

Challenge & Response

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Summer 2013



A Celebration of Women

There are
Prophets
Among Us

A LOVE SUPREME

The Art of Quilting
and Womanist Thought

**LOOKING WHERE
OTHERS WON'T**
How Women are
Transforming Ministry

“Second Wave”
Feminism at 50

The Original
Girl on Fire
HARRIET TUBMAN

THERE ARE Droophets AMONG US!

Melanie C. Jones, Student

I vividly remember being a young girl growing up in the Black Baptist church navigating the politics of an unspoken code that deemed Black women unfit for religious leadership. My community of faith, co-pastored by my mother and father, was an exception among its Baptist counterparts because we fully embraced women in leadership and ministry. The terror of exclusion, however, made an imprint on me when, visiting a neighboring church, I was forced at the age of fourteen to preach from the floor because no girls were allowed to address the congregation from the pulpit. I came to theological education wrestling with the question, "What does it mean to be a prophetic voice in a Black woman's body?" I heard prophetic voices from Black women in the academy, naming themselves "womanists" as a confessional identity that represents belonging to a Black female tradition of truth telling, justice-seeking, redemptive self-loving, and wisdom-bearing.

When novelist Alice Walker defined the term "womanist" in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), Black female religious scholars and leaders in the academy adopted Walker's four-part definition as a birthing ground to cultivate a theo-ethical vision toward survival and wholeness for all. While feminist scholarship rallied against patriarchy and domineering forces threatening women's experiences, some feminists, even into the 1970s, adopted a privileged blindness that ignored women's complex and contradicting identities, particularly race and class. Black liberation theology, in its initial emergence in the 1960s and 70s, even with a quest for liberation of an oppressed African American people, failed to address issues concerning gender. Bold and daring Black women searching for a critically engaged academic dwelling place in the 1980s, rather than waiting for the above-named organizing principles to open the door of inclusion, utilized their socio-cultural realities, theological proclivities, and mother's wits to build a solid foundation for a home of their own.

The womanist theological enterprise is a twenty-eight year collaborative discourse initiated by Black female theologians, ethicists, biblical scholars, historians, pastoral caregivers, religious leaders, and laity who take seriously the lived experiences of Black women in theory and praxis. The primary aim of womanist work is to transition Black women's experience from the margins to the center by confronting the quadripartite oppression facing Black women and other groups at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class while calling for critical theological re-formation and careful ethical practice that resists all forms of oppression in the classroom, church, and community. Drawing from the Black idiomatic expression, "you actin' womanish" (meaning courageous or willful), womanism is an audacious endeavor that engages Black women at its radically subjective center and involves all persons seeking justice.

The question of the moment is whether the womanist prophetic voice remains relevant for theological education today. As an emerging scholar, I enter the womanist dialogue as a daughter who continues to be intellectually nurtured and shaped by womanist scholarship. I contend that womanism jeopardizes its prophetic edge if/when it fails to translate its wisdom to Black church women desiring to subvert

multi-layered oppression in their ecclesial communities and the world at large. Womanist thought must uphold its multi-dialogical, liturgical, and didactic intentions by fostering necessary exchange between the academy, church, and broader society. Budding womanist scholars, including myself, are beckoned by our foremothers to not simply rely on the womanist legacy, but to advance the prophetic agenda in word and deed bodaciously. The unlikely presence of six Black female women studying at the highest academic level of this institution at one time challenges Chicago Theological Seminary to continue evaluating its institutional commitments with respect to Black women and other marginalized groups. Those of us who utilize a womanist paradigm in our doctoral projects here at Chicago Theological Seminary bear the blessing of striving toward a womanist prophetic vision of revolutionary socio-religious transformation.

Melanie C. Jones, M.Div., is a Ph.D. student at CTS in Theology, Ethics, and Human Sciences. She serves as a licensed Associate Minister at South Suburban Missionary Baptist Church (SSMBC) in Harvey, IL where she leads the Women's Ministry and teaches in the Christian education department. She is also an adjunct professor (online) at American Baptist College in Nashville, TN. Her doctoral work utilizes critical inquiry to explore the theological and ethical complexity of Black women's body politics.



Focusing my research on theology and the arts from a womanist perspective of sacramentality is for me the clear indicator of the relevance and importance of supporting womanist theology programs and scholarship in the academy, particularly here at CTS. My choice to attend CTS was based on the caliber of the female faculty, especially the womanist scholarship of Dr. Terrell.

~Jean Derricotte-Murphy, 1st year Ph.D. Student

CTS Womanist Scholars: (L-R) Jerrolyn Eulinberg, Angela Parker, Malene Johnson, Jean Derricotte-Murphy and author, Melanie C. Jones