
The Liberating Narrative of #SayHerName: A Womanist Social Justice Movement in Black Women's Stories

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Introduction

In the wake of police-involved shootings and the killings of unarmed Black men and women, the summer of 2020 provided a global glimpse into social movements that privileged the sacredness of Black bodies. From Portland, Oregon, to New York City, protests under the #BlackLivesMatter banner raised consciousness and awareness of the oppressive conditions faced primarily by Black men in the face of police brutality and death. Alongside the #BlackLivesMatter movement was the #SayHerName movement uplifting the names and narratives of Black women who also faced death at the hands of police. Black women faced with intersecting oppressions required an additional movement to highlight the injustices faced inside of Black organizing and movements. The religious and faith communities must become a part of the movement rather than witnesses to the work within the movement. The engagement of faith and ethical leaders must first begin with the belief that our faith calls us to fight for justice for all, especially those who are historically marginalized and oppressed.

This essay utilizes a womanist ethics methodology to engage the intersections of oppression faced by Black women as a liberating narrative that parallels the experience of the widow in the “Parable of the Widow and Unjust Judge” in the Gospel of Luke.

#BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName Movements

The #BlackLivesMatter movement founded in 2013 by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, began as a hashtag on the social media app Twitter. It began with no connections to any specific political, civil, or religious organizations. It developed from a hashtag to a chapter-based national organization and movement aimed at improving the validity of the lives of Black people living in the United States. While the movement began after the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, and the acquittal of shooter George Zimmerman, it has served as the voice against social injustices committed that have taken place against Black people in the United States.

Although the movement is associated with the death of unarmed Black men during encounters with the police, the #BlackLivesMatter movement made efforts to “broadening the

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conversation” to include social injustices facing Black people. The movement purposed to include how “Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state.”¹ Despite the creation of this movement by Black women and its broadened awareness of how Black people are affected by social injustices, violence against Black woman and its ensuing trauma are missing from the narratives of the movement. Due to the missing narratives of Black women victimized and killed by police, in December 2014, the African-American Policy Forum (AAPF) launched the #SayHerName movement.² Closely connected to an intersectional framework this movement serves as a source to the intersectional oppressions faced by Black women. It also highlights the social injustices faced by Black women that are omitted from social justice movements. Although the #BlackLivesMatter movement provides a prophetic voice against how the lives of Black people are “deprived of basic human rights and dignity” it has not been inclusive of Black women.³ This ideological, political, and affirming movement highlighting both the injustices and contributions of Black people requires a movement within the movement that uplifts the narratives of Black women.

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1. Black Lives Matter, *History*, <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.
 2. African American Policy Forum, “About Us,” <http://aapf.org>.
 3. Black Lives Matter, *History*, <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.

Before religious faith and institutions can begin to address the social injustices and needs of Black women, they must first be aware of how the life experiences of Black women are challenged by intersectional forms of oppression. Before one can act, he/she/they must be aware of the complexities of multiple identities that meet at the intersection of overlapping oppressions.

The #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements reinforce the need to reflect on how centering the voices of Black women in the church and community as organizers and activists is necessary. It bears witness and testimony of Black women who desired to reclaim their personhood in a society that devalues their existence. This also extends to religious faith and life. There are many untold stories of the life experiences of Black women, narratives that are shared and often interpreted through a lens that does not reflect the context or cosmology of Black women. The faith, thought, life struggles, and experiences of Black women must be examined and explored in the context of faith, beliefs, religious institutions, and practices. The restorative work of facilitating dialogue and sharing the narratives of Black women creates a better understanding for doing inclusive theology.

Intersectionality and overlapping oppressions

To practice an inclusive theology, the intersectional oppressions faced by Black women must be a part of the conversation. Author and social theorist Patricia Hill Collins introduces intersectionality as “a new way of looking at social inequalities and possibilities for social change.”⁴ Collins argues intersectionality is not comprised of a set of ideas (since ideas do not foster change), but rather a theory that transforms thoughts into action. According to Collins, intersectionality’s ideas spark changes in the social world because of its ability to inform social action. As a critical social theory, intersectionality captures thoughts and ideas that Collins suggests “can address contemporary social problems” and provide “the social changes needed to solve them.”⁵ Rather than viewing a situation or a problem from a linear perspective, multiple variables are taken into consideration. This acknowledgment recognizes the many factors that contribute to social problems and issues that address each of these variables that make up the whole.

4. Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Duke University Press, 2019), 1.

5. Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, 2.

Intersectionality is also a critical thinking tool best used as a method for understanding and responding to the complexities of human experiences. Collins’ use of metaphor sheds light on the multi-layered intersection of race, class, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. At the intersection of multiple systems of oppression is a narrative acknowledging the witness and experiences of Black women. The framework Collins provides is a first step for exploring the experiences of Black women and social issues affecting their daily lives. Before religious faith and institutions can begin to address the social injustices and needs of Black women, they must first be aware of how the life experiences of Black women are challenged by intersectional forms of oppression. Before one can act, he/she/they must be aware of the complexities of multiple identities that meet at the intersection of overlapping oppressions.

Womanist theology

Womanist theologian Katie Cannon asserts that, “We need a womanist historiography that will challenge what we presently and naively take for granted as true concerning black women.”⁶ By incorporating the narratives of Black women into U.S. history and theological discussions, womanist theology adds insight into the experiences of a marginalized group that is overlooked. Cannon notes that connection of the experiences of Black women and their historical background as “the conditions for patterns of ethical behavior and moral wisdom which have emerged in the Black female community.”⁷ In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker introduces the term “womanist.” Seeking a way to organize the experiences of Black women into simple thoughts, Walker articulates a definition that serves as a foundation for womanist theology. Walker defined a womanist as “usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, willful behavior.” Someone who is “acting grown up. being grown up,” someone identified as “Responsible. In charge. Serious.”⁸ A womanist theology commits “to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”⁹ According to Walker’s definition, a womanist additionally, “Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.”¹⁰

Since the 1980s the term “womanist” has served as a foundation for womanist theology. While the term womanist is a literary term, privileging the experiences of Black women was the impetus for new theological reflection. Walker’s definition recognizes the experience, culture, and values associated with Black womanhood and incorporates the diverse experiences of Black women absent from society. Womanist theologian Linda E. Thomas describes

6. Katie Cannon, *The womanist theology primer* (Women’s Ministries Program, 2001), 119.

7. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.), 6.

8. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1983), xi.

9. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi.

10. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi.

womanist theology as a theology that connects the “plight, survival, and struggle” that “takes seriously black women’s experience as human beings who are made in the image of God.”¹¹ As a theology that reflects both struggle and survival, womanist theology encompasses the work of the Black women in family and community life.

A womanist historiography is inclusive of the experiences of Black women and provides a framework for understanding how these experiences re-interpret Christian beliefs and principles. Black women were empowered by the Black church and the use of biblical scripture as an empowering source for understanding their relationship to a God who spoke to an oppressed people. The Bible as “the highest source of authority for most Black women,” shaped scripture as a reference point for shaping their theological views and their commitments to the survival and liberation of all people.¹² The history of Black women in the U.S. includes a multi-layered oppression rooted in both history and theological beliefs that have fueled years of abuse and mistreatment. The historical lens that identifies Black women is situated in a normative patriarchal framework that does not include their voice or witness. Black women have historically been identified based on the narratives of their oppressors. This patriarchal normative has roots in religious faith and institutions. As an extension of white patriarchal standards of oppression, religious faith and institutions must now privilege the witness and experiences of Black women.

Liberating narratives from stereotypes to archetypes

In her book, *Hope in the Holler*, womanist theologian A. Elaine Crawford focuses upon the historic struggles of Black women. Crawford notes how black bodies have been undervalued and controlled by white culture during various periods of U.S. history. Crawford sheds light on the experiences of pain, abuse, and violence Black women endured because of societal racism, classism, and sexism. As the “permissible victims of American society,” Crawford explores the experiences that Black women faced and their struggle for freedom to be heard and to live free.¹³ Their liberation was often found in their stories and ability to raise their voice and witness in the fight for their humanity. Crawford highlights the mythologies and how they shaped attitudes and beliefs about Black women, their bodies, and their sexuality. These myths heavily influenced the negative treatment and abuse of Black women. The Jezebel mythology labeled Black women as licentious, rapacious, and lustful animals. The system of slavery silenced Black women’s voices while the Jezebel mythology invited sexual exploitation and abuse. The Mammy mythology served to

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denigrate Black women as less than human, while the Sapphire mythology centered on the notion that Black women were loud, dominating, and emasculating. These images were not solely used by White oppressors; they also carried over into Christian contexts that challenged Black women within their communities.

Mythologies grounded in white supremacist ideology created negative views of Black women. However, once Black women gave witness to their experiences, they reclaimed mythologies as powerful archetypes. In 1966, jazz singer, composer, and activist Nina Simone used mythologies and stereotypes of Black women to privilege the voices of Black women. In her song titled “Four Women,” Simone shifts stereotypes to archetypes by sharing the stories of four women. Simone describes each of the women individually, illuminating an experience often wrought with abuse or pain. Unlike the stereotypical names given to Black women such as Jezebel, Mammy, or Sapphire, these women are called by name. Simone calls out the names; Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. The names humanize them and their experiences. Although Simone precedes the #SayHerName movement by half a century, she demonstrates the significance of giving voice to the struggles and experiences of Black women.

A methodology for womanist ethics

In her book *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*, author Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas offers a glimpse into the work of womanist ethicists through the life and experiences of Black women. Her method counters the system and issues that have “kept black women from realizing a positive sense of religious awareness within themselves as well as in the company of others.”¹⁴

11. Linda E. Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm,” *Cross Currents* Vol. 48, Issue 4 (Summer 1998).

12. Katie Cannon, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Westminster Press, 1985), 39.

13. A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), xi.

14. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in*

Floyd-Thomas presents an outline that brings to the forefront both the voices and experiences of Black women experiencing intersectional oppressions. Closely aligned with Walker's definition of womanist, Floyd-Thomas incorporates sources that are often used for doing womanist theology that also serve as a gateway for better understanding the experiences of Black women through the lens of their narratives and voices.

This approach sheds light on the social areas that impact and shape the lives of Black women to include their family, community, culture, and religious life. Floyd-Thomas articulates the tasks womanist ethicists engage in relation to Black female liberation sociology. These tasks involve the reintegration of the experiences of Black women into American society, breaking myths that insult and disparage Black women, the construction of religious ethics with an inclusive theological discourse, and a hermeneutical approach addressing the religious and cultural traditions of Black women seeking liberation from systems that deny them the right to justice and freedom from oppression.¹⁵ This methodological approach seeks to eradicate oppressive social structures that limit Black women. Taking into consideration the identity, the gifts, and resources, the history and culture of Black women, this becomes a way of reconciling Black women to their true selves while engaging their world at the intersections of their oppression. It goes beyond the survival strategies and alternatives presented to Black women and pushes towards liberation and freedom from systems and institutions that limit their possibilities.

A womanist hermeneutic of justice and Luke 18:1-8

By sharing their stories, Black women become participants in their liberation. Womanist biblical scholar Mitzi Smith defines womanism "as a political movement"¹⁶ that "seeks, promotes, and embodies the well-being of black women and men, the wholeness of entire communities of color, and a global neighbor-love."¹⁷ Smith asserts systems such as racism, sexism, and classism are all systems that have been constructed and systems that "can be deconstructed."¹⁸ Rather than focus solely on suffering, Smith's commitment is to action and a commitment to the overall well-being of Black women and their liberation from physical, mental, and spiritual bondage and systemic social injustice or oppression. Smith argues that a commitment to womanist liberation is manifest in the audacious, vocal, and vociferous pursuit of justice and freedom from disease and oppression.¹⁹ Cannon asserts that "understanding the prophetic tradition of the Bible empowers Black women to fashion a set of values on their own terms."²⁰ Scripture is used as a refer-

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ence point to compliment the work of Black women in sharing their stories as it meets at the intersection of history and culture to facilitate restorative justice that reclaims their humanity. It is inclusive of the history that impacts their daily experiences, often highlighting the intersecting areas of oppression. It is a movement that does not stand alone. It becomes the movement fueled by a biblical prophetic tradition that emphasizes the value, dignity, and worth of Black woman.

In the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable to the disciples of a justice-seeking widow and an unjust judge. She is unwilling to take no for an answer. She is an example of Walker's womanish woman, "outrageous, audacious, courageous, responsible, in charge, serious."²¹ In this parable, Jesus describes a widow who approaches a judge who has no respect for people and does not fear God. This persistent and audacious widow comes to this judge daily, seeking justice against an opponent or oppressor. Eventually, her persistence pays off and the unjust judge grants her justice. Jesus demonstrates that the Lord listens to those who cry out day and night. This is a lesson of persistence and encouragement that, despite the position of the unjust judge or ruler, a just judgment is given if one remains persistent. Beyond persistence and offering an encouraging word, this parable serves as a message to faith and religious institutions and communities.

This parable offers a glimpse into a reality faced by marginalized individuals within communities who face systems of interlocking oppressions. In their pursuit of fair and just treatment they are often faced with the isolating task of pursuing justice alone. They have the daunting task of taking on both individuals and systems that seek to dehumanize their existence by robbing them of individual and collective freedoms. Like this unnamed widow in the parable, they are faced with combating systems that are meant to protect them without the assistance or help from members of their own community. They are the nameless, unrecognized individuals living among and in faith communities. They carry the weight of inequality alone without the assistance of faith communities that speak and preach about a liberating Gospel. They are left to carry the burden of discriminatory treatment without the acknowledgement of their stories and experiences as prejudiced

Womanist Ethics (Pilgrim Press, 2006), 1.

15. Floyd-Thomas. *Mining the Motherlode*, 65.

16. Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (in) Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Cascade Books, 2018), 2.

17. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, 3.

18. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, 36.

19. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, 29.

20. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,"

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21. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

acts against their humanity.

In this parable, Jesus introduces readers to a judge charged with administering justice and a widow seeking justice. Jesus centers a marginalized woman in a parable about persistence. The widow is without a husband and assumed to be without supportive male family members since she appears in public court alone. It is suspected that she lacks resources or a means of support. Because she is a woman, she is not permitted to inherit her husband's estate, or property. In this parable she is both a widow and unnamed. She is met by someone who is not concerned with her vulnerable position and someone who does not fear God but someone who is charged with administering justice. While the parable omits the injustice she experiences, it notes her persistence. Despite the interlocking systems of oppression of race, gender, sexuality, or class, she refused to allow this dismissal of her claims to silence her. Instead, she uses what she has, her story as agency as she courageously seeks justice daily. It is her persistent actions that shame the shameless judge, who then takes seriously her request to, "Grant me justice against my opponent."²²

The unrelenting pursuit and persistence of this woman gives permission to Black women to speak up and act out. The unnamed widow demonstrates an example of what it means to courageously take on oppressive traditions and customs. It was her difficult circumstances that pushed her to speak truth to power even if it meant she would do so alone. She became her own advocate without the assistance of a community to aid in her well-being. While the parable demonstrates the power of persistence of one individual it also sheds light on the absence of the community. This does not excuse the community from its responsibilities to care for the marginalized. It does not grant exemption to our communities who overlook marginalized and vulnerable members. Unjust judges and unjust systems still exist today. They represent the systems that take oaths to protect and serve, systems that are said to provide justice and care, but they are the same systems that oppress and threaten the lives and well-being of marginalized groups especially Black women. Some of these systems are present in faith communities that sit quietly on the sidelines as Black women confront systems of injustice daily. Their passive behavior mirrors that of the unjust judge who ignores the demands of the widow seeking justice. The unjust judge ignores the demand for justice despite the ethical standards he committed to upholding while faith communities do the same. Some faith communities have watched the marginalized Black women in their midst cry out for justice daily despite their moral commitments to care for their neighbor. The unnamed widow represents one woman willing to take on the unjust judge and returns to her community with more than justice, she returns with a liberating model for other individuals in her community to follow. She agitates an unjust individual and an unjust system, sharing her story daily. And one person who speaks truth to power, sharing her story in her words, walks away with justice. It is her narrative that bears witness to

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the strategies and methods that continues to fuel the liberating womanist social justice movement of #SayHerName, because their stories will be told, and their names will be called.

Conclusion

A womanist ethics methodological approach and an intersectional framework are imperative for aiding in the liberation of Black women experiencing multilayered oppression. Acknowledging that including the voice and witness of Black women is necessary for religious institutions committed to social justice and for faith in general is not enough, though. The #BlackLivesMatter movement must incorporate both an intersectional framework and a womanist ethical methodological approach. By so doing, the #SayHerName movement will not serve as a mere supplemental movement addressing the overlapping oppressions faced by Black women. The full incorporation of the #SayHerName movement into the wider #BlackLivesMatter movement is best served, then, by a politically active faith community that acknowledges the ways in which it has played a role in omitting the names, narratives, and experiences of Black women in relation to both the church and the wider society.

A quadrilateral method consisting of scripture, history and culture, critical thinking, and personal narratives provides the basis for a hermeneutical framework of theological reflection and understanding for faith communities to play pivotal roles within the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements. This method contains a multi-layered approach to centering the experiences of Black women and serves as a basis for examining faith through the lens of a marginalized or oppressed group. Historically, scripture was often utilized by oppressors as a tool to oppress, but also as a source for oppressed people to find liberation from said oppressors. Scripture is still an important part of the Christian experience of the oppressed today and can still be viewed from the perspective of marginalized people, exemplified in a womanist hermeneutics

22. Luke 18:3, NRSV.

of wholeness and survival and liberation of all.

In addition to scripture, history and culture provide context and a historiography that incorporates the historical events impacting culture over time. In the case of Black women, it is imperative to understand historical events and narratives like mythologies and narratives that impacted their lives. Thus, history and culture provide insight on how the current culture of the Black community responds to social injustices faced by Black women, and personal narratives serve as an important characteristic in womanist theology and scholarship. Black women's ability to narrate and tell their stories from their experiences situates theological reflection from the voice of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. These narratives provide the data and information necessary for critical thinking. This draws a parallelism to Collins' work around intersectionality as a critical thinking tool. Critical thinking offers an opportunity to reflect on the cultural and historical experiences with the narratives of Black women, which then allows for the theological reflection necessary for drawing conclusions related to faith and understanding. It is also the place from which action in relation to Christian social ethics is drawn.

Faith communities should actively participate and engage with the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements, supporting organizations where the narratives and lived experiences of Black women are cultivated in congregations and wider society. Faith communities must privilege the position of widows, the marginalized, and the oppressed, as exemplified in Jesus' parable in Luke 18:1-8. If faith communities are to consider seriously the lived experiences of Black women and the intersectional oppressions they face, they must be willing to place their faith on the frontlines of the struggle for justice. This requires a commitment to working toward an imagined future of liberation that breaks down the barriers and/or walls between the church and the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements in wider society.

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