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Ownership and Violence Against Women of Color Reflected Through the lens of Anglo Saxon Theology

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Theology

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Abstract

In the American cultural mind, white bodies have been lifted as ideal. In addition the male body has received praise, greater access, and safety on the streets, in business, education, and the wider world. In the arena of higher education is where students tend to discover how their personal sociocultural perspective informs ownership or the lack thereof. It is through this reality that the idea of ownership is seen at work when it comes to violence inflicted on women as well as women as the recipients of violence. When race is included in the violence against women dialogue we uncover the branches of Anglo Saxon Exceptionalism, planted by the theologies and worldviews of American colonizers and founders. This presentation will look at violence against women as it relates to ownership (of property and bodies) and race as well as continuing the ideals of puritan theologies sprouting from Anglo Saxon Exceptionalism. The core of this argument lies in the history of how black bodies have been owned in America and how the white male has "owned" rights to men of color for labor, women of color for sex, and white women for reproduction. This thread of history continues in our cultural imagination excusing white men who are accused of assault, but investigating accused men of color more deeply. The only normal result of this system is that white men are protected, men of color are intruders, and violence against women is natural.

Exploring the Meaning of Biblical Narratives for Christian Women and Theatre of the Oppressed as a Resource for Understanding

Lurraine Kimmerle, M.A.

The Christian Bible is full of images of men who follow God; some save nations, others rule them, and many speak for the divine. While there are a handful of women who fill a few of these

roles throughout the Bible, the primary characters of the Biblical narrative are men. These same

men came from a patriarchal world that discounted the experiences and perspectives of women.

These same men questioned Mary Magdalene when she claimed Jesus was raised from the dead,

and similarly many of these men logged the stories we know in the Bible. Because of this,

women are not the primary characters of the Christian story and their ability to participate in

meaning is limited.

As Francis Babbage (2004) points out explaining the problems with theatre that led to the

beginnings of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, "To be a subject is to be able to speak,

to participate in the making of meanings" (p. 54). Whether it is a male God, or one of his

followers, men are the subject characters of the Biblical narrative. This male dominated

perspective shapes contemporary Christian theology, liturgy, and beliefs, and leaves women's

stories and voices on the periphery of spiritual experience. This absence is caused by a three-

fold crisis of power: the primacy of teaching of male headship, the view of women's bodies as

sinful, and the reinforcement, even by women, of these patriarchal ideals. It is my hypothesis

that when Theatre of the Oppressed is brought into the worship process, women are able to

access this silent female image of God and participate in a more communal and self- actualizing

worship experience.

The Missing Narratives of Women

While there are many Christian denominations that ordain women, and most theological

institutions accept and train them, the 2,000-year-old history of the faith is dominated by men

who have created the primary traditions of ritual and study known today. Elizabeth Schüssler

Fiorenza (1992) addresses the problem of androcentric hermeneutics in *But She Said: Feminist*

Practices of Biblical Interpretation. Fiorenza claims there is a lack of knowledge of women's

stories in the Bible, due in large part to male focused teachings and liturgy. She points out that

most Christians understand the bible through what is taught to them and argues that selections of

readings and a new focus on women is a "remedial strategy for reshaping biblical interpretation

and imagination" (Fiorenza, 1992, p. 22). Fiorenza continues her critique by looking at the ways

average Christians receive their knowledge. She is critical of the attempts to feature women

without seriously addressing the roots of patriarchy in church tradition as a whole, and

particularly finds fault with popular Christian literature that ends up supporting oppressive views

of women while still bringing their stories to light.

Janet R. Walton (2000) addresses this call in her book *Feminist Liturgy* where she contends

that there is a need for the female perspective in the liturgy because "every person adds to

interpretations of texts, symbol and sacramental actions" (p. 28). When women lead worship,

interpret scripture, and are valued voices in Christian culture, the entire community benefits

because they see God in more diverse and unlimited forms.

Still, simply adding women to the conversation isn't enough. In her book *Sexism and God*

Talk Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) warns female ordination is only a way of allowing

women into the male sphere but does not adequately question the ideals that support sexism.

However, as she expands later, these same institutions may be the key to liberation. This

happens when clergy seek to not only use "inclusive language for humanity and God but also to

transform liturgy to reflect the call to liberation" (Ruether, 1983, p. 202). Womanist theologian

Kelly Brown Douglas (2001) holds more liberal denominations accountable. She comments that

those women, men of color, and women of color who have achieved leadership positions in the

church are also able to see "that dominating power is predicated on 'unjust' privilege, not on

innate superiority," and calls for an understanding of the bible that leads to liberation, not one that perpetuates oppression (Douglas, 2001, p. 43).

While Ruether, Douglas, Walton, and Fiorenza take a general look at Christianity as a whole and offer necessary feedback on the voices of women, Nancy Tatum Ammerman (1997) offers a specific look at the conservative fundamentalist church through her ethnographic study in *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World.* While many denominations function in hierarchy, where the head of the church is ultimately a bishop or pope, the fundamentalist denominations differ by looking to a single knower and leader in the pastor. This structure is much more insular, making the pastor the one teacher who speaks for God and is the final authority on scripture.

Similarly to Fiorenza, Ammerman (1997) highlights the way Christian books are used to influence ideas in a fundamentalist community. Their books are selected by the pastor for the church to read, and any book or article that a congregant reads outside of church instruction is scrutinized under his teachings (Ammerman, 1997, p. 121). The patriarchal implications rise to the surface when considering these churches do not allow women in leadership positions. The centrality of the pastor's authority gives way only to other men on decision-making committees. The instances where a woman's perspective is allowed is always under strict permission from these male leaders, and at times offered with apology if not tension.

For many of these theologians art and community are seen as a solution that disrupts the single, male vocal voice in theology and church practice. For Reuther (1983) it is about "community in a ministry of liberation" that calls on the skills of every church member (p. 207). It is the artists and poets who will reimagine the languages, symbols, and celebrations of the congregation. Walton's (2000) liturgies do just that as she breaks open the feminine voice

remembering the mothers in Jesus's lineage, as well as those who Douglas says are on the

"underside of marginal realities," women, people of color, immigrants, the poor, the hungry, and

the outcasts (Douglas, 2001, p. 44). For Walton, feminist liturgies require community and are

rooted in coming together to give voice to truth. It is also important when considering the value

of art that Ammerman (1997) notes in fundamentalist churches music selection and group prayer

are among the few arenas in which women are given voice. Through art in worship there is a

collision of perspectives and voices that give way to an unboxed image of who God is, reflecting

more fully who God saves.

Where Theatre of the Oppressed Fits In

If art can truly offer solutions to bring women's voices into the theological and biblical

narrative, it is then important to consider how art can be used as a tool for liberation. Following

Babbage's words on subject narrative, the story of women and God presented through the

biblical narrative and Christianity limits women's ability to create meaning. As Babbage (2004)

explains, Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is a tool that brings voice to those who are not

commonly subjects. Augusto Boal (2008), creator of TO says, "As we know, to speak is to take

power"(p. 20). When most practically applied, TO disrupts spectatorship. The goal of TO is to

allow those who are commonly kept silent, the opportunity to speak. This takes the form of

"spect-actors": spectators, who usually remain silent, are given a chance to participate and

change the narrative. Narratives are then often created out of their own cultural or religious

stories and/or personal experiences. If TO is used with women in the Christian church it could

open dialogue and allow participants to join in making meaning in their faith.

The seminal book, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* begins by exploring how theatre has been used

to influence and control society. Aristotle saw tragedy as a means toward catharsis. Having seen

Oedipus fall from his hubris, the audience feels pity and fear and can leave the theatre anew

having experienced the consequences of their own hubris without danger to their body or life.

By lining Aristotle's theories against his Nicomachean Ethics, Boal breaks down his

understanding of happiness, justice and virtue. In the end Boal (2008) concludes for Aristotle,

"happiness consists in obeying laws . . . for those who make the laws, all is well. But what about

those who do not make them" (p. 24)? There must be a way to keep them happy, and what better

way than the essential catharsis of tragedy. [1] For Aristotle tragedy must end in catastrophe, or a

sudden destructive end. This is a warning to the audience about their own pride, and the gift

catharsis offers in freeing them from it.[2]

For a major part of theatre history Aristotle's *Poetics* was the barometer for critiquing

tragedy, and this dominance kept its audiences content in supporting preexisting political

systems. However, as Boal (2008) argues, it also drastically shifted with the advent of new

political forms; such as feudalism's evolution into capitalism. These political systems

manipulate art in order to reflect the values of the elite—the community members who have the

means to view, pay for, and in the end control art. Therefore theatre became the theatre of the

bourgeoisie. No longer just serving to correct and make law-abiding citizens, it now honors the

virtues of the autonomous man. The new subject characters, unlike the representatives of pride

in tragedy, are now three-dimensional men in control of their own destiny. Unlike Oedipus,

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[1] Here the word "them" includes women, the lower class, and slaves.

[2] In considering how the warning against pride hurts the marginalized, consider also Part 1 of Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow's anthology *Womenspirit Rising* (1992) where they introduce Valerie Saving's arguments against the common belief, developed predominantly by Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren, of defining sin as pride. As well as Savings following article "The Humans Situation: A Feminine View" (date). When considered along side Boal's criticism of Aristotelian theatre it can be seen that perhaps sin as pride is a repeat of the problems Boal saw in Poetics and Greek tragedy, in the end keeping the marginalized low and those in power on top.

whose fate was decided by the gods, tragic characters like Hamlet or Macbeth choose their own

fate and mark themselves for distinction. According to Boal, the bourgeoisie consider this the

greatest virtue.

Theologians are correct that art in community, particularly theatre, can be used for liberation.

However, Boal (2008) warns, it is also important to consider that theatre is not simply a tool but

also a weapon. A weapon religion has unfortunately participated in using, not as an

emancipating tool for the marginalized and silenced, but instead for control. For the Greeks it

was to reinforce the direct control of the Gods over humanity. For Catholics it was a tool for

maintaining an aristocratic hierarchy, and for Protestants, particularly the Renaissance's budding

Lutheran and Calvinist faiths, it was emphasizing independence, unfortunately leaving those on

the margins to scrape for survival alone. What has continually been missed out on is the original

use of art as a dithyrambic communal song. From the Greeks to the present, theatre along with

other forms of art have been used as coercive tools by those in power. Theatre, having its roots

in theological and communal practices, has evolved into a divisive tool of hierarchy (Boal,

2008). If churches are to consider using art to liberate the voices of the marginalized,

particularly women, it must be considered, first, who gets to speak, and, second, if art is being

used as a force for creating community or a force for those already with power.

Having now looked at the problems with spectatorship in the theatre, it is easier to see

similarities between kyriarchal structures in religion and the Aristotelian and bourgeoisie drama

of theatre. Much like the poor and the outcasts are left to observe the drama onstage, the

marginalized, including but certainly not limited to women, are in the spectator position in the

church. Perhaps free to participate where allowed. Women can tithe much like the poor are

welcome to purchase a ticket. They are also welcome to volunteer for the bake sale or in the

nursery being strong and valuable members of the community, but not welcome as members of the clergy. Similarly, some are welcome to help clean the theatre after the show but unwelcome at the board meeting of wealthy donors.

The Problem With Sexuality

Before patriarchal narratives in the bible or Christianity can be disrupted it is important to understand what common narratives are repeated. As Ammerman and Fiorenza mentioned, one primary way these stories are taught is through Christian literature. In this literature the primary biblical men are elevated (like the bourgeoisie) as three-dimensional characters in control of their destiny. The women, on the contrary, are still kept as secondary characters used to support the androcentric plot of the church story. To explore this further I will specifically look at three popular Christian writers and their books: Nancy Leigh Demoss's (2001) *Lies Women Believe and the Truth that Sets Them Free*, Jackie Kendall's and Debbie Jones's (2005) *Lady in Waiting,* and Joshua Harris' (2003), *Sex Isn't the Problem (Lust Is).*

A major religious experience that continually came up in the books I read is women's spiritual understanding of their bodies. In these texts, women are locked into one of two images, which I call the "pornographic seductress" and the "pure submissive." Since women's stories in the bible are limited and offer little in regards to their inward narratives, it is easy to paint them over with images that serve a teacher's goal. Characters like Esther, Ruth, or Mary are set up as pure submissive women, ideal, and whom every woman should aim to emulate. Diametrically opposed to this woman is the pornographic seductress. Women such as Eve, Jezebel, Queen Vashti, and even Mary Magdalene are simplified into dangerous and sinful, and women should avoid being compared to them.

Nancy Leigh Demoss (2001), writer of *Lies Women Believe and the Truth That Sets Them Free,* takes the story of Eve and uses it to reinforce an image that is untrustworthy and weak. She says in the beginning, "Every problem, every war, every wound, every broken relationship, it all goes back to the lie. Eve believed that lie, and we as the daughters of Eve have followed in her steps" (Demoss, 2001, p. 20). There is a consistent thread throughout the biblical narrative of women being either chaotic and dangerous, or controlled and submissive. For Demoss and other writers, Eve is the example of a dangerous and chaotic woman who brought sin into the world. This thought leads to women needing to be under a man so her chaotic nature is controlled.

Other women in the bible, such as Ruth, Mary, or Esther are examples of holy and ideal women. Their already limited stories are cleaned up to reflect this idea. For example Jackie Kendall and Debbie Jones (2005) use the story of Ruth to support their argument for abstinence. They explain that Ruth coming to Boaz's bedside and sleeping at his feet after a night of drinking was a common cultural practice of submission, not seduction: "one thing is for certain when she left to go home, she walked away as a Lady of Purity" (Kendall and Jones, 2005, p. 75). However, the biblical account explains her choice to spend the night as uncommon and both Boaz and Ruth wanted to keep it a secret, "So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized. And he said, 'No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor" (*New International Version,* Ruth 3:14).

From the text it is clear Ruth had a sexual goal when she met Boaz and Boaz wanted to hide her visit from others. Kendall and Jones' choice to sanitize the story of Ruth and make her into an image of purity misses out on an opportunity to show the strength of a woman. At the beginning of the story Ruth has lost her husband and is living in an unfamiliar land. She does what she needs to do to keep herself and mother-in-law alive. Ruth was not a pure submissive

who wanted to honor Boaz nor was she a pornographic seductress who wanted to control and

destroy him. She was rather a strong survivor taking care of herself and her family in the best

ways the culture and time period would allow. She certainly was much more complicated than

the one-dimensional image to which she has been reduced.

Popular Christian author Joshua Harris (2003) participates in this dangerous narrative in his

book *Sex Isn't the Problem (Lust Is)* by painting the image of female sexuality along with male

sexuality and arguing that they are rooted in two different places. Harris claims that men desire

sex for purely physical pleasure and women desire sex for intimate emotional pleasure and

physical pleasure is not involved. A man's battle is to see a woman for more than her body and a

woman's struggle is to not use her body to overpower men (Harris, 2003). In *Lady in Waiting,*

Jackie Kendall and Debbie Jones (2005) similarly claim, "A woman has a depth of soul that

desires an intimate friendship, apart from anything physical with the man she loves" (p. 83).

However for men, "Once passion is introduced into the relationship it is difficult for the man to

stop and be satisfied again with just developing friendship. The Man is distracted by the

physical"(Kendal and Jones, 2005, p. 83). By removing sexuality from women's bodies, these

writers make sexual pleasure an experience for men only. In addition, a sexually attractive

woman is sinful and unnatural. Harris drives this point home further saying, "[Women] when

you dress and behave in a way that is designed primarily to arouse sexual desire in men, you're

committing pornography with your life" (Harris, 2003, p. 88). Women's sexuality is reduced to

being pornographic and sinful, because if it is sinful then it must be stopped and controlled. In

addition, a man may sin because he thinks a sexual thought, but a woman is responsible not only

for her sexual thought but also that she attracts a pornographic gaze. This deeply affects

women's spiritual growth not only because it makes them a dangerous presence in the

community but also because it reduces their morality to their sexuality. A woman who attracts

men is a pornographic seductress, and a pornographic seductress is not a good, godly woman.

Feminist scholar Audre Lorde (2007) analyzes the Western cultural understandings of

eroticism and pornography in her article *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. She critiques

pornography by saying it "emphasizes sensation without feeling . . . " She goes on to say, "There

are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the

sexual"(Lorde, 2007, p. 54, 55). The above writers make this very real mistake in their own

understanding of the female body. To them, and to many other Christians, women's bodies are

something that creates a sexual sensation that is natural for men to separate from emotions or

feeling. The human is removed from the female image, and the woman becomes an object that

can be conquered and owned. The impulse of the male gaze is not cast as sinful because it

wants to own the female body; it is sinful because they are not yet married. Once married he is

free to objectify her body as he wishes. Kendall and Jones (2005), as well as Harris's (2003)

books, never address a holy or better way to engage with sexual impulses. Instead they

encourage their reader to cap those impulses off. When the church defines sexuality only in the

terms of an oppressive male gaze, and normalizes the pornographic, Christian women's bodies

are nothing more than objects for the use of procreation and sexual satisfaction. They are what

tempts men to take the cap off their sexuality, and are blamed for his impulse, pornographic or

not. The clothing a woman wears, the choice to wear a tank top or take a sweater off, the sway

of her hips when she walks, or the way her body moves when dancing, even the movement of her

hair, have the power to become a sexual invitation she is at fault for giving. For women the

seductress and the submissive are cast as porn stars to be used when needed and ignored when

considered unnecessary. Worship, the pulpit, theology, business, and any other place women

have been kept from are non-sexual spaces. It only seems natural to not include women.

Lorde (2007) defines erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and

spiritual plane" (p. 53). Examples of this are building a bookshelf, dancing to music or

embracing a lover. The erotic is controlled in women in order for men to benefit from its power.

The woman, who ventures into this erotic spiritual plane, or into passions outside of the service

of men, is immediately cast as the seductress. In order to protect themselves from being seen as

this, women are encouraged to hide their erotic nature from the men and others around them.

Demoss's (2001) book encourages women to not trust their emotions (p. 194). What a woman

wants is suspect under that which patriarchal theology claims she should want. This restriction

carries not only into her actions and her dress, but also into her beliefs and desires. Demoss

emphasizes the need for women to ignore what they want for themselves and instead focus on

what the men around them need. This is predominantly encouraged by staying at home and

caring for a husband and family over anything else, warning that not doing so goes against God

who's primary purpose in creating women is to serve men as "she was made from the man, made

for the man, and given as God's gift to the man." (Demoss, 2001, p. 126). Going outside of this

design not only hurts women and their marriage, but also offends and impedes on God's divine

plan. When women follow this teaching their attention becomes externally focused on what men

need and their own needs become ignored. Her full self is not welcome at the table, but only a

manipulated and conformed version that fits the restrictive narrative of the pure submissive.

Using Theatre of the Oppressed: A Case Study

The very nature of TO is to bring voice to the voiceless, but even more so to bring voice to

the full community. Through the engagement of the "spect-actor" the passive role of a viewer is

disrupted. In the Christian narrative congregants are no longer told what the bible is saying by a single speaker, but together are discovering their own narratives as well as values in community. This is done through multiple branches of Theatre of the Oppressed. For the purpose of my hypothesis I used Image Theatre specifically to study its benefits toward liberation in the Christian narrative.

In Image Theatre, participants draw, share objects, and sculpt images with their own bodies to communicate ideas, stories, and values with one another. By bringing women together using Theatre of the Oppressed, and looking at the biblical stories of women, they can begin to see themselves in the biblical narrative. Instead of trying to force themselves into a patriarchal image, they have the opportunity to create and re-create the image of what it means to be a woman and Christian for themselves.

During Lent I had the opportunity to explore meaning using Image Theatre with a group of women at a traditional church. Lent is a special ritual in the church year because it centers on giving up something in the participant's life in order to grow closer to God.   S. A. Sweeney (2009), in her dissertation on Ecofeminism and Lent, says, "Ritual is a mode of coming to know. This knowledge comes to us by and through the body. It comes to us through action rather than observation" (p. 16). She goes on to discuss how Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, is multisensory, and requires participation from everyone involved (Sweeney, 2009, p. 17). Due to Lent's unique connection to body, and its invitation to participate, it seemed to be an ideal time to add TO to the worship experience. In addition, because Lent focuses primarily on the body and earthly existence, and considering the oppressive narratives around women's body in the church, I was interested in seeing what Image Theatre would add toward dissecting Lenten themes.

My initial goal was threefold. Firstly, I was nervous about introducing theatrical and artistic

activities into church and wanted to examine techniques that would make the women feel at ease,

potentially moving outside of their comfort zone. This was a particular concern because the

church was only able to reserve 90 minutes once a week for our meetings. TO workshops

normally meet for about three hours and this abbreviated time limited some of our exploration.

Second, I was eager to see how community would develop among the group, knowing

community was difficult to create among women in this church in particular. Lastly, during the

introductory liturgy to Lent on Ash Wednesday participants are told "from dust you came and to

dust you will return." However in the creation story in Genesis Women did not come from the

dust but from Adam's side (NIV, Gensis 2:21-23). Considering this I wanted to see how women

connect their own bodies to the theologies around 'body' in Lent despite the only images of body

being male during the liturgies.[3]

The community that gathered together for this study had its own unique ways of

understanding male imagery and women in the church. While part of a more progressive

denomination that ordains women as priests, this congregation has decided to not hire a woman

priest. In addition the church is unique because it has a large male population and women are a

small percentage of the congregation. The female voice is not only absent from the liturgy, but

also, in some ways, absent from the daily activities in the church. However, there is a strong

group of women who are faithful attendants, and some of these women made up our small group

that met once per week during a portion of Lent.

To overcome my first concern, that is, that I was introducing new artistic styles to this

community, I first had to explain how TO was similar to what they already knew. This was done

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[3] To read a liturgy for Ash Wednesday sees *The Book of Common Prayer* pages 264-269. For readings related to Lent see pages 166-167.

during the recruiting process. Words were used which they already connected to the liturgy such as, "ancient prayers," "contemplation," "reflections," and "engaging the senses." Personally knowing the connections between liturgy and TO, I brought in shared language that made the process accessible. For example, I emphasized that we would engage the senses and look at traditional prayers and stories. The second way I made this work accessible was to send out class readings in advance. Each woman knew what we would be diving into before arriving to each workshop and was able to consider the themes. This empowered them and allowed them to consider these concepts on their own. One TO tool that aided their preparation was sharing objects on a shrine. Women were asked to bring in an object from home that matched that week's theme. For example, during the first week's theme of "from dust you came and to dust you will return," some women brought in items that once had value but are now worthless, others brought stones, or small toys. Each item had a story or an idea connected to it that showcased these women's connections to the theme. Through this exercise they were encouraged to think about how to artistically interact with the ideas long before they were together, in different ways than a traditional pedagogy would request.

Following the first meeting each woman was much more comfortable with new ways of understanding spiritual ideas through TO. It wasn't until we went into body mask work (still poses made with our bodies representing characters or ideas) that this became a concern again. Embodiment is a more advanced activity that non-actors can easily reach in one session, but not commonly within an hour and a half meeting. Because of this I brought in four TO practitioners that have participated in image theatre multiple times. The group was made up of two men and two women. At the time the practitioners agreed to join us it seemed inconsequential whether they were men or women, however after the women found out two men were joining us they

voiced concern. We met before the practitioners arrived and decided as a community if they should still join us. They chose to allow the men into the session because they were open to the experience of having new people join outside of the community. However during the conversation they each highlighted something special about how a woman-only space was liberating.

When it came to the development of community, my theories on the ability of TO to bring women together seemed correct, especially in this group. The women initially did not know each other despite having gone to the same church for over three or more years.

The first exercise that broke the ice was Boalian Handshakes. During this exercise participants shake hands with one another and share information on themselves. In this case we shared our names, how long we attended the church, and what we hoped to experience during the bible study. After sharing, participants continue holding hands until they find another person to share with, only letting go of the first partner immediately after they are holding hands with their next partner. In this way no member of the community is left alone. This game is at times so simple it is confusing and this is what happened during the game. However, perhaps because of the traditional and reserved nature of this church in general, it served as a community building tool since everyone laughed at the situation, and barriers quickly fell.

Our shrine also served to build our community. Each week the group was asked to bring in an object that supported the theme being explored during our meeting. By doing this they were not only sharing their own interpretation of the reading, but also sharing a bit of themselves through the object. After sharing their object each woman lit a candle on the shrine to represent their presence in the room that day. These candles were lit from a primary candle that represented God on the shrine. Once each candle was lit, we arranged the objects to show

different relationships between the stories we shared and the objects themselves. As discussion

around relationships and shared experience opened up, so did the door for the women to see

themselves in one another, and connections were formed.

These uniting discussions continued into the readings. After our first reading, which was not

about gender or sex in any way, comments erupted about how great it was to have a spiritual

conversation with only women. It was as if the group felt freer without restrictions. Mary Daly

(2006) comments on the way women work in male spaces when she says "thus manipulated

women become eager for acceptance as docile tokens mouthing male texts, employing

technology for male ends, accepting male fabrications as the true texture of reality" (p. 5).

During our time together, these fabrications were loosened in the community and each woman

was free to say what she really felt. The patriarchal hold on the conversations loosened even

more when we read a version of the *Prodigal Son* from the Gospel of Luke. For the sake of this

reading I changed the male characters into female characters. Father became mother, son to

daughter and so on. The response was focused on a visceral connection to the story they had not

experienced before, and wondered if men felt the same connection when they read the bible.

This particular reading lead to a Story Circle, an activity where each participant thinks of a story

in their own life related to a given theme. During a Story Circle each person has a chance to

share her story for an agreed amount of time. Our themes were mothers, and sisters, forgiveness,

and love. The vulnerability expressed by each woman pointed to a true community, and together

they were uncovering the biblical meaning of the mother and daughter relationship.

When the men were at our meeting, a strong sense of community revealed itself again in a

new and special way. The women in the group, as I said, were concerned that the men would

alter the distinctive community we had built. However, the opposite happened. During the

exercises relationships among the women and the men began to form as well. For example, some women commented that they saw similarities between what the men shared and their own experiences. I cannot say this would happen with any random group of men. These particular people are trained in community building and are aware of the problems with patriarchal structures in the church and in society. They knew they were entering these women's special community, and did so with respect. If a man from the congregation or male leader joined the group, I do not think the same community would have necessarily developed.

My final interest was to see how the participants connected themes in Lent around body to their own experiences of having a woman's body. This was also of significance to me because of the ways sexuality has played so deeply into patriarchy. Sexuality did not become a primary theme in our meetings, yet their relationships with their bodies peaked during much of the conversation. During our Story Circle 'body' came up in relationships between mothers, daughters, and sisters. This theme particularly focused on choices young women make about their bodies and the judgments put on them by mothers and sisters. This conversation went back to reconciliation much like the mother and the prodigal daughter. The women commented that while they had read this story many times, they had not considered how it informed their own relationships, and wondered if this was because of the changes in pronouns, or if it was the communal sharing of stories.

Themes around body did come up but only when it was discussed directly. Issues around dieting, dress, and body image were examined, but most of the conversation centered on having a body that can be broken or that dies; much like the conversations we had around being dust and being broken. The most poignant moment was during the image and body mask work when certain women were hesitant to take on the image. Creating body masks is about taking the

themes discussed through the images of objects and drawing and putting them into our bodies.

Using their bodies participants sculpt themselves into an image reflecting that theme. Through

this technique the community is able to break apart abstract ideas that are hard to put in, or get

lost through, words. We had read two prayers. One was the "Prayer of Rebellion" and the other

was "St. Theresa's Prayer." Each discussed being Christ's body on earth and standing for God's

justice over earthly law. During our discussion the group agreed that we are Christ's body, and

the conversation moved on to what Jesus looked like in rebellion. We chose to use "Christ like

rebellion" in image work, but some had difficulty stepping into the image and embodying what

Christ could be like in rebellion. This may have been because the actors were in images first and

the women may have felt shy, however they were open and talkative in the previous discussion.

I wondered if it meant more to step into the image because it became the image of Christ, an

image many women are taught not to encompass or that they cannot encompass. One woman

commented that it felt wrong, and remarked she intentionally selected to think of the image as

Mary instead of Jesus for this reason. However, this also may have been due to seeing herself as

a human unworthy to stand in the image of God not because she saw herself as unworthy as a

woman. A longer conversation than what our short time allowed would have been needed to

make any full conclusions on her reasons.

Measurement of Success

It is easy as a woman who wants TO to enhance the spiritual lives of other women to look

for certain changes I personally think are valuable but that would not be true TO because I would

be the single speaker telling these women where they are oppressed instead of making real space

for their voices. Because of this I am measuring success based on the results of my questions

and if the women agree that the process changed them. My primary questions were: Can TO

build community among Christian women, and will it open conversations around having a woman's body?

For my first question, my answer is an absolute yes, specifically because these women did not know each other before our sessions and now care deeply for one another. True community was developed during our meetings. One difficult piece of community is that we did not have consistent attendance between gatherings, however when a woman could not make it she would call or text and expressed sadness for being away from the group, and the group as a whole would mention how much her specific perspectives were missed. During our session one of our members was in the hospital. The group wrote her an encouraging card and was eager for her return. Despite attending the same church for years and never knowing one another's names, after a few weeks these women looked forward to one another's company and began supporting each other outside of our sessions.

The answer to my second question is harder to pin down. While we did hit on points around body, it did not become a primary theme in our discussions. I think the error I made was in assuming the struggle for these women would only be with their bodies. Based on my understanding and reading on Lent I was prepared for the body to be a primary theme, however these women were drawn to other concepts in the readings as well. This is a clear example that what exists in analytical preparation does not necessary manifest in the same way through practical applications. I also believe this emphasizes an important Boalian idea that a single knower cannot always understand what a community needs and multiple voices are necessary. Most of the discussions on body centered around ageing and the changes of bodies over time. There was a wide range of ages in this group and my limited perspective could not have prepared me for the older women's experiences. I believe different readings or exercises would bring out

different conversations around body with these women, particularly ones based on the ways in which the topic did come up. However, the readings and themes brought to the group addressed different issues that needed to be broken open for them at that time.

Conclusion

Theatre of the Oppressed serves to give voice to those who rarely speak by opening space for them to share their stories and ideas. Women in Christianity have been silenced for the past 2,000 years whether through church traditions, theological understandings, or patriarchal teachings. The stories of women have also been cleaned up in order to present a limiting narrative that no human can model. With this impossible task, women obviously fail. Feminist and womanist theology has long been discussing the ways women's voices are absent from liturgy and hermeneutics. Many argue it is not enough to simply allow women to participate in patriarchal structures but a full reexamination of sexism in church tradition must be considered. Bringing art and a communal focus into church practice, women would be able to find a place in the conversation and flip the narrative. Furthermore, it is important to understand how art, and theatre in particular, has been used to keep people oppressed. In addition there needs to be deeper awareness of what oppressive stories are being perpetuated in popular church teachings. The current assumptions in androcentric hermeneutics keep women in a limited and oppressive mold and these conventions will only continue to try and keep them silent. In order for the biblical narrative to be retold and used for liberation these beliefs need to be reexamined. If this is to happen rituals throughout the church year, various denominations, and spiritual beliefs about women and their place in the church need to be studied through a Theatre of the Oppressed lens. Practical research through field study as well as the diverse theological understandings across religious communities and regions also must be considered as culture, faith, and political

views each factor into how women understand themselves. By bringing liberation-based art like

Theatre of the Oppressed into church communities women will have the opportunity to dismantle

patriarchal narratives and use their own knowledge, stories, and ideas for spiritual development.

Doing so will lead women into a deeper self-actualizing spirituality, and will open the church's

understanding of God into one that fits all humanity not merely those with power.

Forever the Girlfriend

Jennifer E. Herring, M.Ed

Since I was four years old, I understood that I was black. I knew that everyone else had

an advantage or privilege that I did not have. In kindergarten, I was reminded by the white girls

in Miss M's class that they did not want to play with me because of my "muddy" skin. They said

they did not want to get dirty. In our classroom, I sat in the back at a table with the one other

black girl, Deena. One day during nap time, I could not sleep. Miss M kept telling me to lay my

head down because it was time to take my nap. I kept waking up, and she kept signaling me to

lay my head down. I finally laid on the nap-mat long enough to make Miss M think I was

sleeping. I peeked around the classroom for something to keep my attention until the wake up

bell would sound. I noticed Miss M was rocking everyone else to sleep. Even the girl who said

that playing with me would make her dirty was being rocked to sleep. As one student fell asleep,

the other was already sitting up with arms outstretched waiting for Miss M to pick her up and

help her fall asleep for naptime. After noticing her do that for at least three students, I figured it

was safe to lift my arms and request Miss M to rock me to sleep as well. Again, she signaled me

even more harshly to lie down and take my nap. I cried myself to sleep. At age four, I understood

that my teacher would never rock me to sleep. I knew that I was not to be loved at school.

The expectation during nap time was that I soothe myself to sleep despite witnessing the children around me being rocked to sleep by our teacher. I was expected to accomplish the same task as all my peers without the same assistance that my peers received. From the beginning, I felt I was set up to have to navigate the system without the same privileges as those around me. Throughout my life, gradually, my primary focus became learning about the forces at work in the larger societal system, but to not question them. I have spent my lifetime navigating the system, as well as outsmarting my counterparts into thinking that I am ignorant to the expectations of the system. I had to master "system language" (Steele, 2004). The following "compliments" were some that I received while growing up. This is when I began to understand the meaning of "system language" in my life and how it shaped who I became and how I perceived myself in the larger society.

- "Wow, you have really pretty penmanship! Who taught you how to write like that?"

- "You're such an eloquent girl; you don't look how you sound."

- "You're pretty for a black girl"

- "You're smart for a dark-skinned girl"

- "You don't look Haitian"

- "You don't act Haitian"

I knew then that, although I was well spoken, smart, and wrote well, something bigger than I could comprehend at the time caused people to be surprised by my intelligence. Society, I learned, was surprised that I was Black *and* intelligent. At the time, I did see these harsh words as compliments. I figured that if I was the exception to the rule that I should keep up appearances so that I didn't disappoint society. I did not want to ever be caught acting in a way that would cause society to categorize me with who they thought I should be grouped with. I actually liked

being considered different. I wanted to be perceived as outside the norm. Maybe then, I could be

deserving of being rocked to sleep.

Minnich (2004) realizes that knowledge is based on what is familiar. Knowledge, as

defined by Minnich, incorporates generations of history that is passed down from members of a

dominant group. Eventually the knowledge that is passed down quickly but quietly becomes

perceived as fact and the norm. Minnich stresses the point that "common knowledge" is used to

exclude "lesser" populations (meaning traditionally marginalized groups) of those who do not

know. Minnich also discusses how human language and categorization contributes to a society

that is exclusive as it relates to quality education and knowledge acquisition. She states that

popular ways of knowledge are so deeply embedded that they become the standard of excellence.

Minnich warns that without a holistic view of the world, individuals become deeply entrenched

in singularity through language, communication and various social policies, which can be

dangerous in that the singularity closes the doors to other worldviews. It limits the ability to have

an integrated interdisciplinary approach to academics and scholarship. My experiences shaped

how I perceive myself as an educator and researcher. Dominant language and culture has shaped

my sociocultural perspective—specifically in a way that has trained my thinking to be that of a

person who is expected to do what she is "supposed to do" at all times.

Western (2008) paints a detailed picture of how his personal story moves from being a

person who lacked access to quality education to one who becomes highly educated and must

deal with his privilege and how others perceive his position and power as a white male.

Specifically, he gives an account of how his position as lecturer in a university setting and

educated white male has positioned him (by the perceptions of the people around him) as the all-

knowing one/all-nurturing one. Western emphasizes that all individuals bring with them a set of

ideals, morals, values and behaviors that are instilled in them based on their histories and social

upbringing. Western furthers this argument by emphasizing his belief that his privilege has to do

with how those who do not share his background perceive him. He states: "…We notice

otherness when difference transgressed normal spaces" (p. 60). However, I would push this

further and ask, *What happens when difference is the normal space but the space is led and*

maintained by individuals who cannot identify with the experience of being othered? In my

experience, what happens is the othered individual begins to understand the layers that make up

who they are based on the forces at play when they are othered. What I mean by this is that

having the experience of being othered by nature forces the othered individual to examine

themselves through multiple lenses as well as their experience which then raises larger questions

around race, ethnicity, gender, religion and the individual's "role" in the larger context. It allows

the individual to explore the cultural expectations placed on them by those who have othered

them. Othering teaches the individual what society expects that they are "supposed to do."

Western (2008)'s observations of perception are applicable to an experience I had as a

Program Coordinator at a soup kitchen which served mostly undocumented Hispanics in

Massachusetts. I was responsible for a soup kitchen that served hundreds of individuals two

meals a day (breakfast and lunch). The program was privately funded which meant that we were

expected to open our services to anyone who entered our facility in need of a meal. Part of my

job was to make sure that there was no illegal activity in the soup kitchen. But, I was instructed

not to reach out to my superiors for support if something illegal were to take place. I was

instructed to call the police instead. While the soup kitchen was a great community resource, this

presented as a safety concern for me and any of my colleagues who volunteered to assist me in

keeping the peace among the individuals--- for example rival gang members, addicts, homeless

families---who visited the soup kitchen. I brought the concern about my safety to my supervisors, the executive director and director of operations. I expressed my frustration and anxiety around being an African American woman who was short and young as well as "young looking" with the lack of respect from the general public that we served. I requested their presence in the form of a "walk through" for about 15 minutes for each meal to convey to community members that my team was present and available to take action if necessary. Eventually, after reaching out to the local police when I witnessed a "sale" in the soup kitchen, my staff informed me that I was being followed and that certain people that the soup kitchen served were waiting for an opportunity to do bodily harm to me because I called the police on them. I reported the incident and following reactions of our clients to my superiors. That night, I was so afraid for my safety, I couldn't sleep.

The response my supervisors gave me was shocking and frustrating at the same time. I was told: "Well, Jennifer when you walk into a room, people will just respect you. It just happens, automatically…" Comments like "Just think tall thoughts" and "it's not as hard as you think" made me challenge their position. I explained to them that there is a possibility that the unwavering respect that they're referring to may be what they are used to receiving. They both were white, tall, educated individuals who held the two most powerful positions in the organization. Both had a dominating presence. They were not condescending in their tone with our clients, nor did they come off as threatening. However, they did not understand that the automatic respect they received from the clients had more to do with the public's perception of tall white people more than my lack of confidence in myself as a Program Coordinator. I am reminded of Western's idea that successful leaders can cope with diversity and difference. In this

scenario, diversity and difference were not looked at as an actual area to discuss or entertain. It was transferred back to me as lacking the confidence necessary to do my job well.

This experience has expanded my thinking about the concept of "status" and how that applies to me and my sociocultural perspective. At the school where I currently work, I still believe that I am perceived as subordinate. Social boundaries were established at my workplace. I could not offer my input as quickly and confidently as my colleagues. Boundaries that come to mind include: initiating dialogue about diversity and using my personal and professional experience to "teach" my supervisors strategies on what may be most effective for students. Teachers, particularly teachers of color, are not at the decision-making table and the values presented are those of district leaders who are constantly working on strategies to make our school look as if we are successfully narrowing the achievement gap. We learn that our job is to receive instructions from our school leaders and deliver the curriculum as we are coached to deliver it.

Like Western (2008), it has been my experience that otherness arrives when difference transgresses normal spaces. However, I think a new form of dominance, power and control arises when difference is the normal space but the space is led and heavily influenced by individuals with dominant histories of privilege and power. Similarly to Western's (2008) account of feeling like a mother nursing his students and colleagues, I experience the reverse at my work place. As a teacher of color who is responsible for maintaining the day-to-day operations of my classrooms, I often sense the unspoken expectation that I become child-like in my responses to my supervisors especially when it comes to decisions that have been made on behalf of the children I teach and on behalf of myself as the educator.

Western (2008) incorporates Cooper's thought on the stuttering generation. Cooper states

that "one of the unintended consequences of political correctness is that is has bred a generation

of stutterers" (p. 64). This is to say that people have now moved toward a fear of saying the

wrong thing. However, I would push this thought further when discussing the dilemmas around

diversity in public schools. I would argue that the fear of offending has become normative.

According to Western, diversity has been defined as "white vs. the other" or "the other vs.

white." If we are to stay consistent with this idea of white as normative, I would argue that the

fear of offending comes from a normative stance that is often unable to cope with diversity and

difference. If this is the case, even the use of the terms "fear of offending" implies a universal

fear of saying the wrong thing about "the other" group of people. But the "universal" fear is

actually not universal at all considering that it seems to be referring only to the normative

group's fear of "saying the wrong thing."

The fear of saying, doing, or even thinking the "wrong thing" is ever present in my

sociocultural perspective. WEB DuBois (1994) in *The Souls of Black Folk* coined the idea of the

double consciousness. It refers to a battle in the body and soul of a black man that has him torn

between what his African history tells him he is and what European slave owners have made him

into. From my undergraduate studies to my current position as a doctoral candidate, I realized the

constant pull I felt in my profession between being an "underprivileged" woman of color, who

grew up in poverty *and* being highly educated and multi-lingual. DuBois states:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's

self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks

on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro;

…The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self (p.2).

This idea is ever-present in my life and in my personal and professional experiences. Too often I experienced people adjusting their language and mannerisms when addressing me and when re-telling a story or interaction they had with another individual. There is a common theme of teeth sucking, eye rolling and head bobbing when reporting a conflict with a student or even in an informal exchange in the teachers' lounge. It is as if, as DuBois would say, I am not viewed in the eyes of others as capable, educated and professional. No matter how much I prove myself professionally, socially and academically, I am looked on in amused contempt and pity as the black girl. Consider how a white co-worker (fellow charter school teacher) described to me an interaction she had with a 6th grade student who I had last year in 5th grade.

Teacher: I cannot believe you had to deal with that attitude all year. Today she was being so ridiculous…

Me: That sounds consistent with her behavior when getting to know new teachers. She has a habit of testing boundaries, but if you keep her mother informed of what's going on, you should get [Student]'s cooperation.

Teacher: (*swinging her neck back and forth*). She kept on walkin' through my room and I said *sucks teeth* uh-uh girlfriend, no way girlfriend you cannot come in here without permission you heard me?

Me: Hmmmm…interesting. Have you considered communicating your expectations to her prior to your class as well as re-norming classroom expectations…

Teacher: (interrupts me)-*rolls eyes* girl you know how they can be I just keep tellin her 'no way girlfriend, this is my room I'm the boss 'round here…"

This conversation has taught me, like DuBois, that this is how I regard myself through the eyes of others. As a "girlfriend." No matter how professionally I present and how I adjust my language to fit that of the dominant culture, somehow and for some reason I am still addressed by the world as someone who speaks less than formal/proper English. Even my six month old daughter is faced with being measured with the tape of the world as a "girlfriend" simply because of the color of her skin. Because she is a girl. While consulting with health care professionals during the birth of my daughter (up until yesterday during a follow up appointment we attended), I recognized that they often referred to her as "girlfriend" or "baby girl." This dilemma reinforced the need to address multiple layers of myself as an individual and the layers that my problem present. I am a woman, I am black, I am married to a black man, I am a mother, a student and a professional.

Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000) introduced the term "intersectionality." It is the idea that multiple aspects of oppression (black, female..etc) cannot be seen as separate issues because the oppression itself comes from an intersection of prejudice ideas that effect multiple aspects of the histories of black women. Collins stated that "cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity…it is interlocking oppression" (p. 42). As a researcher, I would allow myself to become more familiar with the patterns that exist within intersectionality to get a better understanding of myself, my experiences and how my biases would affect the research that I pursue.

The dual consciousness that I experienced was that of a person who could identify with the black struggle, but who was also looking to "rise above" her circumstances by attending predominantly white schools to then return to communities of high poverty to teach and empower students. I struggled between rising above my circumstances of growing up in an urban community while trying to stay relevant among students who continued to have the same struggles that I did.

Steele (2004) discusses the idea of cultural capital in America's schools. Steel's theory of stereotype threat and research discuss that when students have negative thoughts and fear about their academic achievement, they do not perform well. They become paralyzed by their fear of fulfilling the stereotype. I experienced fear of perpetuating stereotypes that I believed "the system" had about me. This fear in some ways kept me from effectively empowering myself as well as making an impact on the students I worked with. In the matters of educating students, Steele suggests that educators refrain from trying to locate the problem but to be understanding about the historical context for the fear and continue fostering opportunities for growth and academic success. Instead of obtaining knowledge about the barriers that students faced and why they were at a disadvantage, I was consumed with trying to figure out how I could use my similarities with students to help them feel better about their circumstances.

Throughout slave narrative it was common knowledge that literacy was to be shared. Somehow, this idea is has not been transferred to the American schools today. According to Perry (2004) it is crucial to understand the consistency of the "black struggle" throughout history regarding literacy, upward mobility in a white America and the role of culture in the individual's academic success. Black language is different than system language. Educators must be cautious not to associate one's home language with the ability to discern or predict their ability to

succeed, but rather to encourage learning by way of being bi-cultural. The ability to learn as a bi-cultural student allows blacks to bring their education into the context of the socioeconomic perspective while incorporating system language which will allow upward mobility. It is crucial that black language is not associated with inability to attain academic achievement. Allowing black students to utilize their language does not refer just to "Ebonics" or broken English that is taught by slaves to their literacy-chasing children in the home. It also refers to storytelling and the sociocultural perspective that often is not allowed to be incorporated in classroom learning. This speaks to the cultural capital that is revealed in the discussion of how schools transmit knowledge through codes that are only understood by those who have cultural and linguistic capital—whites.

Steele (2004) suggests that biculturalism is not celebrated in schools. Blacks have had to either conform to the dominant language of schools, or attempt to incorporate their narrative in curricula and school culture. The lack of appreciation for the bicultural black youth contributes to the dilemma of the achievement gap.

Hilliard (2004) suggests strategies for positioning black youth for academic success. The problem, according to Hilliard, is not a lack of education, but a lack of quality services from school systems to black youth. Educators suggesting that "college isn't for everybody," although a subtle suggestion, contribute to the larger institution of racism. Hilliard also reiterates that the issue is not an achievement gap, but an opportunity gap. In order to combat this concern, there must be a triangulation of influence—that is constant re-enforcement to black youth that academic excellence is the expectation. Triangulation encompasses a push from the families, communities and schools of black youth that show them that the expectation is that they succeed

academically. According to Hilliard, larger connections and policies must be established to reinforce counter-narrative among black youth to narrow the achievement gap.

The internal struggle of the double-consciousness and what I'm "supposed to do" is continual throughout my personal experience. It is not a problem that has a clear-cut solution, but rather a complex issue that is inevitable as I wrestle with issues of identity, school leadership and effective practices. Being a "good" educator or feeling effective will continue to consume my thoughts and actions because, in my experience being "good" at anything means playing the correct role that society places on me. In other words, as long as I approach life the way that I am "supposed" to as an educated black woman, a researcher, an educator, a wife, a mother, society will be pleased with me and I will make progress. The additional layer to this idea is that in my experience, often doing what I'm supposed to do means recognizing the dominant systems that are in play and rather than trying to deconstruct those systems and challenging them, I am expected to continue to play by the rules of those systems in order to keep the system at equilibrium and harmony.

As a researcher, I recognize that my sociocultural perspective has allowed me to make meaning of the experiences and people that I have encountered. I have also learned to examine social and cultural forces that are at play not just in my perspective but for those who do not share my sociocultural perspective. An effective researcher must understand the various layers that incorporate one person, idea, theory or problem. While one circumstance can be examined through the lens of my sociocultural perspective, that same circumstance can be examined from a different lens by an individual who does not share my perspective. An approach utilizing the theory of intersectionality would allow me to begin approaching these issues and equip me to be more articulate about the struggle that I experienced as well as how it may be effecting students

that I come into contact with in American school systems. All of my personal experiences have

been multi-layered and each layer brings a different challenge, question, and opportunity for

inquiry. This multi-layered approach to research will allow me to become well-rounded and

well-informed as I approach various complex problems as an educator and educational scholar.

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