:49; followers: 13:10, 14:9, 16:15.

<sup>733</sup> Cf. 4:18-21, 7:22, 20:1, 21:37, 9:6.

and miracles that follow are all expressions of the Good News which Jesus sought to proclaim.

When the New Testament Church emerges in Acts 2, it initially maintains a complimentary relationship between preaching and teaching. Maria Harris suggests that “The central *teaching* of the church (which is also its central kerygma or proclamation) is announced in Acts with the words: ‘This Jesus God has raised up, and of that we all are witnesses’ (Acts 2:32). Then the account continues: ‘And they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the *communion* of the *breaking of the bread* and in the *prayers*.’”<sup>734</sup> The teaching and the preaching were the same. The distinction between preaching and teaching does not become evident until Paul delineates gifts and positions in his letters to the churches at Corinth, Rome and Ephesus.<sup>735</sup> However, he is also resolute in his assertion that each gift is given by the Spirit for the common good (I Cor. 12:7), and that the various offices in the church are together assigned the task of “equip[ping] the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4:12a). Preachers and teachers, therefore, were less concerned with the division of labor than with creating change in the lives of those with whom they were speaking; with creating Christian persons or forming persons in the faith.<sup>736</sup> For example, when persons in the Corinthian church began to emphasize division and hierarchy, they were chastised for creating

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<sup>734</sup> Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 20.

<sup>735</sup> Cf. I Cor. 12, Rom. 12, Ephesians 4:1-16.

<sup>736</sup> It is also instructive, though perhaps for another discussion, that proclaiming and teaching were generally followed or confirmed by practices that reflected the actuality of that which was proclaimed. This raises questions about what we proclaim and how we might effect healing in the lives of broken persons and communities.



schism in the *Body of Christ* and admonished to recognize that they were one body with many members whose work was to serve “the common good.”<sup>737</sup>

Despite Paul’s intent, it appears that his delineation of ministries and the eventual institution of offices in the church led to a much sharper distinction between preaching and teaching than the early church might have imagined. As the church became an organized institution, the role of pastor or the priestly office became more clearly defined by vocal proclamation, Scripture interpretation and solemnizing the sacraments.

Preaching emerged as the articulation of the *Word of God*, as per Karl Barth, and was reserved for “those who are called:”

1. Preaching is the Word of God which he himself (*sic*) speaks, claiming for the purpose the exposition of a biblical text in free human words that are relevant to contemporaries by *those who are called to do this in the church* that is obedient to its commission.
2. Preaching is the attempt to enjoin upon the church to serve God’s own Word, through *one who is called thereto*, by expounding a biblical text in human words, and making it relevant to contemporaries in intimation of what they have to hear from God himself (*sic*).<sup>738</sup>

Barth suggests that those who are called are, in effect, God’s mouthpiece. God speaks through the preacher, thus preaching is literally “the Word of God.” The one who preaches is uniquely called to the task and is responsible for making the biblical text relevant to the hearers, as per Augustine. Yet unlike Augustine, Barth does not emphasize teaching as an important aspect of Scripture presentation.

Over time, teaching not only assumed a subordinate position to preaching but also became less identified as a vehicle through which the Gospel might be proclaimed. For

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<sup>737</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-7.

<sup>738</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. G. Bromiley & D. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 44, emphasis added.

example, Iris A Cully, a Christian educator writing in 1956 argues that the role of preaching is to proclaim the good news while teaching is for the purpose of forming and sustaining persons in the faith. She contends that teaching is dependent upon an initial proclamation and is only effective after persons have assented to the proclamation of the preacher: “Didache, the teaching, is derived from the proclamation. This comes chronologically second, for only after the good news has been proclaimed and response made, further understanding is needed.”<sup>739</sup>

Cully’s suggestion that preaching and Christian education are arranged hierarchically is grounded in C.H. Dodd’s explication of the elements of “apostolic preaching” of the first century CE, drawn from Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost. Dodd argues that “much of our preaching at the present day [1936] would not have been recognized by the early Christians as *kerygma*. It is teaching, or exhortation (*parakleses*), or it is what they called homilia, that is, the more or less informed discussion of various aspects of Christian life and thought, addressed to a congregation already established in the faith.”<sup>740</sup> The intent of preaching, Dodd contends, is to evangelize and not for “moral instruction of exhortation.”<sup>741</sup> He argues further that “It was by *kerygma*, says Paul, not by didache, that it pleased God to save [human persons].”<sup>742</sup> Therefore, Dodd defines *Kerygma* by outlining 7 distinctive characteristics of which teaching is not included.<sup>743</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> Iris V. Cully, “The Kerygma and Christian Education,” in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 24, no. 3 (July 1956): 180.

<sup>740</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London: Hodder & Stroughton Limited, 1936), 5.

<sup>741</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. According to Dodd, *Kerygma* includes the following: “The prophecies are fulfilled, and the new Age is inaugurated by the coming of Christ. He was born of the seed of David. He died according to the Scripture, to deliver us out of the present evil age. He was buried. He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. He is exalted as the right hand of God, as Son of God and Lord of quick and dead. He

Cully's comments regarding the relationship of didache to Kerygma, therefore, is grounded in a conception of the Gospels the articulation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and its efficacy as a vehicle through which salvation occurs. Transformation and inspiration, as I read Dodd, are completely separate enterprises.

In 1957, John Knox, in *The Integrity of Preaching*, refutes Dodd's claim that preaching and teaching are completely separate enterprises. He argues, as I have above, that there was no discernable difference between the preachers and teachers in the early Christian church and suggests that preaching and teaching most likely referred to two kinds of activities performed by the same persons.

...[It] is highly unlikely that two separate classes of functionaries actually existed and a question may appropriately be raised as to how sharply even the two *functions* were distinguished from each other. One could not proclaim the good news of Christ without attempting at the same time to explain its meaning and to support this meaning with arguments and examples, and without drawing out some of its ethical implications. And one could not, in the manner of the teacher, interpret the meaning of the Christian life itself without reminding one's hearers constantly of the event of Christ.<sup>744</sup>

Preaching and teaching were not only performed by the same person but they were compatible and mutually dependent functions by which congregations were able to discern how they might respond to the Gospel that was being proclaimed. Knox also challenges Dodd's assertion that preaching was the domain of the apostles and suggests that in the *primitive church* the "principal *local* ministers are the 'prophets' and 'teachers,'" men and women who, in the absence of the apostles, preached regularly in

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will come again as Judge and Savior of men (sic.)" Dodd's formulaic conception of the Gospel is similar to salvation formulas that have continued into the present, based on Roman's 10: 9-10. Kerygma or proclamation, as Dodd describes it, should lead persons to a confession of faith and assurance of salvation.  
<sup>744</sup> John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957) 49-50.

local congregations.<sup>745</sup> Concerning the distinction between “prophets” and “teachers,” Knox does “not believe that the two classes were altogether distinct from each other...or that any clear separation even of function existed between them.”<sup>746</sup> They were all teachers in the church, though not all teachers were prophets just as not all prophets were apostles.<sup>747</sup> As noted above, their relationship was fluid and complimentary. Preachers, teachers and prophets were all “concerned with nothing less than proclamation and interpretation of the Gospel—the announcement of God’s deed in Christ and the opening up of the whole vast wealth of its meaning for human history and for every [person].”

As regards the relationship between preaching and teaching in the present era (1957), Knox deconstructs the meaning of teaching and contends that “unless preaching is teaching, it is not preaching.”<sup>748</sup> As did Augustine, Knox contends that teaching is concerned with creating “understanding of the truth and meaning of the Gospel and for the communication of this truth and meaning...as clearly and persuasively as possible.”<sup>749</sup> He then contends that unless preaching is teaching “it is mere sound, or perhaps sound and fury, however unctuous or stirring it may be.”<sup>750</sup> In other words, preaching is not primarily concerned with inciting the emotions or speaking eloquently, but with communicating with integrity how one might find meaning for their lives in the Gospel. Thus, Knox emphasizes the importance of teaching by arguing that “preaching is highly distinctive teaching because of the character and significance of its content, because of its setting in worship, because of the personal relationship which the preacher

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<sup>745</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid.

sustains with [the] message, and because [the preacher] is addressing himself [or herself], not only to the minds of [the] hearers, but also to their wills—indeed to them as whole persons... seeking not only to convince them, but also to bring them to a decision.”<sup>751</sup>

Nonetheless, preaching is essentially teaching. Knox recovers Augustine’s emphasis upon the educative import of preaching, and identifies teaching as that which is most efficacious to the Christian life.

### **Contemporary Musings**

Conversations regarding the relationship between Christian Education and homiletics have been less robust over the past 40 years, but the question remains. For example, James Earl Massey, in his 1996 essay “The Preacher Who Would be a Teacher,” emphasizes the importance of the “teaching pastor” and contends that pastors should also seek to be teachers. His point of departure is the rabbinic tradition in first century Palestine and Jesus’ association with the tradition. He suggests that “The church began under the ministry of an itinerate teaching preacher known as Jesus of Nazareth. Those who heard him teach called him ‘Rabbi’ because of his masterful style and the engaging substance of his work.”<sup>752</sup> He argues, therefore, that the role of the “teaching pastor” is essential to the growth and development of Christian persons and the society at large.

Called and sent to share and pass on the kerygmatic message about salvation, and to train believers in the values and implementation of the good news from God, the pastor is expected to teach what the church teaches. In this service, he or she follows the lead of the first Christian preachers and teachers, aptly described by

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<sup>751</sup> Ibid. 55-56.

<sup>752</sup> James Earl Massey, “The Preacher Who Would be a Teachers,” in *Preaching On the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, Martha J. Simmons, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 93.

Albert C. Outler as “traditioners—trust officers of the Christian treasure of truth, qualified judges of ‘right teaching.’” As a teacher, the pastor not only identifies that tradition but is identified with it and by it.<sup>753</sup>

Massey tasks the teaching pastor with announcing the Gospel with emphasis upon salvation and with sustaining the Christian tradition. The intent of teaching, he suggests, is to train or create adherents to the Christian faith. He also suggests that the teaching pastor’s work begins with inviting persons to experience the Christian gospel and extends to the social and political aspects of our day to day existence.

In addition to teaching what the universal church teaches, however, the preacher is also expected to inspire and promote by teaching what generates social uplift and human advancement through freedom, justice, fairness, and the steady pursuit of community.<sup>754</sup>

Massey’s suggestion that the church’s teaching and preaching has social implications is exciting, especially given my attention to resisting culturally induced despair and creating wholeness. Also, his suggestion that preaching and teaching are compatible expressions of the church’s ministry (my words) challenges Dodd’s contention that the lines of demarcation between the two are set. Yet, Massey’s insistence upon a hierarchical order rather than a complimentary and dialogical relationship between the two is troubling. He argues, for example, that “The Epistles show that didache (what is taught) was understood as necessary follow-up to kerygma (what is proclaimed) although a complete distinction between these cannot always be seen in the literature.”<sup>755</sup> He seems to overlook, however, the compelling and salvific teachings of Jesus and how his proclamation and teaching affected deliverance and transformation in the lives of those who followed him. In other words, his hierarchical

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<sup>753</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid., 94.

construction appears to negate the possibility that one might experience the Gospels a result of teaching as well as preaching.

Thomas Long offers an alternative perspective and seeks to collapse the hierarchy between the church's proclamation and teaching. In his discussion of the role of preaching in the Christian Church, Long asserts that "God calls the whole church to proclaim the Gospel, and every disciple of Jesus Christ is a part of this calling. The whole church proclaims the Gospel, and the preaching of sermons is but one part of this larger ministry."<sup>756</sup> This gospel is provocatively woven into every fiber of the church's existence, as Long illustrates, blanketing our lives with God's presence.

When a church school teacher gathers a group of children to teach them the stories of Jesus, the Gospel is proclaimed. When a congregation opens its fellowship hall on winter nights as a shelter and provides hospitality for the homeless, it bears witness to the Gospel. When, in the name of Christ, members of the congregation bring words of comfort and encouragement to the sick and to those in prison, pray for and with those in distress, and welcome the stranger, they announce the good news of the kingdom.<sup>757</sup>

Charles Foster, in *Educating Congregations*, similarly blurs the boundaries in his assertion that the church educates "whenever and wherever congregations seek to transmit, interpret, and create attitudes, knowledge, skills, habits, sensibilities or perspectives integral to the transformative ministries of God in and through the worship and mission of the church."<sup>758</sup> In other words, it is the responsibility of the entire church to make known, in its teaching and other acts of ministry, representations and verbal expressions, the life-affirming, just and hope-filled message of the Gospel.

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<sup>756</sup> Long, 12.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid.

<sup>758</sup> Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 15.

Maria Harris offers another perspective. In *Fashion Me a People*, Harris values teaching and preaching as integral aspects of the church's overall ministry. She argues that our human vocation is educational: "to be in partnership with God to fashion even as we are being fashioned, attempting to realize our artistic capacities as this happens."<sup>759</sup> Thus, the church's vocation is to educate to and through five central curricular forms: "kerygma, proclaiming the word of Jesus' resurrection; didache, the activity of teaching; leiturgia, coming together to pray and to re-present Jesus in the breaking of bread; koinonia, or community; and diakonia, caring for those in need."<sup>760</sup> Highlighting the historical distinction between the Greek *kerygma* and *didache*, Harris indicates that *kerygma* was most often associated with preaching and *didache* with Christian education or teaching. For example, she maintains that "The Greek notion of the act of proclamation (*keryssein*), [which was] entrusted to a herald (*keryx*), has always been taken to mean both what is proclaimed and the act of proclaiming."<sup>761</sup> As herald, the proclaiming person stands alone, announcing news that has come from God. As a metaphor for preaching, Thomas Long also indicates that the image of the herald "underscores the conviction that the primary movement of preaching is *from God through* the herald *to* the hearers," though he prefers witness as an appropriate metaphor for preaching.<sup>762</sup> The early church, therefore, believed that "it was *God who was speaking in their words*. The Word had become flesh; the Word would go on being flesh throughout the centuries." In other words, they believed that the Word that had been incarnate in Jesus was now incarnate in the church and most explicitly in preaching.

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<sup>759</sup> Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 16.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>762</sup> Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 28.



Christian education, on the other hands, was conceived as *didache*, translated “a teaching.” Didache connoted “direction, instruction, information, guidance on the road” in the Christian and Jewish tradition.<sup>763</sup> These teachings were grounded in the Torah in Judaism and in the teachings of the apostles in the early church. This is best illustrated by an early church treatise called *The Didache* or *The Teaching of the Apostles* “which was so important that in some churches it was considered on a par with the apostolic writings that came to form the New Testament.”<sup>764</sup> The teaching, therefore, also came from God and was intended to teach attitudes and practices reflective of the kingdom of God.

While Harris does not argue that kerygma and didache are the same, she does maintain that they are equally important forms through which the church embodies its central vocation. Therefore, rather than definitively separating kerygma and didache, she contends, in *Reshaping Religious Education*, that kerygma and didache have “multiple embodiments.”

Kerygma and didache also have numerous embodiments. Preaching is generally the best-known and most often used form of kerygmatic speech, but advocacy for the poor and the abused; taking part in processions and demonstrations, especially in the service of justice; and protesting the death penalty in the name of the Gospel may also be incarnations of the embodied word that is the soul of kerygma. And didache—the word translates as “teaching”—carries a meaning that allows it to be applied not only to the catechesis of catechumens preparing for baptism but to the mystagogy that follows; to the instruction in practices already being performed, from centering prayer to the celebration of marriage; to the study of the history of how these developed; to presenting the story and the theologies of the church through the ages all the way back to and through its origins in Judaism, with pride of place given to the biblical tradition.<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>763</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me*, 110.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Harris & Moran, 21.

Harris expands our conception of kerygma and didache by suggesting that they are not limited to the acts of preaching and teaching. That is, kerygma or proclamation is embodied in the numerous oral and kinesthetic or performative practices by which the church seeks to live into and work toward the just intent of the Gospel, including protests, procession and demonstrations.<sup>766</sup> In other words, the church's kerygma is evident in every aspect of its *saying* and *doing*. With respect to teaching, she argues that didache is more than biblical interpretation or bible study, but also encompasses instruction in the full range of religious thought and practice. Thus, she maintains that preaching, while "more centrally a form of kerygma," is also a "form of didache essential to as well as internal in the church."<sup>767</sup> Although I agree with Harris, Augustine, Knox and others, that preaching embodies didache, I would also suggest that there is kerygmatic efficacy in teaching; that Christian education embodies and proclaims the Gospel.

Harris does not explicitly suggest that teaching might also embody kerygma, as does Long, but she does indicate that teaching and "educational curriculum" is priestly, prophetic and political.<sup>768</sup> As priestly, education preserves the tradition and as prophetic it points us toward the future. As political, religious educators "shape systems of

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<sup>766</sup> Cf. Byron Anderson, "Liturgical Catechesis" for a full discussion of the educative efficacy of religious practice and its theological import.

<sup>767</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me*, 114-115.

<sup>768</sup> Harris & Moran, 26. Cf. her discussion of didache in *Fashion Me A People*. She maintains that teaching, whether preaching or catechizing, is more than initiation into the life of the church or passing on the church's tradition; it is "also the act of reinterpreting, questioning, analyzing, and even at times rejecting and resisting" (116, 117). She also, with Paulo Freire, rejects the "banking theory" of education and contends that "A broader understanding of teaching, therefore, highlights the power within catechizing and preaching to raise questions and where necessary revise interpretations" (117). Augustine also prefigures this idea in his contention that "it is a part of the teacher's task not just to reveal what is hidden and solve knotty problems but also, while doing this, to anticipate other questions which may arise, in case they undermine or refute what we are saying; provided, of course, that the solution also presents itself to us, so that we do not undermine our sure foundation." While it is clear that Augustine is concerned with questions that might undermine the subject-matter that he wishes to teach, what is provocative is that he values the questions that the hearers bring to the preaching moment or learning situation and urges the preacher to take them into consideration. Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 127.

organization, government, community—in short, polity—that will provide forms that are both lifelong and lifewide and promote forms that are priestly and prophetic.”<sup>769</sup> When Christian education is understood as political, it is not simply concerned with creating and sustaining a way of being (or a form), but with creating and sustaining a way of being consistent with the Gospel. Therefore, Christian education reveals the possibility of a just and life-affirming reality and invites others to participate in bringing that vision to fruition. That is, Christian education proclaims the Gospel via its curricular content and intent.

For example, when Christian educators invite persons to consider the possibility of justice or wellbeing as the inheritance of all persons we are offering these ideas as feasible and possible despite the world that currently exist. Even more, we help persons consider the possibility of a new reality by revealing the inadequacy of the present world of suffering and by appealing to our shared desire for a just and humane existence. In other words, Christian education is *political* in that it is not disinterested but rather concerned with helping persons conceive reality through the lens of the Gospel with hopes that they might live therein.<sup>770</sup>

Thomas Groome also argues that Christian education is a political activity; “a deliberate and structured intervention in people’s lives which attempts to influence how

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<sup>769</sup> Ibid.

<sup>770</sup> Maria Harris agrees that teaching is political and indicates that teaching “is toward the building up of the body politic of the Christ by continually striving to make that body be, in form and in polity, the kind of organism where power is never power over or power against, but power used *with* and *in favor of* and *for* one another and the wider society. Teaching is toward creating the situation of *koinonia* where all may be one; an activity of mutuality and helping others claim their own best possibilities, not only for themselves but for the sake of the Christ and of the world God loves.” Cf. Harris, *Fashion Me A People*, 112.

they live their lives in society.”<sup>771</sup> He suggests that education must address human persons within the historical context of life and influence “the way we live out our time in community.”<sup>772</sup> Therefore, when we claim that educational activities are nonpolitical, we decontextualize our educational endeavors and risk being “out of time” rather than “in time”—we become irrelevant to those with whom we teach.<sup>773</sup> Richard Shaull, in his forward to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that “There is no such thing as a neutral educational process.”<sup>774</sup> Education either functions to sustain the present order of things or “it becomes the ‘practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”<sup>775</sup> Christian education proposes and seeks to create alternatives; wants persons to discern new possibilities for themselves and their world. In *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, Harris also contends that teaching, at its best, “can shape and reshape subject matter in order to present, to institute and constitute what is, has been, and might be humanly possible,” so that persons might alter their existence.<sup>776</sup> While she emphasizes the power of the imagination to open up possibilities, she qualifies her assertion by suggesting that “teaching is an act not only of the imagination, but of the religious imagination.”<sup>777</sup> In other words, teaching takes seriously those things that are “of ultimate concern and meaning” from a religious perspective, which she identifies as valuing *mystery*, the *numinous*, and the *mystical*. As such, she encourages teachers and

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<sup>771</sup> Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 15.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid.

<sup>774</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999, c. 1970), 16.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

<sup>776</sup> Harris, *Teaching and the Religious Imagination*, 4.

<sup>777</sup> Ibid., 10.

learners to frame their work and view their world through a religious lens.<sup>778</sup> In other words, teaching in the Christian Church invites persons to frame their world in accordance with the Gospel which it proclaims. The point that I am making is that Christian education, along with preaching and other expressions of the Gospel, seeks to influence and help persons discern a way of being and relating through our practices, engagement with the biblical text, our sense of the world, and our sensitivity to the Divine. Christian education, therefore, proclaims the Gospel through its pedagogy, its subject-matter, and its educational intent.

I might also add that my assertion regarding the kerygmatic efficacy of Christian education is not intended to support banking or non-dialogical approaches to Christian education. As I indicated earlier, one of the ways that the young black women with whom I spoke discerned meaning for their lives or came to know themselves was through participation in *cross-generational dialogical communities that provide space for inquiry and reinterpretation, confession and contestation, laughter and lament*. Therefore, churches might also create educational opportunities and preaching events that are dialogical and communal. This is consistent with educational theorists Paulo Freire's suggestion that person name and transform their world through dialogue with other human persons: "dialogue is the encounter between [persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world."<sup>779</sup>

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<sup>778</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>779</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69. Cf. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom*, for additional comments regarding the importance of education that is dialogical and communal.

Similarly, Maria Harris suggests that the educative intent of preaching and teaching is more than initiation into the life of the church or passing on the church's tradition (banking); it is "also the act of reinterpreting, questioning, analyzing, and even at time rejecting and resisting."<sup>780</sup> In other words, preaching and teaching that invites persons to consider the quality of our lives together in dialogue with each other, the biblical text, and the world in which we live to the end of discerning a life-affirming existence for ourselves and others is dialogical and communal.

Preaching is also dialogical in churches that take seriously the call and response tradition. For example, Henry Mitchell maintains that call and response "is part of a larger dialogical pattern traceable to West African culture. The response requires a participating audience, and Black preaching has had such an audience from its beginning."<sup>781</sup> The congregation gives witness to the truth that is being proclaimed through vocal response and gestures. There is an ongoing conversation between preacher and hearer that affirms for the preacher that they are no longer preaching *to* but rather *with* the hearers. Thus the hearer becomes a participant in the larger event of preaching. What might have been a monologue is transformed into dialogue without sacrificing the content and intent of the sermon, and preaching becomes a participatory event. Whether the preaching event is characterized by vocal response or by silent reflection and affirmation, preaching is dialogical when it takes seriously the questions and concerns that hearers bring to the event and seek to create opportunities for discernment and transformation.

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<sup>780</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me*, 116,117.

<sup>781</sup> Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 100.

### In Response

As I consider the numerous dialogue partners who have framed this discussion, I am convinced that that kerygma, or perhaps more specifically the church's act of proclaiming (kerrussō), is indicative of the numerous forms by which the church embodies and re-presents the Good News—preaching, teaching, singing, worshiping, dancing, imagining, lamenting, and more—and its ministry of inviting and inspiring others to live into the reality to which it bears witness. Likewise, when didache is conceived as the art of teaching as well as that which is taught (as per Harris), didache includes the various liturgical and social practices and pedagogical strategies intended to enhance our engagement with and participation in the reality which the Gospel envisions, including preaching.<sup>782</sup>

The content of our proclamation is the Gospel as evinced throughout the biblical witness and expressed most completely in the church's ongoing practice of loving God and neighbor and its commitment to a just and liberating existence for all persons; news of the shalom of God. In this respect, as Knox and Augustine argue, those of us who preach proclaim the Gospel through the practice or pedagogy of preaching, using its unique form to convey meaning, inspiration and create transformation. As we preach the Gospel, we also teach. Preaching does not stand alone, however, because teaching gives form to subject matter or the content of our proclamation (per Maria Harris). In other words, teaching embodies the pedagogical strategies, including preaching, necessary to effectively convey and invite adherents to the view of reality that the Gospel announces (Foster). This means that as the church teaches the bible, its history, theology, its own or

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<sup>782</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me*, 110.

other religious traditions, it does so with the intent of enhancing engagement with and participation in the gospel message.<sup>783</sup>

The implications of my assertion is that, the church both proclaims the Gospel(kerygma), which is inclusive of Jesus' teachings and other texts through which the shalom of God is revealed, and gives form to the Gospel(didache) in the process of proclaiming it in word and practice. Thus the church is always involved in kerygma and didache as it re-presents and gospel and seeks to enhance the quality of our relationship with the God of Creation, self and others, and the created order. While kerygma is centrally concerned with content and didache with process, the reality is that they are indispensable to each other. I believe that the ambiguity between teaching and proclamation in Jesus' life and ministry that I discussed earlier is a valuable illustration of their interconnectedness and is worthy of our attention. This is especially true at a time in history when the compartmentalized approach to education and disciplinary studies is giving way to interdisciplinary engagement. Therefore, I am suggesting that teaching and proclamation are inextricably connected, in that content, intent and process must remain together.

When kerygma and didache are considered from this perspective, we are able to conceptualize a holistic and dialogical relationship between proclamation and teaching without sacrificing the unique forms through which the church re-presents the Gospel within the context of the gathered community and into the larger society. Similarly, when preaching and Christian education are seen as embodiments of kerygma and didache, the hierarchical construction of the past can be toppled in favor of a mutually dialogical and

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<sup>783</sup> See my comments above regarding the gospel message.



supportive relationship. The dialogical and supportive nature of the relationship also mirrors the quality of engagement among human persons that the Gospel envisions and anticipates. In other words, preaching and Christian education are dependent upon each other for their effective deployment and can benefit from myriad practices and strategies that have been definitive for their respective disciplines. In dialogue with each other, preaching and Christian education can help human persons imagine a just and life affirming reality for themselves and others in which love of God, affirmation of their own God createdness, and love of neighbor are the normative expression of human existence. The complementary dialogue also creates transformative experiences that invite and inspire persons to participate fully in bringing that reality to fruition.

### **TOWARD A PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATION OF HOPE**

Living with hope is a vision on its way to becoming an actuality. It remains in the not yet, but we anxiously await its actualization. We actively hope against hope, straining to hear Hope's assertion, because we live in loving and obedient relationship with the One who wills the world's wellbeing. The Gospel so conceived is a *Gospel of hope* in that its announcement confirms and reinforces that which Hope proclaims. This is important because so many people are trying to survive and resist annihilation while faced with concrete realities that again and again suggest that their efforts are futile. Thus, we proclaim the Gospel as our profession of faith, love and hope.

As a descendant of those who sought to study war no more, I announce the Gospel in the name of the many women and men who came before me and who hoped

for that which they would never realize but nonetheless hoped my generation into existence. I speak Gospel words because I believe, by the grace of God, that hoping—that envisioning a future, living as though it were a reality, resisting and contesting where possible, and remaining firm in my conviction to speak—can open the way for a future filled with possibility. I speak hope-filled words because I am convinced that I am not standing alone or speaking into a void, but that there are divine and human emissaries of shalom also speaking, and the sound of our speaking and the pulse of our hoping is greater than the evil of this present age. And yes, I speak because I believe that it is the vocation of the Christian church to proclaim and teach the Gospel and thereby the voice of Hope becomes audible

The possibility of a holistic and dialogical relationship between preaching and Christian education is promising and provocative when considered in light of our emphasis upon strengthening young black women's acuity to the voice of hope. I've already suggested that an adequate pedagogy must not only name what is wrong with the world but value contestation and recreation. Contestation negates that which disaffirms and demands its cessation. Recreation reflects freedom to choose and live responsive to a view of reality that names survival and flourishing as the inheritance of all persons and a possibility in the concrete reality of our existence. Contestation says "no" to negating and disaffirming images, myths and ideologies; snatches from them their power to make oppression appear "normal and inevitable" while recreation says "yes" to new patterns and possibility for divine and human relationship. Contestation rejects culturally induced despair and recreation accepts the power of Hope to energize and catalyze us toward the

future. Therefore, it seems imperative that preachers and Christian educators agree as to some basic tenets of human anthropology and hope.

Living responsive to the voice of Hope requires a life-affirming anthropology that values human existence without regard to gender, race, creed, color, or social location. It views all persons as God's creation and rightful inheritors of wholeness, wellbeing and prosperity. A life-affirming anthropology also negates the inevitability and normality of suffering and affirms the possibility of a world in which suffering and oppression are no more—human persons hope-for and partner with God for the sake of humanity and all of creation. Given this view of reality, a life affirming anthropology also names human persons as creatures who can choose to live in partnership with the Divine so that God's will might be done in and among the many human and non-human entities who inhabit the earth. Therefore, a theology of hope posits *Hope* as a disposition of the human spirit; a personification or presence of the Spirit of God in each person reminding us of God's fidelity, presence and power. This is the worked to which I am inviting Christian education and preaching. In the chapter that follows I will talk more specifically about aspects of the pedagogy of hope that I am proposing with emphasis upon approaches that are *transformational, relational, dialogical*, and imaginative. I will also discuss how and to what extent these pedagogical commitments can assist us in naming and deconstructing structural oppression, negating culturally induced despair and sustaining young black women in their efforts to live responsive to the voice of Hope.

## CHAPTER SIX

**ASCERTAINING THE VOICE OF HOPE: A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL****Sermonic Prelude:**

“The Salvific Efficacy of Midwifery” *or*  
 “Girl... Get the Midwife Now, I’m About to Give Birth!!”<sup>784</sup>  
 Exodus 1:15-17

The Exodus narrative is an old story that has been told over and over again in the Black Church, transforming our imagination and securing us in faith. We preach it, teach it, sing it, and shout it: “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land; tell old Pharaoh to let my people Go!” It is a story with which we can identify; a story of struggle, survival and liberation. It is a story about how God called Moses from a burning bush and set in motion a chain of events that would change the Hebrew people’s lives forever.

There are plagues, diseases and death as the God of Israel makes every effort to secure the Pharaoh’s cooperation, but the Pharaoh says “no!” And when he repeatedly refuses to let God’s people go, the Lord God of Israel, like a thief in the night, orchestrates the Hebrew people’s escape by cloak of darkness, rolling back the waters of the Red Sea,

...collapsing it again on Pharaoh’s army,

...and landing them safely on the eastern shore....

...And there they begin again with the blessed assurance that their future has been preserved by God.

As a people who bear the legacy of chattel slavery, our story is woven together with theirs in a tapestry that creates a kinship connection, because of our common suffering, our yearning for deliverance, and our shared reliance upon God.

And while we know that the circumstances of our sojourn in these foreign lands are different, it seems that we both ended up in the same place, facing the

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<sup>784</sup> The passage that follows is a sermon excerpt designed for oral presentation with a worship community. The language is intentionally conversational and colloquial in nature, and attentive to rhythm and vocal continuity. These stylistic features are also evident in the sermon excerpts incorporated throughout the chapter.

ferocity of slavery and desperately needing the delivering hand of God on our behalf. And so it seems only fitting that we tell this story again with attention to its many contours and turns, unearthing its hidden meaning and listening for the voices of those who are least likely to be heard.

You see, I realized that I had missed something significant in the telling of the story; something that should have been obvious to me as a woman of faith, but my eyes had not been trained to see them...

...In my search for meaning, I read the story again, this time from the beginning and with new vision. *And there they were*, whispering words that may well reveal God's voice for our historical moment.

Though we rarely acknowledge it, the story that I've loved so dearly does not begin with Moses' call at the burning bush, the parting of the Sea, or the people's triumphal departure from Egypt. No, *it* begins before Moses' birth when the threat of annihilation shrouded the boy-babies...

...years before he became the deliverer,  
     for Moses was yet in his mother's womb...  
 ...years before we hear any explicit instruction from God,  
     for God does not yet intervene.

This story begins in the midst of pain and death, suffering and lament, where women who are involved in the things that women do decided to change the course of history.

*They invite us to come,*  
     Come to the place of grief and lament;  
     come to the context of danger and distress!!

And so we come, peering through the windows of this text, listening for their voices and hoping to learn from their experiences.

But they will not agree to simply tell us their story, to narrate it from a distance as though it has nothing to do with us.

This is still our story and we will have to sojourn with them, step into the danger zone and risk being changed;  
     we will have to touch the curves of their hands, feel the pulsating rhythm of the blood rushing through their veins, bend our backs and kneel on the floor with them, and humble ourselves in intimacy with our sisters as we together give birth to hope and possibility.

In this story, creation and salvation are made possible and tangible because of the courage and ingenuity of a cadre of women—

...enslaved and child-bearing women like Moses' mother and the other pregnant Hebrew women...

...risk-taking women and girls like Miriam and the Pharaoh's daughter...  
     ...skilled and God-fearing women like Shiphrah and Puah—

who would not settle for the *inevitability of death*  
but decided to birth a new reality into existence.

### **MIDWIFERY AND THE TEMERITY TO LIVE WITH HOPE**

Throughout this investigation I have described *Hope* metaphorically as that which creates in human persons yearning for wholeness and wellbeing; a personification of the Spirit assuring us of God's presence, power and fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. I have also suggested that the Gospel which Jesus proclaimed is a Gospel of Hope in that it announced that the Kingdom of God has come near and beckoned human persons to turn away from the ethic that had ordered their lives and toward a radically new ethic in which love of God and neighbor would become the normative expression of human existence. The Gospel, therefore, signaled that a new reality was taking shape in the concreteness of everyday life—that God's Divine promise was about to be actualized in the present moment while also enlisting human participation in bringing it to fruition.

The Kingdom of God is still taking shape, expanding in surprising and sometimes uncomfortable ways in the concreteness of human existence and God continues to call human persons to embrace the work of midwifery, of bringing forth that which the Spirit engenders in the “womb of the present.”<sup>785</sup> Although its complete actualization remains in the not yet the Kingdom abides with us now as anticipatory promise. To live in anticipation of the Kingdom of God is to live with hope; it is to acknowledge the

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<sup>785</sup> Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, (New York: Corpus Publications, 1969), 96. I appropriate Alves' use of the midwife as indicative of humanity's participation in God's liberating praxis. He argues that “If action is the midwife of the future, then human activity can add the new to the world” (136). Thus he emphasizes the necessity of human participation in God's liberating activity and suggests that “The Creation of the new future is thus part of the mutual pact of faithfulness to the liberation of [humanity] that unites God and [humanity]” (136). I might add that participating with God not only creates new futures but, as in the case of Jesus' intervention on the behalf of the woman who was about to be stoned in John 8:1-11, enlists us to intervene in concrete ways in the nowness of our existence.

unfinished nature of the Kingdom while also standing upon the surety that the God who has been faithful in the past remains present and active in the nowness of our existence. Thus, to live with hope is to say *yes* to God's *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world. It is to live as citizens of the Kingdom even though the world in which we live is nothing more than a faint reflection of that for which we yearn, if at all. To live with hope is to live as though the Kingdom were fully present despite the ferocity of oppression, suffering and domination; to midwife it into the present moment and make its presence among us an actuality—tangible, visible, palpable—because we have been claimed for a reality which backing is God. To live with hope is to sense the pulsating rhythm of wholeness that binds us together as one family with a common yearning and come to know, as Jesus knew, that “the time is fulfilled” (Mark 1:15).

If we dare listen, we might hear our hearts beating in sync with all of creation, nay with the heart of God, and sense our spirits moaning, groaning and yearning together for that just and life-affirming reality that characterizes the Kingdom. We might come to know what we must know in the depths of our being; that the time is now and to live with hope is urgent. Now is the time for impoverishment to give way to prosperity. Now is the time for those who are tormented by genocidal regimes to live in freedom. Now is the time for the infirmed and diseased who have been denied health care to receive life-sustaining medicines and vaccines that are readily available in the Western World. Now is the time to study war no more. Now is the time for those who are negated and broken to find wholeness; for oppression and domination of every kind to end. Now is the time to say *yes* and midwife a new reality into the present moment.

Living with hope is no small matter because culturally induced despair, an evil and insidious cultural production created and sustained by structural oppression, delimits our ability to say *yes* to the *yes* of God. Thus, even as persons and communities struggle to survive and act for themselves under the conditions of oppression—even as they populate worship communities and seek the One who might deliver them from bondage—culturally induced despair sustains the perception that the present order is impervious to change. The stark reality of culturally induced despair became evident as many of the women with whom I spoke expressed reticence about challenging that which perpetuates oppression in their lives. They believe that their task is to remain strong enough to endure abuse, abandonment, negation, doubt and fear as well as to controvert negation by presenting themselves in a manner that others might find acceptable—*representational preoccupation*. They also describe hope as a private matter intended to energize them in the struggle to adapt, with minimal conception of hope as that which compels persons and communities toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. This, of course, is not their fault but rather a pedagogical problem as the oppressive structures and representations which the women encounter create the perception that oppression is insurmountable or impervious to change. The pedagogical task to which I invite preachers and Christian educators, therefore, is to help young black women and others “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a *limiting situation* which they can transform” so that they might resist adaptation to oppression and become creative and transformative agents in the world.<sup>786</sup>

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<sup>786</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1999, c. 1970), 31 (emphasis added).



Our task is to create strategies that can address and redress culturally induced despair as well as strengthen young black women's acuity and responsiveness to the voice of Hope.<sup>787</sup> *Addressing* culturally induced despair is concerned with unmasking and analyzing its structural and perceptual causes, including its delimiting impact in the lives of young black women—revealing them as *limiting-situations*. To *redress* culturally induced despair is to eliminate these causes so that young black women might discern life-affirming and hope-filled alternatives for their lives. However, eliminating that which creates and sustains culturally induced despair does not in itself engender hope. Thus, the pedagogy is also concerned with strengthening young black women's acuity and responsiveness to the voice of Hope by amplifying resonances of hope embedded throughout history, within their personal and familial stories, and within the various contexts that constitute the world in which they live.

Ascertaining the elements of this pedagogy began with the cultural analysis of hope and despair in the lives of young black women. The cultural analysis included interviews with twenty-two young black women, engagement with existing scholarship and mutual critical dialogue between the two. This process yielded rich insights regarding black women's reflections on hope in existing literature and the extent to which these reflections were consistent with verbal responses and patterns for living evinced by the women who gifted me with their stories. The cultural analysis also revealed the historical and ongoing prevalence of structural oppression in the lives of young black women due

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<sup>787</sup> I have used the term "acuity" throughout this investigation to emphasize perceptual sharpness or the ability to sense God's presence, power and fidelity to creating a just and humane existence despite the reality of oppression and disaffirmation. Strengthening one's acuity, therefore, necessarily includes helping persons address—unmask and analyze—the perceptual and structural sources of culturally induced despair so that they might more clearly sense or discern their role in God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world for all persons.

in part to negating racialized and sexualized images, myths and ideologies woven into the fabric of U.S. culture. The theological discourse and the reflections on pedagogy and its relationship to homiletics and Christian education augment the cultural analysis by helping us ascertain important connections between the women's lived experiences and ongoing scholarly discourse regarding hope, preaching and Christian education. They also provide new insights and pedagogical intimations that significantly inform my efforts toward ascertaining suitable strategies.

In the pages that follow, I will summarize significant insights and pedagogical intimations gained from the cultural analysis, theological discourse and discussion of pedagogy. I will also detail the central elements of our pedagogical endeavor and propose strategies that respond to the women's questions, concerns and deep yearnings. My desire is that these strategies might awaken young black women and others to the voice of Hope and embolden them toward creating a life-affirming reality for themselves and others.

### **Insights and Pedagogical Intimations from the Cultural Analysis of Hope and Despair**

The cultural analysis of hope and despair revealed that young black women perceive the society in which they live as a structurally oppressive ethos in which cultural negation is a prevailing theme; a hostile place in which young black women must struggle to be seen, heard, valued and accepted as full and equal members of society, despite their economic and social gains. In other words, while they identify persons and communities that contribute positively to their self-understanding and sense of the world, the negation that they experience exerts a more compelling claim upon their lives. This is due in part to negating social interactions and the frequency and constancy with which

they encounter racialized and sexualized images, myths and ideologies regarding young black women. Another contributing factor, however, is that the women often experience negation within the very communities from which they seek affirmation. For example, relationships with their worship communities and families are often tenuous and ambiguous, at times mirroring the marginalization and devaluation, judgment and punishment, sexism and disparate treatment, abuse, shame, abandonment, molestation, discord and disunity that have become all too common to young black women's experience in the broader culture. Also, many of their affirming relationships remain remote, as the women often observe significant exemplars from a distance rather than cultivate substantive relationships with them. The scarcity of equally potent affirming representations and relationships, therefore, afford negating representations and encounters a disproportionate amount of influence upon the meaning that young black women make of their world and for their lives. As a result, while some of the women adopt patterns for living that evince resonances of hopes, patterns indicative of culturally induced despair appear more prevalent.

### **Patterns for Living in the Present and into the Future**

The women whose stories inform this investigation revealed eleven patterns for living, variously embraced, by which they navigate the contexts in which they live. These patterns for living respond to the women's overall sense of the world and shared experience of being young, black and female in U.S. culture. Their stories also confirm that young black women are not a homogenous group, despite the prevalence of stereotypical assertions to the contrary, and reveal the contours and nuances of their

unique experiences and ways of being in the world. Therefore, while many of the women embrace similar patterns for living there are also instances in which only one or two women evince a particular pattern. Patterns for living include (1) *becoming cross- and intra-generational models*, (2) *nurturing and sustaining life-affirming relationships*, (3) *representational preoccupation*, (4) *indifference and disengagement*, (5) *hard work*, (6) *strength*, (7) *inert concern*, (8) *personal determination and reliance upon God*, (9) *disappointment and doubt*, (10) *cognitive distancing*, (11) *silence and distance*. Given my extensive treatment of these patterns for living in chapter three, I will limit my comments to a brief summary as we move toward discerning their pedagogical significance.

Throughout my conversations with the women I listened closely for resonances of hope in their descriptive language and ways of being in the world. As discussed earlier, the women's descriptive language for hope departed significantly from that which frames the current investigation. Despite these differences, however, I was able to discern resonances of hope or hope-filled intimations in several of their responses. Most of the women extolled the value of *cross-generational and intra-generational role-models* who affirmed them as young, black, and female and encouraged them as they discerned alternatives for living. In response, some of the women evinced resonances of hope by embracing the ministry of becoming mentors, exemplars and role-models who nurture youths and other young black women toward their best becoming as integral to their identity and sense of purpose in the world. In the same light, several mothers evinced resonances of hope in their efforts to secure their children's wellbeing and advocate on their behalf, even when they did not advocate for themselves. Resonances of hope were also evident in the intentionality with which the women listened, observed and gleaned

from their exemplars, revealing their yearning for wholeness and for life-affirming alternatives to the negation that they experience. Additionally, despite the remote nature of their relationships with exemplars, many of the women expressed their unambiguous desire for more substantive interactions. Where such relationships existed, they sought to nurture and sustain them. The necessity of exemplars and relationships that affirm them as young, black and female seems significant as we consider pedagogical strategies.

Patterns for living evincing culturally induced despair far outweighed those that evinced hope. These patterns for living, though largely protective in nature, keep young black women preoccupied with defending themselves against oppression and negating representations rather than discerning and embracing life affirming alternatives. Again, these are a pedagogical problem to which the pedagogical commitments and practices intend to respond. The first pattern, *representational preoccupation*, reveals young black women's preoccupation with proving themselves acceptable to the larger society in which they live by adapting to perceived societal norms. The women who adopted this pattern for living sought to change cultural perception via adaptation and remained reticent about challenging the social constructions and representations that perpetuate their oppression. They also embraced the task of representing all young black women to the larger culture—the “supra-model”—without challenging the veracity of social constructions that deem young black women identical to each other. The women who did not fight against negating stereotypes adopted *hard work* as a survival strategy or *indifference* and *disengagement* in an effort to manage the negation that they experienced—make it of none-effect. However, these patterns also isolated them from

the larger culture in which they live and diminished their ability to live as creative agents in the world.

The women adopt *strength* as another pattern for living as they seek to survive and thrive in the face of negation and oppression. Their assertion of *strength* acknowledges the many obstacles that young black women face and their determination to “not break down” as they attempt to traverse the tumultuous waters of life. This became evident as many of the women indicated that they need *strength* to endure negation, sexual molestation, abandonment, doubt and fear. *Strength* was also inherent in other patterns for living, such as *personal determination and reliance upon God* when experiencing personal failure, and as that which makes it possible for them to stave off *disappointment and doubt*. *Strength*, in other words, protects young black women from being consumed as they adapt to the world in which they live. Strength so conceived also prevents them from garnering the generative strength that one must embody in order to live with hope. This strength to survive can obviate the strength that regenerates and emboldens the women to question, challenge, talk back, look beneath the surface, imagine alternatives and act in ways that subvert the *isness* of the present for the cause of God’s shalom was conspicuously absent. Their determination to remain strong also revealed a second controlling image, the “constant survivor,” who endures, works hard, gives, depends on none but God with little support from others.

In addition to their personal struggles, several of the women also identified social ills as sources of culturally induced despair, expressing grave concern for the state of our collective existence and articulating the need for intervention. Rather than engage in concrete action, they evince *inert concern* as a pattern for living. This pattern for living

amplifies the extent to which the women perceive hope as a private matter and as unrelated to a more general conception of God's intent toward a just and life affirming existence for all persons. Similarly, some of the women evinced *inert concern* regarding their own experience of oppression in that they sought *strength* to endure rather than challenge oppression even as they expressed their discontent.

A sixth pattern for living related to the overwhelming prevalence of negating media representations is *cognitive distancing*, represented metaphorically as *it's not about me*. All of the women bemoan the prevalence and incessant nature of negating media representations but deny that they are vulnerable to such representations. Thus, they distance themselves from the negating impact by asserting 'it's not about me' or 'they're not talking about me.' However, *cognitive distancing* seems inconsistent with the women's preoccupation with repairing their public image (*representational preoccupation*) and their insistence upon enduring oppression (*strength*), suggesting a more tenuous sense of self than the women were willing to admit. Their stories reveal that negating media representations indeed create angst about their sense of value to society as well as insecurity about body image and aesthetic appeal, leaving them dispirited and reticent to challenge that which creates and sustains their oppression.

Finally, the women's experiences in the Black Church reveal *silence* and *distance* as the predominant patterns for living. Although eighteen of the women indicate that they attend worship weekly, most of them also indicate that they are not significantly involved in their worship communities. Many of them fear rejection of their ideas and remain reticent about asking questions or offering suggestions that might strengthen the community and its ministries. Some doubt the church's relevance while others question

its interest regarding their needs, concerns and deep yearnings. Their most fervent desire is that the church would become a safe spaces in which they can form substantive relationships, tell their stories and articulate their pain without fear of judgment or feeling ashamed. Therefore, rather than joyful embrace of the church's tenets and practices many of the women evinced respectful yet cautious regard for their worship communities, listening closely for words of wisdom and testimonial assertions that might nurture their ability to live in the present and into the future.

The patterns by which young black women live and their descriptive language for hope reveal rich pedagogical insights that can advance our efforts toward identifying an adequate pedagogy of hope. Therefore, I listened closely for what their words might instruct us regarding preaching and teaching with young black women. I continue our investigation by discussing the pedagogical insights that their stories revealed.

### **Pedagogical Intimations**

The first pedagogical intimation concerns the women's descriptive language for hope. I have suggested that to live with hope is to say "yes" to God's "yes" by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world. I have also suggested that living with hope is not only about the wellbeing of others but about one's own wellbeing and sense of wholeness. While many of the women indicated that hope comes from God, their descriptive language revealed no discernable connection between hope and God's intent toward justice and wellbeing in the global community. Also, while they believe that God engenders hope or empowers them to endure oppression, they do not



suggest that God repudiates or is actively involved in eliminating the oppression and injustice that they and others experience.

In other words, they do not conceive hope's communal implications or God's deep concern for our collective wellbeing and liberation. Rather, hope is an inner voice—"that little voice"—that assures them that things will be well and that God is present in their lives, and to live with hope is to live optimistically, believing that God will either solve the problems that they are facing or reveal the means by which they might address them. Emphasizing individual needs without attention to our collective wellbeing or God's repudiation of suffering distracts young black women from discerning the systemic nature of oppression or their role in God's ongoing activity toward justice and wellbeing, including their own wellbeing. Therefore, our pedagogy might help young black women expand their conception of hope by affording opportunities for theological reflection and biblical interpretation in dialogue with their own life experiences as well as domestic and global suffering and oppression. The pedagogy might also emphasize hope's communal efficacy and amplify the value of human persons to God's ongoing redemptive work so that young black women can discern their place in God's unfolding drama.

The second pedagogical intimation is that young black women learn who they are in dialogue and relationship with their families, mentors, friends and by observing exemplars in church and society. Although not exclusive, their predominant dialogue partners and exemplars are women, many of them older women, whose life experiences mirror in some way the struggles and aspirations that young black women themselves experience. Young black women thus learn through their engagement with others, from stories and testimonies of conquest and struggle, personal insights and wisdom, successes

and life experiences and in community with women whose journeys resemble that to which young black women aspire. As suggested in Chapter Three, their experiences illustrate that caring exemplars can interrupt the flow of negation in the lives of young black women and create safe spaces in which they might question and reinterpret their world, confess their misgivings, express discontent, contest oppression, laugh, lament, and find healing as they discern who they are and of what they consist. Therefore, a pedagogy that enhances young black women's ability to live with hope would include woman-centered and wisdom-oriented pedagogical strategies that are relational, communal, storied, and cross- and intra-generational. Also, given the women's assertions regarding the role of clergy-women in their lives, clergy-women might consider the pedagogical significance of their preaching and teaching to create formational and transformational experiences that are sensitive to the unique needs and concerns of young black women.

A third insight is that the meaning that the women make for their lives and their patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction are inordinately influenced by structural oppression and engenders culturally induced despair. Their experience of cultural negation is overwhelming, confronting them across the various contexts in which they live, work, and play. Thus they perceive their world as a hostile place that is impervious to change or transformation and they see themselves as powerless to challenge the negation with which they are confronted. This perception keeps them preoccupied with trying to disprove or controvert negating representations by adapting to perceived cultural norms; it prevents them from deconstructing, contesting and resisting that which perpetuates oppression. This is a pedagogical problem in light of our

discussion of hope because their imaginative and physical energy is consumed with creating more efficient ways to prove that they are good enough or not as bad as others think rather than creating life-affirming hope-filled alternatives for themselves and others.

In response, a pedagogy would include strategies that invite young black women to name and deconstruct the oppression that contributes to culturally induced despair and to discern and embrace alternatives that embody resistance, contestation and creation. Strategies that amplify the personal and communal value of blackness and femaleness will also enhance young black women's ability to live with hope. Finally, given my assertion that young black women learn who they are and of what they consist in dialogue and relationship with others, our pedagogy might also embolden young black women to give voice to their struggles within a shared communal ethos concerned with their wellbeing and with providing space for them to discern alternatives for their lives.

### **Insights and Pedagogical Intimations from the Theological Discourse**

Insights from the theological discourse in Chapter Four augment and deepen the pedagogical intimations drawn from the cultural analysis by adding contextual efficacy to our pedagogical endeavor. This emergent pedagogy is intended to aide preachers, Christian educators and church communities that are interested in addressing and redressing culturally induced despair, strengthening young black women's acuity to the voice of hope and enhancing their ability to live therein. An effective pedagogy will remain attentive to important parallels between the women's theological conceptions, questions, and deep yearnings and the expansive theological dialogue regarding the

source and efficacy of hope. I discuss these insights in the pages that follow under three general headings: The Kingdom of God, The Power of Lament, and Remembering into the Present Moment.

### **The Kingdom of God**

One of the most important aspects of our pedagogical endeavor is to strengthen young black women's acuity to the voice of hope so they might understand themselves and other human persons as valuable to God and important to God's ongoing redemption of the world. The cultural analysis revealed that young black women's overall sense of negation keeps them preoccupied with repairing their image and trying to endure oppression rather than celebrating their God createdness and viewing themselves as creative agents in the world. This is due in part to the prevalence of negating images, myths and ideologies and is compounded by a dearth of life-affirming representations and exemplars in their lives. It is imperative, therefore, that our pedagogy help young black women discern their value to God and humanity by replacing oppressive images, myths and ideologies with theological constructs and metaphors that affirm their wellbeing and amplify God's intent toward a just and humane world for all persons. Thus, I propose the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor and theological construct that reveals God's presence, power and fidelity to just, liberating and restorative action in the world—the shalom of God—and invites human participation in God's ongoing redemptive work.

Delores Williams, Rubem Alves, and Walter Brueggemann support my claim that the Kingdom of God is not an apolitical or ahistorical destination to which we journey or

for which we await but rather an expression of God's presence in the concreteness of human existence. Delores Williams, for example, argues that the Kingdom of God is thematic in Jesus' invitation to human persons to right relations "between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else"—God's ministerial vision for the world.<sup>788</sup> She rejects the idea that God sacrificed or required Jesus to sacrifice himself and argues that the cross represents the destructive use of power to destroy God's ministerial vision. The resurrection, on the other hand, attests to the "the flourishing of God's spirit in the world" and thus to evil's failure.<sup>789</sup> Human redemption, therefore, is God's gift of ministerial vision so that we might discern "the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life."<sup>790</sup> In other words, the Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope invites young black women and others to name, negate and resist oppressive social construction, not as a secular endeavor but in accordance with God's ministerial vision. It also frees human persons to create right relations within themselves, with others and with God, and to anticipate the Kingdom's actualization in the concreteness of human existence.

Rubem Alves similarly asserts that the gospel (Williams' *ministerial vision*) announces the Kingdom of God and argues that when Jesus proclaimed the Gospel he was announcing "the immediacy of that political reality of power in which liberation was possible and offered: The Kingdom of God."<sup>791</sup> The Kingdom of God, therefore, is "the

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<sup>788</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 165-166.

<sup>789</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>790</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>791</sup> Alves, 92.

historical reality of the ongoing politics of God which expressed power invaded history.”<sup>792</sup> That is, the Kingdom of God is God’s ongoing presence, power and intervention *in spite of* in human history and evinces God’s intent toward liberation and humanization. Thus, as a competing image of reality and metaphor of hope, the Kingdom of God announces God’s presence, power and fidelity while also renouncing systems of oppression and domination.

Similarly, Walter Brueggemann reveals that the “Kingdom of God is a core metaphor for a new social imagination” in the Old Testament and the New Testament.<sup>793</sup> He contends that the Kingdom of God represents a new social order that stands in opposition to and judgment of “every other social construction of power and authority” such that those who appropriate its image of reality profess that their lives are not predicated upon the suffering and negation that exist in the present but rather upon God’s ongoing commitment to justice and liberation.<sup>794</sup> Ancient Israel kept the image of the Kingdom alive through the liturgical practices of critiquing ideology, publicly processing their pain and releasing new social imagination which enhanced their ability to live with hope. These practices prevented them from giving in to the contrived world of the empire and sustained the perception that their future was dependent upon God. The process did not end there, however, as liturgy also implied political action in order to “make God’s covenanting kingdom concrete.”<sup>795</sup> In other words, although one’s conception of the Kingdom begins in the imagination it “cannot forever stay impressionistic and fanciful;”

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<sup>792</sup> Ibid.

<sup>793</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 22.

<sup>794</sup> Ibid.

<sup>795</sup> Ibid., 23.

an active human response becomes imperative.<sup>796</sup> Brueggemann's emphasis upon liturgical practice and political action is consistent with Williams and Alves' claim that the Kingdom of God, as a metaphor of hope, implies concrete human action.

Brueggemann also collapses the boundary between the political and the religious, reminding us that liturgical practice, because its subject is God and God's activity in the world, is inherently political. The Kingdom of God, therefore, offers young black women an alternative image of what might be possible to human existence when we align ourselves with God's ongoing presence and activity in the world.

### **The power of Lament**

Liberative pedagogies and theologies have emphasized the necessity of deconstructing and dismantling systems of oppression as essential to our efforts toward creating a just and humane world. Yet, the women with whom I spoke evince culturally induced despair and reticence about challenging the structures that keep them oppressed. They expressed their discontent in the safe space of our dialogue but their predominant patterns for living reveal silence and preoccupation with defending, self-protecting, disproving and adapting rather than deconstructing, contesting, dismantling or discerning alternatives for their lives. Emilie Townes and Walter Brueggemann remind us that communal lament can be a powerful tool for naming problems, seeking justice and hoping for God's deliverance.<sup>797</sup> Thus, our ability to live into the Kingdom might find expression in communal lament as a bold step toward revealing and deconstructing structural oppression.

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<sup>796</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>797</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 25.

Pedagogically, lament might be conceived as transformative because it is a public communal process which intent is to give form or voice to suffering, announce the community's refusal to acquiesce to the oppression that currently exists and catalyze efforts toward alleviating suffering. As Brueggemann suggests, publicly processing pain is "an intentional and communal act of expressing grievance" and of contesting the notion that oppression is normal, natural and inevitable for our lives.<sup>798</sup> I want to emphasize that lament is public and communal and does not lend itself to silence or reticence, therefore, lament as a pedagogical practice requires something of young black women and others whose patterns for living evince silence in the face of oppression. It invites them to give voice to the pain that they experience within the various contexts that constitute their world as well as to the residual pain that those of us who bear the legacy of slavery sense even now. Lament can also help young black women resist patterns of living that emphasize endurance of oppression, indifference, reticence, and cognitive distancing—patterns that perpetuate the "supra-model" and "constant survivor" controlling images. Ultimately, however, lament should lead young black women to become actively involved in dismantling oppression in their own lives as well as in the lives of others.

Lament, in other words, embodies grief and anguish, contestation and resistance, hope and creative action. This contention is consistent with Brueggemann's suggestion that lament or publicly processing pain is subversive, "an act of defiance and protest," and an expression of hope in that it anticipates a response from God. Therefore, lament is not primarily about shedding tears, though tears are not prohibited and may be

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<sup>798</sup> Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, 16



appropriate. Lament is another form by which persons might name oppression and the pain that it causes to persons and communities and to the heart of God. Lament decries oppression because oppression is enmity with God. Therefore, I agree with Brueggemann and Townes that our hope in God and the reality which is God's should evoke lament so strongly that it propels us to act; to work toward the elimination of oppressive mechanisms, nay to become abolitionists for our own sake, for the sake of generations to come and for God's sake. A pedagogy of hope, therefore, might encourage and create opportunities for lament—to name atrocities, articulate their impact upon our lives as individuals and community and discern the role that we might play in dismantling oppression and changing our world.

### **Remembering into the Present Moment**

One of the gifts of ministry in the Black Church is that the black community has a rich and diverse history of struggle and conquest as well as formative stories that ground our existence as human persons and our relationship with the Divine. For example, in the black Christian community, the Exodus narrative and the story of Hagar have been invaluable as lenses through which we interpret our own experiences and the world in which we live. Similarly, we bring our own experiences to bear upon our interpretation of these and other biblical stories, as is also true of numerous other communities who have and continue to struggle against the ferocity of oppression. Our practice of telling and retelling biblical narratives, family stories and those of our heroines and heroes remind us of the many others who have walked this way before; well-known and unsung travelers whose testimonies are made present via the telling of their stories. They include the many who survived the brutality of chattel slavery, those who died when they could

no longer survive, those who were silenced and could only speak in the hiddenness of night, those who accomplished great things and spoke when speaking was prohibited, those who marched and sang *ain't gonna study war no more*, and numerous others whose lives ought to embolden us to live with hope. At least, that was my experience as an African American youth coming of age in the late sixties and seventies when numerous persons and communities were protesting, contesting and actively engaged in the quest for civil rights—public and religious leaders, artists and worship communities, radicals and dignitaries, and common folk like the elder women and men in my neighborhood sitting on their front porches and affirming us as young, gifted, black and beautiful.

The women with whom I spoke are now almost three generations away from that period in history and can scarcely imagine the enthusiasm with which many of us came to know ourselves in those days. Yet their experiences are surprisingly similar in some respects. They continue to experience the ferocity of oppression but without the collective effort of their communities esteeming them higher than the negating forces with which they are confronted. They also appear less familiar with our cultural and biblical narratives than previous generations, as was evinced by the small number of persons who drew upon familial, cultural or biblical stories when describing sources of hope in their lives. I might argue, therefore, that reclaiming the African American and African tradition of story-telling is imperative if we are to embolden young black women to live with hope, because telling and retelling our stories reminds us of who we are and of what we consist.

The power of remembering our stories is evident in Alves' contention that ancient Israel's liberation in the past became a "clue" to the possibility of liberation in the present

and secured them in hope. Similarly, Brueggemann, with attention to liturgical practice in ancient Israel, argues that they were able to dismantle and deconstruct the contrived world of the empire because they recalled their formative story and God's activity on their behalf. As they told and retold their own story they were able to see the inconsistencies between what God deemed appropriate for their lives and the imperial powers that oppressed them. Thus, even though they lived in a world that was hostile to their existence, remembering that God was the agent of their deliverance strengthened each new generation to resist the empire's seductive and insidious assertion of invulnerability and to critique its ideology and social construction.

A pedagogy of hope, therefore, might create opportunities for young black women to unearth and reclaim biblical, communal, familial and personal stories that remind them of God's activity in the past as well as of those who committed themselves to God's ongoing activity in the world. Their stories are everywhere—in biblical narratives, family photo albums, historical accounts, narratives from various eras in history, womanist and black feminist reflections, poetry, Spirituals, blues, jazz, protest music and many other mediums through which black people tell their stories and the stories of God's presence and activity in our lives. These stories can remind young black women and others that we walk with the God of creation and with generations of women and men who hoped against hope until they hoped the present generation into existence. Thus we remember their stories into the present as we learn to live with hope and in the process, hope the next generation into existence through our active involvement in God's ongoing work of redeeming the world.

## **A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR HOPE**

The insights and pedagogical intimations drawn from the cultural analysis and theological discourse are provocative, revealing resonances of hope in the women's lives as well as that which creates and sustains patterns of living indicative of culturally induced despair. Resonances of hope were like a whisper that the women could barely discern, always present but distorted by the cacophony of negating assertions that inundate their existence. Nonetheless, the pedagogical intimations and insights give birth to a pedagogical model that might guide worship communities as they endeavor to address and redress culturally induced despair in the lives of young black women, strengthen their acuity to the voice of Hope and enhance their ability to live therein. Theories and practices in Christian Education and Homiletics also inform the pedagogical model, as will become evident in the discussion of pedagogical commitments and strategies that follows.

The model includes four elements or pedagogical commitments that are organic in nature and integral to the process of creating pedagogical practices by which one might learn to live with hope. They derive from concrete experience and a robust interdisciplinary dialogue. They ebb and flow together, spill over into each other and draw from one another's energy such that my explication of one element may evoke images of another. These pedagogical commitments, therefore, create an overarching paradigm by which hope might be conceived and practiced. The four elements of our pedagogical model are best described as pedagogical commitments that are essential to

creating strategies intended to enhance one's ability to live with hope: (1) *imaginative*, (2) *transformational*, (3) *dialogical* and (4) *relational*.

The pedagogical commitments are foundational and might be used to guide the development and evaluate the adequacy of pedagogical practices and strategies. The practices give form to the insights and pedagogical intimations discussed earlier and are informed by the pedagogical commitments. I propose three pedagogical practices to address and redress culturally induced despair and to enhancing young black women's ability to live with hope. These practices are not exhaustive and can be expanded and deepened as practitioners deem appropriate for their specific contexts. What remains important, however, is that the practices and their related strategies embody each of the four pedagogical commitments. Proposed pedagogical practices include: (1) *remembering our stories into the present moment*, (2) *repentance and reconciliation*, and (3) *lament and re-creation*.

### **Pedagogical Commitments**

Again, the pedagogical model which I propose includes four essential elements or commitments—*imaginative*, *transformational*, *dialogical*, and *relational*—that may be used to guide the development and evaluate the adequacy of pedagogical practices intended to enhance one's ability to live with hope. *Imaginative* as a pedagogical commitment emphasizes the importance of the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope that exposes oppression as fallacious and inimical to God while offering humanity an alternative vision of reality and of what might be possible for the world in which we live. *Transformational* is concerned with evoking change; with

creating strategies by which young black women and their worship communities might unearth and resist that which delimits their ability to live with hope so that they might experience themselves as free for alternative ways of being and relating in the world. *Dialogical* engagement emphasizes the necessity of cross- and intra-generational dialogue so that young black women and their communities can grapple with the complexities of their lives together. *Dialogical* also implies critical reflection or thinking critically about the world in which we live in order to create life-affirming relationships and discern ethical actions that are indicative of hope. *Relational* entails a commitment to supporting young black women as they discern the power and value of their own voices so that they might freely share their gifts with the communities in which they live, and experience themselves as creative agents in the world. In the pages that follow I will describe each of the pedagogical commitments and their significance to the overall model in greater detail.

### **Commitment to Imaginative Pedagogical Practices**

“Every real conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images. By changing [their] imagination, [human persons] alter [their] existence.”<sup>799</sup>

Living with hope necessitates changing our perception of the world in which we live—re-imagine our world—and subsequently our patterns for living in the present and into the future. I return to Ricoeur’s quote to emphasize more strongly the power of the imagination to construct one’s perception of reality, and to illumine its import for our efforts to live with hope. Ricoeur is suggesting that altering our existence requires us to

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<sup>799</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 127 (paraphrased to eliminate gender exclusive language).

change the images, myths and ideologies that “have been constituted and established” in our culture; woven into our literature, art, social conventions and language.<sup>800</sup> These images “have stability and an internal history which transcends the chance happenings of the individual,” therefore, we perceive our world as we do, not simply because of the images themselves but because of their history—repetition and constancy of exposure.<sup>801</sup> Changing our world and our participation in it requires us to re-imagine it through the prism of a more powerful lens.

The lens that I propose is the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope that affirms God’s presence, power and fidelity to just, liberating and restorative action in the world and offers human persons an alternative vision of what might be possible for our world and our lives. Re-imagining our world, therefore, is more than wishing for change. It means changing our perceptual orientation and thus our “underlying attitude” toward ourselves and the world that life reflects.<sup>802</sup> It means creating a new ethos, a new understanding of human relationship, a new way of being and relating in the concreteness of human existence. It means, as Maria Harris suggests, exploring imagination from a religious perspective because human persons “are moved

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid., 126. Ricoeur discusses the power of the imagination in his longer discourse regarding redemption and human institutions. Specifically, Ricoeur argues that “It is not very common to speak of ‘institutions’ in respect to *culture*, such as with regard to political, social, economic life. Yet the profound meaning of the institution appears only when it is extended to the images of man (*sic*) in culture, literature, and the arts. These images have indeed been constituted and established. They have stability and an internal history which transcend the chance happenings of the individual.” Therefore, we perceive our world as we do not only because of the images themselves but because of the history by which they have been constituted.

<sup>801</sup> Ibid.

<sup>802</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 126-127. Geertz argues that a culture’s “ethos is the tone, character, and quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the *underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects*.” Essentially, therefore, I am suggesting that embracing the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope leads to a new ethos or understanding of our world and our participation in it.

by experiencing their imaginations touched by someone or something that excites them into hoping and acting.”<sup>803</sup>

The church is at least one context that can excite persons into living with hope. As Charles Foster suggests, constructing “communities of faith to praise God and serve neighbors for the sake of the ‘emancipatory transformation of the world,’ which New Testament writers envisioned as the Kingdom of God,” is essential to the church’s overall ministry.<sup>804</sup> Thomas Groome agrees and describes this process as leading “people out to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>805</sup> Thus, even though the Kingdom is not yet fully actualized, we re-imagine or change our perceptual orientation as a matter of faith in God and God’s promise of shalom. This is complicated because the Kingdom of God, even as it continues to emerge in the concreteness of human existence, is not yet fully actualized. Living into the Kingdom is further complicated because, though unfinished, it stands in contradiction to much of what is available to our senses, revealing possibilities that are discontinuous with the world of oppression that currently exists. Thus, the Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope invites us to envision that which remains obscure at best; to imagine a world in which love of God, self and neighbor becomes the normative expression of human existence despite the evidence to the contrary.

Creating an alternative image of what might be possible to human existence is not a new idea among homileticians and Christian educators as many scholars and practitioners extol the power of the imagination to transform our ways of being and

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<sup>803</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1987), 20.

<sup>804</sup> Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>805</sup> Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 35.



relating in the world. For example, Barbara Brown Taylor maintains that the central task of the church is to evoke the imagination; not a “fanciful or fictional task, but one in which the human capacity to imagine—to form mental pictures of the self, the neighbor, the world, the future, to envision new realities—is both engaged and transformed.”<sup>806</sup> Reflecting upon the prevalence of images in the world in which we live she indicates that “images of wealth and dominance, self-sufficiency and physical perfection...are as slick as magazine ads and as hypnotic as television commercials.”<sup>807</sup> As noted in Chapter One, we often consent to these images without noticing their influence upon our lives. The church’s task, therefore, is to help persons “see the world, each other, and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God’s reality were the only one that mattered.”<sup>808</sup> This new perceptual orientation, in other words, releases us to live as though the Kingdom were already fully actualized among us.

Similarly and with attention to Christian education, Maria Harris draws upon Ricoeur's redemptive emphasis and indicates that “we teachers, at our best, can shape and reshape subject matter in order to present, to institute, and to constitute what is, has been, and might be humanly possible.”<sup>809</sup> Thus, she contends that “teaching as an act of religious imagination is a power to re-create the world.”<sup>810</sup> Teaching, in other words, is not primarily concerned with disseminating information, but with giving form to subject matter such that it evokes the imagination and catalyzes persons toward creative action in the world. Leonora Tisdale characterizes preaching as participation in the *dance of the*

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<sup>806</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993), 39.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>808</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>809</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 4.

<sup>810</sup> *Ibid.*, 40, 88.

*imagination*, suggesting that the preacher is both a dance partner joyfully engaged with the other partners and a choreographer that brings “biblical text, church tradition and congregational context together into one proclamation of local theology and folk art that is integrative and capable of capturing the imagination of its hearers.”<sup>811</sup> In partnership with other expressions of the gospel, preaching can evoke the imagination by creating connections between biblical narratives and the community’s experiences such that it “inspires others, making them want to put on their own dancing shoes and join the steps of faith.”<sup>812</sup> Similarly, Thomas Troeger, reflecting upon the practice of evoking the imagination in the black preaching tradition encourages preachers to develop their homiletical imagination in order to “counter the world that is with a vision of the world that God is empowering us to create, and preach and work to bring that world to be.”<sup>813</sup> Changing or perceptual orientation, in other words, is essential to making the Kingdom of God an actuality in our lives.

The Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope reveals God’s concern for eliminating the suffering and oppression that young black women experience, assuring them that God stands on their side as they seek to live with hope in the face of negating representations, marginalization and disaffirmation. The Kingdom of God as an alternative articulation of the *oughtness* of our existence also draws our attention away from negating representations and reveals their discontinuity with what ought to be. It displaces disaffirming representations with images that are compatible with wholeness

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<sup>811</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>813</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, “Can You Imagine This?” in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 137.

and wellbeing, intensifying our yearning for a life-affirming existence, something deeper and more meaningful; something that connects us with God. Thus, the Kingdom of God becomes the standard by which young black women and others might evaluate the quality of their relationship with themselves, with other persons, with the created order and with the Divine. The Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope, in other words, encourages young black women to reflect upon and reevaluate their patterns for living so that they might order their lives in accordance with God's just intent for creation and encourage other to do the same. That is, it is intended to create a sense of urgency among young black women, no less than among the communities in which they worship, to affirm themselves as God's marvelous creation, their gifts, talents and ideas as invaluable to the Kingdom's actualization, and to contest oppression of every form.

Re-imagining the world in which we live and our participation in it also invites the church and other worship communities to assess their commitment to the Gospel as an expression of the Kingdom of God and abandon practices and teachings that perpetuate oppression, marginalization and domination. As I discussed in the preceding chapter, the specific form by which this assessment takes place is in the acts of repentance and reconciliations, our communal practice of loving and obedient relationship with God through which the church names the reality of oppression within its own walls and makes itself open for transformation. Communal repentance repairs the breach between the church as a liberating institution and the women who worship there by its embrace of the radical and reconciling possibilities in the Gospel of Hope. Thus, the communities with which the women in this investigation worship might embrace their potential as conduits of hope by deconstructing ways of being, relating and governing

that subordinate women to men as well as by welcoming the gifts of women, girls and others who have been relegated to the margins as essential to its life and ministry.

### **Commitment to Transformational Pedagogical Practices**

To re-imagine the world in light of the Kingdom of God necessitates pedagogical practices designed to change our patterns for living. Transformation, therefore, is concerned with revealing and resisting that which distorts our perception of reality and inhibits our ability to live with hope so that we might discern alternatives that can enhance the quality of our relationship with self, others, the created order and the Divine. In other words, transformation is concerned with how we might resist culturally induced despair and embody patterns for living that evince hope, our responsive *yes* to God's *yes* for creation. Again, this seems particularly important in the lives of young black women and the communities with which they worship, as transformation can lead to more holistic relationships within the community itself as well as embolden young black women to live with hope. To elaborate on the commitment to transformational pedagogy, I turn to Paulo Freire and the Apostle Paul

#### ***Paulo Freire's Pedagogical Conception of Transformation:***

The first conception of transformation that informs this pedagogical endeavor is found in Paulo Freire's educational theory and articulation of "problem-posing education." In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire urges persons who are oppressed to fight for their own liberation and maintains that in order to "surmount the situation of oppression people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller

humanity.”<sup>814</sup> Those who are oppressed, in other words, “must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.”<sup>815</sup> Limit-situations are concrete situations of oppression that convince persons that the world as it currently exists is impervious to change. Left unchallenged or *unnamed*, the reality which limit-situations represent become “mythicized” in our imagination, creating irrational and slavish acquiescence to the world as it currently exists.<sup>816</sup> Thus, as Freire suggests, “it is not the limit-situation in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers.”<sup>817</sup> Transformation begins with revealing or unveiling the limit-situation so that persons might act toward its elimination, a process which Freire describes as *critical thinking*.

Critical thinking unveils the world of oppression, the concrete manifestation of oppression and the mechanisms that sustain them, and leads people toward action in order to transform the situation of oppression. Such thinking “does not separate itself from action” but rather perceives the world as that which can be transformed and not as a static reality.<sup>818</sup> Freire describe this process succinctly as “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”<sup>819</sup> This critically reflective process objectifies or “names” the world and thus presents it as a problem that can be studied and resolved with liberating action, releasing persons from their slavish attachment to oppression and

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<sup>814</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 29.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.* 80

<sup>818</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>819</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. He also emphasizes, quoting an unpublished work by José Luiz Fiori, that reflection both precedes concrete action and follows it (*cf.* footnote 6).

freeing them to name their world differently.<sup>820</sup> As I will discuss in the next section, naming is a communal activity which involves dialogical engagement. Freire's pedagogy, therefore, is simultaneously concerned with changing our perceptions of reality and what might be possible to it, and engendering liberating action by which we transform the world in which we live.

Naming the world or revealing it as a problem (as a limiting situation) is complex because people are generally unaware of their attachments to or preoccupations with adapting to the world as it currently exists. Thus Freire's intent is to help "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" so that they might view the world, not as impervious to change, but as a reality that can be transformed.<sup>821</sup> That is, in dialogue with each other, people come to know "both their *objective situation* and their *awareness* of that situation—their various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist."<sup>822</sup> The process is intended to make people aware or *conscious* of the "thought-language" with which they refer to reality, as well as how and to what extent they perceive that reality—the structural situations in which their *thought-language* is framed.<sup>823</sup> For example, pedagogical intervention intended to enhance young black women's awareness regarding *the way they exist* in the world might help them notice the frequency with which they describe their existence as hostile as well as their related

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<sup>820</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid., 76. This is also important because Freire contends that "the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world" despite, for example, their articulation of self-valuation.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid., 77-78. Freire describes this process of becoming aware as *conscientization* (*conscientização*) which "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradiction, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (17, footnote #1).

patterns for living (e.g. *representational preoccupation, cognitive distancing, silence*, etc.). The pedagogical task, therefore, is to help persons “separate themselves from their own activity... [and] locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others” so that they might overcome the limit-situations.<sup>824</sup>

Limit-situations reveal and are embedded in generative themes; the “concrete representation of many of [the] ideas, values, concepts and hopes as well as the obstacles which impede the people’s full humanization.” In his discourse on generative themes, Freire explains that humans are transforming and creative agents in the world, creating “social institutions, ideas and concepts” and, through our ongoing praxis, history. History, he contends, “develops as a constant process of transformation within which epochal units materialize.” These units or epochs are defined by the interactions of particular “ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges” that are always in dialectical interaction with an opposing set of ideas, concepts, etc. The themes that constitute an epoch or, more specifically, *the ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges* which those who benefit from the existing social structure deem normative and necessary in order to sustain that structure become reified and mythicized as those with opposing ideas seek to change them.<sup>825</sup> This establishes “a climate of irrationality and sectarianism,” as the themes that are deemed normative become mythicized. Rather than creating a climate in which history is continually being transformed, the theme becomes “myth-creating irrationality” and leads to ever increasing forms of oppression in

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<sup>824</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>825</sup> Freire indicates that generative themes are “located in concentric circles, moving from the general to the particular;” from epoch to societies, nations, and communities. He believes that the “fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of *domination*—which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation* as the objective to be achieved.” Thus, the fundamental educational task is to lead persons out to liberation.

order to guard against being challenged or delegitimized. Freire describes these mythicized themes as *generative themes* because “they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled.”<sup>826</sup> Generative themes, in other words, are social constructions as well as patterns of thought, action and interaction that have become mythicized and, as a result, impede humanization. They also exist in dialectical relationship with opposing themes that lead to humanization.

Generative themes “both contain and are contained in *limit-situations*” as the reification of the theme itself implies particular limitation for those who do not benefit from things as they currently exist, and the *limit-situation* or concrete situation of oppression conceals the theme that supports it. For example, the women’s repeated assertion that ‘*the world in which we live is hostile and disaffirming*’ or ‘*to be a young black woman is to live in struggle,*’ while born of concrete situations of oppression, may also represent mythical language, creating fear and reticence as regards transforming action. Thus, their thought-language and way of being in the world both reflect generative themes (e.g. racial and gender domination) while also limiting their ability to challenge oppressive structures or question the legitimacy of the social constructions which presently existence. The generative themes (as reified constructions and patterns of thought) imply their thought-language and are contained in the language that we use to describe our world. Again, this is a pedagogical concern. Freire argues that “When the themes are concealed by the limit-situations and thus are not clearly perceived, the corresponding tasks—people’s response in the form of historical action—can be neither

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<sup>826</sup> Ibid., 83, footnote 19.



authentically nor critically fulfilled.”<sup>827</sup> In other words, persons are unable to “transcend the limitations and discover that beyond these situations—and in contradiction to them—lies an *untested feasibility*.”<sup>828</sup>

Helping persons *transcend limitations* and discover *untested feasibilities* is essential to transformation. Pedagogically, therefore, preachers and Christian educators are invited to create opportunities for dialogical engagement so that young black women and others might unmask the world in which they live as well as their own patterns of thought, action and interaction. The question that remains is how. Freire explains that when persons “perceive reality as dense, impenetrable and enveloping, it is indispensable to proceed with the investigation by means of abstractions.”<sup>829</sup> Thus he proposes creating coded situations intended to “investigate people’s thinking about reality and people’s action upon reality, which is their praxis,” so that they might discern new praxes that are reflective of humanization as an overarching human vocation.<sup>830</sup> In other words, by way of an abstract object or representation, such as a picture, character sketch, movie clip, case-study, contrived interactions, work of art, etc., a coded situation is employed in order to make one conscious of their own patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction (patterns for living) vis-à-vis the oppressive reality with which they are confronted. Decoding the situation involves “moving from the abstract to the concrete;” from detailed reflection upon and analysis of the coded situation to a similar analysis of the concrete reality which it represents. The intent is always to return to the concrete limit-situation and generative theme so that persons might analyze their own thought and

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<sup>827</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>828</sup> Ibid.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>830</sup> Ibid., 87.

action in the world in which they live—“the way they think about and face the world.”<sup>831</sup>

While the coded situation contains generative themes (themes that the dialogue is intended to unmask), the dialogue may also reveal generative themes that had not been anticipated in advance; thus the process of revealing and investigating generative themes is dynamic. Decoding the coded situation permits persons to investigate their generative themes so that they might objectify the world in which they live and contribute to its ongoing transformation.

Freire’s critically reflective approach to transformation reveals that seat of transformation is in persons’ ability to change their perceptual frame and discern concrete action. I might also augment Freire’s emphasis upon critical reflection and analysis with attention to formative stories that ground persons and communities actions in the direction of hope. I am convinced that remembering their formative stories can offer young black women a tangible image of what might be possible for their lives and their world and remind them that challenging that which sustains and perpetuates their oppression is both necessary and possible. This seems consistent with Groome’s suggestion that critical reflection “engages both the rational and the affective capacities of the human persons.” That is, critical reflection is concerned with *evaluating the present through critical reason*, as per Freire, as well as *uncovering the past in the present* and *envisioning the future in the present*.<sup>832</sup>

Groome encourages persons to remember the “social genesis” of their present action—remember communal and individual experiences and stories that ground a

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<sup>831</sup> Ibid.

<sup>832</sup> Groome, 185-188. These three statements serve as subheadings in Groome’s discourse on critical reflection.

community's actions—so that the past might inform how they choose to live into the future. I might also add that remembering unveils possibilities for living in the present. Our stories and our memories include past failings and mistakes as well as moments of joyous celebration. They are also intertwined with other persons and communities and contain the wisdom that we gain as a result of our shared experiences. At these intersections we discover resonances of hope from the past that might inform our ability to live in the present as well as into the future. Groome also contends that creative imagination, imagination which refuses “to duplicate what is given or take the shape of the future as inevitable [but] looks from the present to the future to envision the consequences of the present action and returns from the future to shape the present in the direction of what might be preferred consequences” is also essential to the critically reflective process.<sup>833</sup> This too is provocative as it reminds us that our present action has implications for the quality of our lives and our relationships in the future.

### ***Paul's Letter to the Church at Rome and Transformation***

The second conception of transformation is found in Paul's letter to the church at Rome: “*Do not be conformed to this world—[this present age]—but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*”<sup>834</sup> This nascent Christian community found themselves in the precarious situation of needing to discern the good and acceptable and perfect will of God in an age in which prevailing practices, mores and beliefs were often inimical to the life affirming message of the gospel. Adherence to the gospel required

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<sup>833</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>834</sup> Romans 12:2, NRSV.

them to reinterpret the world that they had always known, the customs and normative expressions that had ordered their existence, in light of the gospel that they now proclaimed. How to make such a radical shift seems daunting, as we read beneath the lines of Paul's letter, as that which is good and acceptable to God is not always readily apparent to them or us. Nonetheless, Paul insists, *do not be conformed...but be transformed or let yourself be transformed.*

Paul's admonishment that they permit themselves to be changed by the gospel implied something more than adherence to a set of practices or theological assertions. It purported the power of the gospel to take hold in the lives of human persons so that they might remain faithful to God in light of the world in which they lived. This is provocative because *let yourself* contains an element of mystery, an assertion that God's presence surrounds us and encompasses us in inexplicable ways, not the least of which is the transformative power of the gospel. Maria Harris indicates that mystery or the Greek word *mysterion* in the Christian tradition connotes "a hidden, unseen, profound presence that becomes visible and tangible in persons, in events, and in things."<sup>835</sup> Transformation as Paul describes it comes from God and is indicative of the mysterious power of the gospel to help people discern patterns for living that correspond with God's intent for their lives. This is not a magical process, however, as Paul also indicates that transformation begins in the mind and leads toward concrete action. In other words, the mind or *soul* (Gr. *nous*) is "the seat of reflective consciousness."<sup>836</sup> Thus Paul's

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<sup>835</sup> Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 14. The word most common to Christianity is the Latin word *sacramentum*, a translation of the Greek *mysterion*.

<sup>836</sup> Hiebert, D. Edmond, "Presentation and Transformation: An Exposition of Romans 12:1-2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 603 (July-September 1994), 321.

assertion, *let yourself be transformed*, might also include the critically reflective process indicative of Freire's educational theory.

Discerning the relationship between these two ideas seems important so that we might resist dichotomizing transformation via critical reflection and transformation as an expression of *mysterion*. As preachers and Christian educators, we believe that helping persons and communities discern meaning for their lives grounded in the gospel is an integral aspect of our work. Thus, our commitment to transformation tasks us with considering how persons and communities might “act in the direction of the Kingdom of God—to be open to God’s promises and reconstruct its actions, beliefs and values in light of its past, its present and its hope,” as Mary Elizabeth Moore maintains.<sup>837</sup> We ask what we might proclaim, what truth we might speak and live, what we can create or suggests in our sermons, educational activities or worship experiences that can break the fallow ground of despair so that seeds of hope might be planted. As Barbara Lundblad says, we pray that our ministries might create transformative experiences for those with whom we speak, and “our congregations and church bodies will bear this word of transformation within the larger world.”<sup>838</sup> Transformation, therefore, has implications for our lives together and ultimately for the shape of our world.

Transformation of the world begins with transformed individuals who can acknowledge the reality of suffering and at the same time declare that suffering is not the oughtness of our existence. That is, it begins with human persons who sense the voice of

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<sup>837</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Educating for Continuity and Change: A New Model for Christian Religious Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 127.

<sup>838</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2001), 13.

hope in the concreteness of their present reality and whose responsive action opens our world for transformation. I too pray that our commitment to creating transformative experience in the direction of the gospel might evoke new vision that can catalyze young black women and others toward living with hope.

### **Commitment to Dialogical Pedagogical Practices**

I have indicated that young black women come to know themselves and of what they consist in relationship with other persons, and most constructively in cross- and intra-generational dialogical communities that provide space for inquiry and reinterpretation, confession and contestation, laughter and lament. Young black women experience themselves as persons of value to the world in which they live through their kinship and friendship relationships as well as their engagement with and observations of black church women, educators and cultural icons, their primary sources of affirmation and hope. Worship communities are also sources of hope but not always spaces that are safe enough for young black women to share their stories and gain much needed wisdom, due largely to sermons, teachings and relational encounters in which the women feel judged, shamed and negated. The women with whom I spoke deeply desire substantive relationships and life-affirming communities that welcome their gifts and value them as young, black and female. I describe such contexts as cross- and intra-generational dialogical communities. Therefore, dialogical as a pedagogical commitment is concerned with creating spaces that are safe enough for young black women to grapple with the complexities of their lives and the world in which they live in dialogue with trusted others who are concerned with their wellbeing.

Dialogical engagement is essential to this pedagogical model because it implies attentiveness to the unique experiences and life situations of the persons who populate our worship communities; their social location, ethnic and racial identity, gender and sexual orientation, age and physical abilities, the hopes, dreams, joys, celebrative moments, sorrows and deep longings that characterize life as they know and experience it. It values those with whom we teach and preach as vital to the life and ministry of the church, always considering how our language, metaphors, images, practices and pedagogical orientation might enhance their ability to discern meaning and live more fully into the Kingdom of God. I was reminded of this one Sunday morning as I preached a sermon replete with references to walking, standing and running to a small gathering of worshippers, the majority of which were elderly and found difficulty standing, much less running. One person was an amputee and used a wheelchair for mobility and several others walked with the assistance of a cane, a walker or a strong arm on which to lean. In my haste to prepare what I wanted to say I had forgotten to consider the persons with whom I would preach; forgotten to listen to their joys, sorrows and deep longings or to acknowledge their life experiences and social locations.

Dialogical engagement is concerned with relevance and right relationships; with valuing the voices of the many with whom we preach and teach and with bringing their experiences to bear upon our proclamation of the gospel in word and deed. Thus, this experience is instructive because it illustrates that thoughtful consideration of the lives of others is essential to creating communities in which dialogical engagement is both valued and practiced. It also reiterates my earlier assertion that preaching and Christian education are not primarily concerned with transmission or simply passing on

information but rather with creating transformative experiences by which persons might learn to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God and to actualize that reality in the concreteness of our shared existence.

Dialogical engagement is radically different from pedagogical approaches that emphasize transmission of information or, as Freire characterizes it, “banking education.”<sup>839</sup> Freire argues that banking approaches to education view knowledge as “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”<sup>840</sup> He characterizes this approach as oppressive in that it “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” and polarizes the relationship between the teacher and student.<sup>841</sup> As a result, education “becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”<sup>842</sup> Freire contends that education of this sort creates adaptation to the world as it currently exists because the teacher regulates the content and flow of information, giving the student what she or he requires in order to ‘fit in.’ Thus the banking approach to education is “well suited to the purpose of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.”<sup>843</sup> Banking, in other words, contributes to acquiescence and adaptation.

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<sup>839</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 53.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid. bell hooks describes banking as “the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date.” *Cf.* bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994),

<sup>843</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 57



In contrast to the banking approach, dialogue is “the encounter between [human persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world.”<sup>844</sup> In other words, transformation requires dialogical engagement, encounters between human persons that reflect mutuality and a willingness to grapple with the complexities of our lives and the world in which we live. I agree with Freire, therefore, that people cannot exist humanly or name the world in which they live absent of dialogue with other human persons.<sup>845</sup> Mutuality, an important constituent of this pedagogical commitment, acknowledges that everyone has a right to participate in the process of naming the world, thus “dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them.”<sup>846</sup> This means that the church, as a context in which persons learn to live with hope, must approach this pedagogical endeavor with humility and the willingness to create safe spaces in which young black women and others might question, challenge and contest negation, offer their stories and gifts, and express their joys and sorrows.

Dialogue is more than a conversation, in other words. It is a shared communal effort toward naming the world and transforming it. Therefore, dialogue is neither hostile nor argumentative but rather an expression of “profound love for the world and for people.”<sup>847</sup> Dialogue also embodies humility, as it negates arrogance and self-sufficiency and acknowledges our interdependence and intersubjectivity.<sup>848</sup> Intersubjectivity is

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<sup>844</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>845</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>847</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid., 71

indicative of mutuality and faith in each other's ability to "make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in [our] vocation to be more fully human."<sup>849</sup> Faith in each other requires mutual trust between the dialoguers so that they might enter into an "ever closer partnership in the naming of the world."<sup>850</sup> Freire also contends that dialogue cannot exist in a climate of hopelessness but requires continuous effort toward becoming more fully human.<sup>851</sup> As an essential element in the process of humanization, therefore, dialogue requires critical thinking; that is, "thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved."<sup>852</sup> Dialogue, as an essential element of our pedagogical model, invites persons to name the world in which we live as an act of creation and recreation to the end of ascertaining a just and humane world for all persons as an expression of the gospel which we proclaim.

### **Commitment to Relational Pedagogical Practices**

Our attention to imaginative, transformative and dialogical engagement implies relationality and is consistent with my supposition that young black women have come to know who they are in cross-generational dialogical communities that affirm them as young, black and female and that promote their wellbeing. Relational pedagogies create opportunities and embolden young black women to claim the power and value of their own voices as they offer their ideas and gifts to their worship communities, families and

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<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>851</sup> Ibid., 72-73

<sup>852</sup> Ibid., 73

the larger society in which they live. Thus, attention to the relationships that frame young black women's existence as well as creating life-affirming relationships within our worship communities can embolden young black women and help them recognize that they enrich the communities in which they participate and that their value is not predicated upon negating representations or cultural disaffirmation.

Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson's explication of voice in *Saved from Silence* is helpful here. They assert that "Voice reflects a valuing of the self in relation to particular contexts, allowing authentic dimensions of the self to arise to expression rather than be submerged in a sea of competing expectations and roles."<sup>853</sup> The young black women with whom I spoke often overvalue the various contexts in which they live and undervalued their own contributions. That is, they value the context more highly than themselves. Turner and Hudson maintains that "the valuing of context over self... fosters particular roles for persons so that the self is masked and unrecognizable. Voice as a metaphor affirms the freedom of expression by human beings in relationship."<sup>854</sup> Silence, disengagement, endurance and self-denial as patterns for living among the women with whom I spoke evince a diminished level of self-valuation, robbing them of the opportunity to experience themselves as persons of worth and as creative agents of the realities in which they live. In contrast, "the voiced woman is one who recognizes her own value and thus accords herself the right to speak."<sup>855</sup> Relational as a pedagogical commitment affirms young black women and others as voiced persons created in the

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<sup>853</sup> Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid.

<sup>855</sup> Ibid. 12.

*imago Dei* (image of God) and values intersubjectivity by creating contexts in which they as well as the communities in which they participate are regarded as subjects.

Relational also affirms our inextricable connection to each and suggests the necessity of young black women to become not only recipients of care but those who offer the same to others; to become active participants in ensuring their own and others' wellbeing. With attention to mutual caring in families and communities of faith and the potential of these communities to impact the development of girls and women, Carol Lakey Hess advocates an "educational process in communities of faith that nurture women toward being caretakers of their own house (self) and of our common house (The community of faith)."<sup>856</sup> She contends, as do I, that worship communities can become life affirming "holding environments" (Kegan) in which women and girls can discern the value of their own voices and "where deep conversation happens but, too often they are not."<sup>857</sup> Thus, Hess urges churches to adopt educational approaches that encourage "curiosity, inquiry, critical thinking and voice [r]ather than obedience and submission to the status quo."<sup>858</sup> Similarly, she cautions women against self-abnegation or devaluation and encourages them to discern the value of their contributions to the world and to our worship communities, indicating that "becoming aware, living an examined life, is an important result of knowing oneself to be grounded in God."<sup>859</sup>

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<sup>856</sup> Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.* 183. Quoted fully, Hess argues that "Education involves handing over to our daughters and sons the forbidden fruits of curiosity, inquiry, critical thinking and voice. Rather than obedience and submission to the status quo, education is an invitation to 'hard dialogue and deep connections': (a) with one another, (b) with Scripture and tradition, and (c) with God."

<sup>859</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Knowing oneself as grounded in God is to share in God's commitment to creating a just and life-affirming existence for all persons. Therefore, rather than remaining silent in the face of injustice, which she describes as *spiritual torpor* or *lassitude*, Hess advocates *prophetic vigor* or *prophetic dissent*. Care as prophetic vigor invites women to give voice to their oppression as an expression of care for themselves and as a means to forming "healthy household life" (life in Christian community together).<sup>860</sup> In this manner, young black women and others can become creative agents in their worship communities and demonstrate concern for their own wellbeing as well as that of others.

This seems important, on the one hand, because care as an aspect of creating pedagogical strategies that are relational means encouraging young black women to regard other human persons with the measure of respect and care that they themselves desire and deserve. On the other, however, it means caring enough about oneself to hold others accountable for the wrong that they have done. Hess describes this as *prophetic caring* and maintains that "care is not simply tending to others but nurturing *relationships* with others...Caring for a relationship, however, is a mutually reciprocal type of caring. It attends to another person, but it also holds another person accountable."<sup>861</sup> That young black women learn to hold others accountable as they nurture relationships is essential, given their propensity toward representational preoccupation and cognitive distancing as patterns for living. Prophetic caring also offers provocative possibilities for nurturing young black women toward actively responding to cultural ills and diminishing their reliance upon inert concern as their primary response.

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<sup>860</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., 91.

Finally, our pedagogical commitment to strategies that are relational implies the necessity for creating spaces or contexts that are safe enough for young black women to express their opinions, share their stories and offer their gifts. Safe spaces invite questions and new insights, encourage struggle, lament and sadness, embody affirmation and celebration and testify to the Kingdom of God as a concrete express of God's love and concern for all of creation. Henri Nouwen describes this as hospitality.

Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.<sup>862</sup>

Our pedagogical commitment to relational strategies is intended to offer safe space and a *wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment* by which young black women might live with hope in the present and into the future.

### **Preaching and Teaching in a Shared Communal Ethos: Midwives of Hope**

Imaginative, transformative, dialogical, and relational as pedagogical commitments give birth to practices that are designed to create opportunities for hope and human flourishing with particular attention to the lives of young black women. They also confirm and support my conviction that *to live with hope becomes possible when young black women and others experience life in shared communal contexts, cross generational dialogical communities committed to creating imaginative, transformational, dialogical and relational experiences in which all those who gather can discern meaning for their*

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<sup>862</sup> Henry J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 71-72. N. Lynne Westfield quotes Nouwen in *Dear Sister: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), page 46, and offer an extensive treatment of hospitality and its efficacy in the lives of black women.

*lives and create patterns for living in the present and into the future that are consistent with and responsive to God's presence, power and fidelity to just, liberating and restorative action in the world.*

Given the pedagogical commitments detailed above, I explore here three pedagogical practices and related strategies that are intended to address and redress culturally induced despair, strengthen young black women's acuity to the voice of Hope and enhance their ability to live with hope. They embody each of the pedagogical commitments and are intended for implementation in worship communities and their component groups as well as other shared communal contexts that embrace the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope. The practices are as follows: (1) *remembering our stories into the present moment*, (2) *repentance and reconciliation*, and (3) *lament and re-creation*. These practices are nonlinear and overlapping, but when held together they contribute to an ethos in which persons and communities might learn to live with hope. These practices can be expanded, deepened and added to as practitioners deem appropriate for their specific contexts. However, each pedagogical practice and the related strategies should embody the four pedagogical commitments articulated above. To that end, preachers and Christian educators might approach each practice with four evaluative questions in mind:

1. *In what way does this practice evince the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of hope? How does it illumine God's presence power and fidelity in the world and commitment to just, liberating and restorative action? In what way is Jesus' announcement that the "Kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15) and his assertion that today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21) brought to bear upon the quality of our relationship with self, other human persons, the created order and the Divine? (Imaginative)*

I might also note that attention to Mark 1:15 and Luke 4:18-21 is not an assertion that preachers and teachers should limit their engagement to New Testament texts. As discussed in Chapter Five, the Gospel as God's intent toward just, liberating and restorative action is evident in New Testament and Old Testament texts.

2. *In what way does this practice reveal structural oppression and the mechanisms that sustain it in the particular situations of the persons with whom we teach and preach? How do these revelations call us to respond as persons and community? What implications do our actions/responses have for the world in which we live—our own lives, persons and communities with which we are directly related, persons and communities within our national borders, global communities? In what way does this practice reveal God's presence, power and fidelity to just and humane existence? (Transformational)*
3. *In what way is this practice attentive to the particularity of our experience and the complexity of our lives together? How does it invite communal participation in naming and transforming our world? (Dialogical)*
4. *In what way does this strategy cultivate voice, affirm and promote intersubjectivity and embolden persons toward active participation in the communal contexts where they live, work and play? (Relational)*

These evaluative questions provide a point of reference as we seek to plan educational events and ascertain sermonic content that can evoke the imagination, lead to transformation, create dialogical engagement and construct communities that value human relationship and welcome young black women as creative agents in their midst.

### **Remembering Our Stories into the Present Moment**

Story or narrative is a powerful tool by which we discern meaning for our lives and for the world in which we live. Meaning shapes our patterns for living, and our patterns for living reflect our perceptual orientation—how we perceive the world. As Patricia J. Williams asserts, that we create our world through narratives—through images, myths and ideologies that purport to be authentic representations of the way that things



are. We dream it into existence, says Williams, and “our customs and laws, our culture and society are sustained by the myths we embrace, the stories we recirculate to explain what we beheld.”<sup>863</sup> In other words, how we perceive the world in which we live frames what we are likely to accept as reliable and normative for living and influences our understanding of what is just, necessary and politically efficacious. The problem that confronts us, however, is that some narratives, some images, myths and ideologies about the way that things are exert a greater claim upon our individual and collective lives than others.

This becomes poignantly clear when we recall that negating and disaffirming narratives about who young black women are and of what they consist inordinately influence the women’s perception of the world in which they live, resulting in patterns for living that are more often indicative of culturally induced despair than hope. Negation and disaffirmation are not absolute in the lives of young black women, however, as many of the women also draw strength and encouragement from family and friendship relationships and from exemplars and wisdom-givers whose testimonies and guidance sustain and energize them as they traverse the tumultuous waters of life. Disaffirmation, in other words, was “not the end of the story,” as Alice Walker suggests, “for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness.”<sup>864</sup> The women whose stories frame this investigation perceive themselves as constantly struggling against perishing in the wilderness and, preoccupied with the struggle, often neglect resonances of hope emanating from the many historical,

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<sup>863</sup> Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997), 26.

<sup>864</sup> Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 341.

biblical and contemporary narratives that surround them. Indeed, they often overlook the power of their own stories and testimonies to sustain them as they seek to live with hope. Amplifying and remembering these stories seem crucial.

Remembering our stories into the present moment as a pedagogical practice acknowledges the many stories that comprise our life-world, including stories that affirm God's faithfulness in the past, present and into the future. Therefore, this first practice is intended to amplify stories that can enhance young black women's ability to live with hope while challenging, disputing and revealing as unauthentic narratives that keep them distracted and preoccupied with struggle and adaptation. This includes remembering and re-appropriating stories of God's ongoing activity in the world that have been formative in the tradition of the black church and community as well as appropriating less familiar biblical narratives. Remembering also includes amplifying resonances of hope hidden in their own stories (familial and personal), cultural and ethnic stories, and stories from the Christian faith tradition. I emphasize these four types of narratives—*personal and familial, cultural and ethnic, biblical, Christian faith tradition*—in order to acknowledge the complex nature of our existence, as we do not exist in one domain to the exclusion of others but are always already living in and across a diversity of contexts.<sup>865</sup>

Biblical narratives and stories from the Christian faith tradition, for example, acknowledge our shared identity as Christian and reflect my assertion that churches can become cross generation dialogical communities in which hope becomes possible.<sup>866</sup>

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<sup>865</sup> Cf. Anne Wimberly, "story-linking" approach in *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) for another pedagogical model that emphasizes the importance of story.

<sup>866</sup> Attention to biblical narratives also presupposes thorough exegesis as essential to preparation and engagement of the texts, its ancient characters and the world in which they live as a tool that ensure integrity as we remember their stories into the present moment.

Cultural and ethnic stories are important because the larger story of the Black Community, with all of its complexities, nuances and turns, is not exclusively a Christian story, yet a story of hope and faith nonetheless. These stories are embedded in the Spirituals that our ancestors sang, jazz and blues as an articulation of pain and possibility, protest music, poetry, dance, fictional narratives, historical accounts, and many other facets through which the community tells and retells its story. It also seems important that young black women offer their personal and familial stories as integral to the unfolding narrative that constitutes their life world in order to help them ascertain that which keeps them preoccupied with struggle and adaptation (culturally induced despair) and gain wisdom and insights that might enhance their ability to live with hope.

These stories are not simply provocative, informative or entertaining but, as Brueggemann and Alves' insights regarding the power of remembering in the life of ancient Israel remind us, they are formational and transformational. Remembering our stories into the present moment, therefore, is a critically reflective practice intended to amplify resonances of hope (help us remember God's activity in the past as a clue to possibilities in the present) and eliminate distortion that leads to culturally induced despair so that young black women might discern the Kingdom of God as a more viable representation of the oughtness of our existence than the script that currently orders their lives. In other words, this practice is designed to eliminate distortion so that we might hear the voice of hope and respond with a definitive yes. I propose three strategies for remembering our stories into the present moment: (1) *weaving*, (2) *reclaiming forgotten voices*, and (3) *rehearsing our ancestral narratives*.

### ***Weaving***

*Weaving* is a focused educational activity that employs narrative in order to help persons reveal and resist patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction (patterns for living) that are indicative of culturally induced despair so that they might discern life-affirming and hope-filled alternatives for their lives. Thus the subject-matter or object of investigation includes the ways of being and relating to which the narratives point (the patterns for living that they reveal) as well as the narratives themselves as purveyors of meaning. This is consistent with Maria Harris' assertion that subject matter is both the "world of meaning, order of nature, physical process, pattern of events, 'labyrinth of reality' toward which the system of clues has been designed to point" and the system of clues itself.<sup>867</sup> The narratives, therefore, serve a dual purpose of unveiling that which thwarts one's ability to live with hope and revealing possibilities that were previously masked, forgotten or deemed improbable. In other words, weaving is a critically reflective process that is not only concerned with illuminating a problem, but with helping persons notice its complexity so that they might resist despairing patterns for living and discern alternatives that are indicative of hope.

As a critically reflective process, weaving is profoundly dialogical and is best implemented in a group setting in which participants can freely share their stories and name the world in which they live in conversation with each other. Weaving also emphasizes self-appropriation or identifying one's own location within the problem, such as our habitual predispositions, opinions, biases, thoughts, reactions and predominant ways of being, as essential to revealing that which prevents persons and communities from living with hope. To live with hope is to avail ourselves to God's ongoing creation

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<sup>867</sup> Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, 32.

of a just and humane existence for all persons; thus weaving is also explicitly concerned with revealing contradictions between oppressive social construction and the Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope. Concerning implementation, the process can be completed in one extended session or over a series of sessions, can begin with any of the four narratives and is most effective when participants engage at least three of the four narratives. Participants should always be encouraged to share their own experience, however, the extent to which that becomes possible and the form that it takes will depend largely upon the level of trust that persons within the community have established and with the emotional intensity of the discussion topic.

The process begins with a presenting narrative that serves as a “coded situation,” Freire’s strategy for revealing oppression and its embeddedness in concrete reality. As discussed above, when persons “perceive reality as dense, impenetrable and enveloping, it is indispensable to proceed with the investigation by means of abstractions.”<sup>868</sup> Thus, coded situations are intended to “investigate people’s thinking about reality and peoples action upon reality, which is their praxis,” so that they might discern new praxes that are reflective of humanization as an overarching human vocation.<sup>869</sup> In other words, by way of an abstract object or representation, such as a picture, character sketch, movie clip, case-study, contrived interactions, works of art, etc., a coded situation makes one conscious of their own patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction (patterns for living) vis-à-vis the oppressive reality with which they are confronted.

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<sup>868</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 86.

<sup>869</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Coded situations help persons become aware of *limit-situations* and *generative themes* and are generally created with a particular theme in mind. Creating a relevant and effective coded situation, therefore, implies that the person leading the activity has engaged in preliminary reflection upon the composition of the groups, participants' social location and ways of being in the society in which they live and worship communities in which they participate. For example, my interviews with the women whose stories frame this investigation may serve as a starting point if I were to initiate *story-weaving* with this particular group of women. Although formal interviews may not be feasible for many persons implementing this strategy, leaders might engage participants and their world through numerous other means, including informal conversations, observing the context, establishing relationships with potential participants in other facets of the community and social gatherings. While coded situations are created with a particular theme in mind, the dialogue or decoding may also expand or deepen the original theme and/or evoke themes that the leader had not anticipated.<sup>870</sup> Thus, the process of decoding the coded situation—presenting the coded situation and the reflection and discussion that follow—is both fluid and organic in nature.

For example, an educational activity intended to address and redress *representational preoccupation* in the lives of young black women might offer the cultural narrative by inviting participants to watch and reflect upon Kiri Davis' 2005

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<sup>870</sup> Ibid., 99. Freire provides an excellent example of this when describing a gathering in which the coded situation not only revealed aspects of alcoholism, the intended generative theme, but the participants' identification with the character in the picture also revealed the deeper connection between "earning low wages, feeling exploited and getting drunk." They were also able to identify themselves as "decent workers" and not 'bad people' because they drink.

award winning documentary *A Girl Like Me*.<sup>871</sup> *A Girl Like Me* is a seven minute documentary in which black teen women discuss their struggles with racial representation and cultural negation in the larger society as well as the problem of colorism in their own communities. In many respects, their comments mirror those of the women with whom I spoke with regard to their efforts to live meaningfully in the world. As a coded situation, therefore, the film seems appropriate to the intended participants, the context in which they live and the generative theme which I intend to unveil. In this example, the presenting narrative is intended to initiate a dialogue in which the women might identify the connection between representational preoccupation, self-valuation and structural oppression in the form of racism and sexism. The dialogue, in other words, begins the process of decoding the situation.

Before talking more specifically about decoding the situation, I might also reiterate that weaving the narratives can begin with any of the four types of narratives. Another activity concerned with *cognitive distancing* and young black women's reticence about challenging the institutions and individuals that propagate negating media representations, for example, might explore biblical narratives such as the five daughters of Zelophehad in the Book of Numbers, chapters 26 and 27—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah—or the Egyptian Midwives whose story introduce this chapter, Shiphrah and Puah. As presenting narratives, these stories provide provocative insights regarding women's ability to embrace the power of their own voices, trust their instincts

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<sup>871</sup> Kiri Davis, *A Girl Like Me*, winner of the Diversity Award at the 6th Annual [Media That Matters](#) film festival in [New York City, 2005](#). The 7 min. documentary can be viewed at <http://www.kiridavis.com/>. I might also expand the narrative and deepen the discussion by offering a competing narrative, with India Arie's single "I'm Not my Hair," the poems "I Am a Black Women" by Gwendolyn Brooks or "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou, each of which evince a high level of black women's self-valuation. Each of these narratives could be employed as individual coded situations or in dialogue with other aspects of the cultural narrative.

and challenge institutional power despite their lack of formal authority. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, for example, pressed the limits of social and religious acceptability and insisted upon property rights from which they and all women in their society were legally prohibited, and God said “yes” to their request. Similarly, Shiphrah and Puah defied the Pharaoh orders and refused to kill the Hebrew children as an expression of their reverence for God, and God honored their actions. In both instances women engaged in acts of resistance and self-care that resulted in their and others wellbeing, and God concurred with their decisions. Thus, as a coded situation, this narrative is intended to help young black women make important connections between the limits and actions of the women in the text, their own sense of limitation and reticence about responding.

Again, the presenting narrative initiates a conversation or dialogue with the intent of revealing oppression and making participants aware of the patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction by which they live in the present and into the future. Weaving, therefore, is concerned with revealing the complexity of the problem or *limiting-situation* and with helping young black women notice “*the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves*” so that they might discern patterns for living that are indicative of hope.<sup>872</sup> To that end, decoding and unearthing the meaning embedded within the narratives is essential. This might be advanced by inviting participants to engage the narratives in five stages:

1. Clarifying questions: Invite participants to ask questions in order to fill gaps within the narrative and enhance their initial comprehension of the story. For example, the narrative in the Book of Numbers, chapters 26 and 27 might

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<sup>872</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 64.



require additional information regarding property rights in ancient Israel. Persons may also be interested in the original study that prompted Kiri Davis' documentary, the Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll studies (1939-1950).<sup>873</sup>

2. Decoding the Situation: Decoding the coded situation provides participants an opportunity to reveal or make explicit their understandings of the world in a non-threatening manner. Or, as Freire indicates, persons “externalize their thematics [generative-themes] and make explicit their ‘real consciousness’ of the world.”<sup>874</sup> The process begins with inviting participants to describe in detail what they see, sense, hear, discern from the narrative. This might include thoughts and opinion about what the various characters in the narrative say or do, questions that the narrative evokes, their interpretation of the situation, appealing and appalling aspects of the situation, insights, and other reflections. At this juncture, the person leading the discussion might listen attentively to the sentiments and opinions that the group express about themselves, the world in which they live, other persons and the Divine in order to ascertain limit-situations and generative themes. This includes listening for new insights, limit-situations and generative themes that the leader had not anticipated in advance.<sup>875</sup> In other words, the person leading the discussion is not concern with the accuracy of participants' descriptions of the narrative/coded-situation but rather with what their dialogue reveals about how they exist in the world in which they live and how that world and their existence in it diminishes or enhances their ability to live with hope. For example, a discussion leader might consider what the women's responses to *A Girl Like Me* reveal about their thoughts, feelings, actions and interactions as regards negating representations in their own lives and to what extent these ways of being enhance or diminish their ability to live with hope.
3. Reflective Interlude: Much of the dialogue thus far has occurred within the larger group setting, therefore, this step provides space for persons to reflect in smaller groups or engage in silent reflection. Therefore, leaders might invite participants to consider aspects of their own experience that may have elicited their initial reaction and to either share their experience with one other, engage in silent reflection or journal their thoughts. The leader might also use this time for journaling, particularly if the activity is completed within one extended session, in order to enhance their own ability to discern generative themes and limit-situations. Leaders might also invite persons to share these thoughts in the larger group as discussion resumes. Not only does this step

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<sup>873</sup> Cf. William Cross, *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 16-38 for an extensive discussion of the Clark doll studies.

<sup>874</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 96.

<sup>875</sup> Although I do not include *hinged themes* in my discussion of *generative themes*, Freire suggests that given the dialogical nature of the process, “the teacher-students also have the right to participate by including themes not previously suggested. I call the latter type of theme “hinged themes,” due to their function. They may either facilitate the connection between two themes in the program unit, filling a possible gap between the two; or they may illustrate the relations between the general program content and the view of the world held by the people” (Freire, *Oppressed*, 101).

provide an opportunity for further reflection but a space for persons who value time for personal reflection to sit with their thoughts. The group leader provides guidance with regard to the length of this reflective interlude.

4. Deepening the Dialogue: Given the dialogical nature of this process, the person leading the group is not only an assiduous listener but a participant in the dialogue. Therefore, while not overwhelming or manipulating the dialogue, the leaders' insights and observations are essential to helping participants make the connection between the coded situation and their own lives—the transition from *abstract to concrete*. These observations and insights open up further dialogue by which persons can analyze “the way they think about and face the world.”<sup>876</sup> Again, the intent of the dialogue is to help persons identify and describe in detail the various aspects of the limiting-situation and generative themes—social constructions as well as patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction that have become mythicized and, as a result, impede humanization—so that they might resist them and discern patterns of living indicative of hope. The depth with which persons are able to reveal limit situations and generative themes—their presence and impact upon our lives—will determine, in large part, the efficacy with which we understand how to resist and overcome them. To live with hope, again, is *to say “yes” to God’s “yes” for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God’s ongoing creation of a just and humane world for all persons*. Revealing limiting-situations, therefore, makes resistance and thus saying “yes” to God’s affirming valuation of our lives and that of all creation both comprehensible and possible.
5. Implications for Praxis and Ethical Action: The dialogue in which we have been engaged implies praxis or reflective-action in the form of resisting limit-situation and generative themes. This is a good time, therefore, to invite participants to consider potential praxes that evince our participation with God’s ongoing creation of a just and humane world as regards our own lives, the lives of others and/or the larger created order. I indicate and/or because the dialogue may suggest that attention to one of these domains is a more pressing concern at a given point in time. However, life-affirming praxes as regards one domain—self, other, physical environment—does not preclude availing ourselves to God’s creation of a just and humane world for all persons at other points in time. The key is remembering that God’s “yes” is extended to each of us as well as to the numerous others with whom we share this existence.

In light of the presenting narrative, additional stories/narratives are intended to deepen engagement with the specific concerns, intensify self-appropriation, reveal alternatives, illumine God’s presence, power and fidelity in the world and embolden

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<sup>876</sup> Freire, *Oppressed*, 87.

persons toward ethical action. The presenting narrative and the intent of the activity, in other words, will provide guidance regarding the content and intent of additional narratives. This is consistent with my suggestion that the perceptual and behavioral shifts for which we hope involves revealing that which creates and sustains oppression as well as remembering experiences, relationships and representations that remind us of God's presence, power and fidelity to just and humane existence. For example, the activity concerned with *representational preoccupation* might explore Genesis 1 or Psalm 139 so that participants might consider their inherent value as human persons and struggle with that concept in light of the negation and disaffirmation in the presenting narrative or in their personal/familial narratives. Addressing and redressing *cognitive distancing* and *reticence* about challenging those who propagate negating representations might include narratives that highlight black women's to social movements and religious organization, such as to the Civil Rights Movement, the various women's movements and the Black Church. For example, Sarah Willie Layten and Nannie Helen Burroughs were among the first leaders of the National Women's Convention, originally established in 1895, disbanded in 1896 and then reestablished in 1900 due to women and men who tirelessly lobbied the male leadership of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. during 1896-1900.<sup>877</sup>

As with the presenting narrative, unearthing meaning and resonances of hope may be achieved via a series of questions, insights and opportunities for discussion. The questions are designed to begin a dialogue, thus the persons leading the discussion is not

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<sup>877</sup> Cf. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, , *Righteous Discontent: The Black Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church – 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) for a complete chronicling of the women's movement in the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.

required to use all of the questions or to ask them in a specific order. The intent is to (a) invite reflection upon the narrative, (b) notice what our reflections upon the narrative reveals about our own patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction and their efficacy vis-à-vis hope, (c) discern ethical action and life-affirming alternatives.

After inviting questions of clarification, the leader might encourage participants to grapple with the follow questions:

1. What do you find compelling or encouraging in the story? In what way does this narrative evoke celebration?
2. How does this story challenge us? What question(s) does it raise about the quality of human relationships, our sense of personal valuation and God's activity in the world?
3. Where do you discern connections between the story in the narrative and your own experiences? With whom do you most identify in the story and in what way do you identify with them?
4. In what way is this story life-affirming? Talk specifically about the elements that affirm your sense of wellbeing and your identity as young, black and female.
5. To live with hope is to say *yes* to God's *yes* for creation and for our lives by availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world. Saying *yes* to God's *yes* includes affirming ourselves and others as God's marvelous creation and attending to the quality of the relationships in which we participate. It also means living in anticipation of and actively participating in creating a world in which all persons are well.
  - a. Talk specifically about the nature of wholeness and wellbeing in this narrative. In what respect do the characters experience lack? In what respect do they experience wellbeing or wholeness? To what degree do their experiences mirror your own experiences or the experiences of other persons with whom you are familiar?
  - b. In what respect does this narrative evince God's commitment to just and humane existence?
  - c. In what way is God a redeeming, liberating or affirming presence in the narrative?
  - d. In what way are other persons a redeeming, liberating or affirming presence in the narrative?

6. To what action or way of being in the world does this narrative call us as Christian community?
7. To what action or way of being in the world does this narrative call us as individual persons?

Warning: many people are accustomed to educational activities that rely heavily upon non-dialogical approaches (banking) and in which the teacher disseminates information with little input from others. Therefore, inviting persons to speak and wonder with these stories may be challenging. Similarly, many congregations emphasize definitive right and wrong answers to very complex questions and may find the process of discernment and viewing questions from various angles of vision distressing. Word of advice: trust the process and stay with it, as there is as much unlearning taking place as learning. Transformation at its best is the process by which we are able to shed old orientations to life while discerning and embracing new possibilities.

### ***Reclaiming Forgotten Voices***

One of the difficulties of remembering biblical women's stories into the present moment is that their voices are often absent or minimized in the narratives that we have available to us. Similarly, women are frequently not the main character in the narrative and their stories are offered for the purpose of advancing a larger narrative in which men are the main characters. For example, Hagar and Sarai's stories in Genesis, as Renita Weems explains, were "part of a larger drama about the promise that God would grant Abraham a legitimate heir that would, in turn, be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-

3; 17:1-4).”<sup>878</sup> This is also true of Jesus’ intervention on the behalf of the woman who was about to be stoned in John 8:1-11 as the narrative was less a story about the women than about Jesus thwarting his detractors’ efforts to present him as a blasphemer of the Law of Moses. Reclaiming biblical women’s voices, in other words, requires us to read between and beneath the lines of our written texts in order to excavate their experiences from biblical and historical terrains for which their stories were not the subject of inquiry or investigation.

Womanist and feminist scholars have embraced this task with enthusiasm.<sup>879</sup> Weems, for example, indicates that her method of biblical appropriation combines “the best of the fruit of feminist biblical criticism with its passion for reclaiming and reconstructing the stories of biblical women, along with the African-American oral tradition, with its gift for story-telling and its love of drama.”<sup>880</sup> Similarly, Hess contends that “women’s sides of biblical stories are often screaming from the silent gaps” and appropriates Judaism’s practice of *making-midrash* as a tool for excavating their voices.<sup>881</sup> Making-midrash, Hess explains, involves “playing with and wrestling with the biblical text to discover meaning between the lines and in the silent gaps. The point of midrash is/was not to recover past meaning but to imagine and to celebrate present

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<sup>878</sup> Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, 1988), 12.

<sup>879</sup> Numerous womanist and Feminist scholars offer re-readings of biblical narrative with attention to Women’s voices, including works previously cited in this investigation, such as Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Renita Weems’ *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible*, Carol Lakey Hess’ *Caretakers of Our Common House* as well as Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell’s edited edition, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), among others.

<sup>880</sup> Weems, ix.

<sup>881</sup> Hess, 27.

relevance.”<sup>882</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson also indicates that midrash, meaning ‘to search,’ “is a method of contemporizing sacred text. It is based on the conviction that Torah itself provides the basis for new understanding and contemporary application.”<sup>883</sup> Reclaiming forgotten voices as a strategy for remembering our stories into the present moment is concerned with contemporizing sacred text with specific attention to unearthing the voices and experience of biblical women, thus midrash seems an appropriate process for gaining new insights and hearing their voices.

I also want to take Johnson’s insights regarding the relationship of these new understandings to Torah seriously, however, because making-midrash presupposes engagement with and a commitment to Torah or to *that which binds the community together* (Brueggemann).<sup>884</sup> Thus I believe that midrash in Christian communities, as a process for contemporizing sacred texts, invites us to engage the historical context and meaning as dialogue partners in our efforts toward reclaiming hidden voices and discerning new meaning; a mutually dialogical relationship that honors past understandings while challenging them for the sake of those who have been forgotten, marginalized and oppressed both then and now. With this in mind, I want to combine midrash with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” as a process that

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<sup>882</sup> Hess, 26.

<sup>883</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>884</sup> Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Brueggemann describes ancient Israel’s engagement with Torah as the “disclosure of binding,” the story that the community accepted as their own. While the prophets challenged Torah for the cause of justice—“the disruption for justice”—they were also thoroughly versed in Torah. Therein lay their authority to “bear a new words...when the *old truth* controlled by human power has grown irrelevant, weary, and boring” (45). Thus he urges prophetic education in addition to education in the Torah so that the church might recognize that “*God is bringing a new world into being* in the midst of the ruin and rubble of the old world” (59).

acknowledges ancient understanding while unearthing new meaning and reclaiming forgotten voices.

Gadamer argues that “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices.”<sup>885</sup> In order to test our prejudices we must both encounter the past and understand what we bring to bear upon our reading of historical texts—our own traditions and understandings. Thus he contends that “the present cannot be formed without the past...Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons [past and present] supposedly existing by themselves.” As I read Gadamer, interpreting the ancients stories from which we hope to excavate women’s experiences involves “reconstruct[ing] the question to which the traditional text is the answer” by hearing the questions posed to us by the text and questioning the text in return.<sup>886</sup> This is necessary because “a reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon.”<sup>887</sup> It also stands, because of its encounter with the questioner, within the horizon of the questioner, thus “it is a hermeneutical necessity always to go beyond mere reconstruction.”<sup>888</sup> The questioner, therefore, “cannot avoid thinking about what the author accepted unquestionably and hence did not consider, and bring it into the openness of the question.”<sup>889</sup> Real understanding of the historical past, therefore, is that we regain its concepts “in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them.”<sup>890</sup> Reclaiming forgotten voices, in other words, is concerned with deepening our understanding of biblical women’s experiences as a heuristic for

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<sup>885</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 304.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>887</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>888</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>889</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>890</sup> *ibid.*



grappling with our own stories. That is, we want to excavate and imagine their stories forward so that we might discern meaning from their experience that can enhance our ability to live with hope in the present moment.

As with *weaving*, reclaiming forgotten voices is concerned with discerning connection and intersections between biblical women's experiences and our individual and communal experiences, and might be implemented by preachers and Christian educators. For example, a Christian educator might re-write a biblical women's story, similar to Delores Williams's womanist re-visioning of Hagar's story, and invite persons to engage the narrative in dialogue with their own experiences. Given our emphasis upon learning to live with hope, the leader might advance the discussion and help participants unearth meaning and resonances of hope by engaging the process for decoding coded situations and encourage participants to grapple with the series of questions articulated in the previous section.

Preachers might also create experiential encounters in their sermons and deepen their exegetical engagement of the text by reclaiming the forgotten voices of biblical women and other marginalized persons. Sermons become dialogical, therefore, as a result of our attentiveness to the concrete situations of people's lives and our willingness to bring them to bear upon the texts that we preach. As Thomas Long suggests, preaching is not a solo endeavor because "the church goes to the scripture by means of the preacher."<sup>891</sup> Similarly, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the preacher is the congregations' "representative person who

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<sup>891</sup> Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 48.

never gets into the pulpit without them. What ever else the sermon is about, it is first of all about them, because they are the community in whose midst the preacher stands.”<sup>892</sup> As the community’s representative and faithful witness, the preacher links the congregation’s story together with those of the biblical text and asks how we might respond in the direction of the Kingdom of God.

This seems particularly important because in order for our worship communities to become shared communal contexts in which women’s voices are valued and welcomed we must engage their experiences. It also seems important to demonstrate that narratives about biblical women are also rich reservoirs for theological and ethical reflection and that men as well as women can gain wisdom from their experiences. Sermons that invite persons to discern ethical action from narratives in which women are the main character, in other words, should not be exclusively reserved for *Women’s Day* observances.

For example, in a sermon concerned with encouraging mercy as an expression of Christian faith I offered a rereading of John 8:1-11 in which I invited hearers to consider their lives in relation to the woman who was about to be stoned. John narrates the story with little attention to the woman’s feelings, questions or concerns as she is silent throughout the majority of the narrative and speaks only after Jesus has admonished her accusers. In this excerpt I wanted both men and women to stand in the shoes of the victim in order to experience her sense of powerlessness and to grapple with the meaning of mercy in Christian community:

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<sup>892</sup> Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 77

As we look into her eyes and search the details of her face, we are caught a little off guard. We realize that we've seen her... We know her... and perhaps we've been her. She is the outsider: looked down upon by the Scribes and Pharisees of our time.

She is the one trembling and fearful; very careful to put on just the right front, lest she be caught...

*For if any one really knew her; knew what she'd done; knew where she'd been; knew about it, she would no longer be among the beloved.*

He is the one who drinks in hiding,

cries in silence, and covers his broken-ness behind a façade of strength,

because real men are never vulnerable.

*She gives herself as an act of repentance, to the church, to her family, at the job, and she gives until there's none of her left to give.*

They never feel quite good enough, quite worthy enough to be one of them, so they live their lives outside the walls of the holy temple that we call church...

*They never feel quite good enough, quite worthy enough to be one of them, but they put on the right front and live their lives within the walls of the holy temple that we call church.*

Her secret must remain hidden in this place:

*She is the one least likely to succeed, the one who got caught, the one who has everything to lose.*

She is the sister that we pass on the streets and turn our heads lest we see our own pain.

*And she is the one most likely to succeed...the college girl, the church lady, the successful sister by all human standards.*

He is guilty of something, of so much, of so little, but nobody knows it because He never got caught.

She never got pregnant, He was never strung out, She dresses well, says all of the right things and is present and accounted for at all of the right places.

*She is the woman... the man, who cannot find her voice...who cannot breathe... who cannot find her song. The one who has been hiding for so long that she...that he, cannot risk; does not dare come forward... because "nobody knows the trouble I've seen," nobody knows my struggle...*

But, late at night he repents time and time again, because he could, at any moment, be dragged before the crowd, exposed and sentenced to death.

She is like a well without water... a lake that has dried up ...water, once flowing rich and pure, but now the only evidence is the mud on the lake's bottom;

*She... He... is the one desperately needing...desiring... longing... for the water which Jesus promised would never stop flowing.*

She is many of us... all of us. She is our sister and our brother,  
exposed and laid bare for the world to see!

The sermon excerpt not only provided a coded situation or frame for articulating the complexity of victimization and the necessity of mercy in the life of the woman in the text, but it links her story with the experiences of women and men in the worship community so that we might consider the action to which God calls us. Preachers can also enhance dialogical engagement with regards to their sermon by providing opportunities after worship or at another time during the week for intentional reflection upon the sermon, including questions and insights from those who participated in the preaching moment.

### *Rehearsing our Ancestral Narratives*

This third strategy is specifically concerned with remembering our ancestral stories—our cultural and ethnic narratives—into the present moment as a source for reflection and from which persons might discern God’s activity in human history and consider the action to which it calls us in the present moment. Gustavo Gutiérrez is instructive here:

Faith reveals to us the deep meaning of the history which we fashion with our hands: it teaches us that every human act which is oriented towards the construction of a more just society has value in terms of communion with God—in terms of salvation; inversely it teaches that all injustice is a breach with God.<sup>893</sup>

This strategy seeks to unearth and rehearse narratives from African American ethnic and cultural histories as well as the larger African Diaspora that evince human acts

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<sup>893</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised edition, (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 139

that are *oriented toward the construction a more just society* and consider them in dialogue with biblical narratives concerned with the same. Not only does it value the contributions of persons of African descent but it invites young black women and others to reflect upon these narratives as purveyors of meaning and affirmation of their existence as young, black and female. This strategy is also particularly concerned with unearthing and reclaiming the voices of black women within the community's larger narrative, voices that are often marginalized in secular and biblical history, as sources for theological reflection and discernment of ethical action.

As a strategy for remembering our stories into the present moment, rehearsing our ancestral narratives might find efficacy in sermon preparation and delivery as well as intentional educational activities. For example, black women's narratives can be used as sermon illustrations in order to highlight an important point and enhance dialogical engagement. They might also be considered as parallels to biblical narratives, as Delores Williams demonstrates with Hagar's story, in order to reveal similarities and differences. For those who are willing to press beyond the boundaries of sermons as oral presentation in monologue form exclusively, preachers might consider incorporating ritual as an aspect of the sermon in order to deepen one's engagement with the biblical text or the sermon intent.

For example, in a family reunion sermon based on Joshua 3:14-4:8 entitled "Bearers of the Legacy" leaders laid at the center of the river and on the river bank as ancient Israel made their journey across the Jordan River, and suggested that the stones stood as a sign to future generations so that they might recall what God had done on their behalf. I then invited family members to take a stone from a pile of river rocks on a table in front of the pulpit

as a sign of God's past and present fidelity. As a practice of remembrance, I invited them to announce their ancestor out-loud as they took a stone from the pile. The transition began with Patricia Williams' comments regarding narrative and social construction followed by ritual action:

...I am convinced that families who tell and retell their stories can counteract the negating and destructive rhetoric that inundates our existence—the impact of the media as well as negating encounters with other persons.

We want our children to live our story and so we remember... We rehearse our family and communal stories and tell them again and again.

And that's what this text is really about.

Not about crossing the Jordan or about what it takes to be a priest. It's about telling and retelling the stories that strengthen us; about fortifying us in the faith... reminding us that there are others who have already traveled this path... that we stand upon the legacy of great men and women who came before us, some educated in classrooms and others by the circumstances of their lives.

It is about remembering... about honoring those who have been through many dangers, toils and snares and the God who brought them through... because if we can remember we will be strengthened for the journey ahead.

It is about you and me, becoming bearers of the legacy, called to tell of the great thing that God has done so that those of us who sit here today, our children and our children's children for many generations might live in the present and toward the future to which God calls us.

With these words, I invite you to take a stone and speak the name of those persons who were bearers of the legacy for your generation, committing yourself to do the same for generations to come.

This strategy is also explicitly cross- and intra-generational and concerned with creating a shared communal context in which persons might learn to live with hope. I have used a similar ritual at the conclusion of an educational activity in which weaving was the primary strategy. In addition to extensive reflection upon black women's narratives in church and society, participants were invited to engage their personal and familial stories in order to help them discern hope-filled ethical action.

## **Repentance and Reconciliation**

Repentance and reconciliation as pedagogical practices are uniquely concerned with the insidious nature of structural oppression to infiltrate our lives, even as we profess faith in God and allegiance to God's Kingdom. This is particularly important for the Black Church, as discussed in chapter five, and its need to reconcile its participation in black women's oppression and embrace patterns of thought, feeling, action and interaction that are indicative of the Kingdom's holistic commitment to justice, liberation and restoration. Repentance is transformative in that it names the reality of oppression, acknowledges our individual and communal participation in it and frees us to live differently. As a regular and repetitive liturgical practice, therefore, repentance assures those who are oppressed that their worship communities are spaces committed to open and non-punitive dialogue and whose intent is to evince the Kingdom of God as an ongoing practice. It also calls us back to and helps us remember that we proclaim the life-giving and liberating Gospel of Jesus; helps us sense the yearning in our own consciousness for a world in which the life and love of the Gospel might become a tangible and palpable actuality.

As an educational practice, words of repentance and reconciliation can be woven into our ongoing liturgy so that we regularly and publicly affirm God's just and life-affirming intent for all of creation. In so doing, repentance can take several forms, including prayers and litanies in which persons and communities confess their sins against God, creation and other human persons as well as in sermons and intentional educational activities. I emphasize prayers and litanies as a concern for preachers and Christian educators in order to remind us that the church educates and proclaims the

gospel in every aspect of its being. Preachers and Christian educators might also consider explicitly emphasizing and inviting persons to imagine the Kingdom of God by remembering narratives into the present moment that evince God's just intent for the world. Revealing God's intent toward justice also invites persons to renounce and challenge oppressive and negating social constructions as an expression of God's presence in the world. This seems particularly important for young black women, given their reticence about challenging negating social constructions and their efforts toward adaptation. Biblical narratives might include selections from prophetic writings such as Micah, Isaiah, Amos and others, Genesis 1, Psalm 82, Matthew 5-7, 25:31-46, Luke 4:18-21 and numerous other narratives throughout the biblical witness with the intent of helping persons grapple with their own experience of oppression and discern ethical actions that evince love of God, self and others.

Repentance also involves rejecting interpretative readings of the biblical text that do not acknowledge the vast sociological and religious differences between life in and prior to first century Palestine and life in the twenty-first century. This is particularly important for women's relationship with the church because of the patriarchal context in which biblical narratives were constructed. Women, as suggested earlier were often marginalized and oppressed and enjoyed few of the rights available to women today. Repentance, therefore, requires attention to the interpretive process discussed earlier in order to read the stories of biblical women forward and imagine them into the present moment while resisting oppressive sexist orientations in relation to women today. Preachers and teachers might also remain attentive to the trajectory of the biblical narrative as regards women and invite the church to hear Acts 2:18-19 afresh:



In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and *your sons and your daughters* shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, *both men and women*, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Repentance and reconciliation invite us to live that prophecy in the present moment.

Preachers and teachers might also remain attentive to their use of metaphors, analogies and language to ascertain the extent to which they perpetuate negating female representations and sexist ideologies. For example, we might augment biblical readings in which male pronouns are used to represent all of humanity by replacing them with “men and women,” “girls and boys,” “humanity” or “human persons” and avoid language that infantilizes women. Metaphors, quips and analogies that exclusively depict women as the malevolent or sinful characters or perpetuate stereotypical conceptions of womanhood might also be avoided. In other words, our task is to ensure that our sermon illustrations, educational activities and ways of being in relationship with the persons with whom we preach and teach appropriately represent the Kingdom of God as a new social order, as Brueggemann contends, that stands in judgment of “every other social construction of power and authority.”<sup>894</sup> Ultimately, therefore, repentance and reconciliation welcomes the voices of women as they tell their stories, sing, preach, dance, testify, teach, and be the church in all of its diversity and beauty because the church, at its best, is an expression of the reality that we so greatly anticipate.

### **Lament and Creative Action**

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<sup>894</sup> Brueggemann, *Hope in History*, 22.

The final pedagogical practice includes lament and creative action. Emilie Townes describes lament as naming the problem, seeking justice and hoping for God's deliverance; thus lament embodies grief and anguish, contestation and resistance, hope and creative action. It is, as Brueggemann argues, an act of defiance in that it decries oppression and propel us toward action. The women whose stories frame this investigation expressed inert concern regarding global and national lack and oppressive social constructions; they were not compelled to act. Therefore, this strategy is intended to intensify our engagement with the Kingdom of God as a metaphor of hope and impress upon us the necessity of availing ourselves to God's ongoing creation of a just and humane world. In this manner, young black women become caretakers of their own houses as well as our common house, the church (Hess) and our global community.

Preachers and Christian educators might implement lament and creative action as an aspect of their sermons or as an intentional education activity. For example, in a sermon during an ecumenical gathering at Wake Forest University commemorating September 11, 2001 in U.S. history, I wanted to maintain the tension between acknowledging a painful event in recent U.S. history and our ongoing commitment as persons of faith to wholeness and wellbeing for all persons. The sermon text, Micah 6:6-8 was augmented by a communal reading of "Reflections on Wholeness," an African call for life in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *An African Prayer Book*.<sup>895</sup> I incorporated lament in the sermon entitled "Living Out Loud in a World that Demands Silence" as follows:

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<sup>895</sup> Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book*, 110-113.

...Micah's 6:8 invites us to not only imagine the possibility of justice, but summons us to attune our hearts to the pulsating rhythm of a world "praying and sighing and groaning for wholeness, wholeness, wholeness..."<sup>896</sup>

...weeping and wailing because of genocidal regimes intent on annihilation... moaning and groaning beneath the rubble of a war torn existence... grieving and mourning because of brokenness and loss... praying and lamenting for our children that are no more... and the mouths that remain unfed...and the bodies that remain unhealed...and the poor who remain locked out... and the oppressed who cannot escape...

...to feel the pull towards wholeness... and sense the world's deep yearning for a life affirming reality.

... This pulse under-girds our existence, but is often muffled beneath the façade of our pretend wellbeing—the possessions that we accumulate, the titles that we wear, the busy-ness of our lives, the walls that we erect, the ideologies that we espouse—Masks that either intentionally or unwittingly shield us from the brokenness that is so viscerally present in our world...

lest our hearts learn the rhythm...

...lest our feet forge new paths...

...lest our tongues sing new songs...

...*Lest we dare to Live out-loud* and keep faith with the God who stands on the side of those whose dreams have been deferred.

The sermon concluded by remembering the August 28, 1963 March on Washington D.C. and inviting persons to live out loud in the present moment: "The question is not how to appease God or humanity, but how is it that we might synchronize our hearts with the pulsating rhythm of a world crying out for wholeness as an expression of our faith and love for God."

A Christian educator might also incorporate the narratives of this sermon into an explicit educational event making use of the strategies and discussion questions described above for remembering our stories into the present moment. Additionally, given the power of lament to propel persons toward creative action, preachers and Christian educators might invite persons to participate in service learning activities, such as letter writing campaigns to mobilize political action, stocking a local food pantry, collecting

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<sup>896</sup> Ibid.

clothing for homeless shelters, participation in AIDS and HIV education initiatives, contributions to relief organizations such as the World Food Bank and numerous other charitable and life-giving initiatives by which we can avail ourselves to God's ongoing activity in the world and thereby learn to live with hope.

### **SOME LAST WORDS**

To be a midwife means that we are willing to sit with another sister  
as she struggles to give birth to her hopes and dreams,  
to breathe with her as she pushes the baby out,  
bend our back to the floor and place our hands in the blood and gore,  
cut the cord and discard the afterbirth of fear and doubt  
so that the baby can live outside of the womb.

It means that we are willing to help a sister discover  
how to respond to God's call,  
and live into the reality for which she yearns—  
how to embark upon a new endeavor,  
step into the door that has been opened for her,  
live when the doctors says that living is improbably,  
hope when the situation appears impossible,  
stand when standing feels too difficult,  
love in the midst of grief and loss,  
laugh in the midst of sorrow,  
pray through obscurity and uncertainty—  
so that she might bring that with which she's been pregnant to  
fruition,  
because we know that in the midst of the pain and screams,  
concealed in the darkness of her womb, ...  
is a new life that's waiting to be born.

Midwives walk with their sisters through the most dangerous and exciting  
times of their lives, doing all that they can to ensure a live birth. And if  
the baby should die, the midwife stands with her just the same.

Hope, metaphorically, is a personification of the Spirit that creates yearning for  
wholeness and wellbeing in human persons, assuring us of God's presence, power and  
fidelity and compelling us toward just, liberating and restorative action in the world. It is

an ontological necessity—necessary for existence—without which we collapse or “break down” in the face of the despairing realities of life. To live with hope is to resist culturally induced despair and avail ourselves to God’s ongoing creation of a just and humane world for all persons. It is an existential imperative, urging us to order our lives with attention to the possibility of *shalom* as a tangible reality in our world. To live with hope, therefore, confronts us as call and responsibility as we anticipate the redemptive possibilities that are already taking shape in the present moment.

This pedagogical model responds to that call. It encourages churches and other worship communities to become midwives of hope—to stand in solidarity with those who struggle beneath the weight of oppression and partner with them as they resist culturally induced despair and learn to live with hope. Our conversations with the twenty-two women whose stories frame this investigation, scholars and film-makers contextualize this pedagogical endeavor, revealing that young black women have and continue to live at the intersection of their deep longing for wholeness and wellbeing and a cultural and religious milieu that they experience as hostile and disaffirming. They yearn for a life-affirming existence in which they and future generations of young black women might live free from suffering, negation and struggle. They want to say *yes* to God’s *yes* for creation and for their lives—to live with hope—but are often preoccupied with protecting themselves and adapting to the world as it currently exists. Resonances of hope were like a whisper that the women could barely discern, always present but distorted by the cacophony of negating assertions that inundate their lives. These distortions, when left unchallenged, create culturally induced despair, convincing young black women and others that they are powerless to challenge or change oppressive social constructions.

Throughout this investigation I have explored the socio-cultural and religious dynamics that engender culturally induced despair and delimit our ability to live with hope as a pedagogical problem to which the church and other worship communities might respond. My thesis remains that an adequate pedagogy of hope will awaken persons to the voice of Hope and nurture their ability to live thereby, as well as address (unmask) and redress (negate) culturally induced despair. The pedagogical model that I have detailed above unmasks and negates culturally induced despair *and* strengthens young black women's acuity to the voice of hope so that they might discern life affirming patterns for living in the present and into the future. The pedagogical commitments, practices and strategies invite persons and communities to evaluate the current shape of the world and our participation in it; to reconsider, re-imagine, change our perceptual orientation regarding what may be possible for our world and for ourselves, and then act as an expression of loving and obedient relationship with the One who wills our collective wellbeing and that of the earth as our shared domicile.

As a pedagogical model intended to enhance our ability to live with hope, the commitments, practices and strategies also invite young black women and their worship communities to unearth and grapple with the many stories and narratives that order our existence, assessing their adequacy in light of the Kingdom of God as a comprehensive metaphor of Hope. To live with hope is to challenge inadequate narratives—negating images, myths, ideologies and social constructions—while also availing ourselves to God's ongoing work of redeeming the world; to consider the efficacy of praying "thy kingdom come, they will be done" or asserting that "the Kingdom of God is at hand" in a world that is so deeply stained by oppression and sin; to sense that we have been liberated

for just and life-affirming action because we are created in the image of a Creating God and thus embody God's presence, if we would only live therein. To live with hope is to match our hearts to God's heart and our commitments to God's commitments, to say *yes* to the *yes* of God for our lives and for the world in which we live, to notice lack and live in love for the sake of the "emancipatory transformation of the world."<sup>897</sup>

Our task as preachers and teachers is to midwife a new reality into existence, to sit with our sisters, these young black women who have captured our imagination and whose lives call us toward restorative action, and help them give birth to the life for which they so deeply yearn. As the Egyptian midwives must have instructed the Hebrew women, we invite young black women to "push" for the new thing for which they yearn is hidden within the darkness of their own wombs.

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<sup>897</sup> Foster, 13.

## Attachment A

### INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

As a Ph.D. graduate Student in the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University's *Person, Community and Religious Life* program, I am conducting research with young black women in the United States of America on "sources of hope and despair" in their experiences in the church and in American culture. You have been selected to participate in this study because you are a black woman between 18-30 who has been involved, either now or in the past, in a Christian community of faith in which hope is considered a central tenant of spiritual life. The purpose of this study is to better understand how young black women "sustain hope in the face of multiple social factors and forces that would seem to press toward hopelessness." I ask that you permit me to interview you as a part of this study. Hearing your story will help me develop educational approaches that can awaken and sustain hope and eliminate despair. This letter provides some background and description of the project.

#### **Description of Project:**

This research is a component of my dissertation project entitled "Toward a Pedagogy of Hope: A Womanist Christian Education and Homiletics Approach to Catalyzing Hope in the Lives of Young Black Women." The purpose is to understand the character and potential sources of hope and despair in the lives of young black women with special attention to how you sustain hope in the face of negating images, stereotypes and cultural cues. Your responses to the interview questions will enable me to (1) understand how and to what extent images and stereotypes that recur within the larger U.S. culture, familial and friendship relationships and religious communities distort, inhibit and/or enhance young black women's ability to live with hope, (2) identify similarities and differences between participant's experiences and existing theoretical explorations of hope, (3) recommend pedagogical (educational) strategies to Christian faith communities that might nurture rather than frustrate hope. I will interview fifteen young black women who are willing to share their experiences and stories. As the Principle Investigator, I will conduct all interviews in person or by phone. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. You will be asked to read and edit the transcription, and then provide signed approval of a final draft of the transcription.

#### **Potential Risk:**



Your participation in the research could involve some stress. In the interview I will ask you to share experiences in which you have felt negated and disaffirmed, especially as it relates to race and gender, some of which you may not have shared publicly. I may also ask you to discuss how these experiences impact your day to day life, your perception of self, your understanding of God, and/or your interactions with your community of faith, family and the culture at large. During the interview process, you will be free to decline to answer a question or even end the interview if you feel strong emotional distress. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

The information you share in the interview will be kept confidential and used only anonymously. Your name will not be attached to the audio recording, or the interview transcription. Your name will be matched by number on a sheet of paper in a separate file with your corresponding interview. You will remain anonymous and your identity intentionally obscured (identifying descriptors will be made generic, such as “young woman who live in an urban community,” or “college student”) in any ensuing publication or use of the material.

I will retain interview recordings and transcriptions in my personal file. A file will be kept in a separate location containing your personal data (name and contact information) and matching interview number. I will be the only one with access to any of these files.

**Benefits:**

The primary benefits of this study are in the advancement of knowledge concerning sources of hope and despair in the lives of young black women. Many people struggle with how to maintain a sense of hope, especially when confronted by negating forces, images and stereotypes from the larger culture and within communities of faith and family structures. I’ve seen this struggle in young women with whom I’ve worked over the past 25 years, particularly with the expanded accessibility and prevalence of popular media images that negatively portray black women in general and young black women in particular. Your participation in this research will help develop educational approaches that Christian communities of faith can use to reveal the negating aspects of culture and help persons live with hope despite negation.

**Communication:**

Please contact me—Veronice Miles, Principle Investigator—if you have any questions about this study. I can be reached at (336) 758-3070 or [vmiles@emory.edu](mailto:vmiles@emory.edu). Please note that the phone number is a Wake Forest University Divinity School number because I am currently also a faculty member at Wake Forest.

If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study you may also contact Dr. Karen Hegtvedt, Chair, Social, Humanist and Behavioral Institutional Review Board, which oversees the protection of human research participants. She can be reached at (404)727-7517 or [khegtv@emory.edu](mailto:khegtv@emory.edu).

Thank you very much for giving serious consideration to participation in this study. I do believe it will benefit religious educators, pastors and others who want to create communities and educational experiences that might help persons sustain hope in the face of negation. If you are willing to participate, your signature on this letter will signify your consent. Therefore, I also ask that you keep a copy for your reference and return a copy to me. Upon receipt of your signed consent, I will contact you by phone to set up an interview at a time and place convenient to you.

Sincerely,

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Veronice Miles

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Participant's Signature of Consent

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Participants' printed name

Preferred phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred email: \_\_\_\_\_

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