

THE MILLENNIAL WOMANIST PREACHER:  
TRANSFORMATIVE, INCLUSIVE, INNOVATIVE AND BALANCED

by

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## **DEDICATION**

*This thesis is dedicated with love and affection to my grandmothers:*

*Grandmommy and Memom*

*“Grandma’s prayers are the reason that a lot of us are still here...”*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to extend my sincerest and heartfelt gratitude to every person who helped me in this endeavor. Without your guidance, help, cooperation, and encouragement I would not have made headway in the project.

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## **ABSTRACT**

TIERNEY C. JORDAN

THE MILLENNIAL WOMANIST PREACHER: TRANSFORMATIVE, INCLUSIVE,  
INNOVATIVE AND BALANCED

Under the direction of ANGELA N. PARKER, Ph.D.

This thesis project will answer the question, how has the work of millennial Womanist preachers demonstrated the expansion of Womanist preaching from the foundations laid by the foremothers of Womanist preaching? Broken down to be further explored and developed by the following sub-questions: (1) How has inclusivity influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching? (2) How has technology influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching? And finally, (3) How has liberative resistance influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching? The primary method used for conducting this research is interviews. Each participant was asked a series of questions, with the goal of curating the answers to the thesis question and sub-questions.

Through the conduction of this research, the millennial Womanist preacher has been revealed as transformative in her ability to embody a radical inclusivity, to navigate a multiplicity of vocations via technology and sacred digital space, and to request liberation for herself and others through rest, ritual, and the setting of boundaries. She offers inclusivity to queer and disabled persons with the goal to envision the totality of the true beloved community. She has strategized the best ways to use technological advancements to increase the accessibility and relatability of her witness. She prioritizes her health by setting and maintaining boundaries which leave time and space for rest and the creation of rituals.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Since entering seminary, I have been introduced to Womanist theology. This introduction to a new system of thought expanded my imagination concerning my career, thoughts about God, and relationship with the Black church. A perspective of God that centers the dismantling of racism, sexism, and classism was transformational for me.

As someone who has always shown interest in the art of preaching, including the intricacies of exploring homiletics and hermeneutics, seeing the Womanist lens applied to preaching revealed truths I had not previously encountered. After being exposed to Womanist preaching, I felt free to ask God difficult questions which brought about a freedom of thought. I believe this freedom can also be beneficial for others, who do not know they need it. What if these systems of thought and experiences were being taught in the pulpit on Sunday mornings?

As someone born on the cusp of generational lines, I never really know whether to call myself a millennial or a member of Gen Z. Some models classify those of us born in 1995 as the end of the millennial generation, while others classify us as the beginning of Gen Z. As someone who is actively watching the emergence of the transformational work millennial women are doing, I thought this generation of Womanist preachers would be the best group to study. These women are currently doing the work, by teaching, preaching, and educating on the topic of spiritual development in a way that is relevant and influential.

In being transformative in her nature, the millennial Womanist preacher has used the research, tenants, and perspectives of her Womanist preaching foremothers' and presented it in a way that connects with current and future generations. I would like to know how these women went about this process and understand the intentionality behind the development of these

methodologies. Holding true to the foundations of Womanist preaching, while also remaining relevant, is essential. As someone who aspires to preach, educate, and proclaim from a Womanist lens, these methods are extremely important to me. This thesis project is based on the belief that millennial Womanist preaching is transformative for those who proclaim it and those who hear it.

### **Thesis Question, Sub-Questions, and Interview Questions**

This thesis project will strive to answer the following question: How has the work of millennial Womanist preachers demonstrated the expansion of Womanist preaching from the foundations laid by the foremothers of womanist preaching? It will then be broken down to further explore and develop: (1) How has inclusivity influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching? (2) How has technology influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching? And finally, (3) How has liberative resistance influenced a millennial Womanist methodology for preaching?

The primary method used for conducting this research is interviews. Each participant will be asked the following series of questions, with the goal of curating the answer(s) to the thesis question and sub-questions: (1) How would you define Womanist? (2) What do you believe to be the purpose of preaching? (3) Who do you believe to be the foremothers of Womanist preaching? (4) How would you define millennial? (5) How do you react to or feel about the term millennial and the way generational conversations occur? (6) How do you believe you embody millennialism? (7) How do you believe you embody womanism? (8) How do you believe you embody the art of preaching? (9) How would you define yourself as a preacher? (10) Do you consider yourself a millennial Womanist preacher? If so, what does that mean for you? If not, how do you define yourself? (11) How do you believe you are different than the term millennial?

What does that mean for you? (12) How do you believe millennial Womanist preachers have evolved from the foundations laid by the foremothers of Womanist preaching? (13) What do you consider to be the foundational principles of your preaching methodology? (14) How do you believe millennial Womanist preaching can be transformative? And finally, (15) Is there anything else you would like to share that you believe would be helpful to the completion of my research?

Neichelle Guidry is the first interviewee for this research project. Guidry is a graduate from Clark Atlanta University (BA), Yale Divinity School (M.Div.), and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (PhD).<sup>1</sup> Dr. Guidry is the founder of *shepreaches* and currently serves as the Dean of Chapel & Director of the WISDOM Center at Spelman College.<sup>2</sup>

Melanie Jones is the second interviewee for this research project. Jones is a graduate from Howard University (B.A.) and Vanderbilt University Divinity School (M.Div.).<sup>3</sup> She is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at Chicago Theological Seminary.<sup>4</sup> Jones is co-founder of the Millennial Womanism Project and currently serves as Instructor of Ethics, Theology, and Culture at Union Presbyterian Seminary; she also serves as the Inaugural Director of the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neichelle R. Guidry, “MEET NEICHELE”, (retrieved 15 May 2020, <https://www.revneichelle.com/about-1>).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Jones, “MEET MELANIE.” (retrieved 15 May 2020, <http://revmelanie.com/meetmelanie/>).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Dominique A. Robinson is the final interviewee for this research project. Robinson is a graduate from Georgetown University (B.A.), Emory University's Candler School of Theology (M.Div. and Th.M.), and Columbia Theological Seminary (D.Min.); she is currently a Ph.D. student at Christian Theological Seminary.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Robinson is the founder of iHomiletic™ and currently serves as the inaugural Dean of Chapel and Assistant Professor of Religion at Wiley College.<sup>7</sup>

With each sub question I hoped to gain an in depth understanding of each interviewee's methodology and pedagogy for preaching, with special attention to its development in relation to the foundations of Womanist preaching. Through the conduction of this research the assumption has been made that millennial Womanist preaching is worth examining and these three women identify as millennial, Womanist, and preacher. There is published work concerning womanism and Womanist homiletics, but the resources for millennial Womanist preaching will mostly be limited to interviews, sermons, and dissertations.

### **Millennials and the Black Church**

Categorizing people by their generational titles has become extremely popular in recent years and people's reactions to those labels has become more complex.<sup>8</sup> For some, generational labels are helpful to make sense of their place in a constantly changing world. For others, these labels convey a negative stereotype they reject altogether. "Millennial" was expected to be a

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<sup>6</sup> Wiley College, "Wiley College Welcomes New Dean of Chapel", (retrieved 15 May 2020, <https://www.wileyc.edu/wiley-college-welcomes-new-dean-of-chapel/>).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sean Lyons, "Baby boomers, Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z labels: Necessary or nonsense?," *Theconversation.com*. (2020, retrieved 15 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/baby-boomers-gen-x-millennials-and-gen-z-labels-necessary-or-nonsense-132161>).

hopeful label for the children of the next generation, but quickly devolved into an epithet.<sup>9</sup>

Generational labels do not diminish the differences among individuals, but they do shape our perceptions of the younger and older people in our society.

Millennials and the Black church have a complicated relationship. The Black church still considers millennials to be the young people within the church, even though they range in age from twenty-six to forty years old. “Millennials across all races are attending church less, but Black millennials’ church attendance has gone down the least out of all racial groups.”<sup>10</sup> Millennials have a reputation of trying to change everything, when in reality the church never responded to their requests for a space that is inclusive of ancestral practices and sexuality. “In the past, Christian spaces left millennials without refuge to worship and thrive spiritually.”<sup>11</sup> Millennials are leaving the church because it has not presented itself as a space that promotes and accepts authenticity, not because they no longer desire spiritual development or a connection with God.

### **Founding Definitions of Womanist Preaching**

In the 1980s, Black theology and feminist theology were actively present in church communities. Black theology addressed the issues of Black men and feminism addressed the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Johnson, “Black Millennials May Be Leaving the Church, But Not the Faith,” *Truthbetold.news* (2019, retrieved 15 May 2020, <https://truthbetold.news/2019/11/black-millennials-may-be-leaving-the-church-but-not-the-faith/>).

<sup>11</sup> “Millennials aren’t skipping church, the Black Church is skipping us,” *The Black Youth Project* (retrieved 15 May 2020, <http://blackyouthproject.com/millennials-arent-skipping-church-the-black-church-is-skipping-us/>).

issues of white women, but Black women's voices were noticeably absent.<sup>12</sup> This is quite strange seeing that Black women have historically been the backbone of the Black church. Black women have overwhelmingly supported the church in numbers and working behind the scenes to assure the church fulfills its mission in the community.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the Black church excluded women in sermons, teachings, and from positions of power. Oftentimes persons in positions of authority have used the preaching moment to victimize and prey upon Black women, while also failing to present them in a positive light. One would suspect that men within the Black church would be more aware of the ramifications of sexism, racism, and classism, but oftentimes they mirror their oppressors by systematically excluding the concerns of women.<sup>14</sup>

Alice Walker<sup>15</sup> coined the term womanist. "According to Walker, a Womanist is a Black woman or woman of color who identifies with feminism and is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality."<sup>16</sup> "In 1985 Black women scholars of religion in America adopted Alice Walker's" definition of Womanist as it was an

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<sup>12</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown, "A Womanist Model for Proclamation of the Good News," *Theafricanamericanlectionary.org* (2010, retrieves 15 May 2020, [http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/pdf/preaching/WomanistPreaching\\_TeresaBrown.pdf](http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/pdf/preaching/WomanistPreaching_TeresaBrown.pdf)).

<sup>13</sup> George E. Wilson, "Preaching with womanist concerns," *The Covenant Quarterly* 72 (2014): 39-40.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> As explained by Britannica, Alice Walker is an "American writer whose novels, short stories, and poems are noted for their insightful treatment of African American culture." (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alice-Walker>)

<sup>16</sup> Kimberly P. Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), xvii.

authentic definition that spoke to the reality of Black women's lived experience.<sup>17</sup> Since this time, womanism has developed into a system of thought that crosses religious and academic boundaries.

Walker curated the definition of a Womanist and Stacey Floyd-Thomas expanded upon it. Floyd-Thomas, a Womanist ethicist, writes

Womanists are concerned with the mental, physical, and social dimension of Black women's real-lived epistemology because knowledge construction that seeks to inform Black women's culture, survival and liberation must be embodied and multi-sensory and are foundational to construction of a Womanist proclamation model.<sup>18</sup>

Walker's definition provided the characteristics of a Womanist and Floyd-Thomas further developed it to define the actions and heart of a Womanist. Based upon this definition, a Womanist must not only be anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-classist but also committed to the mental, physical, and emotional health of all persons.

The primary principles of Womanist discourse are outlined in the influential work of Katie Geneva Cannon. Cannon argues that a Womanist preacher should be "responsive to the emotional, political, psychic, and intellectual implications of our message ...[while]... challenging conventional biblical interpretations... [and]...encouraging an ethic or resistance."<sup>19</sup> These principles have been expanded by Floyd-Thomas in her four tenants of Womanist ethics:

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<sup>17</sup> Fry Brown, "A Womanist Model for Proclamation of the Good News."

<sup>18</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1996), 114, 119, 120.

(1) radical subjectivity, (2) traditional communalism, (3) redemptive self-love, and (4) critical engagement.<sup>20</sup>

The first tenant, radical subjectivity, suggests that even in the face of great odds one displays an ability to speak the truth in love and raise consciousness in the face of resistance. The second tenant, traditional communalism, requires that there is an individual and collective quest for liberation. The third tenant, redemptive self-love, expresses a determination to self-love, self-affirmation, and self-discipline, with a commitment to love God, others and oneself. The final tenant, critical engagement, makes a commitment to the development of resources that address cross disciplinary engagement.<sup>21</sup> Holistically these tenants provide a nuanced expansion of the foundational aspects of Womanist discourse.

Womanist preaching emerged from the Black churches constant desire to silence Black women. Allen critiques the interpretation of scripture within the sermonic moment of the Black church and suggests these nine elements for emancipatory practices in Womanist preaching:

(1) Equipping listeners with a systematic process to critically engage the rhetoric of the sermon; (2) the use of non-gendered or gender-inclusive language in our God talk; (3) A non-gendered language for traditional and Trinitarian language; (4) An emphasis on the humanity of Christ while not focusing on the gender of Jesus; (5) The adopting of a rhetorical stance to make an effective use of Christian rhetoric; (6) The effective use of multi-sensory and kinesthetic communication; (7) The Divine presence manifested in shamanism and conjuring that is performed identity, conflict resolution, and homeopathic; (8) An atonement theology that takes seriously the African American historical experience of sexual exploitation and forced surrogacy, therefore, affirming the ministerial vision of Jesus' life as redemptive, and not solely his surrogacy in crucifixion; and (9) the

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<sup>20</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

dismantling of heterosexism and homophobia inclusive of an affirmation of the diversity of human sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

Allen's definition encourages the listener to bring their full self into the preaching moment. In the history of the Black church, it has often been an unspoken rule that you turn your brain off and agree with everything the preacher has to say. This definition centers the listeners comfortability with thinking critically about the information presented during the preaching moment. The presentation of gender inclusive God language, the lived experiences of the historical Jesus, and the affirmation of the entire queer community should be fully engaged. It is acceptable to agree or disagree with the proclaimer, but the listener's position should only come after having critically engaged with the information presented.

According to Flake, Womanist preaching embodies the following characteristics: (1) affirm, (2) show sensitivity, (3) honor tradition, (4) liberate, (5) present Jesus as an advocate for women, (6) acknowledge African ancestry, (7) avoid male-bashing, (8) tell the truth, (9) inspire action and (10) think outside the box.<sup>23</sup> Flake's perspective concerning Womanist preaching centers the production of healing. The preacher is encouraged to be vulnerable, creative, and authentically Black as they proclaim and exhibit in their everyday life. The Womanist preacher is offering an approach to spirituality and the faith that produces healing for everyone involved.

Cannon, Allen, and Flake each respectively provided their own definitions of a Womanist preacher. The preacher's burden is to inform the listeners in determining, deciphering, and dealing with the issues of life that oftentimes puzzle people. Womanists do this by proclaiming

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<sup>22</sup> Donna E. Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker, and Emancipatory Proclamation* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 82.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine McCollins Flake, *God in Her Midst: Preaching Healing to Wounded Women* (ed. Kathryn V. Stanley; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007), 13-21.

with racism, sexism, and classism at the center of their homiletical and hermeneutical expression. They operate with a constant hermeneutic of suspicion and consistently ask, “Who is linguistically living in the homiletical “othering” room?”<sup>24</sup> Cannon, Allen, and Flake have all developed a methodology for Womanist preaching that spoke most to the needs they saw facing the church of their time. Throughout this study I hope to discover what methodologies have been curated by millennial women.

The foremothers of Womanist preaching provided a system of hermeneutics and homiletics that provided affirmation for the emergence of the millennial Womanist preacher. This preacher has been intentional to curate a pedagogy that is impactful and engaging for its current generation, while also providing the same opportunities and affirmations for the generations to come. Millennial Womanist preaching is liberating and transformative. This thesis project aims to discover the process, methodologies, and pedagogies that have been curated to create such transformative proclamation. Through the conduction of these interviews, three consistent themes organically emerged. Through this work I argue that the millennial Womanist preacher is transformative through her ability to embody a radical inclusivity; she navigates a multiplicity of vocations through technology and sacred digital space; and she requests liberation for herself and others through rest, ritual, and the setting of boundaries.

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<sup>24</sup> Fry Brown, “A Womanist Model for Proclamation of the Good News.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### A RADICAL INCLUSIVITY

The millennial Womanist preacher is transformative in her ability to embody a radical inclusivity. By way of definition, a radical individual is someone who advocates for thorough, or complete, political or social reform.<sup>1</sup> As related to preaching, this is someone who uses the pulpit to make advances in a social movement. Also, by way of definition, an inclusive person is someone who aims to provide equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those having physical or mental disabilities or belonging to other minority groups.<sup>2</sup> As is relates to preaching, this is someone who proclaims that all minority groups are made in the image of God and as a result are fully included within the beloved community. The generational cohort<sup>3</sup> of millennials exudes inclusivity by nature, as the most racially diverse generation in history.<sup>4</sup>

The millennial Womanist preacher embodies a radical inclusivity that bridges the generational gap.<sup>5</sup> She is inclusive in her approach to preaching in a way that engages her audience at all levels. She requires the audience to re-imagine a future that allows for the full

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<sup>1</sup> “RADICAL,” *Cambridge.org*, (retrieved 6 March 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/radical>).

<sup>2</sup> “INCLUSIVE,” *Cambridge.org*, (retrieved 6 March 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/inclusive>).

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Melanie C. Jones, Instructor of Ethics, Theology and Culture / Director of the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership, interview by author, 23 September 2020, tape recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.), McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Dominique A. Robinson, Dean of Chapel at Wiley College, interview by author, 25 September 2020, tape recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.), McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

humanity of each individual present. The plethora of identities and intersectionalities that make up the beloved community is the portrait painted through this inclusivity, while serving as a bridge. However, the millennial Womanist preacher is not monolithic. Through a diversity and multiplicity of approaches<sup>6</sup> she is anti-elitist by ensuring that she does not exclude any individual from the community of faith.<sup>7</sup>

### **Waves of Womanism**

When considering the foremothers of Womanist preaching, Prathia Hall<sup>8</sup>, Ella Pearson Mithcell<sup>9</sup> and Teresa Fry Brown<sup>10</sup> come to mind.<sup>11</sup> Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee<sup>12</sup>, as proto Womanist, should also be considered for their style, delivery, and ways of knowing and being

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> As explained by PBS, Prathia Hall was “ordained a Baptist minister and became pastor of her father's church. She received her doctorate in theology from Princeton, where she specialized in womanist theology, ethics, and African-American church history. In 1982, Hall became the first woman to join the Baptist Ministers Conference of Philadelphia and Vicinity.” ([https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/prathia\\_hall.html](https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/prathia_hall.html))

<sup>9</sup> As explained by the Mitchell Fund, “The Rev. Dr. Ella Pearson Mitchell, the daughter of a South Carolina pastor, became the second African-American woman to graduate from Union in 1943 with a Master of Arts degree in Christian Education.” (<http://www.mitchellfund.org/about-us/>)

<sup>10</sup> As explained by the AME Church's Historiography Dept, “The Rev. Teresa L. Fry Brown, Ph.D. is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She is the first Black and the first woman to hold what many consider the most prestigious preaching professorate in America. She is the first tenured Black female Professor at Candler.” (<http://www.amehistoryinthemaking.com/the-department/our-executive-director/>)

<sup>11</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>12</sup> As explained by Christianity Today, Jarena Lee was “The first African American woman to preach the gospel publicly...[and]... did so at a time when slavery was legal and neither African Americans nor women could own property or vote.” (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/jarena-lee.html>)

that are deemed womanish.<sup>13</sup> Proto Womanists did not have this terminology to define their strain of womanhood but served as forerunners and prototypes for this movement,<sup>14</sup> whether engaging with the specific works of Womanist theology and thought or not, these women were acting in womanish ways through their approach to the text and method of delivery.

There are three documented waves of Womanist religious thought. The first is centered in the work of Williams, Cannon, and Grant as they used Womanist in conversation and as a definition for the way they interacted with their religion.<sup>15</sup> This first wave was centered in “identify[ing] how an examination of the multiple oppressions that affect Black women lead to different theological conclusions than their Black male and white feminist theological counterparts”<sup>16</sup> There are still thinkers and scholars who operate from the first wave thought processes.

The first wave of womanism and its relation to preaching can be reflected in sermons that are directly speaking about what it means to operate in the world as a Black woman and how that allows you to see and read the biblical text differently. These conversations were foundational as a new strand of thought, theology, and biblical studies was being formed. Based on the specific socio-location there are questions being asked of the text that would not have been asked by their peers who identified differently, which affects their sermons and the conversations they have about God. These sermons are identifying that the Black woman is equal to and made in the

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<sup>13</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?: Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

image of God just as much as her male and white female counterparts. The first wave Womanist preacher wants everyone to understand that even though the Bible can be a racist and sexist document, based on the culture in which it was written, we don't serve a racist and sexist God.

The second wave of Womanist religious thought began to normalize Womanist discourse, as seen through the work of Kelly Brown Douglass, which establishes normativity in Womanist religious studies discourse.<sup>17</sup> This wave is shaped by deeper theological and Christological reflections that birthed a Womanist lens for soteriology. The scholarship and writing produced during this wave began to lean towards a Womanist systematic theology, Womanist canon-building, and “qualifying and comprehensive” exams can be taken concerning Womanist approaches to religious scholarship and studies. This second wave is still “largely Christian, heteronormative, and detached from local and global political movements”.<sup>18</sup> The second wave of womanism began to take more seriously the conversations about queer Womanists but was still reserved for academic spaces.

Unto preaching, the second wave of womanism began to talk more about the ways in which Black women related to the historical and biblical Jesus through the intersectional lens of race, class, and gender. This shows up in the preaching moment by acknowledging a lower Christology through the examination of the lived experiences and socio-location of Jesus. These sermons allow the entire Black community to understand the ways in which we are more similar than traditional readings of the text would have allowed. Black Liberation theology was doing this work, but mainly for the ways in which it was liberating for Black males. The Womanists were reading for the unique experience of being Black and female.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

The third wave of Womanist religious thought shifted the focus away from identity of scholar to ideology of scholarship.<sup>19</sup> This is when the question of who can be Womanist and who can do womanism began to appear. Floyd-Thomas argues that anyone can do womanism, and Baker-Fletcher states that only Black women can claim the identity of Womanist. The third wave of Womanist religious thought discusses ideology politics versus identity politics and is not solely centered in the Christian faith. Floyd-Thomas' Womanist tenets were birthed in this wave. For the scope of this study, I will focus on the second tenet, traditional communalism, which defines “Black women’s ability to create, re-member, nurture, protect, sustain, and liberate communities which are marked and measured not by those outside of one’s own community but by the acts of inclusivity, mutuality, reciprocity, and self-care practiced within it.”<sup>20</sup> At this stage in the work of womanism the foundation had been laid and the critique of the traditional readings and understandings began to unfold.

The millennial Womanist was birthed amid the third wave of Womanist thought and she is distinctive in the ways her womanism is embodied. For her everything is not as traditional and based in Christianity as it was for previous generations of Womanists, and she is open to exploring a wider spectrum of other spiritualities. Based on the doors that were opened by previous generations of Womanists the millennial Womanist can run through these doors by exuding a performative embodiment in the ways she shows up in her preaching as well as operation within the world.<sup>21</sup> The millennial Womanist serves as a bridge between the central

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>20</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

components and traditional definition of womanism that centers us, and the birthing of what I believe to be a fourth wave of womanism. At the center of this fourth wave, there is a desire to be radically inclusive for the liberation of all God's children.

In 1999 when Douglass published *Sexuality and the Black Church*, "most Black academics were either silent or anti-gay, and certainly this was true in Womanist circles."<sup>22</sup> In Walker's definition of Womanist, she declared the Womanist as someone "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people."<sup>23</sup> The Womanist tenant of traditional communalism, as coined by Floyd-Thomas, says that a Womanist is, "a woman committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... A Womanist is a traditional universalist who knows humanity is made up of all colors, and it doesn't matter."<sup>24</sup> The millennial Womanist centers the commitment for an entire people and embodies a traditional universalist nature to then expand it to include members of the queer and disabled communities.

The fourth wave of womanism is committed to the traditional definition as outlined by Alice Walker, and the tenants curated by Stacey Floyd-Thomas.<sup>25</sup> The ways in which she lives out those commitments and convictions are new and nuanced. Millennial Womanists aren't the only ones in this category or doing this work, but I believe they are the driving factor and largest advocate through their ability to create a bridge. "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be

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<sup>22</sup> Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.; San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

<sup>24</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 103.

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

crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."<sup>26</sup> By living in the middle of an active reformation the history has not been written and the story is still being developed.

Womanist is a confessional identity that the millennial Womanist preacher must strive to achieve. As a millennial Womanist her actions must be anti-oppressionist to ensure that her words and actions do not prohibit the wholeness of any other group and creates the possibility for all marginalized groups to be free from oppression.<sup>27</sup> Operating beyond societal labels and norms and wanting to self-identify in ways that are different than what people might impose upon her is embedded in her social identity and moral fabric.<sup>28</sup> She is striving to live out the Womanist component of wellbeing, of and for the entire community, through a lens and approach to life surrounding wellbeing and care for the full village.<sup>29</sup>

### **Inclusion of the LGBTQ+ Community**

As the bridge, millennial Womanist preachers require the full inclusion and affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community when proclaiming the sacred text. Whether she identifies as queer or commits herself as an ally she stands strong in the belief that all queer persons are made in the image of God (*imago dei*) and are members of that full community for which liberation is required. Previous generations of Womanists have been homophobic or closeted in their support. Alternatively, the millennial Womanist preacher is asking how to be an ally and how to be fully accepting and inclusive of all persons who identify at the intersection of a multiplicity of

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<sup>26</sup> John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, eds., *SOS -- Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 658.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

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

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

identities. Queer Womanists exist and the millennial Womanist desires to be in community with and fully support them.

Queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or are not cisgender.<sup>30</sup> “Queer denotes ambiguity amidst sexual ambiguity.”<sup>31</sup> Whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, “queer theology, like queer studies and queer theory, erases boundaries by challenging and deconstructing the ‘natural’ binary categories of sexual and gender identity.”<sup>32</sup> A Womanist queer theology reflects a multiplicity of liberation theologies operating in cohesion with one another.

Queer theology is a liberation theology birthed from postmodern identity politics.<sup>33</sup> It is centered and rooted in queer theory, which critiques the binary homosexual vs. heterosexual categories of sexuality as well as the binary categories of gender identity, being female vs. male, as they are socially constructed.<sup>34</sup> The deconstruction of the binary societal norms brings forth the opportunity for one to begin the process of queering the biblical text.<sup>35</sup> Queering the biblical text is helpful in expanding our understanding of the spectrums of gender and sexuality, which also helps us better understand the lived experiences of our queer kindred. Having the theoretical conversations allows us to understand the bigger picture which then allows us to have the more

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<sup>30</sup> “QUEER.” *Merriam-Webster.com* (retrieved 6 March 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer>).

<sup>31</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (1st ed.; New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011), 21.

<sup>33</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> Cheng, *Radical Love*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 15-16.

nuanced conversations concerning the diverse intersectionalities and individualities of the persons within this community. Having these conversations and being intentional when listening to our queer kindred allows for a greater understanding of the best ways to avoid homophobic or queerphobic rhetoric in our sermons and to ensure that we are not exclusionary of queer Womanists when engaging in conversations about womanism.

The millennial Womanist preacher, whether queer or an ally, stands firm in her belief that the queer community should be fully affirmed in their humanity. As an ally this would include naming yourself as such. Declaring yourself as an ally is to position yourself within your social location, while also being aware and considerate to ensure the ways in which you show up are not taking over a movement to which you don't belong. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community naming your social location adds context and nuance to the lens and authority from which one speaks concerning their ability to queer the text. For the millennial Womanist preacher, the full inclusion and affirmation of queer people within the biblical text and preaching moment is nonnegotiable.

### **Inclusion of the Disabled and Differently Abled Communities**

As another component and commitment to living out the call of being the bridge, the millennial Womanist preacher engages the conversation about ableism. Exploring how to be an ally and in community with differently abled Womanists and differently abled persons all around. She is making a commitment to sound biblical exegesis that does not marginalize those whom society has othered. Emotional and physical disabilities should be discussed honestly and openly with compassion and care as a way of removing them from the category of other. Through review and critique of the language that has traditionally been used concerning things considered good and whole she is requesting inclusion of the entire village.

Liberation theology, coined by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1971<sup>36</sup>, seeks to address issues of social injustice. Disability theology explores the ways in which religious traditions have engaged (or failed to engage) notions of disability and impairment and offers constructive possibilities for inclusive theological work in the future.<sup>37</sup> Disability theology is a form of liberation theology. It begins with the observation that experiences of impairment (physical, intellectual, psychological, and social) are a significant and relatively unsurprising element of human life, and as such are worthy of theological reflection.<sup>38</sup>

There is no single approach to disability theology because understandings of disability as well as styles of theology vary widely across contexts. Most persons share a few common elements, including attention to embodiment as a source for theological reflection, a belief that there is nothing inherently wrong with a person who experiences disability, a commitment to justice for people with disabilities, and a fundamental conviction that theology and disability have something significant to say to each other.<sup>39</sup> This leads to ignoring the vast diversity of people with disabilities, without taking into consideration the diversity of disability experiences themselves. We too easily forget that people with disabilities hold a wide variety of other identity characteristics as well and each experience of disability is somewhat unique. Most of us live with illusions about disability and non-disability without ever pausing to ask what values such understandings evoke.

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<sup>36</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (revised ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

For the millennial Womanist preacher physical, social, intellectual, and psychological disabilities will be considered with caution and care. Engaging in conversations with people who are differently abled, inviting them to the pulpit, and using their work to inform sermons are all ways in which the levels of ignorance can be diminished. As research and scholarship expands, there will be more work done discussing a Womanist disability theology and how to better serve as allies. The disabled preacher, congregant, and visitor are real. The millennial Womanist preacher is committed to their full inclusion into their portrayal of the beloved community.

### **Inclusion unto Preaching**

The millennial Womanist preacher approached the necessity for radical inclusivity with a lack of apologetics.<sup>40</sup> The foundation laid by the foremothers of Womanist preaching allowed the millennial Womanist preacher to take a deep dive into her convictions. The work of respectability concerning the tempering of views to be granted access to spaces has been established. It is because of that work current and future work can continue.

As we consider the art of homiletics, the act of hermeneutics, and the art of preaching we must realize the significance of the stories that are being told, and who is telling them. Storytelling during the moment of proclamation should include telling the stories of underrepresented persons and persons who are not normally centered. Knowing that Womanists operate in the world as Black women and fall under that category, we must also remember other marginalized persons through a radical inclusivity. With imaginative, justice seeking, deep creativity and by having conversations with persons who are differently marginalized a better

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<sup>40</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

world can be imagined. The millennial Womanist preacher seeks to make justice seeking, truth telling, and wisdom bearing normative, rather than unconventional.<sup>41</sup>

Engaging the biblical text through the preaching moment has the goal of meaning-making. Providing a relevant understanding of the original text has the goal of bringing practical application to the listeners about the ways it is relatable to the lives they currently live. The millennial Womanist preacher does this through an inclusion of art and science. She operates from the viewpoint that science and religion don't have to be in opposition with one another, but rather can be in conversation with one another. Providing data from the realities of the world and intertwining this information with the written word of the biblical text creates a more engaged preaching moment.

The radical inclusivity is not exclusionary but maintains a level of accessibility. The proclamation of sacred rhetoric needs to be accessible by all hearers of the word. Going into a congregation and discussing queer theory, theology, and biblical studies alongside a theology of disability and the ethics required for us to have better conversations around these topics will leave you with a confused and checked out audience. The practicality and relatability of the preaching moment is in the art of making God talk plain.<sup>42</sup> This is done through the ability to have conversations about the topics I mentioned earlier in a way that translates to various communities.

The stories told within the Bible are written the same but the ways in which they are read and interpreted are ever changing and evolving. The ability to tell these commonly known stories in new and exciting ways is the art of preaching and the millennial Womanist preacher is using

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<sup>41</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

the lens of radical inclusivity to retell these stories. By unlearning the harmful readings of scripture that have been used to vilify and silence the queer and disabled communities the preacher is allowing the radical inclusivity to reveal itself within the preaching moment. This involves taking the time to translate the large ideas and theoretical concepts into accessible and digestible content for your everyday parishioner to understand. Uncovering these creative and new ways of entry allow for people to see themselves within the stories and to ultimately create their own stories.<sup>43</sup>

This radical inclusivity extends to generational conversations. Many millennials have been scarred by the conversations the church had and continues to have concerning the ways millennials are engaging, or choosing not to the engage, in traditional church spaces. Even with all the baggage that comes along with this the radical inclusivity, it does not leave out the elders or the youth. There should be an acknowledgement in the sermon preparation process to address multiple generations, their social-location, the way they show up in the world and its influence on the manner in which the information will be received. The millennials are no longer the youngest people in the room, but by no means are they the oldest.<sup>44</sup> Certain generations are marked by certain experiences, WWII vs 9/11 or social media vs PEW research.<sup>45</sup> We must pay attention to and acknowledge generational markers in the quest for human flourishing.<sup>46</sup> When sharing the gospel and spreading the good news, one must pay attention to the people in the room

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Rev. Dr. Neichelle R. Guidry, Dean of Sisters Chapel / Director of the Women in Spiritual Discernment of Ministry Center, interview by author, 14 October 2020, tape recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.), McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

if their desire is to offer hope. If the parishioners are checked out and feel as if what you are saying is only relevant to a specific generation of people you have already lost the battle.<sup>47</sup>

The radical inclusivity extends to communities outside of your congregation. Some proclaimers have a consistent group of people to which they are preaching while others are operating from an itinerate preaching schedule. Speaking to the Black context in alignment with womanism requires having intracommunal conversations. Through these conversations, along with reflection and analyzation, we can bring an awareness to the reality that what we are currently doing here may not be working. Doing this work and having these conversations allows for the acknowledgement that it is not just the gaze or restrictions of white supremacy that are harming us, but that gaze has often been shifted insular.<sup>48</sup> We must reckon with the ways our own communities have participated in oppressive acts within so that we can imagine a more upright and forthright way forward.

Millennial womanism is saying because of the work of our predecessors we can go further and do more.<sup>49</sup> We have the ability to proclaim God talk in new ways that translate to a multiplicity of communities through critical engagement and communal sharing.<sup>50</sup> This produces the ability to preach to a multiplicity of viewpoints while standing firm in radical inclusivity. The ultimate goal of this proclamation is to communicate as preachers, teachers, and leaders the new world we have imagined.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

This radical inclusivity of the queer and disabled communities is standard and certain for the millennial Womanist preacher. Other forms of radical inclusivity are varied as it is related to the individuality of the proclaimer which is seen through the diversity that can be found within the millennial Womanist preacher community. This diversity speaks to the fact that some aspects of this identity are nonnegotiable while maintaining the fact that this community of proclaimers are not monolithic. Some preachers within this category would argue that you can begin with a text outside of the traditional canon of biblical literature, such as a poem, a movie, or a piece of art. All would not agree with the expansion and inclusion of the texts we deem sacred.

A radical inclusivity is fueled by imagination. Imagining a more inclusive world. A world which seeks the justice of all persons and represent them in the preaching moment and during the proclamation of sacred rhetoric. Millennial womanism, my generational identity, does not stand apart from my womanism and the full awareness of who I am is acknowledging what I bring to my womanism.<sup>52</sup> Embodying a radical inclusivity to engage a transformative imagination<sup>53</sup> pays attention to a world that is to come, the not yet.<sup>54</sup> Preparing for sermons by looking for the missing, muted, and silenced voices.<sup>55</sup> Who is not at the table? Is there something here for everybody? Valuing the voices, bodies, and actions of Black millennial women as it will bring liberation and freedom to our communities<sup>56</sup> and the human community in total. Using the power

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, Instructor, interview by author, 23 September 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

and privilege present within our voices, because all operate from some form of privilege, to deem the pulpit sacred during the time of proclamation.<sup>57</sup> The role of imagination here opens the world up to new experiences and possibilities that are unique to each specific voice and embodiment of the preaching moment.

The millennial Womanist preacher is transformative in her ability to embody a radical inclusivity. She is intentional in the inclusion of partner language as to not center heteronormativity when preaching and speaking. She uses the platforms and positions presented and offered to her in order to advocate for LGBTQ+ persons in the totality of their humanity. She is responsible with her platform striving not to serve as an oppressor for any of the children of God. She is not willing to buy into institutions for the institution's sake by not taking institutions for face value. Millennial Womanist preachers are living out their sacred witness and faith in many ways that are different than the institutions and have utilized technology as a form of proclamation.

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<sup>57</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL SACRED SPACE

The millennial Womanist preacher displays her transformative nature through her ability to navigate a multiplicity of vocations via technology and sacred digital space. The postmodern age of American society has adapted to a gig economy for most working age persons who are not among the wealthy elite. Very seldomly do people only have one job or career and this is especially true for ministers. Bi-vocational feels like a thing of the past and does not even begin to describe the world of the millennial Womanist preacher as she is oftentimes tri-vocational and beyond.<sup>1</sup> These multiple forms of work have been revealed through the rapid growth of the technological field. New gadgets, platforms, and opportunities to generate revenue have presented themselves through the development of apps, online platforms, and so much more. The millennial Womanist has used these advancements to her advantage to pioneer and curate the digital sacred spaces of their imagination.

#### Traditional Concepts of Sacred Space

As meaningful space, sacred space encompasses a variety of different places. It includes places that are constructed for religious purposes, such as temples, and places that are religiously interpreted, such as mountains or rivers.<sup>2</sup> Within the religious confines of Christianity sacred spaces have oftentimes been limited to physical locations and therefore the brick-and-mortar

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Dominique A. Robinson, Dean of Chapel, interview by author, 25 September 2020, tape recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.), McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopedia of Religion, 'Sacred Space,' *Encyclopedia.com*. (2021, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sacred-space>).

church has traditionally held a monopoly on what is considered sacred space for church-going Christians.

Sacred space has traditionally, and even modernly, been limited to physical locations. There have been changes made to the spaces as they have been reimagined by new generations and shifts in society, but the physical building filled with human bodies has always been the center. The practices and spaces used by Early Christians laid the groundwork for the next two centuries of Christian worship. “Though the institutionalization of Christian space was set in motion during this period, it would not be fully achieved until the fourth century.”<sup>3</sup> Considering the development of the Roman Catholic church we see a branch of Christianity that continues traditions and practices of earlier periods, while also developing new ideas and elements.<sup>4</sup>

In the fourth-century churches, the procession of lay Christians into the unoccupied church building and the following procession of the clergy had infused the space with religious meaning and power based on that gathered community, the sanctity of the space relying upon human presence. By the medieval period, this had changed as replicas of the Celestial City and surrogate sites for salvation were on display within the buildings and the power of the space preceded human occupation.<sup>5</sup>

As the journey through history displays the ways in which the foundations of the church space have changed, the emphasis is still on the sanctity of the building. It often focuses on the people within it, but always concerned with the physical brick and mortar location.

During the modern era “Protestantism in the seventeenth century reconceptualized religious space which required that these new spaces also articulated their new ideological perspectives. This period also opens a window [into] the vulnerable character of church

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

buildings”.<sup>6</sup> Postmodernism in conversation with the technology of preaching and the coronavirus pandemic provided room to explore new ways in which sacred spaces are defined. Holding the sanctity and reverence of the brick-and-mortar church without its physical presence.

The conversation of sacred spaces cannot be had without the conversation of safe spaces. Black women have traditionally been the backbone of the Black church, while it has oftentimes not been a safe space for them. “Non-cisgender, non-heterosexual, non-male bodies are not safe in Black churches.”<sup>7</sup> The church building has been dubbed with a sanctity and a sacredness. From the pastor’s study to the pulpit, it has been the home of dangerous actions to Black women. If this is truly a sacred space the following questions must be addressed. How does the same office where you prepare your message become the home for sexual assault and unwanted physical touch? How does the same pulpit that claims to have the intention of spreading the good news house sexist, misogynist, and homophobic rhetoric? How does this building deemed sacred also hold untold memories and stories of harm done to Black women?

“This narrative illumines a tragic reality: the relationship between Black women and masculine rhetorical pulpits in the Black church is tenuous. Plagued by the interlocking oppressions that permeate popular culture, the institutional Black church is complicated.”<sup>8</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher has combatted this narrative by expanding the traditional stance on sacred spaces through the creation of our own sacred spaces. This creativity and authenticity were birthed out of a tradition where other spaces, that were supposed to be sacred, have not

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>7</sup> Melva L. Sampson, “Digital Hush Harbors: Black Preaching Women and Black Digital Religious Networks.” *Fire* 6 (2020): 45–66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

been safe or comfortable for us. The preaching moment in the Black church has often surrounded preaching and bringing the good news<sup>9</sup> through imagination and hope.

While these things are true, it is not happening everywhere. Keeping the oppressive history of the Black church and its treatment of and relationship to Black women in mind we must also acknowledge the progress that has been made by Womanist and Black feminist preachers. There has been a history of Black women doing the work to overcome the blatant sexism shown in the historical institution of the Black church, but there is still much work to be done. Therefore, it is no surprise the millennial Womanist preacher has broadened her perspective concerning the sacred spaces of her religion to believe her pulpit, platform, and spirituality can be expressed outside of the confines of the traditional brick-and-mortar church. These traditional ways of knowing and being about the confines of sacred space have been altered with the advancements made throughout technology. The creation of these new spaces also come with new concerns about their ability to provide safe spaces for the Black women in the church.

### **How Technology Expanded Sacred Spaces**

The advancements made in technology have shifted the ways we think about sacred spaces and question the necessity of them being limited to physical spaces. For most generations before millennials new technology has always come with a learning curve, but the nature of the millennial generation is to adapt. The millennial generation was growing up while technological advancements were being made and they have continued to adapt with the times and learn to constantly adjust as new things come.

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Dr. Neichelle R. Guidry, Dean of Sisters Chapel / Director of the Women in Spiritual Discernment of Ministry Center, interview by author, 14 October 2020, tape recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.), McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta.

The millennial Womanist preacher and her approach to technological adaptations has offered a new frame and lens for what is considered sacred space. The advancements made in technology have allowed us to transform the places from which we proclaim, and what we consider our pulpits. The pulpit is expansive and includes podcasts, exclusively online communities, captions on Instagram, and much more.<sup>10</sup> These non-traditional church spaces have shifted to create safe and sacred spaces for women of color in ministry and the people they are called to minister to.

Examine the ways podcasts, Zoom meetings, Clubhouse rooms<sup>11</sup>, Instagram captions, and other social media platforms have allowed for the creation of a more expansive definition of sacred space. These new forms of technology and ways to build community have become sacred spaces and have become platforms and pulpits for the millennial Womanist preacher. These cross the academic, church, and popular culture spaces. This inclusion does not limit this content to only academics but also doesn't limit the conversations to traditionally churched people. The availability and accessibility of these platforms allow her to access the people who are into church, who are over church, and who are uncomfortable with church language in general.

Let's first consider podcasts. This is a digital audio file made available on the internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, where new installments can be received by subscribers automatically. Religion and spirituality as well as society and culture are popular podcast categories for the millennial Womanist preacher.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> As explained in the app's description, "Clubhouse is a space for casual, drop-in audio conversations—with friends and other interesting people around the world. Go online anytime to chat with the people you follow or hop in as a listener and hear what others are talking about." (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/clubhouse-drop-in-audio-chat/id1503133294>)

Modern Faith, a podcast hosted by Rev. Dr. Neichelle R. Guidry, “is a Womanist podcast that exists to spiritually nourish today's millennial Black woman. This show provides all the good of the Gospel (such as encouragement, empowerment, renewal and truthfulness), without the toxicity of religion. By discussing issues that matter to us, Neichelle Guidry is helping her sisters keep the faith.”<sup>12</sup>

The Womanist Salon Podcast is hosted by Rev. Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Rev. Dr. Renita Weems, and Rev. Melanie C. Jones. This podcast features intergenerational Womanist dialogue that “integrates the popular, political, practical, and prophetic. This podcast plays up the hair salon as a social, secular yet sacred point of departure for exploring Black women's culture in the context of authentic sistahood.”<sup>13</sup> They refer to themselves as “the hair docs” who engage in “woke, Womanist ‘shop’ (beauty shop) talk.”<sup>14</sup>

Fish Sandwich Heaven, a podcast hosted by Candace Simpson, believes “everyone should have a safe place to sleep every night; everyone should have healthy and affordable food; everyone should have a Fun Thing to do that brings joy; there’s a lot more to believe.”<sup>15</sup> The goal of the podcast is to emphasize the reality “that Heaven is a Revolution that can happen right

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<sup>12</sup> Neichelle R. Guidry, “ABOUT,” *Modernfaithpodcast.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.modernfaithpodcast.com/about>).

<sup>13</sup> Porshanality Media, LLC, “The Womanist Salon Podcast,” *Spreaker.com* (2020, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.spreaker.com/show/the-womanist-salon-podcast>).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “what we believe,” *Fishsandwichheaven.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.fishsandwichheaven.com>).

here on Earth” and “we shouldn’t have to wait till the hereafter to be treated like human beings.”<sup>16</sup>

And finally, Sassy SoulVersations is my podcast that explores and expands on the peculiarities of being sassy, soulful, and spiritual. Committed to exploring the intersections of my research interests, religion and spirituality coupled with society and culture, through conversational interviews and reflection.<sup>17</sup>

Each of these podcasts takes a different approach to what it means to minister to people as a millennial Womanist preacher. Some include intergenerational conversations, some incorporate society and culture just as much as religion and spirituality, while others are strictly focused on connecting with the divine. There is no one wrong or right way to execute a digital sacred space as a millennial Womanist preacher, but there are certain aspects that allow these spaces to be categorized in the same ways. They are all founded and hosted by Womanists and each is focused on an inclusive approach to religions and spirituality that centers the lived experiences of Black women. These podcasts hope to liberate an entire people and recognize the Spirit can show up in and work through technology.

Another technological outlet that has allowed the spaces we deem sacred to be expanded include exclusively online communities. This creation and expansion of digital sacred spaces has been portrayed through Zoom meetings and Clubhouse rooms.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Tierney C. Jordan, “Sassy SoulVersations Podcast,” *Tierneyjordan.com* (2020, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.tierneyjordan.com/sassysoulpod>).

Still Saved, a digital hush arbor<sup>18</sup> curated by Rev. Whitney Bond, "is an online, and sometimes in-person, community of individuals just trying to figure out their lives as God's most beloved creations. We discuss the practices and theologies others have used to determine who or what can be saved. And, what does it even mean to be saved!?"<sup>19</sup> These conversations include cussing, drinking, sexing, queerness, therapy, yoga and much more. This is a judgment-free zone. Our purpose to help people love themselves to wholeness, while remembering they are still adored and appreciated by God. Yet, we are Still Saved!"<sup>19</sup> This is a multi-interactive space that helps folks live into their truth, all while talking about faith & spirituality.

The millennial Womanist preacher has an entrepreneurial approach to life and ministry based on their positionality in the world. Living in a gig economy and adapting to the changes in technology by learning things as we navigate through the process is innate to the nature of who we are. We can now examine the ways in which these spaces have been monetized and show how advancements in technology have allowed the millennial Womanist preacher to do ministry in a sustainable way, without gathering in physical spaces or receiving salaries and donations in traditional ways for sustaining ministry. Creating our own paths and our own ways.

Patreon is a membership platform that makes it easy for creators to get paid for creating the things they're already creating.<sup>20</sup> Jade T. Perry is a

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<sup>18</sup> As defined by Rev. Dr. Melva L. Sampson, "Networked Black church or Black churchesque spaces are digital hush harbors. In these digital hush harbors led by Black women walking in the griotic tradition, attendees are provided "outlets where they relish in the safety of belongingness but not at the expense of diminishing personal agency in individual expression." (Sampson, 'Digital Hush Harbors,' 47.)

<sup>19</sup> Still Saved, "About," *Facebook.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/471459636691418>).

<sup>20</sup> Blake, "What is Patreon?," *Patreon.com* (2020, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://support.patreon.com/hc/en-us/articles/204606315-What-is-Patreon>).

“writer, speaker, educator, artist, and mystic who works to center people of color in healing, mysticism, and activism. Jade carries on the tradition of Folk Healing in new ways by expanding upon and re-interpreting the gifts given by her foremothers. She is attuned to Reiki Level II and developed the intuitive gift of clairvoyance in the Black supernaturalist church. As a multi-faithed, sex-positive, Black Feminist spiritual advisor and folk-healer, you can find her discussing POC-centered wellness, art-as-ritual. She also provides individual tarot reading or energy healing sessions. The mission of her work is to contribute resources, art, narratives, and experiential learning opportunities that aid in the holistic healing processes of Blackfolk, Queer & Trans Black & Indigenous People of Color (QTBIPOC) and disabled and / or chronically ill folks within these communities. Jade T. Perry seeks to creatively challenge secular and sacred spaces toward greater levels of equity, justice, and spiritual activism.”<sup>21</sup>

“Black women also turn to online ministry after experiencing church leadership’s lack of care. After ending a toxic relationship with a preacher, Jade Perry took time to heal and develop her own Womanist ethic. ‘I really began to consider what feels true about the Divine to me,’ she says. Perry, who leads a spiritual community on Patreon, said that time of reflection also led her to see the church’s inability to meet the needs of queer and disabled people: ‘As a Black, queer and disabled woman, I had to figure out how to make community when the church doesn’t take my entire being into consideration.’”<sup>22</sup>

Similar to the traditional church, each digital sacred space caters to meet the needs of a specific audience. Every traditional sacred space isn’t for everyone and therefore every digital sacred space isn’t for everyone. These design of these communities to engage the target audience speaks to the authenticity of sacred spaces. A place that allows the freedom to be authentic and to

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<sup>21</sup> Jade T. Perry, “Jade T. Perry,” *Patreon.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/jadetperry>).

<sup>22</sup> Candice Benbow, “While More Black Churches Come Online Due to Coronavirus, Black Women Faith Leaders Have Always Been Here,” *Essence.com* (2020, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.essence.com/feature/more-black-churches-online-coronavirus-black-women-faith-leaders-always-been-here>).

walk in the wholeness of who you are as an individual, without feeling judged or made uncomfortable based on your beliefs and ideas.

The millennial Womanist preacher is using these technological advancements to her advantage but that does not mean there are no downfalls. The ever-changing racist algorithms of Instagram, Tik Tok, and Facebook prove to be their own versions of harm. The safeness of this space can also be called into question when considering internet trolls. Some people are emboldened by their Twitter fingers and Instagram comments to say things on the internet they would never say in person. These forms of hate mail and domineering rhetoric, if consumed, can take a toll on the mental and emotional health of their target. With these nuances in mind the millennial Womanist preacher must be persistent in her resting, rituals, and boundary setting.

Our ability to love and critique the church allows the millennial Womanist preacher to be the church in different ways. Sacred spaces have transitioned to platforms such as podcasts, Zoom meetings, Clubhouse rooms, Instagram captions, and other social media platforms which allows room for these conversations, critiques, and communities to grow. We can examine the ways in which podcasts have become sacred spaces and have become platforms and pulpits for the millennial Womanist preacher. All these virtual communities are present on a variety of social media platforms. Diversifying the way you engage your audience allows you to not be under the complete control of an outside organization. If Instagram was to shut down tomorrow the other platforms used to engage their audiences would still be viable options. Building an email list and gathering their constituents actual contact information is important to the sustainability of digital sacred spaces and communities.

## The Birth of Digital Theology

After having discussed sacred spaces and the ways they have been expanded to include technology to create digital sacred space, let's unpack digital theology. The birth of a digital theology challenges us to delve into the topics the church traditionally won't deal with, allowing for a breaking of the taboos and silences. Digital theology brings the experiences of Black women into the sanctuary through creativity and authenticity.<sup>23</sup> Preaching has been traditionally done unilaterally, preaching at folks. The Millennial Womanist preacher wants to be seen more as a conversation partner by giving people time to talk back, raise their questions and go a little bit deeper.<sup>24</sup>

Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson is not a millennial but has set a foundation for millennials to follow in her footsteps and feel comfortable doing this work<sup>25</sup> through the creation of Pink Robe Chronicles.<sup>26</sup> "Something happens when Black Women are in a digital space."<sup>27</sup> "The digital Black church must be different from its physical landscape and historical institutional status. In the digital age, forward-thinking Black preaching women are going live on social media to

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<sup>23</sup> Guidry, Dean, interview by author, 14 October 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. Lyvonne Briggs speaks about the ways Dr. Sampson has helped her walk freely in her calling and the growth and development of the Proverbial Experience. (<https://www.facebook.com/l.proverbs.briggs/posts/10102159373405449>)

<sup>26</sup> As defined by Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson, "Pink Robe Chronicles™ is a digital hush harbor that centers faith and spirituality using the womanist and Afrocentric values of self-determination, serious engagement, and liberating self-love to highlight the importance of collective work and responsibility in healing and sustaining marginalized communities." (<https://www.drmelvasampson.com/pink-robe-chronicles>)

<sup>27</sup> Melva L. Sampson, "About," *Drmelvasampson.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.drmelvasampson.com/about>).

preach in multifaceted ways and “bypass traditional systems of legitimization and historically recognized gatekeepers.” A natural progression from the clandestine clearing to phonograph preaching, to radio and televangelism livestreams—online streaming media broadcast in real time and simultaneously recorded—serve as agential sites. The article argues that Black preaching women are making use of networked space to circumvent interlaced oppressive religious structures and theologies. Acting as curators, they are deploying livestreams as digital hush harbors in ways that are challenging traditional hierarchies of Black church authority and changing the nature of religious space. The offering concludes that when Black preaching women couple digital media with spiritual agency, they sacralize their lived experiences in ways that colonized religion and the offline Black church have not fully recognized.”<sup>28</sup>

In order to operate in a digital theology, the message is just as important as the space. Everyone who is on the internet is not engaging in digital theology. There must be a commitment to the calling out of white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and every other systemic oppression that faces the communities which you serve. This embodies the Womanist practice of standing on the tradition while being able to critique it.<sup>29</sup> Digital theology includes language that is non-elitist, inclusive in the language it uses, sophisticated, comforting, and balanced.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic Black women have been in digital spaces. “Digital ministry spaces provide Black Christian women with the opportunity to explore sacred practices beyond the limits of the church—and honor that exploration as sacred.”<sup>30</sup> Two examples of

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<sup>28</sup> Sampson, “Digital Hush Harbors,” 46.

<sup>29</sup> Guidry, Dean, interview by author, 14 October 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Benbow, “While More Black Churches Come Online Due to Coronavirus.”

exclusively online sacred spaces that exhibit digital theology as crafted by millennial Womanist preachers include the Unfit Christian congregation and the Proverbial experience. These communities meet regularly and have programming and services that look closer to the meeting of a traditional church space.

D. Danyelle Thomas, the founder of the Unfit Christian Congregation and identifies as a Pro Black, Pro LGBTQ+, Pro Heaux Womanist pastor, is affectionately known to her congregation as Passuh Dany. Her digital theology is shown through her Trap Bible Study.<sup>31</sup> Birthed in 2014 and presented to the digital world in 2016, Unfit Christian is the shade-throwing, citation-dropping, community leading the way to truth, divinity, and a “Shot of Henny in Your Communion Cup”. Thomas bends the norms of faith & millennial spirituality by finding the gospel in unexpected places. Pull up a chair and get a Shot of Henny in your communion cup!<sup>32</sup> She incorporates live videos, Facebook groups, Instagram, and Patreon into the work she’s doing. This community is a congregation of over 4,000 and embodies the full nature of a digital theology.

Lyvonne Proverbs is the curator of The Proverbial Experience and is affectionately known by her congregation, the Proverbial Kin, as Pastor Bae. She identifies as a sex positive Womanist pastor and spiritual coach.<sup>33</sup> The Proverbial Experiences worship service begins with

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<sup>31</sup> D. Danyelle Thomas, “unfitchristian,” *Instagram.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/unfitchristian/>).

<sup>32</sup> D. Danyelle Thomas, “Gospel for the Culture with D. Danyelle Thomas,” *Apple.com* (2018, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/gospel-for-the-culture-with-d-danyelle-thomas/id1397163367>).

<sup>33</sup> Lyvonne Briggs, “lyvonnep,” *Instagram.com* (retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/lyvonnep/>).

music and Bible readings, which initially feel similar to the Black church of Briggs' youth, but within a few minutes it takes a turn. Briggs, who has degrees from Yale Divinity School and Columbia Theological Seminary, calls her African-centered form of spirituality "Christian adjacent." It is drawn freely from divination practices such as astrology and tarot, while in her sermons she makes references to the African deities Oshun, Obatala and Orisha.<sup>34</sup>

The approach and appearance of the proclaimer has always been an important aspect of the preaching moment. Digital theology is no exception as it is also concerned with the ways we show up to the preaching moment.<sup>35</sup> Preaching is an embodied experience which encompasses the full range of motion of the body. Hair, facial expressions, and body language are each preaching alongside the words that are being said. The aesthetics of the proclaimer during the preaching moment is even more evident as it is confined to the visibility of the screen which causes one to focus more on the things they can see. The makeup, clothing, and overall appearance of the millennial Womanist preacher are taken into consideration as the preparation of the written word is also occurring. The ways in which the millennial Womanist preachers dawn the pulpit will be different, remembering that this brand of womanhood and this community of proclaimers are not monolithic. There will be nuances and discontinuity present, but these will be done with intentionality to the manner in which it will be perceived and received.

Digital Theology is contextual, and experience based. There is nuance presented in the ways in which it is carried out, and there is no monolithic way to do it. The people operating in a

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<sup>34</sup> Liz Kineke, "African spirituality offers Black believers 'decolonized' Christianity." *Religionnews.com* (2021, retrieved 7 March 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/05/african-spirituality-offers-black-believers-decolonized-christianity>).

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, Dean, interview by author, 25 September 2020.

digital theology are intentional in the ways they deal with oppression and inclusion. This space is Womanist in the ways in which it thrives and seeks the flourishing of all of humanity, not just a specific group of people. Digital theology is birthed from a desire to form an enunciation and proclamation that transcends the innerwebs. A space where the presence of the Divine, Spirit, and the ancestors can be felt in different cities, states, time zones, and countries, but the message is still relevant and still touching. When operating in a digital space, it cannot be specifically targeted where the message will land; therefore, the potential of your audience drastically increases. The message should be balanced, universal and specific. Knowing your purpose, the work you are called to do, and your commitment helps to maintain the authenticity.

Each assignment is unique to the curator of the space and the mission the curator is destined to fulfill on the earth. Not everyone will be reached. This acknowledgement provides multiple avenues to the same destination. These women are all incorporating African Indigenous religions in their approach to Christianity, the digital sacred space, and the theology it births. Not to say this is a requirement for digital theology, but it could be argued that a decolonized, anti-capitalist, anti-white supremacist, anti-Eurocentric approach to Christianity is required, no matter how the journey to those revelations has been revealed. The birth of a digital theology is requiring the recommitment to our ability to imagine.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REST AND RITUAL AS LIBERATIVE RESISTANCE

The millennial Womanist preacher is transformative in her ability to request liberation for herself and others through rest, ritual, and the setting of boundaries. A Womanist is someone who has a deep love for herself, her wellness, and her health. The ways we care for ourselves can be seen in the intentionality of the rest we allow for ourselves. In the foundational definition outlined by Alice Walker a Womanist “Loves herself. Regardless.”<sup>1</sup> When expressing love for self, there would be a persistent commitment to the need for self-care. Not the whitewashed capitalist versions of self-care that flood our social media timelines to make someone else more money, but self-care that resembles soul care and actively works to reset the body to wholeness and full living.

Through Womanist scholarship it is understood that the body as a hermeneutic is important “as a modality of interpretation useful in deconstructing (and reconstructing) life in the Americas.”<sup>2</sup> By paying attention to the body, we can invoke a more holistic approach to our overall wellbeing. The amount of rest one receives, the intentionality of doing things that make you well, and the resistance from the grind culture of White Supremacy that could cause you to feel guilty about taking that time and keeping up these routines are all important aspects of caring for ourselves. We must unlearn and divest from the thought that rest is not productive. By refusing to rest, we are putting more wear and tear on our bodies and ultimately cut our lives short by living with exhaustion, burnout, and unaddressed stress.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.; San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, “Watch the Body with New Eyes: Womanist Thought’s Contribution to a Humanist Notion of Ritual,” *Cross Currents* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 404.

## Rest as an Ethic

Theoethics is a term used “to highlight the interrelationship between ethics and theology... in contrast to traditional approaches that seek to preserve the disciplinary boundaries between theology and ethics.”<sup>3</sup> This approach to the study of theology and ethics views them as “corresponding and mutually informing.”<sup>4</sup> The “deep-seated religious devotions, practices, and beliefs (theology)”<sup>5</sup> of the sermonic audience “carry with them the necessary material by which their morality is defined and in which their actions for justice are rooted.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, theoethics is helpful to this conversation because it acknowledges the reality of the intersectionality of their lived experiences. The hearers of millennial Womanist preachers are not interested in dissecting the theological from the ethical as they are seeking the relevance of a sermon for their everyday lives. Their theology informs their ethic, and vice versa, therefore the preacher must present them in a way that speaks to the reality of all persons involved.

Womanist theoethics, theological ethics, is “the study or discipline of Godtalk amid human behavior, meaning, and values, [that] emerges out of the experience of women of African descent.”<sup>7</sup> Operating within American culture and society as a Black woman is a unique experience and Womanist theoethics discusses that experience as it relates to the divine from the lens of Black Diasporic women. “A Womanist emancipatory theological ethics embraces hope;

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<sup>3</sup> Nestor Medina, "The Doctrine of Discovery, LatinXo Theoethics, and Human Rights," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* Vol. 21: No. 2, Article 4. (2019): 157-73.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Humpty Dumpty Need Not Fall Again: A Theo-Poetics of Holistic Health,” *Journal of Women and Religion* 19 (2001): 124.

a transformation engendering mutuality and community; and honors the *Imago Dei* in all persons...[which] begins with the premise of the embodied sacred.”<sup>8</sup> All of humanity is created in the image of God, therefore all of humanity is a sacred creation in the eyes of God. Seeking liberation and justice for all of God’s children is at the center of this intersectional desire. There cannot be true freedom for any of us until there is freedom for all of us. Womanist theoethics “focuses on liberation amid personal, societal, and theological-ethical fragmentation.”<sup>9</sup>

In the traditional definition of womanism Alice Walker proclaimed that a Womanist is “Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.”<sup>10</sup> This allows us to bring sabbath, sabbatical, and an ethic of resting into conversation with theoethics. In traditional Black preaching spaces, the concept of sabbath and sabbaticals are still foreign. The sabbath is understood as the day Jesus rested, while it is also interpreted as the day worship services are held. Sundays are our sabbath and therefore what we practice is not the same as what we say we believe because that day is not for rest, but for church. Depending on the denomination and roles you serve within ministry traditional Sunday morning worship is far from an experience of rest. Lengthy church services with visitations from the Spirit can oftentimes leave you depleted and in need of a nap after the service.

Rest in conversation with theoethics speaks to the necessity of sabbath and sabbatical in the lived experience of the millennial Womanist preacher to be reflected in her sermons.

“Another way in which the Sabbath tradition can address the concerns of Womanist theology is found in Sabbath's emphasis upon rest. Liberation, although important, is not God’s only concern for humanity ‘God is equally concerned with ministering to those in need and providing life and meaning even in situations in which liberation seems

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi-xii.

impossible. The Sabbath tradition demonstrates a similar concern for God's life-giving purposes, which it refers to as rest. The Sabbath day is referred to as qadosh, which is the Hebrew word for holiness. That which is holy is set apart for divine purposes, as opposed to that which would be referred to as common or profane. If God declares something qadosh, it has been set aside for God's purposes. The first time the word qadosh is used in the Hebrew Bible is regarding the Sabbath day. "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Gen. 2:3). The Sabbath day has been set apart by God for the divine purpose of rest, and humanity is invited to participate in that rest with God."<sup>11</sup>

By embodying rest as an ethic, the millennial Womanist preacher is being true to herself but also to the listeners of her sermons. The theology and ethics by which she carries herself will ultimately be reflected in her sermons; therefore, practically applied to the lives over which her sermons have influence. By adopting rest into the framework of her theoethical praxis, she is requiring rest for herself while also requiring rest for others.

Theoethics in conversation with rest is also requesting liberation. "The covenantal requirements of the Sabbath ... were grounded in the collective history and faith of the Hebrew people. Their society was to reflect their liberation".<sup>12</sup> Resting is subversive and is therefore influencing societal norms. Resting is antithetical to the ways in which we have been socialized and therefore by resting the culture and society are being shifted into a new normal. "The Sabbath was the alternative socioeconomic standard, a method of defying the predominant socioeconomic systems around them. It was more than a religious precept; it had tremendous economic and social implications."<sup>13</sup> It must be acknowledged that we are not simply resting for the sake of resting. There is liberation, resistance, and the formation of a new ideas when we rest.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Spotts, "The Possibilities of the Hebrew Sabbath for Black Theology," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33 (Fall 2013): 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

The millennial Womanist preacher has the perspective that maintaining a sabbath and routinely taking a sabbatical from their work is leaning into the foundational definition of womanism. “Rest is not some cute lil luxury item you grant to yourself as an extra treat after you’ve worked like a machine and are now burned out. Rest is our path to liberation. A portal for healing. A human right.”<sup>14</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher has taken this to mean the full embodiment of rest. Whether that be through sabbath, sabbatical, or a unique concoction of the two, developing rest as an ethic is something the millennial Womanist preacher believes daringly in.

### **Rituals and Leisure fulfilled through Boundary Setting**

Setting boundaries and staying true to them is not something Black women have been known for historically. Black women have been known for being everything to everyone, which often doesn’t include herself. Through the setting of boundaries and defining specific limits around her time, responsibilities and capabilities the millennial Womanist preacher is already breaking the mold. To claim the right to rest, ritual, leisure, and luxury she is deconstructing the narrative of the strong Black Woman that has been placed on her by society.

“Leisure and the right to simply exist without the constant weight of having to be a tool for production is something Black people have been denied for centuries. It is our divine right to simply be and embody leisure as a human right.”<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes people ask why everything must go back to slavery. Everything must go back to slavery because trauma can be passed down generationally, the same way wealth can. The traumas of our ancestors are still living in our

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<sup>14</sup> Tricia Hersey, “TheNapMinistry,” *Instagram.com*. (2020, retrieved 14 March, <https://www.instagram.com/thenapministry/>).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

bodies, it's still running through our veins in our blood. We are still generations behind white people who embody rest and luxury because there is this constant need to catch up. The millennial Womanist preacher no longer buys into the rat race mindset and the assumption that foregoing rest is needed to catch up. She operates from the ethic that what is for me will be mine and while I will do the work necessary to achieve the goal, I will maintain rest, ritual, luxury, and leisure in my life. I will have a healthy relationship with working while I also have a healthy relationship with resting. I will listen to my body when it says that it is tired, and I will listen when it tells me that it has the capacity to carry on.

Through the acknowledgement of holistic health, at the intersections of physical, mental, and spiritual health, we find that keeping our rituals and routines becomes essential.<sup>16</sup> By committing to the sabbath and scheduling time for yourself, your rest, and your family you abound in leisure and rest. Divesting from capitalism is a process and doesn't occur overnight. We have been socialized and indoctrinated with grind culture and as a result those habits and ways of operating are not undone overnight. In order to break these cycles and to undo these habits we must be intentional in the ways we allow for rest, leisure, and ritual in our daily, weekly, and monthly schedules. Take a nap, plan a sabbatical, and indulge in the things you enjoy. These actions facilitate the luxury and leisure you deserve and desire. We must "stop saying [that] rest is a luxury or a privilege. It is not – it's a human right. The more we think of rest as a luxury, the more we buy into these systemic lies."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kirk-Duggan, "Humpty Dumpty Need Not Fall Again." 123.

<sup>17</sup> Hersey, "TheNapMinistry," *Instagram.com*.

In *Too Heavy A Yoke* Walker-Barnes employs a twelve-step pastoral care method for the StrongBlackWoman in recovery.<sup>18</sup> I believe three of these steps speak to the rituals and leisure the millennial Womanist preacher is exploring to undue a commitment to grind culture and perfectionism. By setting and maintaining boundaries in conjunction with the keeping of rituals, an experience of leisure can be manifested in her holistic health. The seventh step in The StrongBlackWoman's recovery plan states that "we humbly ask the Almighty to remove our need for control and to nurture in us a commitment to self-care."<sup>19</sup> Making a commitment to care for ourselves and realizing the desire to constantly control the narrative is not healthy moves us toward a life of leisure and more luxury. We can imagine a new way of moving and being within the world.

Imagination grows and the unlimited possibilities begin once the need to control the outcome no longer exists. By removing the need for everything to be perfect, for people to view us as perfect, and to navigate in the world as if we have something to prove we can begin to unearth a new reality and a new way of knowing and being within the world. "Oppression is when the culture has stolen your energy and ability to imagine and dream a new way."<sup>20</sup> The oppression that exists within the narrative of the StrongBlackWoman has stifled the creativity of Black women. By unlearning this way of living and acknowledging that mistakes will be made and life will not be perfect the millennial Womanist preacher is leaning into the ability to maintain rituals and routines that produce luxury, leisure, and rest.

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<sup>18</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 186.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Hersey, "TheNapMinistry," *Instagram.com*.

The next step of this recovery program for developing rituals and embracing leisure is requires that “we continue to practice self-awareness, and when we relapse we promptly admit and correct it.”<sup>21</sup> There is a certain level of unlearning that comes with embracing leisure, that can oftentimes feel like more work than the commitment to grind culture and capitalism. By being committed to the unlearning process and the prioritization of oneself the millennial Womanist preacher is learning that there is a lifetime of liberation on the other side of the work of unlearning. “Divest from capitalism. Lay your ass down.”<sup>22</sup> Divesting from capitalism, perfectionism, and grind culture to embrace rest, leisure, and a creation of rituals that are life giving requires an extreme amount of reprogramming as it is a complete reversal from the ways in which we have been historically socialized. “Grind culture is violence.”<sup>23</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher is doing the work to undo and unlearn, while also extending grace when and where it is needed. This grace may be needed often and always as some of the ways we are hard wired truly never diminish but are constantly redirected.

The final step from this recovery program, which speaks specifically to the creation of rituals, is step eleven which states that “we seek through prayer, meditation, and journaling to nurture our connection with the Divine, praying for knowledge of God’s will for our lives and for faith in God’s protection and care.”<sup>24</sup> Finding practical ways to care for ourselves, to center ourselves, to find equilibrium are essential to crafting the rituals that are life giving for you, as

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<sup>21</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*, 192.

<sup>22</sup> Hersey, “TheNapMinistry,” *Instagram.com*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*, 193.

these will be different for us all. This process requires a level of self-awareness, which can prove to be difficult as we are simultaneously discussing unlearning.

When discuss the setting, keeping, and honoring of boundaries as it relates to you being the best possible version of yourself, one must be mindful and realize that if you are not caring for yourself, you cannot care for others. Likewise, if you are not caring for yourself, you cannot determine when you are caring too much for others. Having boundaries set in place allows for an ever-present checking of self to realize when you are overextending yourself.<sup>25</sup> The maintaining of life-giving rituals and the embrace of a life of leisure, both rooted in rest and resistance are not successfully achieved unless boundaries are clearly outlined. There should be boundaries outlined concerning every aspect of your life as is relates to yourself, others and the Divine. Including but not limited to limits around your time, relationships, resources, efforts, energy, etc.

Historically, the Black woman has been told by society that she is not worthy of and doesn't deserve rest and leisure. This misconception is a result of the expectations of white supremacy and exceptionalism.

### **Liberative Resistance from White Supremacy**

Rest, rituals, and the setting of boundaries are all important to the millennial Womanist preacher for the reasons previously mentioned, but the central goal of these embodiments is to achieve liberative resistance from white supremacy. "The grand narrative that defines America is that of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism ...[and] in order to sustain itself, America's defining narrative produced the ideology of white supremacy."<sup>26</sup> Through requesting leisure and luxury

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<sup>25</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, "Resurrecting Self-Care Day 17," *Drchanequa.com*. (2021, retrieved 14 March 2021, <https://drchanequa.com/blog>).

<sup>26</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, "Speaking of God in Stand Your Ground Times," *Lumen Et Vita* 6 (2016): 5.

for herself, which are aspects of life America says Black women should not have, the millennial Womanist preacher is living in her resistance to white supremacy through the liberation of herself.

“When we believe in something that is oppressive to our own being, to our own reality, we are governed by that belief system.”<sup>27</sup> We have been socialized to believe that white supremacy is the belief and system by which we should govern our lives. To embody a liberation theology and resistance from white supremacy we are fighting against all of the things we have been socialized to do. American society has always told the millennial Womanist preacher she isn't enough because she is Black, she is female, she is youthful, and she dares to say she has been called to preach. To stand in this title and to operate in the world as millennial, as Womanist, and as preacher is an act of resistance toward liberation within itself.

At the core of Black theology there is liberation from white supremacy. James Cone said, “the norm of all God-talk which seeks to be Black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for Black liberation.”<sup>28</sup> To acknowledge a Black Jesus, one must be divested from the lies of white supremacy at a foundational level. Noting that this is only a starting point and a launching pad, not the end all be all of the discussion. But if this truth can be affirmed then the journey towards a total liberation for all of God's children, which is a goal of Womanism, can begin.

The concept of the Black body as fundamentally criminal is a result of slavery that has been adapted into the social norms of our twenty-first century American culture and "relegates

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<sup>27</sup> Kirk-Duggan, “Humpty Dumpty Need Not Fall Again.” 133.

<sup>28</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (14<sup>th</sup> ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 27.

the Black body to an ‘un-free’ space.”<sup>29</sup> To think of the Black body as criminal and un-free in a society built on the foundations of white supremacy falls in line with the ways in which we have been socialized. To think of the life and lived experiences in a Black body from any other lens is a form of resistance from white supremacy. To be able to say my body is mine, it is free, and it is not innately illegitimate at its core is to operate from a place of liberation, seeking to resist white supremacy.

As we think about all strands of Black Liberation theology, resistance from the stronghold of white supremacy is evident in each. “Blackness is expansive. Black liberation is a global balm for all of humanity. White supremacy and capitalism [are] killing the planet and everyone on it in very unique ways.”<sup>30</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher operates from a homiletical lens that allows her to resist white supremacy from the pulpit, from her social media platforms and in her everyday lived experiences. The ethic of resting, maintaining rituals, and the setting of boundaries are all personal aspects of the millennial Womanist preacher’s being that are revealed through her personal life. These are the actions she’s taking every day in a routine way that allow her to live out the resistance in which she publicly speaks. Resting and taking naps as a form of resistance to white supremacy and a refutation to grind culture was introduced to us through the work of Tricia Hersey and The Nap Ministry. She has been doing this work since 2013 as a way to advocate for the “liberating power of naps.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas, “Speaking of God in Stand Your Ground Times,” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Hersey, “TheNapMinistry,” *Instagram.com*.

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

As this relates to liberation from grind culture and capitalism, we must constantly remind ourselves that “exhaustion will not create liberation.”<sup>32</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher is committed to doing her work, but she is equally as committed to taking care of herself through rest, rituals, and the setting of boundaries. She is committed to divesting from the belief that her productivity is the only value that she adds to the world. “All of culture is working in collaboration for us not to rest [and this is] why we resist.”<sup>33</sup> By committing to the acknowledgement of herself as already worthy she does not feel the need to prove her worth to others by the production of labor. She knows within herself that she is enough, just the way she is, which within itself stands in resistance to the lies of white supremacy. She then takes it a step further by acknowledging that she is worthy because she exists and not based on the things she can produce.

The mental and physical exhaustion created as a result of constantly being on the grind occurs because “the pace created by this system is for machines and not a magical and divine human being.”<sup>34</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher is committed to acknowledging the Divine that exists on the inside of her by living a life of liberation that includes the rest, rituals, and implementation of boundaries white supremacy stole from her.

An honest self-evaluation would produce the realization that we are tired and exhausted. Self-love is not being exhibited if there is not a willingness to acknowledge when rest is needed. The body that houses the mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing is not able to function at its optimal capacity because of a deprivation of an essential element, which is rest. The millennial

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Womanist preacher is not truly able to love herself if she is not able to rest. Her commitment to the liberation she preaches and proclaims is not manifested if she is not willing to lay down and recover from the traumas that the misconceptions of white supremacy have constantly instilled in our culture.

Two things can be true at one time. Living in the world of spectrums and decreasing the binaries from which we traditionally see things will allow humanity to fully embody the ways in which we are all existing somewhere along the spectrum. If rest is on one end of the spectrum and work is on the other, as we go throughout life, we are continuing to journey along this spectrum. During some seasons of life, we will be fully leaning into the work, and consequently during other seasons of life we must be fully leaned into the rest. While constantly reminding ourselves that most of the time we are simply existing somewhere along the spectrum.

As Divine beings deserving of all the good things God has to offer, we are reminded that God also offers rest, ritual, and boundaries. “We must be subversive and re-imagine rest. Our creation of a liberated world depends on our collective rest.”<sup>35</sup> The millennial Womanist preacher’s commitment to this work is a commitment to liberation for herself and all those whose lives in which she has influence.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The characteristics, qualities, and traits of the millennial Womanist preacher as outlined in this thesis project are ideals. We all sometimes fall short of the ideal and won't live up to those expectations. The goal of the millennial Womanist preacher is to constantly strive for the radical inclusivity, curation of new vocations, and liberative resistance defined in the research of this project.

#### **Beyond a Radical Inclusivity**

The millennial Womanist preacher embodies a radical inclusivity that bridges the generational gap and is inclusive in her approach to preaching in a way that engages her audience at all levels. She is not monolithic. By employing a diversity of approaches she displays an anti-elitist desire to ensure that no individual feels excluded from the community of faith. The millennial Womanist preacher is transformative in her ability to embody a radical inclusivity. She is responsible with her platform as to not serve as an oppressor for any of the children of God. Not willing to buy into institutions for the institution's sake she is living out her sacred witness and faith in a multiplicity of ways.

Moving beyond a radical inclusivity as outlined in this project the millennial Womanist preacher and beyond will have to work through and wrestle with the language that is used concerning the full inclusion of the trans community into the community of womanism. Womanism is a self-proclaimed identity by Black women. How does this language translate to trans women? The millennial womanist preacher must think critically about this concept to ensure that she remains in line with the radical inclusivity she strives to embody. Based upon the

definition that only Black women can identify as Womanist, the conversation around and the inclusion of the trans community will have to be had in a more explicit way.

### **Documenting Digital Theology**

The millennial Womanist preacher displays her transformative nature through her ability to navigate a multiplicity of vocations via technology and sacred digital space. Bi-vocational feels like a thing of the past and does not even begin to describe the world of the millennial Womanist preacher as she is oftentimes tri-vocational and beyond. She has used technological advancements to her advantage to pioneer and curate the digital sacred spaces of her imagination. A decolonized, anti-capitalist, anti-white supremacist, anti-Eurocentric approach to Christianity is required for the millennial Womanist preacher.

Social media is a very effective tool, but the millennial Womanist preacher must not forsake the necessity of scholarship. Documentation of this work through articles, books, and online publications will record the history of the movement as building blocks for future generations. The Womanist scholars and thinkers before us did the work of documenting their thoughts so that we would have a solid foundation. It is imperative for the millennial Womanist preacher to thoroughly document her work so that Gen Z and the Alpha generation have it as a foundation to build upon as they continue to make advancements.

### **Manifesting Liberative Resistance**

Through Womanist scholarship the body is understood as a hermeneutic and by paying attention to the body, we can invoke a more holistic approach to our overall wellbeing. The amount of rest one receives, the intentionality of doing things that make you well, and the resistance from the grind culture of white supremacy that could cause feelings of guilt when taking that time and keeping up these routines are all important aspects of self-care. We must

unlearn and divest from the thought that rest is not productive. By refusing to rest, we are ultimately putting more wear and tear on our bodies than necessary and therefore may ultimately cut our lives short by living with exhaustion, burnout, and unaddressed stress.

As we request this liberation for ourselves and embody it within the sermonic moment, we must be mindful of the other ways the millennial Womanist preacher can use her platform to spread and promote this message. Manifesting liberative resistance is an effort that must be manifested for the entire community. The community of humanity.

### **Womanist Spirituality**

Radical inclusivity, digital theology, and liberative resistance are all aspects of the transforming nature of the millennial Womanist preacher. Another aspect of her transformative nature that could be further studied outside of the confines of this study is her spirituality. A Womanist loves the spirit. An examination of the spirituality of preaching and the ways it is in conversation with inclusivity, creation, and liberation would provide a great starting point for continuing this research. Womanists have a deep and profound inner life that their orientation of the world springs from, which could be uncovered through her spirituality. Womanist spirituality could also be unpacked as it relates to the specificities of the rituals and routines the millennial womanist preacher is engaging as she commits herself to rest and liberation from white supremacy. Who cares for her and who is her community?

### **Recommendations**

As stated several times throughout this study, womanism, and millennial womanism, are not monolithic. As more thought is given to this study moving forward and more work is being done to define and document millennial womanism and the fourth wave of womanism, will there be any topic of discussion that causes a split in thoughts and the way people identify. Will any

topic of discussion push the envelope too far and cause a split from womanism that births something new, or will we continue to define the evolution of womanist thought through waves?

Considering that Womanist theology, Womanist ethics, and Womanist preaching are contextualized and centered in lived experience, these things will continue to grow, evolve, and change, as society continues to grow, evolve, and change. There should definitely be room for nuance in these conversations as millennial Womanists continue to progress in their careers and receive feedback and pushback from the forthcoming Womanist scholars of Gen Z and the Alpha generations.

The foremothers of Womanist preaching provided a system of hermeneutics and homiletics that provided affirmation for the emergence of the millennial Womanist preacher. This preacher has been intentional to curate a pedagogy that is impactful and engaging for its current generation, while also providing the same opportunities and affirmations for the generations to come. Millennial Womanist preachers have curated processes, methodologies, and pedagogies that speak to the nature of their liberative and transformative proclamation.

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