RICE UNIVERSITY

Toward a Theory of Reciprocity: Constructing a Hermeneutic of Relationality for Black Theological Discourse

By

Darrius Hills

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Anthony B. Finn, Agnes Cullen Arnold
Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies, Chair

Elias K. Bongmba, Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religious Studies

Nicole A. Waligora-Davis,
Associate Professor of English

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas,
Associate Professor of Ethics and Society
Vanderbilt University Divinity School

HOUSTON, TEXAS
May 2016
ABSTRACT

There is a blind spot in the theological discourses among black men. Particularly, as womanist scholars have correctly observed, black male theologians have not taken seriously the complexities of sexism and gender identity formation as serious problems within black religious studies in North America. Because of the premium placed upon black male voices and black male leadership within religious and political organizations, the discipline of black theology, if left unchecked, is doomed to continue dismissing black women’s perspectives. This project suggests that a plausible alternative in response to the dearth of attention to sexuality and gender within black theological discourses among black men, involves a reinterpretation of human personality, community, and connection.

To this end, this dissertation frames a vision of human relationships in which the above concerns regarding the correction of sexism and the dismissal of black women’s perspectives are addressed. I argue that black theological method, informed by a theory of reciprocity rooted in womanist conceptions of human relationality, offers a useful way to address the lack of critical attention to sexism and misogyny in black theology. Making use of womanist religious thought, African American literature, philosophical ethics, and gender studies to frame a new interpretation of human relationships, this dissertation constructs a theory of reciprocity meant to expand and furthermore, suggest how a reconstruction of the understanding of human relationships and human identity has potential to reconfigure harmful manifestations of black masculinity that often find expression in black religious communities and theological scholarship.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The past seven years seem unreal. Even now, as I prepare to submit this dissertation to my advisor and the extended committee, I do not quite believe it is happening at all. When I started in 2009, I suffered, as I do now, from a tremendous lack of self-esteem. In spite of this, I’ve persevered and, one could argue, have thrived in the process. This all, still, exceeds the bounds of what I thought possible or imaginable. Many people have contributed to my success as a scholar. There are so many people and organizations that have stayed at my side and on my side—offering a gracious word of encouragement, professional and career support and appreciation for my work, and when necessary, a swift kick in the pants when I got off track. While it is impossible to list them all, please trust that I do my best.

I must start with my Rice family and those within the Department of Religion. I can never express adequately my appreciation and gratefulness for my advisor, the inimitable Dr. Anthony Pinn. When I first thought about doctoral work in religious studies, I emailed Dr. Pinn “out of the blue” during the summer before my final year of seminary at Garrett-Evangelical. Literally within an hour, Dr. Pinn responded back, asked a few questions about my research interests and other programs I was considering, and very pointedly asked, “Is Rice on your list?” At that point, I immediately knew doctoral work would have to be something I pursued—no matter the cost, and I felt comfortable that working with Dr. Pinn would ensure my success and preparation at the highest level. Time has proven my instincts correct. As I often say at the end of every conversation—after every instance of our work together the past few years, I can only say, “Thank you, Dr. Pinn.” Thank you for taking a chance and giving me an opportunity
to be part of this community. You’ve been an advisor of the highest caliber—never accepting easy answers, always insisting on the production of my best work, and always pressing for excellence in my personal and professional endeavors. More than that, you’ve been a tremendous friend. Again, thank you for giving me “strength for the journey”.

I’ve been fortunate to work with some of the best peers walking the face of this little rock we call earth. Many past graduates from the African American Religion cohort continue to inspire and motivate me. Drs. Derek Hicks, Torin Alexander, Margarita Simon-Guillory, and Paul Easterling—to you all, thank you for always being available for an affirmative word and offering a critical ear; your insights have made graduate school that much easier. I must offer a special thanks to both Drs. Derek Hicks and Stephen Finley—both of you have been particularly critical in my academic and professional journey. I credit you both with being especially helpful in my efforts to win fellowships and other sources of graduate funding. I will always strive to embody your spirit of camaraderie and concern for those that make the journey after me.

I also thank Dr. Christopher Driscoll, Biko Gray, Jason Jeffries, Dr. Jonathan Chism, Cleve Tinsley, David Kline, Jessica Davenport, Dr. Aundrea Matthews, Nathaniel Homewood, Dr. Terri Laws, and Rachel Vlachos. You’ve all been extraordinary assets to the development of my own intellectual perspective and have helped me refine many rough edges of this dissertation—I am grateful for your intellectual companionship. I must particularly thank Dr. Driscoll, Biko Gray, Dr. Chism, and Jason Jeffries. You each, in your own way, have been quiet sources of inspiration for my personal development—aside from the academic and intellectual. Thank you for your friendship
and for truly pressing me at various points of this dissertation writing process. I look forward to seeing you all “on the other side of Jordan”!

I must also say a sincere word of appreciation for the rest of my dissertation committee: Drs. Elias Bongmba, Nicole Waligora-Davis, and Stacey Floyd-Thomas. Dr. Bongmba, thank you for your ongoing gentle demeanor and encouragement for this project early on—particularly your enthusiastic response to my early grappling with the ethical themes of Levinas and Buber. Dr. Waligora-Davis, I appreciate your willingness to be part of the process, and your wealth of knowledge and helpful suggestions on the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston as well as African American literature generally has been a godsend. Finally, to Dr. Floyd-Thomas—thank you for your pioneering scholarship in the field of womanist ethics. I was elated when I learned you would be on my committee, and I look forward to the possibilities of more collaboration with you in the future. I hope that the work I’ve done here, in some meager way, points to what you’ve noted as the “epistemological treasures” that lie within womanist religious thought for other communities. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to work with you. To Maya Reine and her work with Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning, thank you for your unending patience and for the opportunity to learn how to juggle multiple tasks while maintaining the hectic life of a scholar. Finally, I say a sincere word of thanks to Sylvia Louie. Thank you for your years of dedicated service to the Rice and the Department of Religion. I will always recall fondly your greetings in the early mornings, and your encouragement whenever I had doubts or concerns about the process. Thank you.
Beyond the Department of Religion, there are numerous people in the larger Rice community that I must acknowledge. In the department of History, I thank Drs. Alexander Byrd, Allen Matusow, and Lora Wildenthal. Each of you has been a profound source of support and guidance, particularly during my first and second years. Thank you. Finally, I’ve had the opportunity to be part of a wonderful community that has strengthened my professional development as a scholar and teacher. Through the Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication and the Program in Writing and Communication, I’ve been able to work with both graduate and undergraduate students as a writing consultant, and as a graduate fellow instructor. For these opportunities, I thank Drs. Elizabeth Festa, Tracy Volz, and particularly, Jennifer Shade Wilson, for being a steadfast network of support and encouragement throughout this process.

To my father, Rev. Dr. Derrick Hills, thank you pressing me to cling to the faith and never forget that this all for God’s glory. It is an honor to forever chase your likeness. To my mother, Sharron Hills, you’ve always tried, despite the uphill climb, to push me to be more confident and to “name it and claim it”—I’m almost there. You’ve embodied a womanist spirit without ever claiming to do so. Thank you for your example and inspiration. To my sister, Brittany Hills—thank you for “the wisdoms” when I’ve gotten out of sync; keep on keeping on, kid. Finally, to my wife, Whitney Bell Hills—thank you for being you. I never imagined I’d get married while in graduate school, but here we are. Thank you for joining me for this insane ride. In spite of myself—in spite of my flaws—in spite of my impatience—in spite of the occasions of my moodiness while writing and teaching, thank you for staying by my side. I appreciate and love you all.
I also take this opportunity to thank scholars from other academic fields and institutions who have been great friends, and whose good humor has given me great encouragement. To the “Garrett crew”, I offer thanks and appreciation for the work and witnesses of soon-to-be-Dr. Michele Watkins-Branch, Dr. Pamela Lightsey, Dr. Stephen Ray, and Dr. Nancy Bedford. Thank you all for your encouragement and good cheer. Special thanks also to soon-to-be-Dr. Melva Sampson; I greatly appreciate your invitations to participate in the womanist gatherings of the AAR. Thanks also, Drs. Monica Coleman, Shayne Lee, Tommy Curry, and Ryon Cobb. It is an honor to call you all colleagues and friends. Special thanks to Dr. Tommy Curry, who allowed me to co-write my first published article while I was writing my dissertation.

There are no words to capture just how positive my graduate school experience has been because of relatively minor financial burdens. In addition to generous support from Rice, I’ve experienced outrageous blessings through virtually every phase of my matriculation through the program. I thank the Fund for Theological Education (now the Forum for Theological Exploration) for the early support in the form of doctoral fellowships. I especially thank Dr. Sharon Watson-Fluker for her dedicated service and fierce advocacy for excellence in theological education. I must also acknowledge the wonderful people of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church for selecting me as a Dempster Graduate Fellow. Finally, to the staff and personnel of Louisville Institute, I must express the highest gratitude for being chosen as a 2014-2015 Dissertation Fellow, which allowed me the freedom to complete the major components of this dissertation. Among the Louisville cohort, I especially thank Dr. Don Richter, Pamala Collins, and Keri Liechty.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ................................................................................................................................. iii

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .................................................................................................................. iv

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** .................................................................................................................... ix

**INTRODUCTION** .............................................................................................................................. 1

Rationale for Study ............................................................................................................................... 8
Methodological and Theoretical Considerations ............................................................................... 9
Structure of the Argument and Chapter Layout .............................................................................. 11

**PART I: Sources For Black Male Relational Theology** ................................................................. 17

**CHAPTER ONE**

Thinking Through Reciprocal Relationality ..................................................................................... 18

Womanist Beginnings: Naming and Claiming the Discourse .......................................................... 19
Womanist Religious Thought: Past, Present, and Future ................................................................ 30
Womanist Religious Thought as Restricted Discourse .................................................................. 35
Womanist Religious Thought as Instructive Discourse .................................................................. 38
Reciprocal Relationality ..................................................................................................................... 41
  Womanist Ways of Relating ............................................................................................................. 41
  On the Appeal to Martin Buber’s Philosophical Ethics .................................................................. 42
  Martin Buber and Reciprocity ......................................................................................................... 47
M. Shawn Copeland’s Eucharistic Solidarity .................................................................................... 50
On the Need for Models of Reciprocity ............................................................................................ 57
  Manish Boy Positionality .............................................................................................................. 59
  Theological Surrogacy .................................................................................................................. 60
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 62

**CHAPTER TWO**

Rethinking Tea Cake And Humanizing Mr.: Womanist Literature And Black Men’s Efforts Toward Reciprocal Selfhood .................................................................................................................. 63

Black Women’s Literature and Voice Reconstruction ...................................................................... 65
Zora Neale Hurston and the Fullness of Black Humanity .................................................................. 68
  Tea Cake and the Costs of Patriarchal Masculinity ..................................................................... 75
Committed to Survival and Wholeness for All .................................................................................. 87
  On Becoming a “Natural Man”: Humanizing Mr. ...................................................................... 93
Tea Cake, Albert, and the Role of the Grotesque in Masculine Identity ........................................... 97
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 107
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 300

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................ 307
Introduction

“I’m not just a minister’s wife; I’m Sharron.” This one declarative statement from my mother has stayed with me since I was a child. Growing up in Shreveport, Louisiana, whenever we’d visit my great-grandmother, I’d always be drawn to a framed newspaper clipping from the Shreveport Times featuring my mother in an op-ed piece on religion and local ministerial families. The interviewer asked my mother about her feelings on what it was like to be a “minister’s wife” in addition to being a full-time career woman and mother, to which she offered the aforementioned response—bespeaking her individuality and an autonomous self-identity. While my mother does not, and has not ever adopted or claimed womanist sensibilities, in that response, and in her disposition, she somehow embodies many of the qualities and features of womanism that I have sought to expound upon in this dissertation. I firmly believe that growing up with this kind of example in a mother has influenced my fascination and appreciation for the work of Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and the womanist scholars of religion who have appropriated their writings. My receptivity toward womanist religious thought thus grew from an early familial setting that proved conducive for my positive understandings of egalitarian sharing and connective strands between women and men—with neither holding any hierarchical leverage over the other. This dissertation, likewise, grows out of that inclination.

As I write this introduction, an ongoing mix of two of my favorite musical artists/genres is playing in the background: Kendrick Lamar and Smokey Robinson. Particularly, one of Kendrick Lamar’s most recent songs, simply titled, Untitled, is now playing over the stereo. I am always specifically drawn to the hook of this song: I holler,
“What you do? What you say?” I shall enjoy the fruits of my labor if I get freed today. It is my hope, that I too, can enjoy the fruits of this intellectual and reflective labor of love, of work, and of many restless nights (and days) embodied within this dissertation. In many ways, my seminary and graduate school experiences have been an ongoing labor—a labor exploring and grappling with the intricacies of theological reflection. I was particularly concerned with constructing a theological perspective that took seriously the criticisms, insights, and truths of womanist religious thought. Furthermore, I was compelled to really grapple with the implications of what womanist discourse could mean within my perspective as a black male scholar of religion.

I began this dissertation with a simple query: where is the engagement of womanist theological discourse among black male theologians? This question was hardly original. Garth Baker-Fletcher’s Xodus: An African American Male Journey and My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus Musings (co-written with Karen Baker-Fletcher) began addressing the need for partnership and collaboration between black male and female theologians on pressing issues pertaining to gender hierarchies, homophobia, and communal solidarity. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins’ co-edited volume, Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic features an interdisciplinary collaboration of male and female scholars devoted to unraveling the interlocking systems of race, sex, and class that further serves to restrict open dialogue on the nature of the erotic within black religion, theology, and ethics.

By engaging the work of progressive black male theological discourses, that is, those more attentive to sexuality and gender, I concluded that a good way to make use of womanist scholarship and source materials is to interpret them in ways that heighten
awareness of the complexities of male embodiment and its effect on women and men. I argue that a useful method of including black female source materials into black theology is to focus upon a reinterpretation of human relationality. In speaking of “relationality”, I refer to the patterns, terms, and mutual exchanges of human activity within the context of a community of human subjects. So what does this mean? The patterns, terms, and the dynamics of the mutual exchanges within human communities, such as familial structures, religious communities and/or practices, and social customs, frame individual and social mechanisms by which human beings come to know themselves within the context of community. Sustained attention to these interior dimensions of human social arrangements can add complexity and richness to the direction, purpose, and meaning of human life. This project, therefore, has ties to theological anthropology by both clarifying the nature of human activity and further, beginning the critical process of aspiring to better modes of human activity within the context of community. In Reforming Theological Anthropology, F. Leron Shults notes that modern theological anthropology “must take into account not only our psychological and social relations to other persons but also the physical and cultural relations that compose the matrices within which our lives are dynamically embedded.”\(^1\)

For our purposes, the course of action in working to reconfigure black theological discourse includes a greater awareness and interpretation of the “psychological and social relations” underpinning the mutual exchange(s) between black male and female bodies within the context of community. However, this project goes a bit further. Part of my insistence upon a deeper sense of the relational underpinnings of black theological

\(^1\) F. Leron Shults, Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 2.
discourse involves the framing of a reciprocal heuristic. What implications emerge when *reciprocity* becomes a primary heuristic through which relationality is framed in the lives of black men and women? Furthermore, how might black male theological discourse draw upon relational themes within womanist thought to consider the implications of *reciprocal* relationality for both black theology and black men? To address these questions, I make use of womanist religious studies and literature, philosophical ethics, and gender studies to consider the implications of a reciprocal interpretation of black theological method, and further, to consider what such a move will bode for black men’s understanding of relationality.2

I argue that one potential hope for the reconstruction of black theological discourse and black male identity is the development and application of a heuristic that emphasizes a reciprocal understanding of human relationality. Through a reciprocal framing of theology and human connection, I hope to offer an intellectual foundation for further work—a space in which the self-reflexive foundation for the (re)construction of black theological discourse can be laid, and black masculine identity can be reconfigured.

Many scholars of African American religious experience and history have explored the lack of black female presence and source materials within black theology and black religion, and have rightfully concluded that black women’s experiences should take on a more prominent role within both realms. Paula Giddings’ *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, documents the relegation of black women to supporting roles within the civil rights movement and the black church, despite that without their efforts such institutions and organizations would

---

have failed. Sociologists C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya echo Giddings’ assertions about the dearth of black females within the leadership of black Christian communities. They observe how womanist theology emerged from the religious and cultural sensibilities of black women who felt isolated from both their religious communities and their seminary and divinity school colleagues. Womanist scholars of religion such as theologian Jacquelyn Grant, note how womanism remains a critical endeavor in black religious studies because it has provided black women a voice—a space to speak upon and validate their own religious experiences. Taking the voices and representatives of womanist scholarship seriously, a new generation of black male theologians have worked to produce scholarship that challenges the sexism within black churches and within the academy.

Situated squarely within this trajectory, this dissertation builds upon the work already done to include black female representation within black theological discourse by emphasizing the incorporation of womanist-identified relational themes as outlined in Alice Walker’s original formulation. Also playing a critical role in the outlined theoretical concerns, Martin Buber’s I and Thou will serve as another perspective through which I develop reciprocal relationality. In bringing together Buber and womanist

---

scholarship, my thoughts are centered upon both Buber and Walker’s communitarian impulse—which I hope to reveal as having complimentary vantage points.\(^8\)

Despite the strengths of Buber’s ethical system, I develop my concept of reciprocity in concert with the insights of womanist scholars of religion. I do this for at least two reasons: first, I am committed to responding to womanist source materials as a key component of my methodological concerns. This means that the perspective of black female scholars will inform theoretical questions, areas of collaboration, and directions for further study. Secondly, as it stands, Buber’s relational framework on its own is disembodied. Where are the embodied subjects within Buber’s “I-You”? Buber clearly states that “I-You” “establishes the world of relation”\(^9\), but who are the respective participants within the realm of this mode of relationship? For Buber, the three spheres

---

\(^8\) While Buber’s interpretation of dialogical relationality is a critical part of the dissertation, one would be remiss to ignore the problematic nature of Buber’s framing of the “I-You” dialogical pairing, which describes the nature of human forms of relating. Throughout *I and Thou*, virtually no attention is given to gender constructions, nor is any analysis provided regarding the ramifications of women’s roles or functions within the “I-You” pairing. It is as if Buber ignores the historical reality that shapes people’s relationships and ways of relating to others in order to emphasize a relational idealism that fails to match the actual concrete dynamics of people’s life experiences in the context(s) of community. Given these problems, it is natural to ask about the necessity of Buber in this project at all. I consider Buber’s work critical to my theoretical considerations because his formulation of reciprocity helps to unpack the relational themes within womanist thought that I understand to be valuable for black theological discourse. Another scholar to include is Patricia Hill-Collins. Hill-Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* in part theorizes “intersectionality”—examining how race, class, and gender construct the terms of the multifaceted realms of oppression in the lives of black women. Attention to this particular orientation within black feminist discourse could be useful in responding to the gaps in *I and Thou*, in that the multidimensional character of black female oppression contributes to the “othering” process that Buber is critiquing within human relationality. Establishing a connection between intersectionality and Buber’s concerns with responding to the complexities of “otherness”, is therefore an important point to be raised.

in which relation arises are: the life with nature, the life with men, and the life with spiritual beings.\textsuperscript{10} The subjective dynamic of Buber’s relational framing is much too vague, and still seems to gloss over and possibly ignore any implications for women’s function within his relational pairing. Despite these problems, Buber’s work is crucial in that his philosophy helps this project unpack the communitarian reference point for my attention to the implications of womanist relationality.

By fusing the theories from Buber with the concrete historical experiences of black women that ground womanist discourse, I am trying to suggest a parallel between womanist ways of relating and the insights of Buber’s relationality. To be clear, the idea here is not to centralize Buber theoretically.\textsuperscript{11} I begin first with the communal impetus within Alice Walker’s interpretation of womanism and within black female literature, and make use of Buber’s outlining of reciprocity to highlight what I’m arguing are key features of womanist ways of relating. In this framing, womanist thought still remains the central theoretical tool, as well as provides the primary source materials highlighting the reciprocal heuristic I develop, while Buber’s work remains a critical, though secondary lens through which this relational framework is mapped.

Within this mode of relationality, the ends of others serve as the primary incentive for theological inquiry and the basis for all claims. Of course, total selflessness is not possible within the context of community, nor would such be desirable. Total selflessness leaves open the possibility of self-negation. Self-negation should not be a tenable outcome for any theology, because the rejection of self, in any capacity, is ultimately to deny the fullness of human subjectivity, creativity, and potential. And as

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 57.
womanists have shown us, loving and accepting the fullness of ourselves, regardless, must be a central feature of our thoughts and actions. In lieu of the negation of self, I’m arguing, instead, for a reconfiguration of what self-hood entails within the context of a human community of other selves. Particularly, I’m exploring what theo-ethical implications emerge and are at stake when we consider the human self as reciprocal in orientation, and further, what such a heuristic can provide in the reconstruction of black male identity.

The centrality of human relationality within this dissertation is concerned with reconsidering how human communities can find better, more wholesome ways of living together, as well as how my responses here can address the problem of sexism and misogyny. If it is true that “human existence is characterized by a trembling fascination, a passionate longing for a secure relation with the other,” then it is crucial for black male theologians to further reflect on the ways that constructs of gender and sexuality, and race and class issues, impinge upon black male relationships, their cultural and intellectual productions, and further, how this exchange affects the nature of black male theologizing.

**Rationale for Study**

Primarily, this study is motivated by the idea that womanist source materials provide a useful way to think through, challenge, and correct problems within black theological discourse pertaining to sex and gender and as embodied in human relationships. However, this project is also driven by a desire to effectively learn how to make use of womanist insights and perspectives in the development of my work as a

---

black male theologian. My task, therefore, is to build upon black and womanist theologies, womanist literature, and philosophical ethics, in order to critique and reconstruct the nature of human relationality, as well as dismantle problematic intersection(s) between harmful conceptions of maleness and black theological discourse.

**Methodological and Theoretical Considerations**

While influenced by a variety of thinkers and intellectual disciplines, this dissertation is interdisciplinary. The first half of dissertation makes use of philosophical ethics to develop the relational framing I originally locate within womanist thought—namely womanist-identified literature, while the second half of the dissertation makes use of black and philosophical theology. Throughout the latter portions of the project in which I engage black male theological discourse, there will be further attention to womanist religious thought and sexuality and gender studies, particularly theories of masculinity.

*Philosophical Ethics*

Martin Buber’s relational framing as presented in *I and Thou*, represents one piece of the theoretical foundation in the framing of reciprocal relationality that I go at lengths to construct within this dissertation. Philosophical ethics offers a means of exploring the interior tri-dimensionality of human selfhood, namely, the self as *self*, self as *self-in/with-community*, and self as *self-with/in-world*. Within this space, thinkers such as Martin Buber offer the theoretical underpinnings and heuristics that provide the mapping for the completion of this project. Buber is critical in this dissertation because he provides a way of thinking of relationality as reciprocity, and reciprocity as relationality. Buber’s

---

13 Buber, 58.
relational framework will serve as a key component of and supplement to the more important and primary source materials found within womanist literary and theological scholarship.

I recognized early on in the research on Buber, that his selection as a critical frame for the project would raise a few questions—namely the role that a white philosopher could or should play in an intellectual exercise that claims to centralize the perspectives of black women. I maintain that my emphasis on Buber’s philosophical ethics has been a useful and needed aspect for this work on relationality and identity formation. Ultimately, my choice to keep Buber in the conversation was on one level a pragmatic choice. That is, I committed to his ideas, and I was too deep into the research and writing to abandon his contribution to the tone and direction of the written chapters. On another, albeit lesser level, I also had a desire to engage in the novelty of putting a Buberian framing of relationality into a creative fusion with womanist religious scholarship—something I’ve not seen in my review of the literature.

**Black Theologies and Womanist Religious Thought**

Dialogue and engagement with womanist religious thought is critical to my theological methodology because it “values the ongoing process of theological reflection” and “neither pits ideas against one another, nor gives token nods to each other” [italics mine], [because] “genuine engagement is necessary for real theological and ethical change.”

Dialogue should be processual, ongoing, and collaborative. The work of theologians Garth Baker-Fletcher, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn, all of whom I situate in this dissertation as primary conversation partners within black male theological

---

discourse, has provided space for self-reflexive discourse in black male theology that my project builds upon. Collaboration with womanist theologies and source materials heightens my awareness of the need for sustained attention to embodiment, black female agency, as well as the need for self-reflection on the pitfalls of certain manifestations of black masculinity. In this regard, M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom* (2010) provides a model of mutual embodiment that succinctly gives flesh and materializes Buber’s otherwise very abstract theorizing of ethical concerns and the other. Womanist literature provides creative expressions of the mode of communal and individual transformation that I argue is possible within womanist conceptions of relationality.

*Sexuality and Gender Studies*

bell hooks insightfully opines that “Men cannot change if there are not blueprints for change. Men cannot love if they are not taught the art of loving.”15 Attention to the analysis of gender and sexuality within African American communities will provide the wherewithal to address the theological construction of wholesome and life-giving masculine “blueprints” for African American men. The insights of black feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill-Collins provide necessary investigation into the plight of black women, give attention to the superficial and stultifying effects of patriarchal conceptions of gender, and challenge the homophobic and misogynistic underpinnings that damage African American communities and relationships. I make use of such work in order to examine the long-reaching effects of privileging patriarchal understandings of masculinity. Sexuality and gender studies pushes for a more incisive critique of the trappings of faulty notions of masculinity.

---

Likewise, it is critical to draw on work from black men who take seriously the need to reframe masculinity. The work of scholars in this area are useful in that they demonstrate the problems with race and representations of black manhood that ultimately short-circuit a more wholesome embodiment of black male personality and self-expression due to rigid adherence to the old models—useless “blueprints” of masculinity that are ill-suited for healthy relationships. The work of black male scholars committed to addressing sexism and misogyny is important because their perspectives demonstrate that self-critique entails a commitment to challenging and criticizing those areas of black thought and male identity that engender destructive capacities and consequences. Self-criticism in this regard entails a confrontation with the meaning and construction(s) of black male identity, embodiment, and masculinity. The reconstruction of black male identity over against harmful masculine tropes that have been cemented into black psyches (collectively) and somehow recast as “authentic” and positive—is a necessary component of any scholarship or activism that seeks to be anti-sexist/anti-patriarchal. By engaging the disciplines and thinkers listed above, my reciprocal framing of relationality in black male theological discourse can build upon and theorize bell hooks’ assertion in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992):

Collectively we can break the life threatening choke-hold patriarchal masculinity imposes on black men and create life sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity that can provide black men ways to save their lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle.\(^{16}\)

**Structure of the Argument and Chapter Layout**

This dissertation is divided into two Parts and is comprised of six

---

Chapters. Part One, comprised of the first three chapters, is titled “Sources for Black Male Relational Theology.” This part of the dissertation constructs the key terms and the theoretical grounding for my framing of reciprocal relationality. It is in this portion of the dissertation that I wed the insights of womanist religious thought with Buberian relational ethics to frame the relational heuristic that characterizes my dissertation’s overall tone and direction. Part Two, comprised of the final three chapters, is titled “Black Male Relational Theology Developed.” The second part of the dissertation extends the theoretical and methodological grounding established in the first three chapters, by shifting focus to the development of a system for theological reflection. The final three chapters explore various representatives of progressive black male theological reflection and their insights on relationality. I use their work, specifically their engagement with womanist thought, to construct and describe a dialogical framing for a relational turn within black theological discourse, and finally, to discuss the possibilities of “black male self-(re)covery” as a redemptive process within black male relational theologies.

Chapter One constructs the key contours of my conception of reciprocal relationality. I argue that true relationality, based upon my reading of the communal impetus situated within Alice Walker’s original interpretation of womanism, is characterized by reciprocity. Drawing upon Martin Buber’s philosophical ethics, primarily as discussed in I and Thou, and from the available secondary literature on Buber’s thought, I map and tease out the terms of the reciprocal framing that I argue is central within womanist thought and is useful
for the reconstruction of black male theological discourses and black masculine identity. I eventually build my notion of relationality through a fusion of Buberian ethics (premised on the centrality of the “other” as essential to one’s own self) and specifically, upon womanist perspectives on embodied relationality as presented in the work of M. Shawn Copeland.

Chapter Two argues that womanist literature can inform, or rather, provide useful tropes to think through, the development of relational identities premised upon the communal impetus within Alice Walker’s original framing of womanist discourse. I provide a character analysis of “Mr.” from *The Color Purple*, and “Tea Cake” from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. My central argument is that Mr. and Tea Cake, as literary figurations, have potential to inform progressive black masculine tropes because of the reciprocal underpinnings of their relationships with female characters and to illustrate some of the deeply troubling and disturbing aspects of both figure’s pathological behaviors as representations of the negative consequences of harmful manifestations of black masculinity. The lessons I tease out from the examples of relational masculinity embodied in both Mr.________ and Tea Cake set the stage for the following chapter.

Chapter Three comments upon the insights one may glean from the gender politics of Mr.________ and Tea Cake. I formulate these insights as the markers of “reciprocal masculinity.” There are at least three elements that I argue are critical to the development and reconstruction of a more wholistic, reciprocal black masculine identity: 1) the reformation of pathological masculinity; 2) recognition of the necessity for compound subjectivity within human relationality; 3) the pursuit of personal and communal fulfillment through taking responsibility for the well-being of others. In
elaborating upon these three markers of reciprocal masculine identity found within the literary sources, I hope to demonstrate the constructive capacities of womanist source materials to inform black male self-understanding.

Chapter Four places my framing of black male relational theology in the trajectory of the writings of black male theologians Garth Baker-Fletcher, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn. The objective here is to demonstrate those areas of their work that speak to the relational concerns outlined in this dissertation, as well as suggest ways in which my relational framing may serve to expand their assertions, and further, provide a springboard for the level of theological reflection that black male scholars of religion can undertake in order to take seriously the need for more thought and reflection on the matrix of theology, sex, and gender.

Chapter Five constructs *dialogical centralism*, the methodological standard within my construction of black male relational theology. My construction of this methodology is partly indebted to Anthony Pinn’s “relational centralism”, which he cites as his interdisciplinary methodological framing within *Terror and Triumph*.17 Dialogical centralism thrives on open-ended collaboration with black female theological, ethical, and literary source materials as an essential component of theological reflection, however, I clarify specific components of this methodology in the engagement and interpretation of womanist source materials. I therefore attempt to create a guideline for engaging womanist scholarship: 1) establishing and respecting the boundaries of womanist discourse as safe space, 2) avoiding the problems of womanist source

---

appropriation by remaining committed to ongoing male self-reconstruction, and 3) recovering the art of listening.

The final chapter comments on the possibility of black male self-(re)covery, which I argue is a possible result of the gradual, ongoing embracing of a reciprocal conception of self in the context of community. (Re)covery, as I interpret it, is an ongoing commitment to the renewal of black male relational selfhood. It is the always but coming act disavowing the restrictions of patriarchal, misogynistic, and phallocentric approaches to human relationships. (Re)covery prompts the realization of the non-fixity of black maleness. In outlining the notion of (re)covery, I draw upon Paul Tillich’s conception of the “New Being” as a way to lend the regenerative nature of the process of (re)covery more existential and theological weight.
PART I: SOURCES FOR BLACK MALE RELATIONAL THEOLOGY
Chapter One:

Thinking through Reciprocal Relationality: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female…Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

—Alice Walker

For woman’s cause is man’s cause: (we) rise or sink together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free.

—Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South

Relation is reciprocity.¹

—Martin Buber

When Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose emerged on the literary scene in 1983, one could not have imagined the effect her work would yield in the self-image and self-understanding of countless black women. Within Walker’s personal reflections on black female experiences, personally, communally, and institutionally—she intones that at the heart of black female personhood are “womanist” ways of knowing, being, and doing. These womanist ways are courageous, self-assured, and communal dispositions that ultimately enable black women to remain true to their female roots as well as stay grounded to the needs of their communities.²

In order to demonstrate a grasp of both the historical development of womanist discourses in the study of religion, as well as cite the notable voices, texts, and perspectives therein, this chapter attempts to provide a womanist genealogy—discussing

the original perspectives of black feminism in contrast to womanism, then continuing on to discuss the branches of womanist thought within the field of black religious studies. I then shift gears to discuss the unique capacity of womanist religious thought to serve as an instructive methodological tool for black male theologians.

Finally, making use of the writings of religious philosopher Martin Buber, and the womanist relational insights in the work of theologian M. Shawn Copeland, I outline and tease out my interpretation of reciprocal relationality. Within the confines of this project, reciprocal relationality, premised upon the communitarian impulse of womanist thought, is an envisioning of human relationships in which the human self, its actions and movements, is conceived as always already connected to the well-being of other human selves. This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork pertaining to this particular interpretation of relationality and its reciprocal underpinnings as defined throughout the dissertation.

**Womanist Beginnings: Naming and Claiming the Discourse**

Within this dissertation, I centralize an interpretation of a womanist relational ethos as premised upon the work of Alice Walker, *and* as presented within the womanist literary tradition, notably the writings of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. Citing womanist relationality as a compelling source in reconstructing the concept of relationality in black theological discourse, I am therefore pressed to consider the extent to which the relational orientations espoused within womanist religious thought can guide this interpretive endeavor. It is best to begin with a thorough understanding of the development of womanist thought proper—necessitating a conversation about black

---

feminist orientations prior to the emergence of womanist thought. I begin with attention to the distinction between feminism and womanism.

Womanists and feminists, as Delores Williams notes, aim to “help evolve a world in which sexual, racial, class and caste oppressions no longer exists.” Despite this overlapping, it would be a mistake to think that womanism and feminism are the same. In making this observation, it is critical to be as specific as possible in clarifying which feminists are being referred to when the topic of feminism is breached—namely, one must break down feminist thought along racial lines, because black and white women’s various understandings and practices of feminism have not always been the same.

Numerous historical analyses of the intersections between black and white women’s disparate social and political concerns, as well as the staging and planning of activist movement in response to such concerns, demonstrates readily just how contentious and just how polemical the relationship between the interests of white feminists and black women was during the evolution of women’s rights in the United States.

In addition to women’s rights, early 20th century black women’s political efforts, which provided a basis for contemporary branches of black feminism, was largely directed toward suffragism and civil rights, and anti-lynching activism. A noteworthy black female activist during this period was scholar and educator, Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892), constructing a salient defense of black female enfranchisement and education and the repudiation of racism, positioned her as one of the

---


earliest representatives of black feminist consciousness. Another woman of this era, Ida B. Wells, also organized on behalf of women’s rights and suffragism, but was particularly known for her anti-lynching/anti-KKK activism. Wells dedicated her entire life to documenting the swelling rates of anti-black violence perpetrated by Klan mobs, playing a key role in the boycotting of many white-owned businesses and pushing for the drafting of anti-lynching laws in the U.S. through her extensive global campaigning.\(^6\) Beyond these individual examples, post-Reconstruction black women’s club organizations, notes Paula Giddings, provided black women some of the earliest political platforms upon which they could voice black communal concerns in addition to their burgeoning sense of egalitarian sexual politics.\(^7\) Wells herself was a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW)—an organization committed to both the issue of women’s rights and to the larger concerns of the race.\(^8\)

The black women’s club movement was the natural counterpart to white women’s clubs, and the differences between the two were evident. Black women’s clubs gave life, resources, and opportunities to those who otherwise had no recourse, whereas the white women’s club was often seen as “the onward movement of the already uplifted”—an observation bespeaking the great gaps of privilege, power, and political access between black and white women.\(^9\) These lines were further demarcated when the topic of universal women’s suffrage was raised. White female suffragists, particularly the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), wanting to protect their

---

\(^8\) Ibid., 135-136.
\(^9\) Ibid., 98.
own self-interests, adopted a strategy of political expediency by focusing solely on the white female vote. This strategy was meant primarily to demonstrate that the white female vote would not pose a threat to white male supremacy, thus potentially creating useful allies in white supremacist male politicians in power.¹⁰ Decades later into the modern women’s liberation movements of the 60s and 70s, conflicts over political representation and the lack of cohesion in the formation of interracial alliances between black and white women around common interests, remained an issue. Unfortunately, black women also had to contend with sexism within their own communities.

Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) provides insight into the sexist and misogynist undercurrents of the modern civil rights movement. Along with the infamous example involving Stokely Carmichael’s assertion that the only position or role for black women within movement was “prone,”¹¹ it was very common for black male leaders to downplay and ignore the contributions, ideas, and agency of black women beyond that of auxiliary and supportive functions.¹² Disillusioned by both the racism of white feminist organizations, and the sexism of black male-dominated religious and political organizations, black women drew upon their own resources and energies in the formulation of a black feminist platform that addressed the shortcomings of white feminists and civil rights organizations. Undoubtedly, the most explicit declaration of black feminism is the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement” (1977).

---

¹⁰ Giddings, 124.
¹² Giddings, 312-313.
Providing an intersectional reading of black female oppression that required the centralizing of their experiences as the modus operandi, the participants within the Collective were able to assert a uniquely “antiracist and antisexist position” that could also effectively address the particularities of black women’s experiences of heterosexism and economic oppression within a patriarchal, capitalist society.\(^{13}\) The Collective’s statement on black feminism was the first published account of black women’s efforts to name and distinguish an intellectual and political tradition that addressed the specificity of their sexualized and racialized plight and has become a standard reference point for black women’s studies courses in Women’s Studies departments in colleges and universities across the U.S.

I exercise care in discussing some of the distinctions and the historical development, of varied branches of black feminist praxis in order to recognize the capacity black women have demonstrated in being agents for social change—both for themselves individually and for the larger community. They often did so with few resources and institutional support that the larger, and more established white feminist organizations enjoyed.\(^{14}\) However, I also give attention to black feminism to further highlight and emphasize how a racist and sexist American context has given rise to black women’s intellectual and political praxis in the creation of their own discourses to address their varied experiences of oppression and marginalization. The growth of black feminism demonstrates how black women have been able to make use of a variety of


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 18.
tools to articulate their voices and the validity of their interests over against patriarchy, racism, and sexism. It is furthermore important to document and outline the specificity of black feminism and black feminist thought in order to illustrate its connection and parallel to the later development of what would become known as womanism. The emergence of womanist thought, as developed by Alice Walker, stood on the shoulders of these early periods and the intellectual productions of black feminist thought and political formation. I now turn to a discussion of this perspective.

Walker’s exhaustive, four-part definition which clarifies and outlines her interpretation of womanist inclinations toward self- hood within the context of community:

1. [to be distinguished from] womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings [italics mine]. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

4. Womanist is to feminist as lavender is to purple.\footnote{Alice Walker, \textit{In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens} (Orlando: Harcourt Books, Inc., 1983), xi-xii.}

In spending the next few spaces reflecting on Walker’s definitional rendering of womanism, I briefly chart the development of womanist thought before considering its implications for black religious studies.

In \textit{The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought}, Layli Phillips indicates that Walker actually mentions the term “womanist” prior to the full-scale elaboration of the term in \textit{In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens} (1983). In a 1979 essay, “Coming Apart,” Walker situates womanist in contradistinction to feminist, noting that, “a ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common.”\footnote{Alice Walker, “Coming Apart (1979)” in \textit{The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought}, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.} In making this assertion, Phillips notes, Walker was able to inaugurate “a new way of talking about the relationship between women, social change, the struggle against oppression, and the quest for full humanity.”\footnote{Ibid., xx.} The new manner of speaking to black women’s specific social, political, and cultural concerns was the purpose—the function that Walker’s development of womanism served. However, it must also be noted that Walker’s development of womanism as the counterpoint to feminism was a revolutionary act of naming that both shares in the analytical resources of interpretation from feminist ideology, but makes use of an intersectional focus that is more suited to address the experiences of oppression of black women—“womanist is to feminist as lavender is to purple.” Womanism offers a wider analysis that is believed to correct the shortcomings
of feminist ideology as it pertains to the specificity of black women’s oppression. As Phillips notes, “unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action.”18

The significance of naming, labeling, and self-identifying oneself or one’s work as “womanist” therefore corresponds to very specific intellectual lineages and political commitments. The power that lay within the self-naming and identity formation capacities of womanist thought, therefore, cannot be understated—naming “is a critical step in the move back to one’s own subjectivity.”19 The work of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, among others, has provided womanist theologians, ethicists, and other writers, a new language through which they can describe black women’s unique historical responses to multidimensional sources of oppressions. In self-naming or identifying oneself as womanist, black women are able to validate their experiences and render themselves subjects in lieu of objects. With the problematic of naming in mind, it is therefore necessary to exercise caution in distinguishing not only the differences between feminism and womanism, but in further clarifying the multiple uses and interpretations of womanism so as to avoid conceptual and methodological errors.

This is an appropriate place to shift the conversation. As I have established the grounds for the historical and literary development of womanism as a perspectival discourse reflecting the life experiences of black women, I can segue into a typological

18 Phillips, xx-xxi.
interpretation of womanist religious thought—citing major thinkers and key texts. In citing the “perspectival” dimension of womanist religious thought, I do so mindful of Katie Cannon’s assertions on the need for the development of a womanist canon. She writes of this canon: “there is a certain distinguishable body of writings by African American women characterized by fidelity in communicating the baffling complexities and the irreducible contradictions of the Black experience in America.”\(^{20}\) Taking their theoretical cues from Alice Walker, womanist religious scholars skillfully interweave the insights and truths of womanist thought with their experiences and methodological perspectives on concepts of God, the practice of wholistic living within community, and how best to draw upon the experiences of black women as repositories of wisdom for societal transformation. In doing so, they have created a discursive canon that reflects both themselves and the centrality of their critical reflections on religious experience. My central concern within this project is to develop an interpretation of relationality within black theological discourse built upon womanist religious thought and womanist literature.

Walker’s insights and accompanying source materials in womanist religious thought do not simply provide fodder and context for my assertions as a black theologian. I draw upon womanist religious scholarship in a way that emphasizes the capacity of these insights to both inform and transform the nature of black theological discourse. Mere acknowledge of womanist religious thought as useful for black theological discourse is an exercise in appropriation because there is no real consideration of its transformative capacities. Situating womanist thought as a means of engaging in

transformative dialogue, however, is representative of needed collaboration with, and engagement of, the intellectual and cultural materials of black women. Womanist ethicist Katie Cannon speaks to this issue of appropriation in the engaging of intellectual resources and methodologies—noting that appropriation entails “taking over” someone’s culture, educational capital, and discourse, “with desire beforehand to convert the thing taken over to one’s own use.” Reciprocity entails “giving back in kind [after receiving from others] and quality, mutually exchanging and being changed by [italics mine] each other’s data and resources.”

While Cannon does not explicitly reference black male scholars in her comments on appropriation and reciprocity, she does appeal to the idea of transformative dialogue within scholarly discourses, which informs how I read and analyze womanism as a black male theologian. In reading, for example, the work of Walker, Hurston, and Morrison, it is not a one-sided endeavor. As I reflect on the implications of womanist thought and these literary sources, I do so with an openness to discovering how transformative discourse can prompt a renewal. The renewal, as I understand it, is born out through my efforts at reconstructing the nature of relationality within black theological discourse and black masculinity through the lens of womanist relational orientations.

Womanist religious thought serves as a guide in this project for further deliberation and thinking about a particular theological and theo-ethical issue. Stacey Floyd-Thomas outlines central tenets of womanist ethics that correlate with Alice Walker’s original description: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive

---

22 Ibid.
self-love, and critical engagement. Specifically, as it pertains to the scope of this project, I emphasize traditional communalism. In *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (2006), Floyd-Thomas writes that traditional communalism builds upon “the various gifts, identities, and concerns of black people...in order to use every resource available to strengthen the community as a whole.”

Traditional communalism is a social disposition—an approach toward community-building that emphasizes the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” It is my contention that, based upon Walker’s emphasis here, there is a communal impetus embodied in the very character of womanist thought and womanist relational orientations. Womanism values the collective and holistic well-being of male and female selves within the context of community, what theologian Kelly Brown Douglas refers to as “right relationship” in black communal life. The “rightness” of human relationality is therefore largely a measure of the extent to which all persons are both their brothers’ and sisters’ keeper. This interrelated, mutually life-giving, and care-giving understanding of human activity among and toward others grounds this project’s understanding of reciprocal relationality. In the next portion of the chapter, mindful of Cannon’s push for an examination of the writings of black women as a central component of womanist thought, I will address the perspectival canon of womanist religious scholarship to highlight some of the representative texts, major themes, and methodological tools.

---

24 Ibid., 9.
Despite its growth, popularity, and compelling scholarship within the field of religious studies, womanist thought is still a relatively young intellectual discourse. Alice Walker was obviously responsible for the initial coining of the phrase “womanist” during the late 70s and early 80s, but ultimately, it was black women religion scholars in departments of religion and divinity schools who further developed “womanist” inroads into black religious studies. For our purposes at this juncture, I highlight central texts and thinkers in womanist theology and ethics as representatives of the pioneering work done within the field.

The motivation and incentive behind the development of womanist scholarship in black religious studies was rooted in both a need for black women’s unique self-expression(s) of their religious experiences as well as a firm distinction between their work and that of other disciplines. Finding no real theoretical or methodological “home” within male-dominated black theological discourse, which neglected the examination of sexism and misogyny, or within feminist discourses, which overlooked the problematic of matrices of race and class-based mechanisms of gendered oppression, womanists charted new ground in the creation of a discourse that specifically refocused and recast their varied experiences of marginalization onto a larger ideological platform.

The earliest articulations of womanist religious studies emerged through the scholarly essays of theologians and ethicists such Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Katie Cannon. Such essays were the first to distinguish black women’s critical

---

26 See Part V of *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, 1966-1979 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), and Part IV of *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2,
reflections on their religious experiences within the black church as a new mode of theological and theoethical reflection. As these women earned their doctorates, they moved on to become professors in established programs in religious and theological studies, producing the first systematic texts that elaborated upon the intersections between womanism, religion, and black communities. Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (1989) is a representative text within the field due to its poignant efforts to contrast womanist Christological interpretation to feminist Christology locating the significance of Christ in his redemptive activity in lieu of concerns with Jesus’ maleness. Further, Grant’s insistence upon the short-sightedness of white, feminist theology in failing to consider “the challenge of the darker sister” and her experiences pushed for a troubling of singular expressions of “women’s experiences” as context and source for doing theology.

Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), echoing the work of womanist biblical scholar Renita J. Weems, highlights a “survival quality of life” motif embodied in the biblical story of Hagar. Williams goes further in connecting Hagar’s experiences of isolation, abandonment, and surrogacy to the historical experiences of African American women. This text is both representative of the field and noteworthy because of its explicit placement of black women’s experiences as the ground for biblical insights about the relationship between God and marginalized women’s quest for liberation and wholeness from dehumanizing circumstances. Applying a different methodology, Katie Cannon’s work was pioneering 1980-1992 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992). See also, Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Women and the Church” in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, 141-152.

in the development of the field of womanist ethics. Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) demonstrated the power and profundity of black women’s literature to inform human activity, social analysis, and moral decision-making. Citing the work and life of luminaries such as Zora Neale Hurston, Cannon makes the case for an unmistakable reservoir of ethical values present within black women’s moral agency exhibited in their responses to racism, sexism, gender discrimination, and poverty. Situating black women’s literature as a “literature of necessity”\(^{28}\) that ventured into the everydayness of black life,\(^{29}\) Cannon uses the work of Hurston to demonstrate the repository of moral wisdom endemic to black female efforts to survive within racist, sexist, and classist social contexts.

The above referenced authors and their texts are by no means exhaustive, but are often cited as first wave womanist religious scholars who’ve been indispensable to the creation of womanist theology and ethics.\(^{30}\) There have also been numerous scholars since then who have built upon the work of the first generation of womanist religious thinkers. Kelly Brown Douglas’ work has taken up the topic of womanist Christology, and like Grant, emphasizes Christ’s redemptive work within community—what she formulates as an “ethic of communal wholeness.”\(^{31}\) Douglas’ *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) delves deeper into the failure of black Christian communities to effectively address the problems of sexism and homophobia within its pews—one of the first womanist texts to specifically cite homophobia as a major


\(^{29}\) Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 67.


theological problem that diminishes communal cohesion. In ethics, the scholarship of Emilie Townes and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, among others, stands on the shoulders of the pioneering work of Katie Cannon.

Townes, for example, situates the development of ethical values in the anti-lynching activism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett—seemingly echoing the interpretive move Cannon employed in drawing upon the literary scholarship of Zora Neale Hurston as a reservoir of moral wisdom. Townes’ later work, such as *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006), provides an extended critique of historically racist and sexist depictions of black women in order to demystify and deconstruct those perceived “wisdoms” and their effect on the institutional and political treatment of black women in contemporary settings. Stacey Floyd-Thomas’ *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (2006) offers a systematized outlining of the varied sources available for the construction of womanist ethics—highlighting the literary analysis of black female writing, the sociology of black female culture and identity, and black female historiography.

Finally, there is currently a discussion of a third wave in womanist religious thought, which is primarily concerned with the topic of the evolution of womanism within the 21st century religious, theological, and ethical landscapes. Monica Coleman’s edited volume *Ain’t I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (2013) is one of the representative texts on evolution of womanist discourse. Discussing topics ranging from religious pluralism, popular culture, gender and sexuality, and politics, Coleman’s volume charts womanism’s development and its influence on male and female scholars of

---

religion and disciplines related to black cultural studies. Third wave womanist religious thought, in Coleman’s view, also clarifies those areas of departure from the originators of the discourse:

Third wave womanist religious thought as an ideology does and does not espouse a certain politic… I resist rigid definition [sic] of third wave womanist religious thought. I prefer to say there are “marks” of third wave womanist religious thought. That is, third wave womanist religious thought: (1) engages the religious lives of women of African descent; (2) maintains a goal of justice, survival, freedom, liberation, and/or quality of life; (3) understands itself to both draw upon and also depart from a tradition of womanist religious scholarship; (4) engages work and thinkers both inside and outside black religious scholarship.33

Third wave womanist discourse makes use of the “past” in which it was formed, while also being open to new perspectives and moving in divergent directions. Second wave womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas makes space for a third wave, noting that “womanism is a movement with multiple voices, cultures, and experiences, rather than a school or a canon that prefers one voice, culture, or experience of ‘woman’ or of ‘the Black woman’ over others.”34 Both Floyd-Thomas and Coleman speak of womanism as embodying the capacity for polyvocality—drawing upon multiple perspectives—multiple voices—multiple theoretical and methodological orientations.

As suggested from the above, womanist religious thought is solidly linked to the life-blood and cultural mores generated by black female communities in North America, but nevertheless possesses the capacity for evolution and growth to meet the changing needs as well as address contemporary theological and ethical issues of our times.35

33 Coleman, ed., Ain’t I a Womanist Too?, 19.
35 Mitchem, 67-85.
Emilie Townes speaks to the inextricable link between black women, their experiences, and their intellectual and artistic productions and womanism in terms of a “bias.” Bias need not be negative; rather, this bias speaks instead to an unapologetic centralizing of black women’s religious experiences as the medium through which theological and ethical assertions are evaluated.  

Womanism represents a discourse for black women, by black women; in this sense, therefore, womanism is restricted discourse, but what are the ramifications of what such a restriction entails? How might “cultural/racial outsiders”—namely, black male religion scholars, approach and make use of womanist religious scholarship? I address this question in the following section on the restricted nature of womanist religious discourse.

**Womanist Religious Thought as Restricted Discourse**

Womanist religious thought is protected space. There is indication of this protected stance within the foundational writings from Alice Walker. The second component of Walker’s description of womanist/womanism includes a reference to the necessity of self-insulation and group solidarity within black female life and cultures—and advocating occasional “separatism”, periodically, for reasons related to health, well-being, and personal fulfillment. As it pertains to womanist religious thought, beyond the writing of fiction, I would add that in constructing womanist space(s)—a foundation upon which they can do their own work, there is a protectionism that undergirds womanist intellectual space. In her essay, “A Womanist Journey,” theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher, speaks to

---

37 Gillman, 85.
the need for a protective stance on the part of womanists toward the discourse. She writes, “The world has cruelly placed black women at the bottom of the totem pole. This requires us to protect one of our few oases.”  

One may be tempted to read this assertion of protectionism as rooted in hostility. However, the matter is actually more pragmatic and cautious. The protective stance toward womanism is a way to defend the discourse’s faithfulness to the established tradition and canon, as well as a way to ensure its survival within the deeply contested terrain and power-laden identity politics that often undergird the intellectual productions of academic disciplines. Baker-Fletcher clarifies this point further—harkening back to some Cannon’s observations on appropriation and reciprocity in womanist discourse. Baker-Fletcher’s protective posturing regarding the democratic space(s) within which womanist religious thought is disseminated is in part rooted in a hermeneutic of suspicion toward non-black, non-female communities and the potential for their co-optation of the discursive spaces of women of color. Baker-Fletcher is vigilant of, for example, the historical practices among white Americans of “[stealing] the most creative, cultural productions of black people.”

As noted in previous sections, there is a deeply political slant to the issue of naming within womanist discourse. As a black male theologian engaging womanist religious thought from my specific social location, it important to eschew any preoccupation or concern with naming—such debates are largely internal and specific to the black women who self-identity as womanist. Womanists ultimately hold the final

---

40 Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 132.
word on how they reflect on and use their identity markers. The substance of my work revolves around dialogue and listening; for “dialogue, mutuality, and respect” with womanists “are acceptable, even hoped for, but naming is not”\cite{Coleman2007} As Karen Baker-Fletcher has noted, womanist religious scholarship is representative of a protected space to the extent that it reflects a segment of the life-worlds and wisdoms of black women—a discursive site for the construction of black female identity and the rebuilding and reconfiguring of black female selfhood and self-expression.

One may wonder how womanist thought could be beneficial to non-black, non-female communities given these protective stances. Particularly, I am interested in what possibilities are available for black male scholars of religion who seek to use womanist religious scholarship in their projects, mindful of the restrictive boundaries previously established. In my own case, I apply lessons from womanist literature and womanist religious thought to the problem of relationality in black theological discourse, even while recognizing the great care womanists have expended in distinguishing themselves as a group as ardent in the defense of their discourse as they are in their gracious sharing of resources and openness to dialogue.

At this point, I make a turn toward the ways in which womanist religious thought yields an instructive component for black male theological discourse. Yet in doing so, I make the following observation—to which I alluded at the start of this section: as a black male theologian making an effort to draw upon the protected terrain of womanist religious thought in my work, I am, in the words of Laura Gillman, a “cultural outsider.”

Gillman’s *Unassailable Feminisms: Reappraising Feminist, Womanist, and Mestiza*

\cite{Coleman2007} Coleman, *Ain’t I a Womanist Too?*, 17.
Identity Politics (2010) offers insights into how members of dominant groups and cultures can address and respond to the cultural productions of marginalized communities in ways that promote social transformation and deny the obscuring of said communities’ collective and individual voices.

The critical step in this process, which I keep at the fore of my mindset, is beginning with the genuine awareness of the limitations that contour my grasping of the lives, worldviews, and experiences of the marginalized communities I engage. As Gillman notes:

...because of the culturally and physically segregating practices that result from our current racist social structures, the cultural and biological outsider, generally speaking, is less able to understand and appreciate the nuances of marginalized cultural expressions or grasp their perspective from the location they occupy.43

Acknowledging my partial, unfinished perspective, it is my responsibility as a cultural outsider draw upon womanist religious and literary scholars’ writings as a means of “[reinterpreting and reframing] what is already ostensibly ‘known,’ ultimately locating the newly learned particulars within larger cultural patterns, social relations, and historical shifts in ways that are socially transformative.”44 From this “partial” perspective as an outsider, I acknowledge the restrictive boundaries of womanist religious thought and clarify how womanism offers a corrective to my understanding.

**Womanist Religious Thought as Instructive Discourse**

As the basis for the restricted nature of womanist religious thought has been established, we are now ready to begin a more explicit examination of womanist religious thought and its instructive application within this project and the development of

43 Gillman, 87.
44 Ibid., 89.
reciprocal relationality. I argued that womanist religious discourse serves as a protected discursive space for black women. Yet, while womanist discourse must be acknowledged and respected as such, this observation should not suggest that womanist thought fails to embody an instructive and self-reflexive purpose for discerning persons beyond the black female community. In “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond,” Patricia Hill-Collins touches on some of the problems that emerge from the multiple uses and the politics of naming that undergird feminist and womanist philosophy. However, she also provides some helpful commentary for how one can draw upon womanism mindful of Gillman’s admonition to engage the perspectives from marginalized communities in manners useful for transformative dialogue. Hill-Collins writes:

[There] is a distinction between describing black women’s historical responses to racial and gender oppression as being womanist, and using womanism as a visionary term delineating an ethical or ideal vision of humanity for all people [italics mine]. Identifying the liberatory potential within black women’s communities that emerges from concrete historical experiences remains quite different from claiming that black women have already arrived at this ideal, “womanist” endpoint. Refusing to distinguish carefully between these two meanings of womanism thus collapses the historically real and the future ideal into one privileged position for African American women in the present.45

Taking Hill-Collins’ tone on naming seriously, as well as looking for interpretive possibilities that centralize transformative dialogue, I contend that womanist religious scholarship is best suited for this project as a “visionary ideal” through which I can interpret human relationality and black male identity formation. In drawing upon womanist relational orientations as an ideal—the lynchpin for this project’s envisioning

of reciprocity, there is space for the formation of new applications of womanist thought within black male theological discourse.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas has observed that the moral wisdom and the intellectual insights from the previous generations of womanist scholars have enabled us now to receive “these epistemological treasures so that [we] can do womanism even if [we] cannot be womanists.” In standing on the shoulders of womanist religious thought as a visionary ideal in the construction of reciprocal relationality, Floyd-Thomas’ optimism regarding the use of womanist scholarship by non-womanists offers added encouragement that womanist religious thought embodies an instructive component useful for black male scholars. Approaching womanist source materials as one seeking instruction necessitates first, as I’ve noted, a respect for their unique location as black women with specific attention to how their social location as black women nuances their theological and ethical perspectives in ways distinct from my own as a black man. Further, respecting the boundaries of womanist religious discourse also means respecting the protective posture many may take during the process of exchange and dialogue. As “cultural outsiders,” black male scholars like myself who privilege womanist religious thought must draw upon the collective work womanists have done in an effort to strengthen black theological discourse by providing alternative discursive framings do theology in ways that build strategies for more cohesive understandings of human relationships and for the rethinking of black masculinity. The final spaces of this chapter explore the application of womanist religious thought and philosophical ethics toward the construction of reciprocal relationality. Here, I discuss my interpretation of reciprocal

\[46\] Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 4.
relationality and attempt to defend the hermeneutics of reciprocity offered from Martin Buber and M. Shawn Copeland.

**Reciprocal Relationality**

*Womanist Ways of Relating*

One of the prologues of this chapter was provided by early 20th century writer, activist, and scholar, Anna Julia Cooper, in which she spoke of the mutuality, and the self-in-community framing that lies at the heart of this project’s exploration of reciprocity. Beyond her many intellectual achievements and her strident defense of education as the proper means of retraining and progressing the black race, Cooper was a particularly noteworthy figure for her insistence on the uplifting of African American women as the true litmus test of the black community’s flourishing and overall well-being. In a critique of the premium placed upon black men’s upward mobility as a measure of black progress, Cooper offers an alternative read:

> It is absurd to quote statistics showing the Negro’s bank account and rent rolls, to point to the hundreds of newspapers edited by colored men and lists of lawyers, doctors, professors, D.D.’s, LL.D.’s, etc., etc., etc., while the source from which the life-blood of the race is to flow is subject to taint and corruption in the enemy’s camp.

Cooper based her activism on behalf of women upon the premise that the “whole is sum of all its parts,” and that the “character of the parts will determine the characteristics of the whole.” That is, what affected one member of the community, affected all. As black women, in Cooper’s view, were particularly suited to offer insight on the race

---

49 Ibid., 644.
question as minorities within a sexist and racist society, Cooper therefore surmised that increasing the station and cultivating the talents of black women in particular would result in a balanced and just society for everyone. This interrelated conception of the black community and human relationships as demonstrated in Cooper’s thought, neither putting male over female, nor female over male, speaks to this project’s interpretation of reciprocal relationality in black theological discourse.

Humanity has its significance, purpose, and ultimate functionality within the context of community and other selves. In a teleological sense, the end of human action and behavior is connected to the ends of others. The communitarian structure of womanism presents an embodied reflection of my formulation of reciprocal relationality by centralizing the experiences of black women. This project, as I have noted, begins with the idea that there is something profound about womanist ways of relating—that there is something useful about black female epistemologies and relational approaches in black theological discourse. In an effort to unpack and build upon the nature of reciprocal womanist relational orientations, it may be helpful to consider the primordial underpinnings of such relationships within the context of community. For this part of the discussion, I turn to the philosophical ethics of Martin Buber—putting his theorizing of dialogical relationality into conversation with womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland’s interpretation of Eucharistic Solidarity, in order to outline the crux of my interpretation of reciprocity within human relationality.

On the Appeal to Martin Buber’s Philosophical Ethics

Before delving into the components of Martin Buber’s ethical framework, a discussion of the rationale for appealing to Buber within this project is necessary. Why is
this the case? First, I invoke again some of my earlier stated concerns about true reciprocal engagement with womanist religious thought in contrast to mere appropriation. As stated before, this project builds on womanist religious thought and womanist literature as a tool to engage the multidimensionality of black women’s lives in such a way as to incorporate their various understandings and valuations of human relationships into the central impetus for the doing of black male theological discourse and rethinking black masculinity. It stands to reason, therefore, that in all assertions—in all components of the project, womanism cannot be trumped by either the ethical framework of Martin Buber or the engagement with black male theologians in later chapters. Womanist religious thought must be the driving force behind my discursive work and not a mere experiential insight or compelling series of intellectual musings.50

Given the parameters of this project with its deep ties to womanist religious thought to which I’ve gone to great lengths to illustrate, I must therefore answer the question of why the writings of a white and male religious philosopher offer a useful inroad to my reflections on womanist relational orientations. A useful strategy in addressing this matter may be possible through an appeal to other womanist religious scholars who likewise have deviated, methodologically or theoretically, from the perspectival canon of black women’s writings that has been central within womanist discourse. They provide an example of how to make use of such non-normative

50 I must particularly single out the advising of Stacey Floyd-Thomas in pushing me to think through this issue of the representation of womanist thought as the central theoretical and methodological frame for this project.
sources\textsuperscript{51} in way that does not betray womanist ideological commitments. As an example of this practice, I turn to the work of theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher.

Baker-Fletcher’s *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (2006), begins in the preface stating her “integrative” approach to theological construction

> It is important for readers to know that the approach to theology I employ here is integrative in several respects. Womanist theology does not separate theology from real-lived, concrete existential concerns. Womanist approaches to theology…are interdisciplinary.\textsuperscript{52}

Drawing upon this interdisciplinary focus, Baker-Fletcher speaks on necessity of engaging a plethora of intercultural, theological, and interfaith resources for her theological construction as a Christian womanist and encourages other scholars to do so as well. Furthermore, and this is the particular takeaway of the following comment, Baker-Fletcher is not immune to making use of alternative sources of knowledge wherever it may be found in the process of doing her constructive work:

> …why shouldn’t twenty-first-century Christian theology learn from theologians of diverse backgrounds and cultures, who are not simply interesting “others” but who are divine gifted members of the body of Christ upon whom we are interdependent? Moreover, why shouldn’t theologians who are committed to rigorous scholarship give credit where credit is due for angles of vision into the truth of God’s nature within the body of Christ, from whatever culture the contribution to Christian faith may come [italics mine]?\textsuperscript{53}

As suggested in the above statement, Baker-Fletcher takes a pragmatic approach toward the usage of source materials that assist in the development of her theology. As a

\textsuperscript{51} That is, intellectual resources not specifically cited by womanists as central to their scholarly output.
\textsuperscript{52} Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), ix.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., x.
womanist theologian, Baker-Fletcher thus takes advantage of interpretive freedom to both include the contributions and perspectives of black women and other women of color, as well as embrace the shared insights available “from Euro-American culture that are consistent with womanist attention to praxis…and the integration of ontological and existential concerns.”

Speaking further about the shared resources available from Euro-American intellectual traditions, in the introduction of the text, Baker-Fletcher gives explicit attention to her use of process theism to elaborate upon her womanist insights regarding the Trinity. Echoing her preface comments regarding her theology as integrative and interdisciplinary, Baker-Fletcher cites the process philosophical thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, along with Wesleyan Christian relational theology, and womanist theology and ethics as critical academic influences on the work. Baker-Fletcher gives more credence to the work of Thomas Jay Oord, an “evangelical relational theist” who fuses process theistic thought and evangelical theological claims—with particular attention to the evangelical belief that “God is perfect in love, almighty, without beginning or end, one, personal, free, omniscient, the Creator and Sustainer, both transcendent and immanent in relation to the world, the ground of hope for the final victory of good over evil, and the proper object of worship.”

Baker-Fletcher goes on to assert that Oord’s ability to respect essential tenets of the Christian witness even while employing process theism provides an example and

54 Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, x.
55 Ibid., l.
influence directed toward her efforts to “conserve key tenets in Christian doctrine”—namely resurrection, the healing tradition, prayer, the Trinitarian understanding of God.  

Baker-Fletcher also cites influences of other white scholars, including Clark Pinnock’s “open theism,” as well as linking Whiteheadian metaphysics with John Wesley’s spirituality. However, in reviewing these elements of Baker-Fletcher’s integrative theological assertions on the trinity from a womanist perspective, the most important point to consider is the clarity with which Baker-Fletcher demonstrates that she is not limited solely to womanist theology and ethics as the sole methodological or theoretical frame of reference, despite her clear identification as a Christian, womanist (in that order) theologian.

Drawing upon Baker-Fletcher’s admittedly pragmatic gathering of seemingly non-normative source materials to engage in womanist theological construction, I see my usage of Martin Buber’s philosophical ethics as an effort to share the resources of Euro-American intellectual and philosophical traditions in order to find a synergistic complementarity within womanist religious thought in order to help unpack the reciprocal framework that this project develops. Paralleling some of Baker-Fletcher’s above stated interdisciplinary motivations, in sum, I draw upon both womanist religious thought and Martin Buber’s philosophical insights in order to acknowledge the many intellectual predecessors who’ve devoted much time and energy to the concept of human relationality better and more cogently than I ever could. In maintaining this mode of theoretical and methodological openness to those “angles of vision” that possibly offer

56 Ibid., 4.
fresh, intellectual “manna” to the work that I am trying to do, I am thus able to draw upon non-normative resources while remaining faithful to the centrality of womanist religious thought within this project. With this pragmatic openness in mind, using Baker-Fletcher as an example, I can now engage the ethical framing in the work of Martin Buber.\footnote{Another womanist scholar, Monica Coleman, makes use of process thought for theological construction. See Coleman, {	extit{Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology}} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).}

{	extit{Martin Buber and Reciprocity}}

I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.\footnote{Audre Lorde, {	extit{Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches}} (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 147.}

—Audre Lorde

The strength of Martin Buber’s ethical framework is the elaboration he provides on the intrinsic dimensions of human personality and activity within the context of social relationships. As ethicist James Walters notes of Buber’s relational ethics, the basic contribution of Buberian thought to the philosophy of religion was “his basic insight that real, genuine being is being in relation”—“the only authentic life is the relational life.”\footnote{James W. Walters, {	extit{Martin Buber and Feminist Ethics: The Priority of the Personal}} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 45.}

Buber’s ethics emerge from engagement with life in the real—the concrete dimension of human activities and experiences. This framing is most explicit in {	extit{I and Thou}}, which I now discuss.

In {	extit{I and Thou}}, Martin Buber notes that true “relation is reciprocity.”\footnote{Martin Buber, {	extit{I and Thou}}, 58.} Buber goes further in his description of this relational framing of reciprocity through the word
pairing, “I-You,” which establishes “a mode of existence”\textsuperscript{62} between subject and world. There are thus three life spheres in which the mode of the subject’s relationship to the world emerges: life with nature, life with men\textsuperscript{63}, and life with spiritual beings.\textsuperscript{64} Buber, therefore, espouses a view of the human as relational. I particularly hone in on the second sphere, as it addresses the proper I-You dual subject relation that brings Buber’s theory into focus and that constitutes the concrete world of human relation. There are several initial clarifications that must be addressed in Buber’s interpretation of the “life with men [sic]”. First, I-You is distinct from I-It. I-You is the meeting of two subjects, each maintaining its distinctive property(ies), personality—its alterity.\textsuperscript{65} I-You is subject-to-subject relationship—making primary both subjects’ full entirety. Of this dual subjectivity in reciprocal relations, Buber writes:

> Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said, there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.\textsuperscript{66}

Here, Buber also seems to make an inference to the impossibility of \textit{possession} within truly reciprocal relations. The fullness of You is, after all, without “borders”, meaning, that the other within the relationship it is not bound by the limitations of an objectified, partial designation of recognition from the I. This is a critical observation, particularly when we consider the nature of gendered hierarchical relationships between men and

---

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{63} Buber’s framing is highly masculinized, a point I address later in the chapter.
\textsuperscript{64} Bub\textsuperscript{er}, 56-57.
\textsuperscript{65} Alterity is “distinct separateness.”
\textsuperscript{66} Buber, 55.
women, which often have their grounding in antiquated, outdated notions of the separation between the sexes.\textsuperscript{67}

The recognition of the subjectivity of the other in Buber’s, in addition to resisting the possession of others, also rejects the objectification of others. To assert the You-ness of another subject is ultimately to recognize that he or she is not an object—the other is not defined in terms of the representations of the observer:

When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among other things, nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities…he is You and fills the firmament…everything else lives in his light.\textsuperscript{68}

I-It, however, is representative of an asymmetrical relation that lacks reciprocity. Whereas, the “You” is a full subject, “It” is lesser—“It” has not the same degree of agency and fullness as indicated in “You.” Granted, this philosophical assertion is largely linguistic; yet, this observation cannot be dismissed outright, as the words and descriptors we use with and toward each other “do not state something that might exist outside [us]; they establish a mode of existence.”\textsuperscript{69} Relational language matters. Buber’s insistence upon the dialogical totality and entirety of the human self sets up the basis for his understanding of reciprocity, which this project draws upon in concert with womanist thought.

Despite the strengths of Buber’s heuristic, there are problems. Namely, the subject of Buber’s relational I-You pairing is masculine. Most of the subjects in his

\textsuperscript{67} See Elizabeth Spelman, \textit{Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Ch. 2.
\textsuperscript{68} Buber, 59.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 53.
descriptions of the “I” and the other are centered on male figures: “Man becomes an I through a You.” 70 The masculine tendencies throughout Buber’s writing raise questions regarding the efficacy of his ethical system for the material, concrete experiences of women, particularly women of color. Furthermore, if, as Buber notes, all “actual life” is found in the encounter between the subjectivity of the I and You, does this not then speak to a material existence?71 “Actual life” would seem to be an acknowledgment of the material, enfleshed life-worlds of the human subjects in question. Given this acknowledgment, one may wonder why Buber’s theory of human relationships and reciprocity appears to be completely abstracted with no substantial discussion of concrete human communities, regions, or customs—save those of his own. To give Buber’s theory some life—some embodied elaboration beyond the abstractions of his framing, I place his dialogical view of human reciprocal relationships in conversation with M. Shawn Copeland’s theory of embodied Eucharistic solidarity as a model for human activity within the context of community.

**M. Shawn Copeland’s Eucharistic Solidarity**

Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (2010) provides a Christological interpretation of black women’s bodies in which black female embodiment provides a context for thinking about the Eucharist, solidarity, and Christian community. Central to my concerns within this project, namely the use of womanist religious thought as a lens through which I can develop a hermeneutic of reciprocal relationality, is Copeland’s usage of the *humanum* as a conception of radical human selfhood that is relational in orientation and movement. Before explicitly discussing this element of

---

70 Buber, 80.
71 Ibid., 62.
Copeland’s thinking, background on the development Copeland’s notion of embodied Eucharistic solidarity is needed.

Citing the theological and ethical problems that accompany theologies that prioritize, male and white notions of embodiment, Copeland suggests an alternative reading of the black female body. The broken body of Christ, a casualty of the Roman state, “provokes our interrogation of the new imperial deployment and debasement of bodies” who have likewise suffered and died at the hands of empire.\(^{72}\) Copeland’s thesis on black female embodiment as the Christological point of reference illustrates a striking, perhaps obvious, parallel. Referencing the historical destruction of the bodies of the black female enslaved as the “farthest down” victims of American imperialism as fully expressed vis-à-vis slavocracy, and other contemporary sources of black female marginalization, the suffering black woman’s body invokes the *memoria passionis*—a vivid reminder of Christ’s suffering and death, which then offers up a challenge to our collective amnesia, neglect, and indifference toward the suffering of black bodies.\(^{73}\) In highlighting the body of Jesus as a chilling and painful reminder of the inhumane acts against black female selfhood, Copeland suggests a linkage between the messianic functions of Jesus’ crucified body that bears a remarkable semblance to the bodies of black women; black womens’ bodies mirror the body of Christ.

Following Copeland’s turn to the black female body in theological anthropology is her formulation of Eucharistic solidarity. Eucharistic solidarity is a praxis-oriented envisioning of communality that rejects “the dynamics of domination,” and provides “a

\(^{72}\) M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 84.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 3.
new way of being in relation to God, to others, to self.”\textsuperscript{74} In grounding theological anthropology in black women’s varied experiences of racism and sexism—in effect making black women the “new anthropological subject”,\textsuperscript{75} Copeland accomplishes a few tasks. First, Copeland, like Grant’s \textit{White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus}, provides a womanist hermeneutic that consists of rethinking the interplay between the body of Christ and black female embodiment, illustrating how black women’s bodies are possible of conveying theological import. Copeland’s interpretation is also an act of methodological defiance that speaks to the “audacious, willful, and courageous behavior” that Alice Walker situates within womanist sensibilities. Copeland’s insistence upon rendering black female bodies as subjects of theological anthropology embodies a “stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought” in American religious and theological studies—any act that places black women at the fore of a white and masculine political and intellectual context is ultimately an act of courage.\textsuperscript{76}

Copeland speaks to this defiant courage when she notes that

\begin{quote}
The mere linguistic convergence of \textit{Eucharist} and \textit{racism} disturbs. It makes us queasy, uncomfortable. It should. Brining these realities together \textit{defies} [italics mine] all religious, theological, and moral logic, for they signify opposing horizons of meaning. Eucharist and racism implicate bodies—raced and gendered bodies, the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

Second, Copeland adopts the Eucharist to suggest an embodied model of solidarity—implicating the movement and \textit{agency} of black women’s bodies in the process of creating this solidarity. In the Eucharist, the bodies of Christians gather and

\textsuperscript{74} Copeland, 126.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{But Some of Us Are Brave}, eds. Glora T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, xvii.
\textsuperscript{77} Copeland, 107.
consume the bread and wine, which are believed to represent the body and blood of Christ. Through Copeland’s interpretive framing, black women set the terms of relational encounter and thus “embrace with love and hope those who…are despised and marginalized, even as [they] embrace with love and forgiveness those whose sins spawn the conditions for the oppression and suffering of others.” Within this space—within this Eucharistic framework, it is the initiation of mutuality—of interrelated care, without regard for sex/gender that is most compelling.

Finally, Copeland’s Eucharistic interpretation of embodied solidarity clarifies and exposes the problems associated with privileging male embodiment. By making black women the primary enactors and conduits of Eucharistic solidarity, Copeland is making the effort to insist upon subjectivity of all human beings male and female. In the Eucharistic space, both black male and female bodies become living sacraments bespeaking the “real-symbolic unity between what we are as humans, even as the de-creation of black bodies clarifies the cost of daring to em-body Christ in a morally degraded context of white racist supremacy.” Black bodies, particularly black female bodies, within this interpretive framing, contest the racist and sexist ontologies of black embodiment. Ultimately, Copeland’s Eucharistic solidarity pushes for a troubling—a problematizing of the premium that has been placed on male-ness and male embodiment within black theological discourse, and religious studies generally. In responding to Copeland, one is compelled to be authentically engaged in a praxis of solidarity with

78 Ibid., 127.
79 Ibid., 2.
80 Ibid., 125.
women, and further, to have an honest confrontation with the nature and meaning of subjectivity between black men and women.

The dynamism of Copeland’s Eucharistic framing of solidarity which also parallels some of the same elements of Buber’s situating of the human subject within his relational ethics, begins with a radical conception of the human self as reciprocal in orientation and movement which she models after the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Of Jesus’ organic and reciprocal practice of his masculinity and embodied spirituality, Copeland writes:

Through [Jesus’] preaching and practices, living and behavior, Jesus performed masculinity in ways that opposed patriarchal expressions of maleness through coercive power, control and exploitation of “other” bodies…He nurtured men and women with word and touch, bread and wine, and water and fish. He reached out in compassion to the infirm, and took the lowly and forgotten, children and women to his heart.\(^81\)

Here it is obvious that in Copeland’s view, Jesus was “the Christ”, not solely because of any assertions emphasizing the hypostatic union, or any other such formulations of divinity. The true essence and significance of Christ is defined and measured by the ways his life inspires and informs a higher understanding of human activity in the context of community—“Jesus signifies and teaches a new way of being human.”\(^82\) Copeland refers to this radical idea of human selfhood as humanum, which she borrows from Edward Schillebeeckx.\(^83\)

Humanum refers to a vision of full humanity—a goal to be realized and achieved through the enactment and practice of social justice and care. Humanum, therefore,

\(^81\) Ibid., 63.
\(^82\) Copeland, 65.
\(^83\) Ibid., 164, n. 25. See also Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus: An Experiment in Christology, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
represents a process of human growth and evolution toward a higher consciousness of humanity in relation to God and humankind:

Our search for the *humanum* is oriented by the radical demands of the incarnation of God; it reaches its term in the dynamic realization of human personhood. Thus, *to be a human person* [italics mine] is to be (1) a creature made by God; (2) person-in-community, living in flexible, resilient, just relationships with others; (3) an incarnate spirit, i.e., embodied in race, gender, sex and sexuality, culture; (4) capable of working out essential freedom through personal responsibility in time and space; (5) a social being; (6) unafraid of difference and interdependence; and (7) willing daily to struggle…for the survival, creation, future of all life.\(^{84}\)

The *humanum* concept yields the following theological pronouncement on the need and value of a reciprocal interpretation of the human self within the context of community: only in and among others in self-giving love is human selfhood found. God in the person of Christ was *humanum* par excellence, and black women, who Copeland situates as at the center of theological anthropology, as they have historically demonstrated the same embodied spirituality and solidarity exemplified in the life of Christ, represent *humanum* in a way that is instructive for other communities. We must not lose sight of the deeply reciprocal and relational themes that lay within Copeland’s framework. Her dynamic reading of the human self within community “entails recognition [italics mine] of the humanity of the “other” as human, along with regard for the “other in her (and his) own otherness.”\(^{85}\)

Copeland’s assertion of the need for mutual, interrelated recognition within the praxis and practice of embodied relational solidarity, echoes the mutually-derived subject-to-subject relationships outlined by Martin Buber. Copeland further emphasizes

---

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 94.
this point in the following statement in which she links the recognition of the other with the principle of relational openness:

The principle of openness flows from this recognition and regard. Openness implies receptivity, that is, a willingness to receive the other and to be received by the other in mutual relationship, to take on obligation with and to the other.\textsuperscript{86}

The reciprocal dimensions of both Buber and Copeland’s relational focus that helps establish for a basis for this project’s framing of reciprocal relationality is their highlighting of 1) the human being or subject as relational and social in nature, and 2) an ethic of care that recognizes the subjectivity of others and takes an interest in the other subject’s well-being and fulfillment. What both Buber and Copeland centralize, from their respective ideological commitments and methodologies, is an understanding of human personality that takes on an obligation for the other in which persons experience full humanity only within the context of service and care with and toward others. Buber assists our efforts by giving us a sense of what reciprocal relationships mean at the primordial level of human social life. Copeland grounds this primordial interpretation in the lives and bodies of black women via the trope of Eucharistic solidarity. Buber and Copeland both, however, resound the clarion call for a heightened sense of what it means to be human. Copeland’s humanum promotes a vision of human be(ing) that is only fully human through the care and grace extended toward others which is embodied through Eucharistic practices of solidarity. Buber gives us a useful starting point to think about such a conception of humanity as relational, but it is Copeland’s womanist oriented conception of the humanum within Eucharistic solidarity that enfleshes (and blackens) the heuristic of reciprocity that this project seeks to ultimately develop.

\textsuperscript{86} Copeland, 94.
In nearing the conclusion of this chapter’s theoretical and methodological considerations, it is useful to consider some implications of who or what could model this reciprocal relationality as framed above. The groundwork has been laid, but further attention to possible sources and figurations from womanist thought requires investigation. Specifically, I seek reciprocal models within womanism that will assist further in bringing to life the relational framing that I’ve outlined in this chapter. On this issue I find recourse through womanist literature—namely, the novels *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. That examination is the subject of the next chapter.

Before addressing womanist literature as a source for the construction and adaptation of models of reciprocal relationality, a few words on the necessity for reciprocal models can provide context for that mode of interpretation.

**On the Need for Models of Reciprocity**

In the essay “Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” Alice Walker comments upon the unequivocal necessity for alternative resources in artistic creativity. We need “models” in our work, thought, and life in order to enlarge our perspective\(^\text{87}\)—prompting a challenge to move toward a larger, greater, and more robust imagination toward the human condition that initially thought possible. More than simply an avenue through which persons can compare and contrast themselves, models actually save us from a one-sided perspective on life; they give us a sense of life beyond the veil of our own limited, restricted judgments and momentary affectations:

> The absence of models, in literature as in life…is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit

---

and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence.\(^8^8\)

While Walker was obviously speaking here in terms of literary artistic production, I should think that the same principles can be applied to theological discourse. After all, as Gordon Kaufman reminds us, theological reflection is imaginative human construction with a bent toward the uncovering of the meaning of life orientation.\(^8^9\) At the core, human life orientation, as has been demonstrated through the work of Buber and Copeland’s relational thought, is social, and thus, is concerned with the manifestations of how social life is played out. It seems reasonable therefore to apply Walker’s assertion of model necessity in the arts to our concerns with theological discourse.

The work that this project seeks to accomplish likewise uses of a variety of models, tropes, and figurations to refocus relational self-understanding as cast within black male theological discourse and black masculinity studies. In fusing Copeland’s conception of the *humanum* within her Eucharistic relational framing with the primordial underpinnings of Buber’s relational interpretation of humanity, I outline a similar hermeneutical move which ultimately emphasizes a heightened sense of the human self as relational within the context of communal life. In transitioning to the next chapter, there is more to be said about the care that must be exercised in selecting “models” that are most beneficial for this project’s formulation of reciprocal relationality.

The selection of these models is critical, serious venture largely because I am doing so through the lens of womanist religious thought and womanist literature. It is vital that my model of construction and reconstruction is done from an interpretative

\(^8^8\) Ibid., 4.
\(^8^9\) Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. 
space characterized by a self-reflexive process that is non-appropriating. Womanist source materials cannot do the “heavy lifting.” What I mean by this is that the usage of such models in this project is meant to provide grounding for an interrogation of the nature of reciprocal relationality as cast within womanist thought. There are at least two cases in which model selection and interpretation can slip into acts of intellectual appropriation with no consideration of charting new terrain in either black male theological discourse of the reconstruction of black masculinity. Making use of the work of Anthony Pinn and Delores Williams assists my concerns on this matter.

*Manish Boy Positionality*

One possible shortcoming of this kind of appropriation of womanist insight is revealed in terms of what theologian Anthony Pinn has framed as the “manish boy” epistemology—which in effect renders black male bodies lacking moral and ethical weight, or worse, invisible—having no such responsibilities at all. This phenomenon within black theological discourse basically creates positionalities for the bodies of black women and men in which black female bodies are “fixed” in specific locations, whereas the bodies of black men enjoy more fluid and ambiguous movements.\(^90\)

Reconsidering, for example, the work of Copeland, the concern is thus stated: to make use of Copeland’s *humanum*-oriented Eucharistic model in which the life-giving, Other-directed qualities of black women’s ways of relating are central could in effect be read as an effort to situate black women as (fixed) proxies for an internal, self-reflexive, social process that black male theologians (and black men generally) can and should initiate ourselves—thereby rendering black women the sole bearers of responsibility for

---

\(^90\) Pinn, 60.
correcting problematic theological shortcomings and masculine anxieties/hang-ups. The message from such a cautionary note is therefore crystal clear. The regeneration of reciprocal models in black male theological discourse is never free of the moral and ethical obligations that accompany the use of womanist thought. Care must be extended to foster and cultivate an openness to transformation of self as a result of the wisdoms and truths that may emerge through the sharing of resources and mutual exchange with womanist source materials.

Theological Surrogacy

A final problem related to appropriation that must be addressed is the issue of theological surrogacy. Here, I am particularly mindful of the work of Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993). Drawing upon the Old Testament story of Hagar’s isolation in the wilderness, as a single mother, shunned by her enslavers, Williams opines that the experiences of black women in America resemble that of a type “wilderness,” which then creates a biblical foundation for womanist theology that resonates with black women.\(^{91}\) Williams devotes a later chapter to discuss the role of surrogacy as a historical reality for the black female enslaved, and even post-Emancipation. During slavery, black women often found themselves oppressed by coerced surrogacy—particularly for their sexual, reproductive, and “nurturing” capacities—all of which was directed in such a way that black women’s enslavers were the direct beneficiaries. Likewise, in post-antebellum society, black

---

women still had the pressures of economic well-being cast upon them, which yielded similar abuses against their bodies and personhood even while being legally “free”.\textsuperscript{92}

Much like the problem stated above regarding the invisibility of black male bodies, Williams words also point to the problem of heightening the visibility of black women’s bodies by making black women responsible for correcting the varied ills and pathologies that have infected our theologies and interpretations of what it means to thrive in the context of community. The caution, therefore, to use Williams’ words, for my framing of reciprocal relationality by drawing upon womanist thought, is making of black women (womanists particularly) “theological mammies” whose function is to support, nurture, and protect the needs and goals of black male theological discourse and black masculinity critique.

Surrogacy as framed in this way is ultimately insidious because it places black women in the precarious position of having to channel their resources and interests toward the service of other people.\textsuperscript{93} I acknowledge the possibility that my work here can be interpreted as reifying the concept of theological mammies against which Williams warns, because it could be read as if I’m situating womanist thought as a “savior” of black theology and black men at black women’s expense. In response, I can only re-assert what I’ve stated above. Drawing upon womanist relational insights is not making black women personally responsible for the reconfiguring of self within the context of community; I’m simply suggesting that in the on-going process of rebuilding the relational self in community, womanist approaches to relationality provide a useful mechanism for reflection and internal critique. Womanists may provide us the model for

\textsuperscript{92} Williams, \textit{Sisters in the Wilderness}, 62-74.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 81.
relationality, but we cannot ask womanists to do for us what we are unwilling to do for ourselves.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided the theoretical and methodological grounding that constructs reciprocal relationality as cast throughout the project. Drawing upon womanist theory as developed by Alice Walker, philosophical ethics, and womanist theology, I have sought to demonstrate the validity of considering these realms as compelling sources to flesh out a relational framework in black male theological discourse. It is important to recall that this project covers ground not only in the larger scope of black theological discourse; I also consider what implications a reciprocal relational framework may yield for self-reflection on black male identity formation and reconstruction. The next chapter builds upon the reciprocal framing of human relationality by shifting the conversation through an examination of womanist-identified literature in the search for additional models of reciprocal living within the context of community. Keeping in mind the concerns noted above regarding black male invisibility and theological surrogacy within my relational framing, the next chapter presents an analysis of black male transformation vis-à-vis heightened relational orientations within Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I consider Walker’s Mr./Albert and Hurston’s “Tea Cake” as womanist literary models of male transformation via reciprocal selfhood.
Chapter Two:

Rethinking Tea Cake and Humanizing Mr.______: Womanist Literature and Black Men’s Efforts toward Reciprocal Selfhood

I’m satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel [sic] like a new experience.

—Albert

The previous chapter outlined the nature of reciprocal relationality as premised upon the communal ethos in womanist religious thought and as framed within the philosophical ethics of Martin Buber. The present chapter builds upon this interpretation of reciprocal relationality through an analysis of womanist literature—with special attention to the relational development of black male characters therein. Through an extended reading of the efforts toward more wholesome relationships marked by reciprocal and mutual care, I provide an analysis of Tea Cake from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Mr./Albert from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Given this project’s concern with incorporating womanist religious thought and literature into theological discourses involving black men, Hurston and Walker’s novels are useful resources toward this objective.¹ It is my contention that *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple*, as classic examples of womanist-identified literature, also provide another frame of reference specifically useful for reflection on black male identity and the development of a reciprocal understanding of black masculinity. Here I argue that Tea Cake and Albert both provide some theoretical grounding to think through the complexities of black masculine identity.

¹ Throughout this chapter, I refer to “Mr./Albert” as “Albert,” indicating the way in which he becomes more humanized over the course of the novel’s development.
In order to be as objective as possible in the analysis—rejecting easy appeals to reductionist interpretations, it is vital to wrestle with and maintain the tensions present in both characters. I situate Tea Cake as a representation of the regressive pitfalls of patriarchal masculinity and Albert as an example of the positive consequences resulting from the effort to reform this masculinity. Tea Cake’s regressive masculinity and Albert’s progressive masculinity highlight the communal framework that grounds womanist relational orientations by ultimately representing respective deviations from, or and models of, reciprocity. Victor Anderson’s theory of the grotesque to be taken up later in the chapter provides an interpretive strategy for reconciling the unfavorable features of the central characters’ personality and behavior. Grotesquery, in Anderson’s view, is ultimately about arriving at a certain comfort with the messy, convoluted, and ambiguous nature of reality and specifically, human personality. Drawing on this theory establishes a rationale “to play, to dance, within the ambiguities of the symbol”\(^2\) of reciprocal relationality through Tea Cake and Albert. A grotesque reading of both also helps establish a basis for viewing the characters’ internal conflicts and inconsistencies as a way to strengthen our interpretive venture, for as Anderson notes, such conflicts in human personality and experience are “necessary for the clarifying of goods, ends, and values [italics mine] that enlarge our horizons of meaning in order to make for a life that is livable with others.”\(^3\) In theorizing the relational and gender identities of Tea Cake and Albert with an appreciation for ambiguity and conflict, added significance and meaning for reciprocity is possible.


\(^3\) Ibid., 17.
Black Women’s Literature and Voice Reconstruction

The capacity of black women’s literature to dissect the features and experiences of black women’s lives cannot be overstated. Black women intellectuals and writers have documented the undeniable evidence of the situating of black women’s literature as insightful glimpses into the tripartite oppressions of black women within a male-oriented, white, and sexist American culture. While the larger, dominant societal framework found economic, political and other institutional means to silence black female voices, this framework could not quell black women’s intellectual acumen, nor their capacity for offering profound cultural critique regarding the social issues of their day.

There are a few central themes regarding the significance of black women’s writing that are worth illuminating. The first pertains to communal well-being. Black women writers, notes Katie Cannon, have often played the role of “participant-observers”—using their creative talents to “capsulize on a myriad of levels, the insularity of their home communities,” thereby emphasizing the ebb and flow of the “life within the community, not the conflict with outside forces.” Lauding black women’s capacity to be critical observers of the black communities’ “stuff”—that is, the material conditions under which black women and men live, Cannon posits black women’s intellectual activity here as a useful mechanism for grasping the moral wisdoms that guide ethical decision-making.

Another element underscoring the significance of black women’s novels, which is particularly apt as we consider the themes and motifs of self-reconstruction, agency, and

---

5 Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics, 87.
fulfillment in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, is the extent to which the novel gave voice to black women’s experiences. Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the African American Novelist* suggests that black women’s novels not only addressed the multivariated issues prevalent in the black communities’ quotidian existence, but black women’s novels also represented an effort to highlight the representation of black women and their interests to larger society. Per Carby, novels became a way for black women writers to discuss and address their existential and spiritual concerns as predicated upon social relations articulated through gender, race, and class.⁶

Womanist religious scholarship and literary writings draw upon this tradition of the pioneering work of black women writers. Womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas writes that womanism has revolutionized how we understand knowledge production due to the work of black women who prioritize black female flourishing in political and intellectual endeavors “rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos.”⁷ Regarding, however, womanist-identified literature as representative of the progression of black women’s writings, Stacey Floyd-Thomas elaborates upon Audre Lorde’s notion of “biomythography” in order to theorize one aspect of black women’s writings as a source for the doing of womanist ethics.⁸ According to Floyd-Thomas, biomythography fuses autobiography and fiction in order to “locate the struggle for moral agency and self-identity in a context

---

⁸ See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. 
of social location.”\textsuperscript{9} Interpreting womanist novels such as \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} and \textit{The Color Purple} from a biomythographical reference point may enable us to see how such works illustrate black female subjectivity through the unpacking of the moral life-worlds and moral deliberation of black women.\textsuperscript{10}

Alice Walker once noted that “black writers [male and female] seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle,” the consequence of which is thought to be some tangible notion of freedom or self-improvement.\textsuperscript{11} Arguably, it is black women’s creative response to struggle through the written word that many womanists cite as celebratory of black women’s resilience and tenacity in the subversive act of self-reconstruction. Gillman echoes this point, noting that womanists interrogate black women’s literature “to retrace the fictional characters’ interrogations of the limits of their selfhood,” and their full humanity through the practices of justice.\textsuperscript{12} It is through the black female novel, therefore, that storytelling becomes a political act. Black women’s literature frames ethical distinctions pertaining to life under oppression and the various conventional moral and ethical approaches that take for granted unlimited freedom and a wide range of choices. This is an important observation that supplements Floyd-Thomas’ interpretation of black women’s literature as biomythography.

In \textit{Their Eyes} and \textit{The Color Purple}, we are able to see the biomythographical underscoring through the eyes of the central characters, Janie and Celie. Both Janie and Celie’s tales serve as a recollection of both their memories and as a repository for moral wisdom regarding black women’s responses to sexism and other forms of gendered

\textsuperscript{9} Stacey Floyd-Thomas, \textit{Mining the Motherlode}, 21.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Walker, \textit{In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens}, 5.
\textsuperscript{12} Gillman, \textit{Unassimilable Feminisms}, 95.
oppression. While it seems fairly obvious how black women’s writing has given black women a voice and a distinctive outlet for addressing both her own concerns as well as how her concerns are embedded within her community of origin, clearly I do not intend to leave the matter of influence unsettled on this point. Black women’s writings are also equally valuable as sources for more reflection on black male identity.

Mindful of Barbara Smith’s observation that “for books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered,” I feel it necessary to begin each novel’s character analysis with some information on Hurston and Walker, respectively. Prior to the character analysis of each novel, I will first provide some autobiographical and thematic information meant to introduce Hurston and Walker’s artistic commitments as revealed within Their Eyes and The Color Purple. It is not expected that attention to the writers’ respective backgrounds will provide clarification on the intentionality behind the novels written. However, attention to their backgrounds and literary influences will provide a basis for categorizing some of the central contextual components that inspired how the writers saw their work within the canon of African American literary and cultural expression.

*No Sobbing Negrohood:* Zora Neale Hurston and the Fullness of Black Humanity

In the foreword to Robert Hemenway’s groundbreaking biography of Zora Neale Hurston’s life and literary contributions, which outlines her early experiences, her personal and professional relationships, and the motivation and creative push behind her

---

14 This phrasing was taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” see Hurston, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979), 153.
artistic achievements, Alice Walker notes that the most characteristic feature of Hurston’s work was “racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings.”

Hurston’s desire for an unabashed, unsanitized artistic portrayal of blacks as full humans as indicated throughout the corpus of her work, reflects an “uncompromising race pride,” and “fascination with the masses” that was not always celebrated during her lifetime. Hemenway concurs with Walker’s assessment—Hurston was unequivocally “Eatonville [Florida]—“she was the folk.” Hurston’s allegiance to the black folk experience and cultural expression was not lost on her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries who thought “it impossible to tell where the folk left off and Zora began.”

As Hurston’s love and appreciation for Eatonville and all the other Eatonvilles of rural, black America were so central to her work, it may be useful to spend some time talking about her coming of age in the embrace of black folk culture and how this impacts her literary writing. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston recollects her upbringing within the racial insulation of her childhood home of Eatonville, Florida. By most accounts, Eatonville was “a pure Negro town, charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all” (*Dust Tracks*, 1). Such an environment, possessed of “a utopian, imagined world where blacks lived near whites without a single instance of enmity,” provided Hurston and her

---

16 Ibid., 62.
17 Ibid., 64.
18 For this chapter, unless otherwise noted, all citations from *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2013) and *The Color Purple* will be in documented parenthetically within the body of the chapter.
19 See also Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 12.
family, in contrast to the lot of most other black southern families at the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, a moderate degree of cultural insulation and protection in the face of the brutalities of a societal context rooted in white supremacy and black degradation.\textsuperscript{20}

Kaplan notes that the Hurston family prospered in Eatonville, with her father eventually becoming a Baptist minister, and earning a reputation as a capable politician who drafted the township’s first laws.\textsuperscript{21} Hurston’s early exposure to Eatonville life instilled her sense of racial pride as a member of an independent, self-governing African American town.

The relationship between her mother and father, John Hurston and Lucy Ann Potts, is central to Hurston’s overall development, personally and artistically. Her parents’ marriage was marred by disputes over domineering attitudes and instances of the patriarch’s philandering,\textsuperscript{22} but nothing that completely severed the relationship (\textit{Dust Tracks}, 10-11). Hurston is quick to note, however, one key area of difference in the way her mother and father raised their children to survive and thrive in the context of white cultural mores and milieus. “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun,’”—which meant a “commitment to education that was transferred to her five sons and three daughters.” Her father, however, would constantly make an effort to “squinch” young Hurston’s spirit (\textit{Dust Tracks}, 13).

Hurston comments on the nature of some of her father’s warnings:

> He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue. Mama was going to suck sorrow for not beating my tempter out of me before it was too late. Posses with ropes and guns were going to drag me

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{22} Hemenway, 15.
out sooner or later on account of that stiff neck I toted. I was going to tote a hungry belly by reason of my forward ways. My older sister was *meek and mild* [italics mine]. She would always get along. Why couldn’t I be like her? *(Dust Tracks*, 13-14).

Hurston’s comments here indicate a few things worth mentioning. First, her father’s words clearly ascribe to and advocate a respectability politics for Zora that simply never took root, and that ran contrary to her mothers’ determination to raise daughters who didn’t become “mealy-mouthed rag dolls” as adults *(Dust Tracks*, 13). The father’s efforts to extinguish the effervescent dimensions of Hurston’s being and personality in order to enable what he conceived of as a safe existence among whites came at a price—namely, the extinguishing of a voice. Mama Potts’ exhortation to “jump at de sun” disabused such efforts.

It is also particularly telling that her father often resorted to comparing Hurston to her older sister. The older sister’s “meek and mild” behavior stood in stark contrast to Hurston’s bold self-assertions, thus enabling the sister to “get along”. I contend that, given the father’s respectability politics, coupled with the lauding of the subservient qualities of Hurston’s older sister, it is likely that Hurston’s father, like most men of his time, had certain gendered expectations of masculine and feminine behavior that Hurston’s “forward ways” betrayed. Black female “forwardness”, or self-assertion and confidence, in the patriarch Hurston’s mind, were attributes to be quelled, not encouraged. Fortunately for Zora, her “forward ways” took her far beyond the provincialism of an Eatonville or Maitland. This spirit of audaciousness, intellectual intensity, and tenacious self-assertion took her from the Morgan Academy (now Morgan State), Barnard College, then finally to Columbia University where she trained as an anthropologist. It is against the backdrop of these early experiences of Hurston’s home
life and her experiences in Eatonville that we must contextually situate Hurston’s artistic interpretation of black folk life as exhibited in her writing. How Hurston chose to portray black life reflects her own unique brand of racial pride as well as her insistence on the full humanity of her people. As noted above, however, her strident defense of black folk culture and her situating of this culture within her writing and anthropological studies often put her at odds with her intellectual contemporaries.

As part of a cohort of Renaissance luminaries such as Alain Locke, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and others, Hurston “shared in the historical and cultural forces that made the Harlem Renaissance an identifiable moment in American intellectual history.”23 It is precisely, it seems, Hurston’s refusal to cede to the artistic expectations of some of her more social protest-driven colleagues that caused conflicts. Hemenway refers to this conflict as an ideological one—namely the question of black art for “art’s sake” or for the use of art for more propagandistic purposes—addressing the grand problems of the race as a political burden. That is, Hurston was pressed to answer whether the black artist was driven more by creative and artistic freedom, or by the “Negro problem.” Hurston was resolute in her rejection of propagandist writing. Hemenway notes:

…Hurston and many of her fellow Harlem Renaissance artists felt uncomfortable with their “responsibilities,” because they believed that a propagandistic motive vitiated artistic effects. They claimed that racial appeals would compromise their art. Hurston later said she “was and am thoroughly sick” of the “race problem.” Illustrating the trap of either/or thinking that often characterized the Renaissance debate between propaganda and [a]esthetics, she once told a black critic that she was interested in “writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology.”24

23 Hemenway, 36.
24 Ibid., 42.
Hurston’s pride in the folkways of the black community would not allow her to treat them as subjects of either scorn or pity. She was committed to full dress writings and art pertaining to the black people that celebrated them for all their chaos, beauty, and spirit—becoming an example of younger artists interested in the “pure art created by the black rural masses.”

The political and ideological disagreement between Hurston other writers was never more apparent than with her publication of her most well-known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937. Former professor and mentor, Alain Locke referred to Hurston as a very “talented” writer, but described the work as “folklore fiction at its best” and accused Hurston of “oversimplification” in her portrayal of black, rural life.

Richard Wright decried *Their Eyes* for its “facile sensuality” in the portrayal of black life and its failure to address “the Negro, but [instead] a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy.” Langston Hughes commented that Hurston’s easygoing association and modeling of black folk culture made many of her contemporaries bitterly deem her a “perfect darkie” for white benefactors—bespeaking a resentment of her seemingly deferential, obsequious attitude. These harsh criticisms no doubt took their toll in promoting a steady decline of Hurston’s once-burgeoning star power within the cadre of representatives of black arts and letters during the Renaissance, but such castigations of her writing failed to take into account the extent to which black life is more full than the collectivist response to white racism.

---

25 Ibid., 39.
Despite that literary portrayals of what it meant to be “tragically colored” were in vogue at the time of her writing, Hurston refused to allow her writings to remain locked into any portrayal of her community as any lesser than the whites against whom the stark literary realism of Wright and others decried. To Hurston’s mind, the blacks that she grew up knowing, loving, and embracing in Eatonville and elsewhere were fully and unapologetically human. Full of life—full of potential, Hurston viewed her community as “so diversified, [their] internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it [could] cover [them] all” (Dust Tracks, 192). Insisting on the full humanity of black people—people capable of feeling life’s highs and lows—black people who loved—black people who lost—and black people who found themselves again and again, Hurston situated her writing as an illustration of both the tragedy and triumphs of a community that, against some quite formidable odds, still embodied an unquenchable thirst and zeal for life. There was no discernible monolithic notion of “The Negro Problem” in Hurston’s writing and thinking. Hurston’s interpretation of black male and female life was therefore an attempt to cast black, southern communities as fully dimensional collectivities of persons with the same existential concerns, passions, and desires as any other. Hurston saw “Negroes [as] neither better nor worse than any other race” (Dust Tracks, 248). This organic vision of black communal life and thought—which Eatonville no doubt instilled early on, is played out in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Donald Marks has noted that Hurston’s understanding of the organic vision of black communal life as portrayed in Their Eyes privileges an earthy conception of human experience and relationships to which
“metaphors of natural fertility and sexuality” are attached and established as the ideal.\textsuperscript{29} It is to Hurston’s portrayal of some the ebbs of flows of black romantic and communal life within this work that we now turn.

\textit{Tea Cake and the Costs of Patriarchal Masculinity}

\textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} tells the story of Janie, a black woman involved in three marriages, with each setting the stage for the novel’s overall structure, as well as demonstrating a new phrase of Janie’s personal development. As Hurston’s most well-known work, \textit{Their Eyes} has been described in myriad ways. Hemenway called it a “love story”\textsuperscript{30}—based in part upon Hurston’s love affair with a younger man prior to the publishing. Perhaps it is a feminist coming-of-age novel—given Janie’s burgeoning sense of independence and autonomy against the imprisonment of the social whims of men. I do agree with Hemenway that there is a mark of the autobiographical that underscores Hurston’s portrayal of Janie. It is possible—maybe reasonable, to view Janie’s development as Hurston’s way of clarifying the nature of a broken relationship just prior to taking up residency in Haiti for anthropological research. The relationship between Janie and Tea Cake had no tangible resolution or reconciliation, much like Hurston’s affair. This is not, however, to say that the novel was about Hurston’s love life explicitly, but her personal life does seem to provide fodder for her creative outpouring. As she admitted: “The plot [of \textit{Their Eyes}] was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him [former lover] in \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God.”


\textsuperscript{30} Hemenway, 231.
It is difficult to grasp the reciprocal dimensions of Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship without an understanding of the stultifying marriages she endured with both Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. The marriages between Janie and the men can be characterized, with some overlap, as relationships of control and relationships of passion.\textsuperscript{31} The marriages with Killicks and Starks were similarly based upon control to the extent that both “reinforced the dominant social structure, placing value on social mechanisms, technological progress, and the accumulation of wealth and power.”\textsuperscript{32} Both sought to imprison Janie into gendered expectations of the female role—albeit in vastly different manners. The marriage to Tea Cake, however, can be aptly characterized as a relationship of passion, given the central role(s) that play and sexuality take.

The Killicks marriage was largely a business arrangement—an arrangement concocted by her grandmother, Nanny, meant to quell Janie’s burgeoning sexual maturation after Nanny witnesses her kissing a local, Johnny Taylor. Nanny’s female respectability (sexual) politics compels her to attempt to save Janie from the degradation of being misused by another black man without social standing: “Ah don’t want to trashy nigger, no-breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’ body to wipe his foots on” (13). In order to spare Janie from becoming a “mule uh de world” (14), Nanny reasons that she should marry Killicks, clarifying the specific content of the marriage and its overall benefit:

\begin{quote}
Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, its protection…you got to take in consideration you ain’t no chile like most of ‘em. You ain’t got no papa…Neither can you stand alone by yo’self (15).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Marks, “Sex, Violence, and Organic Consciousness,”152.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
Janie’s “protection” lies hand-in-hand with her linkage to a man, in this case, a husband. There are at least two dynamics of Janie’s marriage to Killicks that should be accounted for. First, we are able to get a glimpse of the degree to which Nanny had internalized the gender restrictions and lack of expectations imposed upon black women within a patriarchal context. Nanny saw no recourse for Janie to find any sense of individual fulfillment beyond domestic confinement. Second, the marriage to Killicks, as his name would seem to suggest, effectively sought to kill—to destroy Janie’s sense of self, as well as dictate her positionality within the marriage: “You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh” (31). In the final analysis, Killicks confined Janie to the field as yet another tool on the farm; she was advantageous for the development of his agrarian empire.

Joe Starks’ plans for Janie do not involve her being made into a field hand; she is an object to be desired: “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self” (29). Given Janie’s previous marriage in which she was made to suffer as a domestic beast of burden, becoming Mrs. Janie Starks promised “change and chance”—all of which was promised by Starks’ big voice (28). As Janie discovered, however, domestic servitude is manifest in varied forms. As Starks begins to establish himself within the town—as he asserts his “big voice,” he does so largely at the expense of Janie’s voice. Joe silences Janie’s individual desires through the amplification of his own via his political aspirations. The transition to this higher social status indeed provides Janie material trappings, but also yields devastating effects on Janie’s voice and freedom. As “Mrs. Mayor Starks,” Janie is no longer Janie; she becomes, rather, a direct reflection of Mayor Starks’ social status. “Mrs. Mayor Starks” is totemized amongst the
“regular” female masses within the town; Janie was the “bell-cow,” and the other women were her gang (41).

On this same occasion, Starks also silences Janie quite literally. After being asked to speak to the town with “uh few words uh encouragement,” Joe rebukes Janie’s chance to speak: “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (43). This scene in the early part of their marriage again illustrates Joe’s efforts to restrict Janie’s movement in public and private arenas. Starks, “invested with his new dignity” and “unconscious of her thoughts,” (43) imposed a Victorian ideal of womanhood and domesticity that left Janie without an identity or voice apart from that of “Mrs. Mayor Starks.” Per Joe’s own feelings on the arrangement, Janie had no reason for complaint: “…I god, Ah ain’t even started good. Ah told you in the very first beginnin’ dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad [italics mine], ‘cause dat makes a big woman outa you” (46).

The interplay of Joe’s self-constructed authoritarian deification (“I god”), the alienating experience of being classed off from her friends, and her coming to represent a token of status, left Janie with “a feeling of coldness and fear” (46). After years of resentment, verbal sparring, and at least one physical altercation, the toil and strain of the marriage “took all the fight out of Janie’s face” (76), and likewise, proved to be Joe’s fatal undoing. His chauvinism, premised upon the assertion of his voice, eventually declines and he dies.

As Janie found out after two failed marriages, a “marriage did not make love” (25). The common denominator within both marriages can interpreted as the push and
pull between an unstoppable force and an immovable object; both marriages were built upon an expectation of Janie’s total submission to a sexist ideal that restricted Janie’s personality. The mutual sharing—the give and take endemic to the kind of relationship that Janie may have envisioned, was not present with either Killicks or Starks. She functions within relationships in which her mind and voice were not received as valuable or necessary. As Janie said to Joe, “Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me” (86). In Janie’s estimation, a relationship, or at least the kind of relationship she wanted, could not exist where one voice “squeezes out” another voice. Listening to one’s own impulses and desires must give way to a consideration of the needs of another, and on this note, the “relationship” failed. Furthermore, the first two marriages failed because of the rigidity of the “traditional societal trend of male dominance and female servitude.”

Within the third marriage to Tea Cake, however, Janie finally has an opportunity to experience, in part, a more egalitarian relationship, with, she believed, a more “ideal” lover. Tea Cake is an ambiguous, unfinished character—embodying both potential and brutal pathology within his masculine identity. What is critical in our examination of Tea Cake is neither his perfection as a character nor his role in allowing Janie a different perspective on marriage and/or intimate relationships. The purpose for this portion of our analysis is to situate Tea Cake’s regression within the marriage, as a cautionary tale in our reflection on black masculinity and relationality.

Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods meets Janie shortly after the death of Joe Starks, as Janie is adjusting to life as a widow. Janie, despite the protestations and opinions of the Eatonville citizens, is not in a hurry to be remarried:

Janie laughed at all these well-wishers because she knew that they knew plenty of women alone; that she was not the first one they had ever seen. But most of the others were poor. Besides she liked being lonesome for a change. This freedom feeling was fine. She had already experienced them through Logan and Joe (90).

Hurston’s placement of Tea Cake within Janie’s life compels us to wrestle with the paradoxes of both social conventions and human personality. A younger man—slightly less bound by the gendered decorum that may have influenced Killicks’ and Starks’ gender politics, Tea Cake enters the relationship particularly receptive to Janie’s autonomy. However we must acknowledge and maintain the tension between the optimistic tone that inaugurates and characterizes their relationship with the textual evidence of Tea Cake’s pathological tendencies rooted in patriarchal assertions of masculinity, namely physical aggression. Unlike Janie’s first two husbands who sought the fixing of Janie’s position within the domestic sphere, Tea Cake enters the relationship immediately inversing the accepted conventions for male and female ways of occupying time and space. Within seemingly mundane, quotidian spaces, Tea Cake acknowledges Janie’s subjectivity, for example, by integrating her into traditionally understood masculine spaces. This is first evident after he invites her to play against him in a game of checkers. The significance of this invitation—the betrayal of gender politics that stipulated in which women could and could not participate, was not lost on Janie:

[Tea Cake] set up [the checkerboard] and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice (96).
This scene is perhaps easily dismissed, but Tea Cake’s response to Janie—his acknowledgement of her as an individual with agency, somewhat destabilizes Janie’s understanding of male companionship, and illustrates a lynchpin of reciprocal relationality: a recognition of mutual subjectivity within human interaction and connection. Unlike either Logan Killicks or Joe Starks, who both belittle her intellectual abilities, Tea Cake does just the opposite. Tea Cake consistently affirms and acknowledges Janie’s intelligence. For example, refusing to accept Janie’s self-deprecating assessment of her skill at checkers: “Jody useter tell me Ah never would learn. It wuz too heavy fuh mah brains” (96), Tea Cake contradicts this view of Janie’s mental prowess in his response: “Folks is playin it wid sense and folks is playin’ it without. But you got good meat on yo’ head. You’ll learn” (96). In appreciating Janie’s independence, intelligence, and strength of character, Tea Cake sees in Janie an equal companion thus revealing why he took her fishing, taught her to shoot guns, and why he sought her presence while working on the muck (Florida Everglades).

Of course, there are several examples of Tea Cake’s exhibition of reciprocity and egalitarian understandings of relationships. In his mind, Janie “got de keys to de kingdom” (109), bespeaking an attitude of reverence and worship. For this reason, we have numerous examples from the text that indicate the extent to which Tea Cake values not only Janie’s mutual companionship, but her overall happiness and well-being. Hurston notes that Tea Cake establishes an ethic of care toward Janie:

Janie awoke the next morning by feeling Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away. Holding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp and fly away…He wouldn’t let her get him any breakfast at all. He wanted her to get her rest. He made her stay where she was. In her heart she wanted to get his breakfast for him. But she stayed in bed long after he was gone…After a long time of passive happiness, she got up
and...let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind. That was the beginning of things (107).

Per Janie’s internal thoughts, the “beginning” of the courtship/relationship with Tea Cake was characterized by attributes of mutuality and care. Janie was receptive to the man who became her “glance from God” (106), and Tea Cake, steadfast in his commitment to her, responded in kind. Ultimately what Tea Cake brings to the relationship that makes him admirable is a “desire to cultivate meaningful intimate public and private spaces that he and Janie can share”—whether through fishing, hunting, playing checkers, or teaching Janie how to shoot guns.³⁵

In his essay, “Finding Tea Cake: An Imagined Black Feminist Manhood,” Mark Anthony Neal argues that within the character of Tea Cake, we are provided a new model of a “folk hero” through which we can reimagine black feminist masculinity. Tea Cake, as I have argued, can serve as an intriguing trope for conjuring the many possibilities of Black manhood and personality, thereby highlighting [and clarifying] some “life-sustaining traditions of African-American culture.”³⁶ While lauding those elements of Tea Cake’s conduct that are given to feminist principles, Neal seems to downplay the more troubling aspects of Tea Cake’s character. Neal correctly notes that Tea Cake holds traditional gender ideals, but does not offer as much criticism about the destructive capacities of those ideals and the impact it has on Janie. Instead of a more substantive critique of Tea Cake’s “occasional bouts of domestic violence,” Neal instead notes that Tea Cake’s creative approach to intimacy, care, and mutual sharing is “undermined by

³⁶ Neal, “Finding Tea Cake,” 258.
his natural instinct to protect Janie”—citing such protectionism as a product of the culture that produced him.37

This interpretive move slightly overlooks Tea Cake’s violence toward Janie by lauding his “willingness to grant Janie access to masculine spaces” and allowing more flexibility in spite of prevailing gender norms within the Eatonville community.38 It is more useful, and a more well-rounded reading of the text, to confront the fullness of Tea Cake’s personality and behavior—praising the positive, and problematizing and critiquing the pathological. In short, any complete meditation on Tea Cake and notions of gender within Their Eyes must be comfortable with the ambiguous and often messy nature of human relationships and personalities.

Tea Cake and Janie’s marriage is first is threatened when local resident, Mrs. Turner, attempts to disrupt their home. Turner is a fair-skinned black woman who practices an indiscriminate brand of colorism, self-hatred, and race-baiting. She “attacks not only Tea Cake’s color but dark-skinned Blacks in general.”39 Turner’s self-hatred and distorted view of African American culture is so pervasive that she locates racism not in the actions or ideals of whites, but in dark-skinned blacks, their behaviors, and most ridiculously, their physiology: “If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin’ us back…it’s de color and de features” (141). Mrs. Turner’s attachment to Janie, as we learn from the text, was not out of any real sense of friendship or genuine care, but rather, premised upon a particular admiration and envy of Janie’s European ancestry. Turner

37 Ibid., 260.
38 Neal, 260.
39 Hudson-Weems, 198.
“built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all” (145). Her “friendship” with Janie, therefore, was more of a gesture in whitewashing by association—it was a way of paying “homage to Janie’s Caucasian characteristics” in order to herself “become whiter and with straighter hair” (145). Mrs. Turner’s desire for whiteness and perhaps for some of the trappings of Janie’s own socioeconomic status, influenced her matchmaking efforts on behalf of her brother: “You and him would make up uh swell couple if you wuzn’t already married” (143).

Tea Cake, fully aware of Mrs. Turner’s intentions, immediately seeks to regain control over Janie. Tea Cake has a conversation with Mrs. Turner’s husband in which he seeks to convince him “tuh keep her home” (143)—suggesting, in a telling fashion, that women are like items that can be shifted and moved according to the whims of men, who in this case, are the primary owners of women’s bodies. He confers with another man about the prospect of alienating a woman and her opinions, for fear that they’d rupture his relationship (control over?) with Janie. Tea Cake, took an indirect restrictive approach that mimics the actions of both Logan Killicks and Joe Starks because essentially he validates the authority of another man over his wife as a necessary step to subjugate a woman to his will. Tea Cake allowed his feeling of powerlessness and his jealousies to spiral into physical attacks on Janie; Hurston notes that “He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (147). In beating Janie to illustrate his dominance, Tea Cake illustrates the superficial quality of his possessive and abusive behaviors premised upon a patriarchal identity anchored in the silencing, physical trauma, and imprisonment of women. The performance of a particular masculine identity cannot be understated here. Judith Butler’s interpretation of performativity in Gender Trouble provides some
grounding for the gender dynamics of identity that underscore Tea Cake’s violent behavior.

Butler is useful for her attention to the discourses and ideological constructs that serve the purposes of establishing norms, which then regulate societal formation. In *Gender Trouble*, “Butler extends the limited linguistic concept [of performativity] by applying it to constructions of gendered identity and subjectivity more generally.”

“Women” and “men” establish femininities and masculinities through “regulatory practices of gender formation and division [that] constitute identity.” Gender identity is constituted through the performances of directed behaviors and acts which serve the end of producing gendered subjects. Tea Cake’s beating of Janie in response to the conflict with Mrs. Turner is indicative of a type of performance. Tea Cake dances the dance of an artificially constructed gendered self rendered intelligible only through “incessant and repeated action” premised upon the control, or what he perceives to be the control, over Janie. In this masculinist performance of control, Tea Cake was able to “[arouse] a sort of envy in both men and women” (146). Tea Cake “petted and pampered” Janie after the beating which “made the women see visions” and “made the men dream dreams” (147)—suggesting that his patriarchal display of masculinity awed the townspeople and was seen as worthy of mimicry.

43 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.
Male envy of Tea Cake’s patriarchal performance becomes obvious as his friend, Sop-de-Bottom, speaks admiringly of Tea Cake’s ability to mark the effect of his control over Janie through physical force:

“Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man…Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol’ rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn’t tell you ever it ‘em…Lawd! wouldn’t Ah love tuh whip uh tender women lak Janie!” (147-148)

Tea Cake’s violence is illustrative of a gendered “putting on of airs.” The beating was a way for Tea Cake to give the appearance of control (“Uh person can see every place you hit her”) in an effort to renegotiate the disruption of patriarchal masculine identity.

Following the hurricane, when he is bitten by a rabid dog, Tea Cake becomes psychotic, aggressive, and murderously insane. This prompts the final, deadly confrontation in which Janie is forced to kill who she loves most for self-preservation—demonstrating the extent to which Janie loved her(self) more. Both Tea Cake’s regression and his embodying contradictory characteristics that end up being destructive, serve as a jeremiad—a cautionary tale about the dangers of masculine identities premised upon the enslavement and destruction of black female bodies. For within Tea Cake, we see a range of qualities and the gathering of competing notions of self and masculine identity—many are positive; many are negative. Tea Cake is at once tender and egalitarian, and likewise he proves capable of being violent and controlling. It is important to take a full scope of Tea Cake’s development and character—emphasizing both the pathological, namely the violence and control over Janie, and the praise-worthy, if we are to truly appreciate his theoretical usefulness as a trope for rethinking the possibilities of black
masculinity. Juxtaposing Tea Cake with Albert from *The Color Purple*, who is the next figuration within our analysis, will provide another relational trope for our consideration.

**Committed to Survival and Wholeness for All: Alice Walker’s Womanist Prose**

While *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* is often cited as the first text to coin the phrase “womanist,” an earlier article written by Alice Walker, “Coming Apart” was published in 1979. In this essay, a musing on pornography, racialized sexual objectification, the lack of self-love and the negative effect on marriages and intimate relationships, Walker’s meditation on the marital struggles of a fictional couple note that “The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is…a ‘womanist’...A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common.”

This brief reference to the term within the piece is associated not with black women’s culture explicitly, but rather, as a marker of distinction from white feminism as cast within the women’s liberation movement. The concept of womanism was more fully elaborated upon within *In Search*.

There, Walker notes that a womanist is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” This is a critical element of the womanist ethos that must be considered as we transition to the character analysis of Mr./Albert in *The Color Purple*. Womanism, as Alice Walker conceives it, is built upon a communitarian perspective in which the flourishing and well-being of women and men is rule and not the exception. This commitment to wholeness is unwavering in its pursuit of more wholesome and liberating life spaces for others, particularly the “everyday” black women—those black women who “knew without ‘knowing’” the reality of their truths

---

and the validity of their life experiences. Black women’s culture, per Walker, provides the central frame for her literature and creative reading of black life. Given some of the personal reflections from Alice Walker on her mothers’ experiences during the Depression-era South, it is reasonable to conclude that a womanism which had no name, was in some ways a life-way for Walker’s mother, and other black women as a necessary feature of survival.

Walker recounts a story from her mother when turned away by a white female government aid worker at a food distribution center. Her mother was cursed and dismissed for being “well dressed,” and thus assumed to not need assistance. The Walker family survived that winter by “depending on one another, because they had nothing and no one else.” Such communal values, Walker opines, are uniquely black and uniquely southern:

> And when I listen to my mother tell and retell this story I find that the white woman’s vindictiveness is less important than Aunt Mandy’s resourceful generosity or my mother’s ready stand of corn. For their lives were not about that pitiful example of Southern womanhood, but about themselves.

Walker was reared within a context in which there was communal disposition toward solidarity based upon a modest existence and very palpable impoverishment. The chapter within which this story is retold is titled “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience.” Walker, following her recollection of this story, notes that she, and black southern writers generally “[inherit] as a natural right…a sense of community.”

---

46 Ibid., 237.
47 Walker, *In Search*, 16.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 17.
50 Ibid.
Walker does not romanticize the south; in her words, “I can recall that I hated it, generally.” What she does value is the heritage of a community “bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice.”

Walker seems to incorporate this heritage into her writing—for as a writer, she carries the “great responsibility” to give creative and vibrant expression “to centuries of not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love.”

More critically, however, black women take main emphasis in Walker’s communal rendering of black life within her writing. Through this interpretive venture, Walker privileges a conception of communal wholeness and survival that effectively destabilized patriarchal notions of the black family—rendering black men within her work to the periphery. Lorraine Bethel notes that writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker are “black woman-identified black women” who frame their work around their experiences as black women—experiences “generally regarded as valueless, insignificant, and inferior to white/male culture.” Walker’s re-scripting of gender politics, institutions, and roles from the perspective of black women within The Color Purple, therefore, may have aroused the ire of black male critics of the work. Black women’s writing deemed inhospitable to black men, or that seem to create fissures in the foundation of patriarchal family structures within the black community, are typically

---

51 Walker, In Search, 21.
52 Ibid.
53 Lorraine Bethel, “‘This Infinity of Conscious Pain’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition,” in But Some of Us Are Brave, 179.
interpreted as damaging for black men, a betrayal of the black community, and more critically, thought to usurp the “rightful” sweeping influence of black male writers.54

In “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple,” Candace Jenkins, citing black feminist critic Deborah McDowell, notes that Alice Walker’s writing has been roundly criticized by male critics for its disruption of the romantic, illusory conceptions of the black family and community. Alice Walker, among other black women writers, were targeted because they “[deconstruct] a black family romance and [represent] the ways in which ‘traditional’—and traditionally idealized—family structures can endanger black women both physically and psychically, largely because of the patriarchal power that such structures grant to black men.”55 Walker, through The Color Purple particularly, engages the project of “queering,” or turning the black family and societal expectations of gender roles within the black community on its head by reconfiguring the black family in ways that “divest its black male members of a good deal of power.”56 For many black critics, black men are “divested” of their power through the “demonization” of their characters in the writings of black feminists.

In a negative review of The Color Purple, Darryl Pinckney complains that the men in the novel

are seen at a distance—that is, entirely from the point of view of women—as naïfs incapable of reflection, tyrants filled with impotent rage, or as totemic do-gooders. Walker’s cards are always stacked against

56 Ibid.
them...Contemporary black women’s fiction has always contained scenes of domestic violence. But in *The Color Purple* the violence is virtually on every page. And throughout the novel, the color of the villains has changed from white society to black men.\(^\text{57}\)

The language in Pinckney’s review is telling. He seems incapable of imagining any black writing in which black men are on the periphery. There is also an implicit need to silence the pain of black women’s stories. For Pinckney, the focus on black women and their experiences is less important, despite the brutality, than a positive assessment or portrayal of the oppressors of black women—even if those oppressors are black men. Thus, Pinckney seems to advocate that black female pain and trauma be diluted “in service of the black male image.”\(^\text{58}\)

From another perspective, the resistance and criticism of black men toward Walker, therefore, as Jenkins notes, is likewise patriarchal resistance toward familial relations in the public and private sphere that are built upon egalitarian communion in lieu of female subordination and male supremacy. Walker’s womanist vision of a de-romanticized black family unit thus has direct consequences for male power and notions of masculinity. If it is true, as Michael Awkward has suggested, that “monolithic and/or normative maleness” is represented in the domineering patriarch—the head-of-household,\(^\text{59}\) then a family in which men do not dominate is a family in which patriarchal masculinity itself is questionable.\(^\text{60}\) Given the extent to which Walker demystifies the

---

\(^\text{58}\) Ibid., 145.
\(^\text{60}\) Jenkins, “Queering Black Patriarchy,” 971.
black family structure and communal institutions—deconstructing what Hortense Spillers has called the “provisions of patriarchy,”\textsuperscript{61} black male power is decentered.

It is necessary to shift gears at this point, as it is not my intention to overstate the case for Walker’s subversion of black male power through her womanist communal sensibilities. It is a profound misreading of Walker’s womanism to suggest that the commitment to survival and wholeness is rooted in a power struggle between black women and men. Arguably, this errant view has contributed to the hostilities of black male critics who excoriated Walker’s writing and were responsible for establishing her reputation as a traitor to the black community.\textsuperscript{62} I would argue that Walker’s reconfiguration of notions of family and community as indicated by her framing of survival and wholeness also offers us a way to rethink notions of masculinity.

As Jenkins has noted, Walker’s communal interpretation “queers” the black patriarchal structure, but there is also a sense in which Walker’s framing can provide useful ways of thinking about male presences and “authority” within the context of communal space.

Ultimately, it is in playing with, literally queering, such patriarchal fantasies that Walker’s novel invites hostile critical scrutiny, for by the conclusion of the text, Walker’s black family contains a possibility far more bewildering than the father’s absence: a father who is present, but nonetheless no longer dominant or even interested in domination [italics mine]. It is no wonder, then, that Walker’s narrative is viewed by many critics as an affront to black community wholeness, for it posits a community without a (male) leader…\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Hortense Spillers, “The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibility Straight: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers,”
\textsuperscript{62} Jenkins, 970.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 972.
What interests me, particularly as we delve into our analysis of Mr., is precisely this question of a more wholistic masculine identity that is “no longer interested in dominating” others, particularly women. What might it mean, to think about black masculinity as an embodiment of non-domination? If men took seriously the need to move through time and space in ways that effectively worked to create more democratized and wholesome spaces for others, how would human relationships flourish as a result? In turning to my character analysis within *The Color Purple* to address some of these questions, I now offer an analysis of “Mr.”/Albert in order to map out the effort toward non-dominating, relational understandings of masculinity.

*On Becoming a “Natural Man”: Humanizing Mr._______*

In “A Matter of Focus: Men in the Margins of Alice Walker’s Fiction,” Erna Kelly argues that the men in Walker’s fiction are capable of redemption if they are willing to become or choose identities that do not hinge upon dominating women. In my view, “Mr.” had to cease being a depersonalized figure in order to change; he had to become more human—he became “Albert.” Albert’s shifting in becoming “other than,” is in part what drives my interpretation of his efforts to become more reciprocal. *The Color Purple* begins with sexual dispossession, the rape of a black woman, and an attempt to silence the revelation of this trauma: “You better not tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (1). Celie’s marriage arrangement between Alphonso, Celie’s rapist stepfather, and Albert indicate how both Alphonso and Albert view women’s bodies as property to be sold and commercialized:

Mr._______ say, Well, you know my poor little ones sure could use a mother.

---

64 Gillman, 115.
Well, He [Alphonso] say, real slow, I can’t let you have Nettie. She too young. Don’t know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice (7).

Further offering depersonalizing and dehumanizing judgments of Celie’s “worth” as a wife and breeder of children, Alphonso notes

She ugly…But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it…Fact is…I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. She’d come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of their crib. But Nettie you flat out can’t have. Not now. Not never. Well, next time you come you can look at her…she can work like a man (8).

In a scene reminiscent of an antebellum auction block during slavery (“Well, next time you come you can look at her.”), Alphonso and Albert replace the white slave traders through their adoption of the ethos of commodification and control of black women’s bodies.

As Celie reflects shortly thereafter, it took the full spring season “to make up his mind to take me” (9)—thereby signifying the extent to which Albert saw Celie (and Nettie) as objects to be bought and sold. The arrangement between Celie and Albert was fed by the movement of (re)productive property from one male owner to another. This is starkly demonstrated through Albert’s inquiry regarding the cow that Celie was responsible for nurturing: “That cow still coming?” Alphonso responds, “Her cow” (11). Celie is grouped in the same category with chattel—beasts of burden. The exchange between Albert and Alphonso is again cast as a business transaction premised upon the ownership and movement of black women’s bodies, which, when coupled with Mr.’s juxtaposition of Celie with the cow, invokes Nanny’s dire observation from Their Eyes
"Were Watching God" regarding the black woman as “de mule uh de world.” In spite of this ignominious introduction to the mode of black masculinity practiced by Albert at the start of Celie’s experiences, the novel still nonetheless provides a panoramic view of his growth and his efforts to reconfigure himself by becoming, or rather, working toward becoming, a self-identified “natural man.” But like any process of growth—of evolution, the endurance of growing pains is an absolute necessity. Growing out of patriarchal masculinity, as Michael Awkward suggests, is “serious work” that takes place internally within oneself and through both self-reflexive and praxis-oriented efforts involving struggle and pain.65

We may characterize Albert’s reconstructive efforts as centered upon at least two critical moments—the moment Celie asserts herself and the process through which he comes to adopt a more relational understanding of himself. Celie’s spiritual and sexual awakening in her bond with Shug prompts her refusal to accept his mistreatment and thus, prompted Albert’s recognition of her, and other women, as full persons. Albert’s relationship with Celie begins with the denial of her individuality and the promoting of her object status.66 In his eyes, Celie, “is black, pore, ugly, a woman…nothing at all” (206). Celie’s understanding of herself changes dramatically in the development of her relationship with Shug Avery. What develops between Celie and Shug becomes a profound display of “mothering/nurturing”67 relationships, in which Shug becomes both confidant and lover. Celie soon becomes Shug’s primary caretaker, thus the attachment

67 Barker, 56.
and deeply intimate tie between the two women begins.

Shug, in kind, nurses Celie back to mental, social, sexual, and even psychic health throughout the remainder of the novel; she reminds Celie that she is worthy of love and is a full person. Celie’s move from self-abnegation to self-actualization and self-authorization is poignantly demonstrated in the confrontation between Albert and Celie when she declares her intent to go to Memphis. “It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation,” says Celie (199). Celie “[affirms] her selfhood and…rebirth into creation, to be free, to be equal to every man, to every being.” And when castigated by Albert for her audacious display of autonomy, Celie responds: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly…But I’m here” (207). These events reveal that Albert was forced to accept Celie’s agency and freedom and thus compelled to confront the full weight of Celie’s presence. Given Celie’s demand for recognition and respect, Albert’s domineering approach to his relationship with Celie is one that he can no longer maintain.

Key for this part of the analysis, is Albert’s renegotiation of masculinity and relational orientation. Following Celie’s sojourn to Memphis and prior to her return, Albert seems to succumb to her initial curse: “Until you do right me, everything you touch will crumble” (206). As a result of this, a change seems to take place within Albert’s personality. Finding himself in a weak and vulnerable position, Albert begins to immerse himself in the lives and activities of the community around in ways reverse his previous behaviors. Instead of lording over women, for example, Sophia comments that Albert has taken up activities and labors typically associated with female spaces: Albert “out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman”

---

68 Ibid., 58.
69 Barker, 62.
Albert also learns to open and extend himself to others, Albert’s self-giving ethos is evident in his taking an active part in the care of Sofia’s ill daughter, Henrietta. Celie’s return home also sets the stage of the novel that focuses on the differences in Albert’s demeanor, his emotional vulnerability, and his experimentation with a different masculinity. The masculinity Albert tries to embody is one that is reconciliatory—one that enables him to “let himself care” (253) for Celie and his extended family. Albert’s recuperation from his illness, Sofia notes, was due to his returning of Nettie’s letters to Celie, prompting Albert’s effort to rebuild the ties between himself and Celie, as well as realize, as Sofia comments, that ultimately, “meanness kills” (225).

Albert’s reversal of the “meanness,” which we may interpret as the unwillingness and failure to embrace a fully relational view of himself, is the epistemological “about-face” toward reciprocal subjectivity that allows him to interweave himself within the communal life of those around him. Albert comes to embrace an organic conception of individual self within community in a way he had not experienced. This effort—this higher understanding of himself as relational, is why Albert notes that it was “the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man,” and that “it feels like a new experience” (260). The reconfiguration of which Albert speaks is thus due largely to his reconsideration of the bounds and terms of relationship with Celie and those nearest to him.

**Tea Cake, Albert, and the Role of the Grotesque in Masculine Identity**

To be sure, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* are dated texts. Given this fact, it may strike some as odd to consider these novels viable for a project that reconsiders tropes for reconstructing and rethinking black masculine identity from a more
contemporary valence. More troubling, however, are these particular literary characters as central subjects for the interpretive framing of reciprocal relationality, given the stark tension between their pathology and potential as tropes for reflecting on black masculinities wholistically. Making use of Victor Anderson’s notion of the grotesque helps us maintain the tensions evident within both Tea Cake and Albert while still finding theoretical value for this project.

Both Hurston and Walker leave unresolved certain components of Tea Cake and Albert’s development as it relates to our framing of reciprocity. Tea Cake’s full succession throughout Their Eyes is more accurately a regression from his early reciprocity, while Albert’s relational self-understanding and development follows a more linear course. Neither character, however, is a flawless, unproblematic trope. They are both messy and contradictory—exhibiting both the best of relational practices and ideals along with the worst. Furthermore, there is no clear, unadulterated resolution of this tension; Tea Cake dies in a state of insanity, making the full extent of his reciprocal self-understanding incomplete, and while Albert’s comeuppance and new sense of masculine self appears to have inaugurated a reconciliation with Celie, we do not learn if this is a relational or communal position that Albert maintains. These questions and concerns need not take away from our analysis; perhaps Hurston and Walker were on to something in leaving “unfinished” the completeness of Tea Cake and Albert’s relational development. Perhaps there is something to be said for the role of ambiguity in human personality. A grotesque reading of the two figurations in this light assists us in our response. Grotesquity, as I go on to discuss, speaks to the contradictory impulses and behaviors individually within Tea Cake and Albert. However, in the final analysis, I
think it vital to situate Tea Cake and Albert as respective negative and positive tropes through which we can meditate on black masculine identity, while likewise avoiding any sense of finality regarding their usefulness as tropes for black masculinity. In viewing them as contrasting viewpoints on this subject, we are able to square ourselves with an ambiguous reading of black masculinities as cast in womanist literature.

In Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience (2008), Victor Anderson critiques the self-limiting perspectives of black and womanist theologies for its “crisis of legitimacy”—the tendency to construct totalizing notions of “blackness” or “black experience” as premised upon and characterized by “suffering, humiliation, struggle, survival, and resistance” as a monolithic response to whiteness and white racism. In Anderson’s view, the response to white racism and other modes of oppression has become the central modus operandi of black and womanist theologies. Anderson prefers instead the construction of a signifier of blackness that covers more ground beyond that of responding to oppressive realities and that “connotes contexts of experience that are structured by ambiguities [italics mine] of difference over sameness.” In sum, Anderson frames blackness and black experience within African American religion as varied and comprised of many diverse features of African American life and experience.

To single out this particular reading of race-as-symbol as the only marker of social and cultural meaning for African Americans is to collapse and outright ignore the

---

72 Ibid., 9.
full range of life options and ways of being represented in black communities. Race is but one facet of one’s experience as an African American. Critical to Anderson’s construction of blackness and black experience is his reading of the “grotesque” which I elaborate upon to explain why the tension in both Tea Cake and Albert do not detract from their usefulness as tropes for thinking through the complexities of black masculinity. Anderson is clear that the concept of the grotesque upon which he bases his claims regarding African American cultural criticism has its roots in European cultural philosophy as primarily an aesthetic concept.\textsuperscript{73} Anderson makes the grotesque the benchmark of his interpretation of experience generally and African American religious experience, specifically—suggesting that Anderson views the grotesque as having material consequences in African American life. Bracketing this, I seek to apply this admittedly aesthetic concept toward our literary analysis as descriptive of Tea Cake and Albert’s behaviors and personality. I’ve described Tea Cake and Albert as particular tropes useful to reflect on black masculinity. Yet, they are interesting in that they contrast each other in their relational development; Tea Cake, despite being both tender and caring and volatile, ultimately regresses over the course of the relationship, while Albert’s course is much more linear. This element of difference in contrasting tropes presents an impasse—a polemic between the central literary figurations within the analysis.

We require, therefore, a method of reading these contrasting masculine tropes from a “non-oppositional” vantage point. That is, the pathologies of Tea Cake and the potential in Albert as individualized relational tropes need not negate one another, and

\textsuperscript{73} Anderson, \textit{Beyond Ontological Blackness}, 127.
thus, can reveal something about black masculinity. A full read of all the features of both figures, the messy and the linear—the repulsive and attractive, enables an interpretation for both figurations that is comfortable with ambiguity and opens up more hermeneutical possibilities that contemporary interpretations may otherwise dismiss.

The grotesque, which Anderson also describes at length in Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism (1995), represents an approach to human experiences characterized by unresolved and ambiguous facets of life, behavior, and beliefs. A grotesque purview of human experiences is comfortable with—is grounded in

sensibilities that are oppositional, such as attraction and repulsion, and pleasure and pain differentials. However, the grotesque seeks neither negation nor mediation between these sensibilities. Rather, it leaves them in tension, unresolved by negation or mediation.74

_Creative Exchange_ offers an even more explicit reading of the grotesque and human experience. Anderson asserts that grotesquery “disrupts the penchant for cognitive synthesis by highlighting the absurd and sincere, the comical and tragic, the estranged and familiar, the satirical and playful, and normalcy and abnormality.”75 Within the context of both Anderson’s interpretation of African American religious experience, and more particularly, our acknowledgement of Tea Cake and Albert’s ambiguity as literary tropes for reflecting on black masculinity, the concept of the grotesque is useful insofar as it provides an opening to the unresolved field of human personality and identity. A grotesque understanding of human personality, says Anderson, is “open to the feel of

74 Ibid.
75 Anderson, _Creative Exchange_, 11.
unresolved joys and laughter; open to the experiencing of the comedic and tragic in experience; open to the interplay of sameness and difference.”

Primarily, a grotesque view of human personality and experiences can assist us in resisting the temptation to engage in reductionist, either/or readings of Tea Cake and Albert’s behavior that would only serve to short-circuit fruitful conversations that have potential to yield further insights into the nature of black masculinity as portrayed in black female literature. The aforementioned assessment from Erna Kelly regarding male characters in Walker’s fiction, provides weight for my conviction regarding the open, ambiguous possibilities of Tea Cake and Albert as figurations who house the potential for further insights beyond the intentions of either Hurston or Walker. A grotesque interpretation of Tea Cake and Albert’s efforts toward reciprocal relationships and modes of masculinity allows them both to embody the problematic and wholesome components of their personalities and gender identities as illustrative of the wide constellation of human emotions and actions, however problematic and harmful. In sum, a grotesque reading of both tropes allows them to still maintain a theoretical purpose for our work on reciprocal relationality and for elaboration upon various features of masculine identity formation—however contradictory those features may be.

Tea Cake starts off as Janie’s “glance from God”—an ideal lover and partner with a great deal of power over Janie’s sense of self and identity. Janie employs mythic language to describe him; his steps “[crushed] scent out of the world” (106); he made “summertime” out of the dullness of life (141). Tea Cake began the relationship bringing romance, play, leisure, and an imperfect, but important sense of mutual partnership. But

---

76 Ibid.
as textual evidence illustrates, Tea Cake regresses from this ideal, and the severity of this regression—the embodiment of the negative and positive—the tragic and triumphant—illustrates the range of dispositional and personal outcomes of human personality and behavior that impacts this relationship. He beats Janie out of jealousy and a need to maintain patriarchal control, he steals money from her (122), and has a penchant for gambling (125).

Furthermore, we have to account for Tea Cake’s murderously insane transformation post-hurricane. What might grotesque interpretive schemes say about a state of mind marked by contradiction? In *The Grotesque in the Works of Bruno Jasienski*, Agata Krzychylkiewicz notes that the grotesque has been popular among 20th century writers as it is “a particularly suitable tool in expressing man’s…freakish and absurd nature.”77 One element of the absurdity of human nature as portrayed in literature, indicates a sense of the grotesque as produced by mental dispositions “such as paranoid vision, hallucination, dream, or a degree of insanity.”78 Tea Cake, arguably at his lowest and worst state, mentally and physically, assaults and threatens to kill Janie just as his insane behavior “assaults [our ideas] of a rational world”79 marked by harmonious relations. Tea Cake’s violent assault upon our sense of relationships and community, from a grotesque interpretation, allows us to reflect on this aggressive practice of masculinity as a mirror of the “emotional confusion of modern man.”80 Reading Tea Cake’s violent, psychotic behavior as a reflection of the “emotional confusion” of man therefore has implications for the grotesque and masculinity—as “confusion” can easily

77 18.
78 19.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
be extended to problems on the level of individual behavior, as well as larger societal problems and ideals that feed into such behaviors—namely in this case, the problem of the pervasiveness of a patriarchal, woman-devaluing society.

Tea Cake, from this perspective, is a representation of the pitfalls of patriarchal masculinity—aggressiveness, violence and controlling behavior, and a distorted, warped view of reality and human relationships. To be sure, we should not approach the consequences of a “Tea Cake” literally, nor should we assume the patriarchal displays prior to Tea Cake’s death are final. Men who exhibit patriarchal tendencies are not automatically bound for death. The key issue is how patriarchal identities yield negative consequences and are self-destructive. Masculine identities that thrive off of control instead of freedom—domination over partnership—as we learn from Tea Cake, are not virtues to be practiced, but are destructive for relationships and communal cohesion.

Albert’s example is easier for us to reconcile from a grotesque point of view, as he exhibits both the “absurd and the sincere”—albeit to different degrees than Tea Cake, but unlike Tea Cake, Albert’s ambiguous development toward a more wholesome notion of relationality is linear in scope. He emerges within the novel resentful of Celie because she was not Shug: “I beat you cause you was you and not her” (270), feels entitled to do violence to women’s bodies, and of course, is both physically and verbally abusive toward Celie. He is also emotionally stunted—seemingly incapable of feelings of connection with either his father, or his son, Harpo. This changes, however, when Celie refuses to acquiesce to Albert’s control, spurred on through her relationship with Shug.
Albert is then able to begin the long process of reconciliation and healing—practices that he develops in the always recovering recovery from patriarchal masculinity.  

Albert’s full progression from the start to the conclusion is a project of human enlargement, a term I borrow from Victor Anderson. Human enlargement, writes Anderson, “seeks to account for human experience…and discover the meaning available within human experience itself.” I would argue that the meaning Albert was able to recover over the course of his reformation is grounded in the realization that his old life and the way he treated others was unsatisfying and deadly. As he noted in response to Celie’s query about Shug’s brothers: “They still act the fool I use to be [italics mine]” (271). Albert’s trope, for our purposes, is instructive in its portrayal of male redemption from patriarchy—redemption that entails the search for new, alternative modes of being, thinking, and speaking in order to promote the flourishing of both community and individual well-being. Albert’s journey toward greater “human enlargement” necessitated the incorporation of a new blueprint—a new foundation for self-understanding as a man. To this point, I turn briefly to bell hooks to complete the character analysis.

In The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love, bell hooks writes that “Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change.” hooks muses on the potential within all men to expand the horizons of their gendered self-perceptions by finding strength from examples and ideals that prompt a rejection of the will to dominate in

---

81 I use this phrasing, “always recovering recovery” to denote the unfinished nature of the process of self-reconstruction regarding patriarchy and pathological masculinities.
82 Anderson, Creative Exchange, 14.
relationships. In making an effort to accept a new relational “blueprint,” Albert is humanized and begins a process of self-reconstruction. When Albert expresses his wish that he no longer “act the fool” he once was, Celie is encouraging, responding “we all have to start somewhere if us want to do better, and our own self is what us have to hand” (271). Celie’s words here evoke a sense of human fulfillment through the process of self-(re)making. However, there is also an implicit suggestion that this self-(re)making is not an assured, or a definite consequence of one’s effort; rather, self-(re)making is dependent upon one’s actions toward the desired end: “…if us want to do better.” Therefore, one has potential for remaking and reforming themselves, and that potential for growth must be realized by the person in question. One must recognize that “our own self is what us have to hand.”

Reading Albert as a shifting, evolving trope for the process of redemption from a masculinist identity premised upon the wielding of patriarchal power, we are provided a well-rounded interpretation of black masculine reformation within *The Color Purple*. Such an interpretation of black masculinity is at once a meditation on the plethora of possibilities of black masculinity via non-normative framings, as well as a creative approach to wrestling with the literary portrayal of “unresolved ambiguities of black [male] life” in womanist thought. Rather than condoning or glossing over the severity of human brokenness or flaws, an acceptance of the grotesque in varied discursive explorations of black masculinity, as mapped through the example of a Tea Cake or an Albert, illustrates the larger constellation of male personality as explored in black women’s fiction writings, but also has concrete applications for cultural and gender

---

criticism studies in that we are able to reflect on both the problematic and useful
epressions of masculinity in men. We are, each of us, at once Tea Cake and Albert—in
varying degrees, at a variety of times, in thought, word, and deed. Like these characters,
we are all ambiguous subjects—with both pathologies and potential housed within the
recesses of our personalities and actions. A grotesque approach to our reading of these
characters enables this kind of sobering acknowledgement of human frailties and human
promise and the impact on human relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a character analysis of black masculinity as exhibited by
central male figurations in the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. It is my
argument that these figurations provided a useful way to think through the complexities
of our development of black masculinity from a reciprocal framing of relationality.

Acknowledging their character flaws and conflicts as still useful for further analyses, the
next chapter considers how Tea Cake and Albert are also useful for the outlining of
certain values of reciprocal relationality—values that comprise what I coin as the tenets
of “reciprocal masculinity.”
Chapter Three

Mr. _______ and Tea Cake Revisited: The Terms of Reciprocal Masculinity

When Charles McLaurin loaded up his car to transport three black women to the voter registration booth in Ruleville, Mississippi on August 22, 1962, he believed that working with these women, as well as scores of others, was a special calling—a rite of passage that created the possibility for freedom through political agency. Steve Estes notes that McLaurin and other black male political organizers during the Civil Rights Movement looked upon their activism, not solely as the way to uplift their communities, but also as rite of passage into manhood—a defiant response to white male segregationists through an affirmation of themselves as men, and an advocacy of black women’s rights and democratic agency:

The rite of passage for SNCC activists and other young men in the southern movement avoided many of the traditional trappings of manhood that rested on power and domination. These men were leaders whose primary goal was to find local leaders to replace them. Though SNCC men occasionally used masculinist rhetoric, their advocacy of participatory democracy led them to an inclusive, humanistic organizing strategy that welcomed both men and women into the leadership of the movement.¹

The opportunity to work with black women for their uplift therefore provided McLaurin a radical way to conceptualize his own political agency and identity. Reflecting years later on that experience in Ruleville, McLaurin commented that was “the day I became a man.”² As Estes notes, “McLaurin found his strength that day by helping the women find theirs...[he] claimed his manhood by helping the women reclaim a bit of their dignity.”³

² Ibid., 62.
³ Ibid.
Later in September 1962, McLaurin went on to meet Fannie Lou Hamer, with whom he worked for many years on voting registration drives and other SNCC\(^4\) initiatives in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Arkansas. In addition to serving as Hamer’s campaign manager in her bid for Congress,\(^5\) McLaurin’s commitment to black women’s liberation, as well as black children, was further evidenced through his becoming a field organizer for the National Council of Negro Women, and being instrumental in the development of Head Start and child enrichment services in the Mississippi Delta.\(^6\)

I cite McLaurin’s contribution to highlight an individual case featuring one black man’s assertion of an identity built upon the extension of himself on behalf others for their well-being. Based upon McLaurin’s personal assessment of his actions, and the evidence we have of his other political activities, it is arguable that McLaurin saw his identity as a black man, as not premised upon domination and control, but was rather, expressed through collaborative freedom fighting with black women.\(^7\) What I have highlighted in McLaurin provides a way of opening conversation about how black men can tap into the relational dimension of masculine identities in ways that uplift others.

What I am interested in considering within this chapter, are some of the implications of

---

\(^4\) Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.


\(^6\) Estes, 85.

\(^7\) Despite many accounts of black men dominating the philosophical objectives and activism of civil rights movement, several historical surveys of the period indicate the need for a more complex interpretation of black male attitudes toward women, black women’s overall political involvement, and the role of gender in arousing the political consciousness of black male activists. See for example, Danielle McGuire’s *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010). McGuire argues that the Civil Rights Movement itself seems to have gotten its start in part from a concerted effort on the part of black men to protect black women from sexual assault at the hands of white men and civil servants.
an interrelated understanding of masculinity within community that may be practiced by individual men.

In this chapter, I argue for “reciprocal masculinity”—a dispositional approach to gendered self-understanding and behavior based upon the efforts toward reciprocal relationships as explored through the previous chapter’s character analyses of Tea Cake and Albert. Reciprocal masculinity, phrasing I use conceptually to describe individual masculine identities premised upon the recognition of the necessity and centrality of mutual, egalitarian relationships within the context of community, is far from exhaustive. That reciprocal masculinity, in my view, is not exhaustive warrants a critical observation. Reciprocal masculinity is an ideal that one lives into—that one gradually embraces, with no certainty or assurance of total embodiment; it is not ever fully realized. My thoughts on this particular matter are echoed in Michael Awkward’s essay, “A Black Man’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism”. Awkward notes that black men who engage feminism and womanism should ultimately devote their energies to the safeguarding of an anti-patriarchal position in thought and practice. It is therefore not my intention to cast reciprocal masculinity as a normative ideal, but is, nonetheless, one heuristic that enables me to reflect on the reconfiguration of black masculinity. If there is a normative dimension that undergirds my constructive work here at all, it is the anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist impetus that informs how I’ve read and interpreted womanism as a resource that impacts black theology and black masculinity. Reciprocal masculinity is better formulated and understood as a corrective ideal to aspire to and live into gradually, rather than a formalized “system” of masculine revisioning. It is representative of one possible

masculine identity and vision among other alternative interpretive options. Positing reciprocal masculinity as normative assumes that my construction is above reproach and not subject to scrutiny or criticism, and more, that the heuristic itself cannot evolve. This chapter represents an attempt to construct a vision—a possible interpretation of masculinity premised upon reciprocity that thrives through anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist relationships. My construction and interpretation of reciprocal masculinity provides a possible means of envisioning a corrective against patriarchal, domineering masculinities.

A vision is a glimpse of what could be possible. My vision of an unrealized reciprocal masculinity as elaborated upon within the resources of womanist religious thought and literature, is really, what we may call, an interpretation of masculine-reconstruction-forever-in-progress. What I mean by this is that just as Tea Cake and Albert exhibit both pathology and promise as unfixed, transitional characters, it is our sober, proactive acknowledgement of these contradictions, and the real-life contradictions of all men, that should temper our interpretive work as we meditate on the lessons such characters inspire in ongoing reflection on notions of self and identity within community. In theorizing an unrealized gender identity premised upon reciprocity, this chapter constructs a vision of masculinity in which the onus for continual internal reflection is placed upon the discerning man. The event that prompts this discernment and reflection, to be sure, is largely dependent upon those who find such a transition into a new masculine identity compelling. In reflecting on this briefly, I again return to Awkward. Part of what men are compelled to do in responding to womanist critique, as Awkward notes, is wrestle with their varying degrees of privilege that prove harmful to women, and commit themselves to partnering with women to address “the gendered inequities that
have marked our past and present, and a resolute commitment to change.⁹ In the process, the sands of advantage and power may shift, and emotions may run high in the process of exchange and dialogue, but it is the correction of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny that must be the incentive for the reconfiguring of masculinity.

Another critical observation is the need for underscoring the incentive behind reciprocal masculinity. In deeming reciprocal masculinity as unrealized, I also hope to illustrate that it is illustrative of an ongoing process that “always but arrives.” In this case, “arriving,” or the full embodiment and practice of reciprocal masculinity, is never assured or even desired. A sense of finality in the push toward greater, more robust gender identities built on equality and mutuality suggests that the internal reflection and external praxis needed to correct sexism and misogyny has an ending point rather than necessitating ongoing critique and new modes of anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal practices. Instead, the incentive underscoring reciprocal masculinity is the ongoing push for greater expressions of human relationship. The process of working toward a more reciprocal identity, extending oneself with and on behalf of others, not the end “result,” is the *sine qua non* of this vision—this possibility, of reciprocal masculinity.

While I formulate reciprocal masculinity as an interpretive vision—an possible interpretation of masculinity to be molded, sculpted, and adapted by the individual and the community, the purpose of this chapter is to articulate some practical tenets of this vision as exhibited in Tea Cake and Albert. Again, the markers of reciprocal masculinity outlined here are far from exhaustive, but are meant instead to highlight practices and inclinations that impact the positive outcomes of this relational framing of masculine

---

⁹ Awkward, 52.
identities within the context of community. Among the critical components that comprise reciprocal black masculine identity, I emphasize: 1) the reformation of pathological masculinity, 2) recognition of the necessity for compound subjectivity within human relationality, and 3) the pursuit of personal and communal fulfillment through taking responsibility for the well-being of others. The reformation of pathological masculinity, that is, masculine identities rooted in coercion and dominance, speaks to a need for self-reflexivity in addressing the pathology because by reflecting on the problematic features of pathological masculinity, one can gain a deeper awareness of the destruction such masculinity yields on relationships. Compound subjectivity is my understanding of a relationship of subjects in which neither party alters nor diminishes the capacity of another person to occupy space and time. This mode of relating presses for a mutualized, egalitarian view of relationships in which the individual agency of women is acknowledged and accepted as a given. My phrasing should not be confused with Anthony Pinn’s theory of complex subjectivity, which is specifically a theoretical interpretation of black religion. Finally, the third element of reciprocal masculinity emphasizes an interrelated concern for the flourishing of others through acts of caregiving. To help unpack these points, I return to a brief analysis of Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Color Purple, as well as draw upon Emilie Townes’ care ethics described in Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care.

(Black) Masculinities

Concepts of masculinity are not abstract notions and/or signifiers of meaning and identity detached from the patterns of human interaction and historical processes. Conceiving gender identities as floating signifiers of meaning with no grounding in particular contexts, societies, or communities is an erroneous view. Taking, as R.W. Connell does, a reading of the sociological dimension of gender construction illustrates how it is both ahistorical and an exercise in essentialist assumptions to view the topic of masculinity in a purely positivist framework. Assuming a “one-size-fits-all” interpretation of masculinities based upon general observations of men without considerations of, among other aspects, cultural context, region, psychology, or other influential factors that nuance masculinity studies, is problematic. In other words, I do not assume all men come to understand and embody notions of masculinity in exactly the same fashions, in all historical periods. My view, rather, like Connell’s, is that masculinities are social constructions that are furthermore demarcated along various cultural and racial lines, and thus, subject to different influences which yield competing masculine identities. Judith Butler seems to echo some of these assertions, noting that racial and gender categories are interlocking and “find their most powerful articulation through one another”—suggesting that gender “norms” must also be read and interpreted as set against the backdrop of racial lens, and not, in contrast, as singular categories of social analysis. There is no monolithic masculine identity that encapsulates all men; rather, there are a plethora of masculinities situated within particular locations of human

12 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), xvi.
interaction and community—for example, there is research on hip-hop masculinities,\textsuperscript{13} prison masculinities,\textsuperscript{14} and even notions of Christian masculinities.\textsuperscript{15} Aware of this, any useful exploration or interpretation of black men and pathological masculinity must begin by first situating masculinities generally as social, relational, and, plural, and second, highlighting those historical and social processes that specifically mark the formation of black masculinities.

Masculinity, as Connell notes, is “not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity.”\textsuperscript{16} Masculine (and feminine) gender identities are lodged within the world of social interaction and relations. This means that notions of masculinity are developed within varied spheres of behavior and attitudes that shift and evolve within the family, culture, economy and political/legal frameworks of societal life.\textsuperscript{17} Further, I also agree with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity—that gender identities and practices are also constructs to the degree that they can be manipulated through superficial, embodied means, such as “drag.” The manipulation of gender ideals and constructs in this way, as Butler notes, are performative in that the “performance” reveals the practice of embodied and stylized acts of self-expression on the individual and communal levels according to social norms.\textsuperscript{18} To account for and study masculinities thus requires an

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{13} See Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Y. Moore, \textit{Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation} (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2006).
  \item\textsuperscript{16} Connell, \textit{Masculinities}, 29.
  \item\textsuperscript{17} Mutua, \textit{Progressive Black Masculinities} (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi.
  \item\textsuperscript{18} Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in S. Case (ed.), \textit{Performing Feminisms}:
analysis of social patterns and behaviors in everyday life among men in culturally specific networks. While an exhaustive social history of masculinities is not possible within the following spaces or within the confines of this chapter, I will provide some attention to the need for nuance and contextual considerations when interpreting black masculinity.

Rather than rely upon pre-established norms for who men are and what men do, it is more important to consider the “making and remaking of [gendered] conventions in social practices” and dissect how men in various settings negotiate those conventions in everyday life.\(^{19}\) As we consider the function and direction of black masculinities in theological discourses and further, consider the ways in which womanist thought can help us reflect on black masculinities, we are compelled to first consider the experiences of black men historically and how those experiences, shaped by the larger American social structure, further influence those notions of manhood.\(^{20}\)

Robert Staples’ *Black Masculinity: The Black Man’s Role in American Society* (1982) considered the extent to which American racism yielded the formation of ethnic differences in the masculine understandings of black men in contrast to white men.\(^{21}\) In Staples’ view, black men necessitate a “special status” in sociological studies pertaining to masculinity due to their unique location as an oppressed minority group. Simply stated, black men, while still the recipients of male privilege, are not quite representative of the dominant forms of masculinity that white, elite males enjoy. It is important to

---

\(^{19}\) Connell, 35.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

recognize that even as there are differences in conceptions of masculinity along racial lines, as Staples notes, this does not mean that these differences cannot emerge within the same contexts alongside one another. Connell’s research on oppositional masculinities, drawing on the work of Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (1977) which focused on the formation of working-class and elite masculinities within secondary school in England, led to the idea that differences in masculinity were often “produced in the same cultural [and] institutional setting.”22 For the American context, this research makes plausible the idea that black masculinities can be constructed within the same cultural milieu as white masculinities, especially when we consider historically how “in a white supremacist context, black masculinities [have played] symbolic roles” for white gender constructions, as well as both white fantasies and fears of black male embodiment. Therefore, in the U.S., as Connell notes, “hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities.”23 Calvin C. Hernton’s *Sex and Racism in America* (1965), which predates Staples’ work, makes a distinction between perceived humanity of white men and black men and its tie to masculinity—noting that “the whole denial of the Negro’s humanity, specifically his masculinity, is in large measure predicated upon the existence of the white world.”24 Staples and Hernton’s observations suggest that there are normative, or what Connell refers to as “hegemonic” masculinities, that centralize and laud the gendered constructions that favor white men, rendering abject and debased black men. Connell observes that the conceptions of hegemonic masculinities

---

22 Connell, 36.
23 Ibid., 80.
that both Staples and Hernton describe, ultimately occupy the dominant position in the
cadre of masculinities through various practices of social stratification that serve to quell
dissension within the gender order.\(^{25}\)

Within an American social context, white men represent the dominant group and
are typically perceived as the “accepted”, standardized representation of male culture.
Black men, given the legacy of slavery, Jim Crowism, and the prison industrial complex,
have had a different set of historical and social experiences that denied access to the same
status as white men, as well as being denied the larger network of wealth and power upon
which hegemonic masculinities are constructed.\(^{26}\) Such ostracization from the
mainstream has situated black men on a different (read lesser) positionality within the
order of masculinities. The terrain upon which black men’s construction of their
masculine identities has occurred is that of an alienated existence marked by the
dominant society as a realm of abject Otherness—a zone of non-being.\(^{27}\)

Based upon historical record, and given the reality of the American legacy of
racial apartheid against black and brown communities, black masculinity has largely been
constructed by dominant white society as a threat to be quelled and controlled. The black
male body, in particular, has often been the scapegoat for America’s deep anxieties and
fears regarding its sordid history of conquest and colonialization on the path toward its
maturation as a nation. Toni Morrison provides an interpretation of this racialized
Morrison notes that within literary discourses and other Eurocentric discursive spaces,

---

\(^{25}\) Connell, 80
\(^{26}\) Patricia Hill Collins, “A Telling Difference: Dominance, Strength, and Black
“Africanism” became an interpretive mechanism through which whites framed their ideas of civilization and, notably, manhood. In white, American literature, Morrison notes, images of “impenetrable whiteness…appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people,” and were associated with darkness and dark imageries.28 As a literary concept with tangible implications for social relations, literary darkness came to characterize African people, who ultimately served as the springboard for the collective white imagination’s articulation of “historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies.”29 In short, black people were reified as the literal embodiment of America’s uneasiness with the features of its future and its existence that proved troubling and uncertain. Blackness and black bodies served as a meditation on the terror of the unknown. Morrison interrogates the literature of Edgar Allan Poe to illustrate how 19th century Anglo writers employed imageries of “impenetrable whiteness” as the “antidote for…and meditation on the shadow—a dark and abiding presence.30 The coupling and companionship of light and dark imagery, accompanied by descriptions of darkness as linked with “fear and longing”31 and whiteness or light as the resounding resolution of the darkness, serves to reinforce the social categories of race that situate blackness as warranting of suspicion, distrust, hatred, and ultimately, in need of conquering.

Morrison also suggests that Africanism as both a literary and discursive concept in American culture also has implications for the construction of manhood and

---

29 Ibid. 37.
30 Ibid., 32-33.
31 Ibid., 33.
masculinity in America, which has direct consequences for the perception of black men. Morrison notes that “the image of a reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona.” Further, as “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature,” Morrison concludes that U.S. literature was critical in the construction of the American as a new white man—thereby establishing a uniquely proto-American literature framed within the context of Africanist presence. In addition to the role that darkness and blackness has played in the American creative and imperial imagination, politically, socially, and in literature—the response to this darkness is further associated with masculine identity. Analyzing literary descriptions of white manhood during the 18th and 19th century, Morrison elaborates upon the concept of the “new white man” as an embodiment of, among other attributes, authority, power, gentility, resourcefulness, and education. Africanism, as the inverse of the laudable characteristics of new white masculinity, was “deployed as rawness and savagery [and provided] the staging ground and area for the elaboration” of the quintessential American identity. What fuels and comprises this masculine identity is, among other attributes, autonomy, authority, and absolute power.

---

32 Ibid., 39.
33 Ibid., 39.
34 Morrison, 42-43.
35 Ibid., 44. Africanism itself is not, in my reading of Morrison, an explicitly gendered concept, but its usage, based upon her analysis of the white writers of the time, expresses a hermeneutic of white masculine self-expression and development. Africanism, conceptually and discursively speaking, provided the terrain for the full flourishing of white masculinity and thus, white nationhood. Maurice Wallace’s Constructing the Black Masculine (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) does a good job chronicling the literary efforts of black men intellectuals, writers, and political leaders to reconstruct black masculinity over against such “Africanist” discourses in the work of white literary scholars and intellectuals.
36 Ibid.
Such virtues enable the white man to defend himself against, as well as conquer, the savageries of the dark.

An Africanist framework, whether in literature or in political considerations, enables a white man to “persuade himself that savagery is out there” — though savagery may be read here as both the dark body and whatever momentary fears and uncertainties that emerge in white men’s experiences. Kelly Brown Douglas’s theological reading of the black male body in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, extends some of Morrison’s perspective. Douglas opines that the black male body is interpreted as always, already encroaching upon white physical spaces within the white religious and social imagination, and in doing so, arouses the ire of Anglo-stand-your-ground-culture because blackness—the black body—signifies both the inverse of white racial/religious purity and a “sinful” threat to white holiness.

The *quintessential* masculine identity, therefore, is typically understood as housed in white male bodies, as the black male body is associated with “savagery” and unknown terror. Black men “cannot pass the test of whiteness,” and therefore cannot possess “certain rights” specific of whiteness/maleness. Applying such an interpretive framing to our present study, it is reasonable to suggest that white, American masculine identities were never meant to include black men. Black men are deviations—daresay insults—to this ideal. As outsiders in relation to this construction of the masculine ideal, black

---

37 Morrison, 45.
38 Stand Your Ground culture refers to Douglas’ interpretation of an American social, racial, and economic climate premised upon the right to private, spatial, and embodied entitlement and the pragmatism and necessity of deadly force to defend these realms.
40 Ibid., 40.
masculinity therefore is the site of major contestation. Black masculinities are in a unique position in that it both represents a problem and a privilege—racial distortions and stereotypes of black men have been shown to have deadly, dehumanizing consequences, but the privileges of maleness contrast sharply with these unfavorable features of the experience. Nuanced readings of black masculinities mindful of the historical contexts under which masculine identities are developed dissuade us from simplistic renderings. It is not enough to criticize the harmful consequences of patriarchal masculinities as embodied by black men; we must take advantage of historical and social interpretations that take into account the relationship of black men to their larger social context. If we acknowledge problematic features of black masculine identity, it is important to also acknowledge that black masculinity does not arise tabula rasa without historical process.

Some scholars and literary critics who examine black masculinity begin with the historical period in which black masculinity and black sexual politics generally were most pronounced—the modern Civil Rights eras of the 60s and 70s. For example, Michele Wallace’s thesis of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978) is that the masculinist bias toward political leadership undermined and ignored the important contributions of black women during this period. As she notes, Ethicist Keri Day invokes some of Wallace’s commentary on the nature of black masculinity. In *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (2012), Day provides particular insight into the Poor People’s Campaign of the 60s, the exclusion of black women due to the “sexist and heterosexist assumptions and constructions of black womanhood and manhood as well as black femininity and
masculinity that affected the ideologies and practices employed by male leaders.”

Additional interpretations and readings of black masculinity may take into account the extraordinary circumstances under which black men interpreted and saw themselves as gendered within American masculine culture, and further, address how American, Eurocentric culture “shaped” and attempted to deny their masculine identity. In short, black masculinities and the interpretation thereof, also require a nuanced reading that attends not only to the formation of black masculinity within American culture generally, but also to the extent to which black masculine identities are the result of black men’s own conscious processes of identity formation in response to trends and mores in American society.

So for example, one question that may help initiate conversation on the development and place of black masculinity in American culture is asking how African American men have understood, described, and in some cases, reconstructed their masculinities? Debates over black masculine identity and black masculinity have been ongoing for centuries. As Marlon B. Ross has noted, “Writers from the 1850s onward, including Martin R. Delany, David Walker, Charles Chesnutt, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, William Pickens, Ida B. Wells, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Walter White, and Nella Larsen, meditated on what we now call the social constructions of race and gender and specifically on the engendering of Black manhood.” These writers’ attention to the lives of black men and the unique location and development of black masculine identity indicates precedent for work being done on

---

black men that far predates the highly charged political and sexual debates of the 60s and 70s. There is also substantial work available that treats the historical manifestations and expressions of black masculinity in the research and writing of those mentioned above.

Among these are Martin Summer’s *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (2004), which focuses on the ways African American and Afro-Caribbean men were able to forge conceptions of masculine identity through a variety of venues, including fraternal orders (freemasonry), college life, black nationalism, and the intellectual atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. 43 Other useful texts, such as Steve Estes’ *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (2005) address black men’s articulation of masculinity in more recent historical periods, notably during the civil rights era. 44

Beyond a recovery of histories on black men’s experiences and interpretations of their masculinities, it is also useful to draw upon sociological data that helps us understand how black men’s understanding of masculinity is both distinctive and unique. For example, Andrea Hunter and James Davis’ 1994 study uncovered that many black men did not feel that they were recognized as men in dominant American society—rather, there was an overwhelming “perspective on manhood and masculinity often hidden in the discourse on the Black male crisis” 45—suggesting ways in which there are distinctive and culturally specific ways that black men articulate black male identity in

contrast to white male identity. Other sociological treatments have considered the performativity of alternative modes of black masculinity among younger generations as a way to cope with the feelings of displacement and alienation within American culture.\textsuperscript{46}

The above section grounds our discussion through an explicit demarcation between the concept of universal masculinity, and the more nuanced approach of a plural conception of masculinity, taking care to denote the hierarchies that emerge between these masculinities. In discussing both the social constructionism of gender identity (masculinity) through the work of R.W. Connell, as well as pointing to some of the resources to illustrate the historical and sociological data underscoring the debates surrounding black masculinity, I’ve made an attempt to indicate some of the directions the conversation on black masculinity has taken as well as highlight the distinctiveness of “black masculinities” in contrast to other masculinities. While nowhere near an exhaustive purview, the above provides distinctions that clarify the unique, contested nature of black masculinities. With this grounding in place, it is now appropriate to address the implications of our previous chapter’s literary analysis of Their Eyes and The Color Purple. Taking into account both Tea Cake and Albert’s efforts and failures toward the realization of reciprocal masculinity, we may now consider further a typological outlining of this concept as embodied and illustrated through both figures.

\textbf{Becoming a Natural Man: Recognizing and Reforming Pathological Masculinity}

James Baldwin’s essay “To Crush a Serpent” (1987) offers a searing indictment of Christian fundamentalism for its rigid interpretation of embodied sexuality, its overt racism as indicated in the conservatism of the religious right, and the negative effect on

notions of communal and embodied salvation. Baldwin articulates a concept of salvation that troubles the more pietistic, individualist soteriologies of contemporary American evangelicalism. In contrast to the focus on the singular rapture of one’s “getting right with God,” Baldwin’s soteriology is more communal and earthy. For Baldwin, salvation is a social process built upon the recognition of a shared humanity and personhood. Salvation “is the beginning of union with all that is or has been or will ever be” and “connects, so that one sees oneself in others and others in oneself.” Per Baldwin’s view, salvation is relational—the growth, fulfillment, and self-constitution of a person’s realization of salvation depends upon the recognition of a shared selfhood with others. Baldwin criticized the puritanism and anti-body dimensions of conservative, fundamentalist Christian soteriology; he notes, “The prohibitions that suit the fundamentalists best all involve the flesh,” and “sin is not limited to carnal activity, nor are the sins of the flesh the most crucial or reverberating of our sins.” Baldwin seems to connect his emphasis on preserving the integrity of the body to his conviction that there is no salvation without an acceptance of the absolute unity between God and the embodied character of human life. The incarnational underscoring of Baldwin’s interpretation of salvation allows space for a theology of body inclusive of, and receptive to, the many varieties of sexual and gender identities.

Baldwin’s incarnational theology of salvation posited as an embodied, communal endeavor, is instructive for our turn to the reformation of pathological masculinity. It is

---

48 Particularly raced and sexualized bodies.
49 Baldwin, “To Crush a Serpent” in Randall Kenan, ed., The Cross of Redemption, 164.
my view that the interrelated, communal tenor of Baldwin’s articulation of his concept of salvation is likewise a useful interpretive tool in our reading of pathological masculinity. As Baldwin notes, “Salvation is not separation. It is the beginning of union with all that is or has been or will ever be.”

Pathological relationships, in contrast to Baldwin’s soteriological description of relationships that unify bodies and souls, instead thrive off of forms of control, abuse, and alienation.

I define pathological masculinity as an approach to community and relationships that presumes a sexist and patriarchal hierarchy with and among others, namely women and other marginalized groups. Pathological masculine identities privilege coercion, domination, and control in lieu of persuasion, partnership, and the free exchange of ideas, resources, and experiences. Pathological masculinity is an embodied ideal of manhood that fails to “see oneself in others and others in oneself.” This mode of masculine identity wields patriarchal power in daily life in ways that are destructive to oneself and community—characterized by dominance, hierarchal assertions of control, and a disregard for the subjectivity and agency others. With both Tea Cake and Albert, we see glaring displays of these features in various manners. Both men, at different points, enact physical violence and control over Janie and Celie, respectively—bespeaking an attitude and disposition with an inclination toward dominance. Tea Cake “shows Janie who’s boss” through violence over the conflicts with Mrs. Turner and her brother, and Albert asserts his right to beat Celie because he feels entitled to make her conform to his version of domesticity: “she my wife…Plus she stubborn” (22). Further, as an illustration of the generational recycling of pathological masculinity based upon

---

dominance, even Albert’s son, Harpo’s abusive treatment of Sofia leads her to comment on Harpo’s domineering behavior in their marriage: “He don’t want a wife, he want a dog” (64).

I focus particularly on Albert for this first element of the typology of reciprocal masculinity because we are provided a better sense of his overall development by the novel’s end. Albert adopts a more relational understanding of himself, and becomes receptive to Celie’s personhood and her eventual friendship. In the previous chapter, I asserted that this effort toward reformation on Albert’s part is based upon Celie’s demand for respect and dignity, but there is also occasion for Albert’s recognition, which I understand as ultimately the acknowledgement of the wrongfulness of his approach to women, or relationships generally. This recognition—this reflexive sense of the need to model and practice “right relationship” is what is informative for our reading of the reformation of pathological masculinity. Kelly Brown Douglas refers to right relationship as “a womanist way of relating to their families and men,” emphasizing communal wholeness through: “1) a communal understanding of family, 2) a willingness to do what was necessary for the well-being of the family/community, 3) female networking and cooperation, and 4) a reciprocal relationship of equality and respect with their men/husbands.”

The familial underscoring Douglas ties into wholesome relationships cannot be dismissed and helps unpack the reformation of Albert’s masculine identity. Albert’s gradual transitioning from pathological masculinity was in part a consequence of the

efforts of a family member as well as recognition of the need for a different kind of relationship with Celie. Albert, with the help of both Harpo directly and Celie, indirectly, and his own acknowledgment of his problems, learns to embrace a relational framing that thrives on openness, mutual care, and a desire for the well-being of those around him. Illustrating Douglas’ framing of right relationship, Harpo emerges as an interesting figure in the saga of Albert’s process of redemption—becoming an additional humanizing influence. It is vital to emphasize Harpo’s role in Albert’s recuperation and healing after falling ill, as well as his particular prompting of Albert’s actions that lead to reconciliation with Celie. Harpo’s placement at this juncture of the plot is not a matter that is bereft of significance. Harpo’s efforts in nursing his father back to health after “living like a pig” (224) initiate the process that enables Albert to adopt and enact a more relational understanding of his identity.

As we learn from Sofia, Albert, in the aftermath of Celie’s departure, becomes a recluse—“shut up in the house so much it stunk” (224). Harpo eventually forces his way into the home and initiates a care-taking process that reveals the extent of Albert’s vulnerability, as well as the ethic of care that Harpo exhibits toward his father—troubling and defying some of the conceptions of masculine behavior. Sofia notes “Harpo went up there plenty of nights to sleep with him…one night I walked up to tell Harpo something—and the two of them was just laying there on the bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy in his arms” (224). The son becomes a parent figure to the father—

54 That I use the language of humanization to describe Harpo is my effort to allude to his expansion of his own humanity through his extension of care toward Albert. It is the very extension of self—the placing of another within the field of one’s scope of human relations that exhibits the enlargement of human personality that Victor Anderson’s work helped illustrate in the previous chapter.
nurturing, feeding, bathing, and exhibiting all the attributes that a parent (typically imagined as a mother) ideally lavishes upon children—reflecting the interwoven, familial dynamic that Douglas characterizes as “right relationship.” When Celie notices Albert’s rejuvenated appearance (222), she is in effect recognizing the external results of Harpo’s care. There is one specific facet of Harpo’s influence upon Albert that prompts his physical restoration and health. Celie inquires about the source of Albert’s new health (read redemption), and for Sofia the reason is obvious: “Harpo made him send you the rest of your sister’s letters. Right after that he start to improve. You know meanness kill” (225). Harpo therefore must also be credited with having a hand in the reversal of Albert’s misfortunes as well as reconciliatory efforts toward Celie—all of which is part and parcel of his overall transition from pathological masculinity. Still, however, Harpo is hardly a saint, nor does he fail to embody and practice a masculinity that does harm. In the novel he exhibits the very same tendencies and pathologies as Albert—notably his beating of Sofia, prompting their estrangement. Not to trivialize or dismiss this element of Harpo’s contradictory behaviors, his nursing of Albert and his own eventual reconciliation with Sofia through a reimagining of the nature of marriage reflects Alice Walker’s belief in the prospect of evolved conceptions of masculine identity. It demonstrates that men are capable, even in their own flaws and weaknesses, of engaging the practices of reciprocity and right relationship.

Like Albert, Harpo is a work-in-progress, neither all terrible, nor all wonderful. By the novel’s end, he makes efforts to reconcile himself with Sophia after periods of estrangement and abuse. Whether his actions on the part of Albert’s rejuvenation prompted this reconciliation is not completely explicit. In any case, while Harpo is not
the central figure for our interpretation of the reformation of pathological masculinity, in centralizing Albert’s efforts toward transformation, we must acknowledge Harpo’s participation in Albert’s gradual process toward redemption. While Harpo is indeed as damaged as Albert is in terms of their relational identities, or lack thereof, Harpo is still able to extend himself on Albert’s behalf. At this point it is now necessary to consider the more salient features of Albert’s intentionality in correcting the unfavorable features of his masculinity.

Most indications of Albert’s individual volition regarding the self-reflexive and corrective actions toward the destructive nature of his masculine identity become evident in his private interactions with Celie, and her responses. Specifically, we may say that through these exchanges, Albert makes an effort to embrace a natural view of himself in relation to Celie. In one of Celie’s letters to Nettie, she discusses the prospect of hating Albert for what he’s done to separate Celie and Nettie. I quote Celie’s feelings at length:

But I don’t hate him…After all the evil that he done I know you wonder why I don’t hate him. I don’t hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don’t mean just that he work and clean up after himself and he appreciate so me of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen [italics mine], and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I’m satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience (260).

Cелиe’s thoughts and recollections here are interesting. First, we can establish one common denominator for she and Albert’s reconciliation and Celie’s forgiveness: Shug. Both Celie and Albert’s love for Shug was in part a factor in their embarking upon a mutual friendship. Their connection through Shug even prompted Celie to observe in the letter that, as it related to Celie’s feelings of isolation and lovelessness in Shug’s absence,
Albert “seem to be the only one understand my feeling” (259). Further, Celie’s own words seem to indicate Albert’s improvement, not simply in terms of domestic upkeep: “he work and clean up after himself,” but particularly in his capacity to be a partner. I do not speak of a “partner” here in a romantic sense, but rather to indicate the status of their new friendship. Albert, in contrast to his previous dealings with Celie, “really listen.” Celie’s observation suggests an intentional attentiveness from Albert that has moral implications, which I describe below.

P. Sven Arvidson notes that attentiveness requires focusing on another “as the theme of…ongoing attending life.”\(^5^5\) On this point, I make an effort to underscore the possible Buberian insight within Arvidson’s observation on attention, as there are theoretical implications premised upon an ethics that centralizes the well-being others. We may say, from a Buberian framing, that the notion of attention provides extended commentary on the nature of the “I-You” encounter. Attention toward the other, Buber would say, entails seeing the “whole being,” which is one’s full self, unadulterated, unaltered, and unminimized. Recognizing the wholeness of being is a lynchpin in the nature of true relation and true reciprocity.\(^5^6\) Within Albert’s sphere of attention, Celie became, even if momentarily, the focal point. From this perspective, Albert pays attention to Celie; in doing so he receives the fullness—the wholeness, of Celie’s voice, her experiences, her desires, her personality, and her alterity, or distinct separateness as an agent. Their conversation(s), rooted in the mutual process of reception and

---

\(^5^5\) P. Sven Arvidson, *The Sphere of Attention: Context and Margin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 150.

\(^5^6\) Buber, *I and Thou*, 67-68.
attendance, achieves a “moral moment.” Because Albert “really listen,” he does not “single out some item in the sphere of attention which is anything less” than a full recognition of Celie and her personhood. The moral and reciprocal implications of Albert’s attention to Celie are solidified on these grounds because he accepts the whole and not the part—the total and not the partial. In this moment of moral recognition, Albert, as a work-in-progress and not fully arrived into a reciprocal masculine identity, is able to share and receive with Celie, and in doing so, they endure and be-come together as two subjects.

Also illustrative of Albert’s intentional push toward the correction of his masculine identity are those references to his acknowledgement of the changes within himself. Unprompted, as Celie recollects, Albert expresses a joy in his feeling like “a natural man” (260), which I interpret as a moment of recognition from Albert on the transformative capacities of an embrace of a relational identity. In becoming a “natural man”—a masculine identity more organic and more connected to black women and the larger community, not in domineering but egalitarian ways,, Albert first had to come to terms with the destructiveness of his behaviors. In a sense, Sofia was right, meanness did kill—it killed “Mr.”, that is, the former identity Albert embodied and enabled a reformed Albert to respond anew with a relational identity. In attempting to transition toward, and become a natural man, Albert realized he couldn’t remain “the fool [he] use to be” (271). He had to change—he had to grow. The natural man in Albert’s view, both recognizes the error of his previous modes of being and relating, and makes an effort to correct them.

57 Arvidson, 150.
58 Ibid., 169.
59 Ibid., 150.
Albert’s gradual, ongoing effort to reform his pathological masculine identity is grounded in a reconstructed relationship with his son, Harpo, and his efforts to rebuild his relationship with Celie through shared experiences and emotional outpouring that create the possibility for corrective self-reflection on those destructive components of his masculine identity. The “natural man” transitioning that Albert mentions and attempts to embody, reflects an imperative in the self-reflexive dimension of masculine reconfiguration—pushing for black men to “rethink their own masculinities and sexualities in order to create more productive relationships within the black community.”[^60] Albert, then, can serve as a fictional representation of a transitioning, shifting black male identity that can assist our efforts to reconfigure pathological masculine identities. Pathological masculinity thrives off control, domination, aggression, violence, and the subordination of others, particularly women. “Natural Man” masculinity, which is an understanding of self that is more organic and receptive of non-hierarchical arrangements of relating to others, and which Albert learns and struggles to embrace, thrives within the contexts of egalitarian partnering, openness, and self-reflection on one’s flaws and shortcomings. Eschewing the façade and puniness of pathological masculinities rooted in control over others compels us toward the prospect of human enlargement—a calling to exhibit a notion of self and community beyond what we currently are and beyond what we currently practice. If domination, aggression, and violence cannot make us larger, freer, and more loving and more relational, and it most assuredly does not (as we learn from Albert), it is likely time for us to do something new—create new identities. In the literary trials and redemption of Albert, we have an

example and an inspiration from which we can draw on and release the shackles of threadbare pathological masculinities that destroy both self and community.

**Becoming an Us: Compound Subjectivity within Reciprocal Masculinity**

The next element of reciprocal masculinity takes its cues from the analysis provided of Tea Cake’s relationship with Janie. Through our reading of Tea Cake, reciprocal masculinity is marked by an approach to relationships in which compound subjectivity provides the framework for how we discuss mutual agency within relationships. While there are elements of Tea Cake’s personality that fell prey to the more traditional trappings of masculinity and this bled over into the occasional subsequent aggression and violence toward Janie, there are also some dimensions of his relational approach that nonetheless inform this desired tenet of reciprocal masculinity. Again, I define “compound subjectivity” within reciprocal relations as premised upon the mutual recognition of the agency of others—a relationship of subjects in which neither party alters nor diminishes the capacity of another person to occupy space and time. In considering Janie’s overall development and experiences within the plot, the characteristic feature of her interpersonal experiences with men involves varying degrees of their attempts at coercion, control, and silencing Janie’s independence and voice. The men in her life, including her more promising relationship with Tea Cake, all at varying points, view Janie as an object, and thus, not a subject. With Tea Cake, however, there is evidence of an effort to see Janie as a person—a partner. It is my argument that Tea Cake, while not by any means a complete or perfect representation, embodies and practices the relational ideal of compound subjectivity, albeit inconsistently, at various points of his and Janie’s relationship and within their marriage.
It is again important to emphasize the need to conduct this reading of Tea Cake and our observations about reciprocal masculinity in Tea Cake against the backdrop of Janie’s perpetually negative association with patriarchal and pathological masculinity and how these flawed, misogynistic perspectives on gender and sex impact relationships between women and men—or more to the point, how it impacted Janie’s relationships with men. In the wake of Joe Starks’ death, Janie had become “raw” and somewhat disinterested in the prospect of either marriage or romantic involvement: “This freedom feeling was fine. These men [new suitors] didn’t represent a thing she wanted to know about. She had already experienced them through Logan and Joe” (90). What Janie “experienced” and therefore sought to avoid by re-entering a relationship, was the restrictiveness of a rigidly patriarchal union in which she was confined to the private sphere or molded into a role not of her choosing. Thus, Janie’s first marriages to Killicks and Starks fail because both men “insist too severely on Janie’s obedience to them and to conventional sex-role and class-role stereotypes.”

Killicks and Starks, in “insisting too severely” on Janie’s deference and submission, do not value or acknowledge Janie’s humanity. The love that Janie originally envisions for herself—one that is fulfilling and life-giving, becomes a possibility with Tea Cake, because Tea Cake accepts and allows for the expression of Janie’s freedom and humanity in ways that Starks and Killicks do not, particularly within spaces commonly deemed masculine spaces. We need further explanation, however, regarding Janie’s immersion into these male spaces and Tea Cake’s motivation for including and inviting Janie.

61 Shawn E. Miller, “‘Some Other Way to Try’: From Defiance to Creative Submission in Their Eyes Were Watching God” in The Southern Literary Journal, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Fall, 2004), 75.
Seeking to avoid both overly idealistic readings of Tea Cake and Janie’s relationship, as well as readings that render Tea Cake an unrepentant ne’er-do-well, the interpretive work presented here seeks to ground the reciprocal masculinity exhibited in Tea Cake within a realistic appraisal of his failures and promise. As SallyAnn Ferguson notes, “Tea Cake genuinely encourages Janie to discover and realize her inner self, [but] he is also an unreliable and violent man whom Janie eventually must kill after he attacks her like a rabid dog.”

Part of the discovery of Janie’s inner self—her inner voice and self-assertion, I argue, is introduced through these activities in which Tea Cake includes her. The male-identified activities I go on to discuss below are primarily the checker game and gun shooting. The question is not whether these are masculine spaces; this much is obvious given the social and gender conventions for male and female behavior at the time in which the novel is written; the issue is what Tea Cake accomplishes by inviting Janie to participate in these spaces and why he feels compelled to do so.

Ferguson notes that Hurston characterizes Janie’s husbands through familiar folkloric motifs within African American culture. Tea Cake, according to Ferguson, is an embodiment of the black folk hero, Stackolee (Stagolee, Stacker Lee). As is the case for the Stackolee character of African American lore, Tea Cake is loved as a central thread in the fabric of the community, but is also known to engage in a disregard of the “rules” of polite society, namely through the vices of drinking, gambling, violent outbursts. However, coupled with these pathological behaviors, Tea Cake likewise resists the social conventions of his day through the exhibition of a “freedom of spirit”—

63 Ibid.
one that he shares with the woman he loves. In this sense, Tea Cake can be read as including Janie and inviting her to share in these experiences with him as both an act of love for Janie and as the continuation of his capacity for troubling the conventions of the Eatonville community through radical individuality. It is possible that Tea Cake, in his love and care for the growth and evolution of Janie’s “inner self,” wanted her to likewise experience the freedom of defying social norms, even if that defiance was neither exhaustive nor total. My point in emphasizing Janie’s participation in these realms of the community, as I do in more detail below, is not to suggest that Tea Cake purposefully alters or changes the gendered dynamics of the Eatonville community. Tea Cake lacks the language and analytical wherewithal of post-women’s liberation feminist and womanist critique that may necessitate the kind of self-reflection that would underscore such an intentional challenge to existing social structures. I am saying, however, that a troubling of these male spaces by inviting Janie is nonetheless a plausible consequence of Tea Cake’s enabling her to trespass the bounds of male-dominated terrain, albeit in a limited fashion.

I noted above that Tea Cake enables Janie to experience freedom and the assertion of her humanity specifically in ways that Killicks and Starks do not allow. Despite this, there is obvious overlap regarding the unfavorable characteristics that all the men share. Tea Cake’s eventual violence and jealousy toward Janie are particularly disturbing because, as Tracy Bealer notes, “he is so unlike Logan and Joe, yet sporadically performs the same dominative masculinity they do,” however, he still embodies and practices a reciprocal love for Janie that proves to be liberatory, even as this love does not guarantee

---

64 Ibid., 192-193.
complete liberation from the social hierarchy of their community.\textsuperscript{65} These comments on Janie’s participation in masculine spaces and Tea Cake’s role therein, are meant to temper some of the more idealistic readings of Tea Cake as an exemplar of gender justice who intentionally seeks to challenge existing social structures as they pertain to gender and community. As I now attempt to do, Tea Cake’s limited \textit{and} liberatory love for Janie emphasized her subjectivity in ways that may be considered somewhat radical—certainly more radical than either Killicks or Starks would have allowed. Bealer opines that Tea Cake must be distinguished from Killicks and Starks because, “rather than revolting or stifling her, Tea Cake loves Janie by and through her equal participation in play and pleasure”—normalizing and validating Janie’s desire for mutual interaction within herself and as experienced within the community—a desire denied in her previous marriages.\textsuperscript{66} The reciprocal implications of Tea Cake’s acceptance of Janie’s subjectivity are explored below by interpreting some of Janie’s experiences of mutual interaction, play, and pleasure in the masculine spaces mentioned above.

The reciprocal undertones of Tea Cake’s approach to Janie as a subject is indicated through his acceptance of, and insistence on, her ability to participate in the same spheres of activity as the men in Eatonville. Consider their first conversation in the store—Tea Cake inquires as to why Janie is not at the local baseball game, as “Everybody else is dere” (95). This is an interesting contrast to note because it seems to indicate that Tea Cake \textit{expects} Janie to be immersed within the life and activities of the townspeople. Comparatively, the same scenario, if it had taken place in Janie’ previous

\textsuperscript{65} Tracy L. Bealer, “‘The Kiss of Memory’: The Problem of Love in Hurston’s \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}” in \textit{African American Review}, Volume 43, No. 2/3 (Summer/Fall, 2009), 312. (311-327)
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 320.
marriage, may have ended with Starks’ insistence on Janie’s remaining relegated to the activities of the store on the day of the game. The store, within which Janie was mere ornamentation and a symbol of Joe’s power and influence in Eatonville, was also a class symbol—providing imagined lines of demarcation between Starks (and by default, Janie) and “such trashy people” (54). Tea Cake, however, does not levy, at this point, such an expectation or sex role proclamation—he indicates an interest in Janie as Janie—that is, as a member of the township in whom he perhaps has some romantic interest.

Tea Cake, unlike Killicks and Starks, is able to recognize Janie’s humanity by acknowledging her intellectual prowess and equal abilities to participate in activities typically dominated by men. There are glimpses of this in the example of Tea Cake’s instruction in checkers and, later on, to Janie’s learning to shoot guns. What I centralize specifically in this part of the analysis, are the implications of Tea Cake’s *extension of confidence* in Janie’s ability to participate in these so-called masculine spheres. Tea Cake’s confidence in Janie’s ability to thrive on these accounts requires a willingness to accept Janie’s humanity and capacity for participating within the Eatonville community, or more specifically, male spaces within the community. Doing so indicates Tea Cake’s reception of Janie as a thinking, breathing, acting subject.

When Janie reflects on her first checkers lessons from Tea Cake, the extent of her realization that someone took time to recognize her ability and potential passion for the game becomes obvious. “Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it *natural* [italics mine] for her to play” (96). Janie almost appears surprised at the prospect of a man expressing confidence and zeal in her ability to play checkers, a game that “de men folks treasures round heah” (95). Tea Cake’s insistence on Janie joining him in the game
arises from a desire for friendly banter (“You looks hard tuh beat,” 95) as well as Tea Cake’s recognition of Janie’s formidable intelligence for the game. Whereas Starks “useter tell [Janie she] never would learn,” a view no doubt rooted in his belief that “somebody got to think for women and chilluns and chickens and cows” (71), Tea Cake insists upon an alternative view of Janie’s mental strengths. As Tea Cake notes, Janie “got good meat” on her head (96), and further, as if to indicate the seriousness of this assertion vote of confidence in Janie’s skill, promises to return and teach her more strategies and movements of the game. Within the context of Their Eyes, playing checkers was perhaps a communal pastime that provided a certain pleasurable respite from the daily hustle and bustle of rural, agrarian life in Eatonville. For Janie, however, it became a way to realize another facet of her personality that was largely quelled in her previous marriages. While Killicks and Starks operated from a gender framework that subordinated women and downgraded their abilities, Tea Cake posited women’s intelligence as a given reality. That Janie exhibits intelligence is neither shocking nor anathema to Tea Cake. Tea Cake emerges in this regard as arguably the first man in Janie’s life who does not engage her as “lesser-than” as dictated by the conventional standards of gendered behavior, identity, and relationships. In doing so, he is able to see within Janie not simply a formidable opponent in checkers, but more so, an intelligent, capable woman who could learn and participate in the mundane and quotidian dimensions of everyday life—thereby betraying the societal and gendered constraints popularly associated with female and male agency.

We can also observe the same features of Tea Cake’s reception of Janie’s full subjectivity as revealed through his expectation that Janie can engage in physical
activities and work commonly ascribed to men. In contrast to Starks’ placing Janie on a pedestal—insisting that she was a “bell-cow” who was to stand above the common folk and their activities (41), Tea Cake again turns such categories on their head by enabling Janie to find a purpose and function within the communal fabric of the work-worlds of the rural folk life. Tea Cake’s openness to Janie in this regard troubles the Victorian gender roles that Joe embodied and demanded within Janie’s second marriage and places her in the unique position of again having to reevaluate her role within the community. As Janie comments to Pheoby comparing Starks’ treatment with Tea Cake’s egalitarian treatment:

Jody classed me off. Ah didn’t. Naw, Pheoby, Tea Cake ain’t draggin me off nowhere Ah don’t want tuh go. Ah always did want tuh git round uh whole heap, but Jody wouldn’t ‘low me tuh. When Ah wasn’t in de store he wanted me tuh jes sit wid folded hands and sit dere. And Ah’d sit dere wid de walls creepin’ up on me and squeezin’ all de life outa me (112).

There is, thus, a literal mobility—a fluidity of movement that Janie experiences with Tea Cake (“…ain’t draggin me off nowhere Ah don’t want tuh go.”) that was virtually unknown with either Starks or Killicks. The implications of Tea Cake’s acceptance of Janie as her own person and including Janie within these previous off-limits spaces are particularly evident when we reconsider his giving Janie gun training and inviting her to work with him “on de muck” (128). All of these actions on his part seem to indicate an acceptance of Janie as an equal partner and companion who can engage in the very same communal activities that he can. Tea Cake includes Janie in these realms because he is able to recognize that she’s capable of participation and because he desires her company. After arriving to the “muck,” or the Florida Everglades, Tea Cake opines that Janie must learn to shoot for the purposes of hunting. When Janie second-guesses Tea
Cakes assertion of the necessity of this skill, he replies: “Oh, you needs tuh learn how. Tain’t no need uh you not knowin’ how to tuh handle shootin’ tools. Even if you never find no game, it’s always some trashy rascal dat needs uh good killin” (130-131). The grim foreshadowing of this statement notwithstanding, Tea Cake’s pragmatic rationale underscoring his opinion regarding Janie acquiring this skill indicates an acceptance of her engaging in activities that are not only traditionally “masculine,” but that are furthermore particularly critical in the agrarian pursuits upon which the life of the community depended. As the scene goes on to describe, Janie “got to be a better shot than Tea Cake” (131), and their weekly expeditions resulted often in being “loaded down with game” (131). Tea Cake, in providing an opportunity for Janie to put on display her well-practiced skills, also provided an opportunity for the townspeople, who may have shared rigid gendered expectations for male and female activity (“…the thing that got everybody was the way Janie caught on”), to rethink their conventional standards of gender. While Tea Cake does not outright change or eradicate the artificial boundaries of masculine spheres by having Janie participate, it is possible that a consequence of Tea Cake’s inclusive actions defies certain gendered expectations for how men and women interact and act in the quotidian spaces of everyday life.

It is also important to consider the role of vulnerability in Tea Cake’s inclusive gender politics with Janie. There is some indication of Tea Cake’s vulnerability through his inviting Janie to work with him—a vulnerability I link with the “limited and liberatory love” for Janie mentioned above, helps shed light on alternative motivations that may characterize his inclusive approach to Janie’s participation within the community. Tea Cake’s invitations to Janie are interesting because at one point he
expresses a *desire* for Janie’s presence due to his loneliness (133). Tea Cake’s vulnerability in the expression of his loneliness provides an important distinction, particularly when responding to the possibility that his incentive for the inclusion of Janie in male spheres is due more to the bestowing of an “honorary male” status upon Janie than to Tea Cake’s reciprocal sense of relationships. Such readings of Tea Cake’s are dismissive of the extent to which Tea Cake was truly motivated by his persistent desire for Janie’s presence and companionship. The genuine quality of Tea Cake’s love, desire, and respect for Janie is evident early on and through the course of their relationship, particularly illustrated through Janie’s repeated doubts about Tea Cake’s sincerity and his efforts to reassure her. When Janie initially rebuffs Tea Cake’s admission of his romantic interest in her—dismissing them as “night thought,” Tea Cake responds the next morning: “Thought Ah’d try tuh git heah soon enough tuh tell yuh mah daytime thoughts. Ah see yuh needs to know mah daytime feelings. Ah can’t sense yuh intuh it at night” (105-106).

There is also evidence that Tea Cake’s genuine desire for partnership, in both masculine spaces and beyond, is driven by a desire for Janie to express herself and speak her mind openly and honestly, which, I submit, troubles any reading of Tea Cake’s inclusion of Janie in masculine spaces as cursory. On this matter, I draw on Bealer’s insights regarding Tea Cake’s dialogical seriousness when communicating with Janie. Interpreting Janie’s doubts and insecurities about the status of the relationship and Tea Cake’s sincerity, Bealer observes that “Tea Cake teaches her to speak again by demanding that she clearly and honestly admit her feelings for him.”

---

67 Bealer, 320.
questions whether Tea Cake really wants her to accompany him to a picnic and suggests that she’d be accepting of another woman going instead, Tea Cake replies: “Naw, it ain’t all right wid you. If it was you wouldn’t be sayin’ dat. Have de nerve tuh say whut you mean” (109). Here, Tea Cake is clearly accepting and demanding nothing less than the expression of Janie’s voice—her affections and desires. Tea Cake recognizes Janie’s insecurity—revealing an insightful awareness of her feelings and fears, but refuses to let her withdraw from him. He demands that Janie speak those feelings and fears into their relationship. True partnership, based on this exchange, we can surmise, is built upon the expression of two personalities—two voices, in which both maintain a reciprocal integrity that does not deny, but encourages the voice of the other.

We must also contend with the prospect of Tea Cake’s own self-interest in his desire to have Janie on the muck. He did, after all, assert that his loneliness was part of this desire (133). Further, there is also an interesting element of self-doubt in Tea Cake’s request for Janie’s presence, which indicates the extent of his mixed feelings he has about the permanence of their relationship. When Janie inquires about why Tea Cake took frequent breaks to see her during working hours, he responds: “Come tuh see ‘bout you. De boogerman liable tuh tote yuh off whilst Ah’m gone” (132). Tea Cake’s request for her to work alongside him in the Everglades is likely fed by a mix of vested interests and motivations, including genuine loneliness, possible anxieties about infidelity, and overall safety. What is unmistakable, however, is Tea Cake’s love for Janie and his desire to have her present with him. Janie, accepting Tea Cake’s love, and his relational practice of mutual labor and partnership notes: “Ah laks it. It’s mo’ nicer than settin’ round dese quarters all day. Clerkin’ in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but
do our work and come home and love” (133). It is my view that Tea Cake’s inclusive partnership—his recognition of Janie as lover, partner, and confidant—is a compelling reason behind Janie’s decision to work with him. Apparently, it was “mo’ nicer” to be respected and valued as a contributor to communal life and the home rather than be pushed into a rigidly constructed paradigm of sex role restriction and classist lines of demarcation.

Tempering my interpretation of the egalitarian qualities of their relationship also allows for the more unfavorable and contradictory elements of Tea Cake’s ambiguity to inform the reciprocal framework explored here. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Tea Cake exhibited a “mixed bag” of characteristics within his masculine identity—some positive, many negative. I speak of “possibilities” mindful of the additional contradictions that many critics have raised of Hurston’s development of Tea Cake and Janie in light of the novel’s reception as a feminist, coming-of-age love story. Shawn Miller has noted the problems that emerge from a strict feminist reading of Their Eyes—centered on Janie’s quest for love and wholeness from object to subject in the face of masculine oppression.68 The ambiguity of the feminist interpretation of Tea Cake and Janie’s relationship is twofold. We’ve already discussed the contradictions in Tea Cake—in both his tender, interrelated capacities as a partner and lover, as well as the insidious features of his patriarchy. Miller also notes, however, that reading their relationship from a feminist standpoint is further problematized because Janie “masters

conventional [patriarchal] marriage” through creatively “negotiating oppression
predicated on gender.”^69

In short, Janie’s “go along to get along” ethos geared toward realizing her own
autonomy presents yet another complicated and contradictory feature of the
relationship—what Miller refers to as a “covert feminism.”^70 For instance, after a
particularly violent night of gambling with two hundred dollars of Janie’s money, after
which Tea Cake returns home bloodied with his winnings, Tea Cake illustrates his
acceptance of patriarchal arrangements in the sharing and distribution of money. I quote
this scene at length:

They counted it together—three hundred and twenty-two dollars…[Tea
Cake] made her take the two hundred and put it back in the secret place.
Then Janie told him about the other money she had in the bank. “Put dat
two hundred back wid de rest, Janie. Mah dice. Ah no need no assistance
tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whatever
mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain’t got nothin’
you don’t git nothin’.”

[Janie replies]: “Dat’s all right wid me.”

He was getting drowsy, but he pinched her leg playfully because he was
glad she took things the way he wanted her to [italics mine] (127-128).

Janie seems to eschew direct resistance to the unfavorable qualities that Tea Cake
embodies, but also seems to appeal to some of the patriarchal aspects of these qualities—
in effect bolstering his role as imperfect, but benevolent patriarch.^71 Of course, if we take
Miller to be accurate in his reading, the “feminist” interpretation of Their Eyes fails
because the patronizing arrangement between Janie and Tea Cake only serves to reify the

---

^69 Miller, 84.
^70 Ibid., 93.
^71 Ibid., 86.
illusion of male superiority as well as traditional gender roles within marriages and intimate relationships.

In the final analysis, there may very well be several reasons for Janie’s compliance. Tea Cake’s markedly less stringent approach to Janie’s subjectivity within the marriage can possibly offset the other aspects of the marriage that proved not as progressive or fulfilling, indicating the extent to which Tea Cake proves to be a highly contradictory character—capable of both progressive and regressive behaviors. This reflects further, how there are elements of Tea Cake’s example that are more cautionary and problematic for our efforts to configure the nature of reciprocal masculine identity, and that our reading of Tea Cake must continually uphold a realistic appraisal of what his example can and cannot teach us. Additionally, it may also be possible, according to Miller, that Janie’s first marriages to Killicks and Starks enabled her to realize the futility of trying to unmake conventional (patriarchal) marriage, and thus, with Tea Cake, she learned to appropriate this conventionality to achieve her own interests.72 There is also a sense in which Katie Cannon’s interpretation of the life of Zora Neale Hurston supplements Miller’s reading—particularly in terms of the “unctuousness as virtue” ethics as outlined in Cannon’s Black Womanist Ethics. Cannon posits the ethical implications of Hurston’s capacity for survival as predicated upon a realistic appraisal of the impossible possibility of “perfectionism in the face of the structures of oppression.”73 This unctuousness, or survival ethics, promotes the survival of the continual struggle of the day-to-day but also appreciates and when necessary, appropriates, “the interplay of contradictory opposites” in order to carve out a sense of wholeness within a restrictive

72 Miller, 92.
73 Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics, 104.
environment for black women. In other words, unctuousness as virtue recognizes the absurdity of oppressive circumstances, and promotes a cool disposition until an opportune time to make an advance and correct one’s circumstances. Taken from this perspective, Janie’s compliance with Tea Cake’s flaws and failures through indirect means may shed some light on this feature of their relationship.

It would be unreasonable to expect Tea Cake to exhibit complete enlightenment on gender and sex roles; for he is located “within the traditional ideology of marriage prevalent in rural twentieth-century America.” This assertion, far from condoning or downplaying Tea Cake’s patriarchal tendencies, is an attempt to continue to be realistic regarding the interpretative limitations that may couple our drawing upon a contradictory character for insights regarding reformed masculine identities. Hurston’s development of Tea Cake, which we have shown to be at least in part dictated by previous romantic experiences with men, indicates that the characters Janie encounters, are imperfect, have “clay feet” and can therefore, not be reasonably expected to embody ideals or sensibilities that run counter to the societal, literary, and sexual contexts of the period in which they (and Hurston) lived. Despite this, we may still appeal to the contradictory dimensions of Tea Cake’s personality explored in the previous chapter as a way to both reject those aspects of his personality that are harmful, but preserve those qualities that are worth embodying and practicing within reciprocal masculinity. There is, therefore, a pragmatic approach needed in consideration of how best to interpret and learn from Tea Cake’s example—some of his attributes are worthwhile and admirable, while others should be dismissed. On one hand, some of what Tea Cake presents to us is obviously anti-

74 Ibid., 92.
relational and deadly in the establishing and maintenance of wholesome, and reciprocal relationships: he exhibits a penchant for violent aggression against women and men, and he articulates at times a conception of men as the natural “head” within marriages and relationships (hierarchy). However, inconsistently, he still demonstrates the capacity to embody and practice other features that worth preserving—namely, he accepts Janie’s humanity and provides occasion for her to express that humanity in ways that many men in that era thought either unimportant or impossible.

In any case, neither Tea Cake’s flaws nor his positive attributes regarding his masculinity are exhaustive or complete; he is a shifting, transitional character—embodying both the pathological and the reciprocal at various points and even simultaneously. While this facet of his masculinity seems to evolve and then in the final pages, deconstruct, there is still ample evidence that he acknowledges Janie’s full personhood and subjectivity within the marriage, even as he shares harmful characteristics with Killicks and Starks. The idea here is not to assert that Tea Cake is Janie’s liberator. Positioning Tea Cake in this vein of thought would only serve to reinforce the very patriarchal frames of references and relationalities that we seek to dismantle. Tea Cake’s overall development, while incomplete and leaves much to be interpreted regarding the full extent of his transformation and regression, is still illustrative of moments of the positive recognition the humanity of women, as well as moments of his personal pathology and destructiveness that are useful in our construction of reciprocal masculinity.
Fulfillment through Responsibility: Care Ethics and Reciprocal Masculinity

The final element of reciprocal masculinity under scrutiny involves the formation of an ethic of care that emphasizes responsibility for the well-being and flourishing of others. Grounding our analysis of this framework is a return to the actions of Albert in *The Color Purple*, and components of womanist care ethics as elaborated upon in Emilie Townes’ *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* (2001). Townes seeks to examine “the broader social constructs of health and health care from which to develop an ethic of care”75 that addresses the health care crisis of African American communities. Drawing upon her attention to the ethical and theological implications of the healthcare debate and her focus on the preoccupation with profits in lieu of the health and well-being of poor communities of color, Townes’ text is important for this portion of the chapter because of her elaboration upon a return to care ethics as the appropriate motivation behind health and wellness provisions. The practice of care ethics, in Townes’ view, is initiated because of a recognition of need within another—the recognition of another’s humanity as sacred one’s own. Townes emphasizes human connection and the recognition of the humanity others as a lost art that must be again realized in the reforming of contemporary health care issues. There are ties, therefore, to the reciprocal themes that have been explored thus far. In centralizing the recognition of the needs of others, and thereby recognizing their humanity and dignity as worthy of care, Townes’ womanist ethic of care provides a useful way to interpret the reciprocal thematic that shapes the final component of the masculine construct within this chapter.

A critical part of the health care crisis in black communities, as well as for the larger health care system in the U.S., says Townes, involves a emergence of a profit-driven system that seeks not the eradication of health epidemics and diseases, but privileges “an overly individualistic medical model that obscures, if not denies, the communal aspects of our health.” Townes grounds her critique of U.S. healthcare in relational and communal orientations of womanist thought—thereby making a profound assertion about the breakdown of relationship and how this breakdown exacerbates the dulling of our senses toward the suffering of others. As Townes notes, developing “caring relationships…is a key social ingredient in addressing health and health care in the United States broadly speaking and in African American communities in particular.”

Addressing inequalities in healthcare and treatment for African American communities, Townes proposes a turn to womanist-influenced care ethics as a compelling method of reconfiguring health crises in black communities. The construction of care ethics within our healthcare systems and within healthcare ministries in Black churches, says Townes, primarily begins with an organic conception of human connection through the lens of empathy:

We need each other. One way to begin to find ourselves is to develop a sense of empathy beyond the mere intellectual identification of ourselves with one another. As a moral virtue, empathy means that we put ourselves in the place of another. This means sharing and understanding the emotional and social experiences of others and coming to see the world as they see it. We move away from “those people” and “they” language and behavior to “we” and “us” and “our” way of living and believing.

76 Townes, Breaking the Fine Rain of Death, 3.
77 Ibid., 174.
78 Ibid., 175.
Empathic care and concern for others is furthermore contoured by a reconfiguration of love, which is both agapic and erotic; empathy and care informed by this double-sourced interpretation of love enables people to “realize that we need to live our lives as if we are more united than separate.”\(^\text{79}\) Agapic love is love for self and others and is rooted in mutual recognition of one’s humanity; it is a shared recognition of one’s humanity and thus, the value of human life that therefore informs this facet of care. Erotic love, which Townes draws upon the work of Audre Lorde to develop, is based on a creative, energetic life force that propels one to seek after genuine change and wholeness in the lives of our sisters and brothers. The erotic dimensions of care ethics, therefore, enables the giver to find joy and fulfillment in the satisfaction of the act of care-giving and the positive, wholistic consequences in the life of the care recipient.\(^\text{80}\) What is critical in Townes’ ethic of care in the development of this element of reciprocal masculinity, is the extension of oneself for the sake of the well-being and health of others—not out of a sense of altruistic “do-good-ism”, but simply because one’s presence warrants this care. There is first an acceptance of the value of the life of the care recipient and an added embodied sense fulfillment derived solely from the change and healing of the care recipient. It is my argument that this care ethic is illustrated by returning to the case of Albert in The Color Purple—namely through the brief information we gather from his role in the healing and rejuvenation of Sophia’s daughter.

When Celie recollects her return home and notices Albert’s marked self-improvement and personal transformation, Sophia and Harpo reveal that he has begun to

---

\(^\text{79}\) Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*, 175.

participate in domestic chores—immediately indicating a type of breakdown in the
gendered work roles:

I know you won’t believe this, Miss Celie, say Sophia, but Mr.______ act
like he trying to git religion...He don’t go to church or nothing, but he not
so quick to judge. He work real hard too...He sure do. He out there in
field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman
[italics mine].
Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finish
(222).

I highlight these illustrations of Albert’s change to demonstrate some of the facets of
Albert’s personality as a lead-up—an introduction to the care ethics that are exhibited
through his participation in communal healing rituals—the implications of which shall
be considered as an element of reciprocal masculinity. By immersing himself in
activities traditionally situated as female activities, Albert may have learned, with the
assistance of Harpo, and through Celie’s steady assertion of her own voice and
experiences, to identify with the plight and day-to-day experiences of the black women in
his community. This one glimpse of possible resonation and identification with women
makes it plausible that Albert could likewise feel a sense of care toward and connection
with, Sophia’s daughter, Henrietta—which I now consider as an indication of reciprocal
masculinity through his behavior in ritual acts of healing.

What is important for our purposes are those moments of Albert’s realization of
the possibility of a new relational ethos that seems premised upon care ethics, which can
then provide us further insight about the reconstruction of black masculinities. What is
first critical in this scene is Albert’s expressing of concern, which lends itself to the
agapic/erotic love we’ve cited within Emilie Townes’ care ethics. His conversation with
Celie on this matter suggests a deep, abiding concern with the young child’s state of
health. Albert’s *empathy* toward Henrietta is pronounced through his detailed explanation of the child’s ailment—suggesting that he is not only very well-acquainted with and well-informed of the condition, but has also likely participated in the care-giving associated with the illness:

> You know Harpo and Sofia baby girl real sick? he say. Naw, I didn’t, I say…Yeah, she look fine, he say, but she got some kind of blood disease. Blood sort of clot up in her veins every once in a while, make her sick as a dog. I don’t think she gon make it, he say. Great goodness of life, I say. Yeah, he say. It hard for Sofia (223).

There is further indication that Albert takes a more proactive approach toward the care of Henrietta. Celie, reflecting on the dietary healing practices of the Olinka people, as revealed within Nettie’s letters, decides to make use of those practices to help with Henrietta’s medical ailment, much to the chagrin of Henrietta:

> Us do what you say the peoples do in Africa. Us feed her yams every single day. Just our luck she hate yams and she not too polite to let us know. Everybody for miles round try to come up with yam dishes that don’t taste like yams…But Henrietta claim she still taste it, and is likely to throw whatever it is out the window (252).

While this scene is particularly brief, what cannot be dismissed is Albert’s participating in the ongoing acts of care-giving that eventually enable Henrietta’s survival. As Celie notes of Albert’s actions: “Sometime I meet up with Mr._______ visiting Henrietta. He dream up his own little sneaky recipes. For instance, one time he hid the yams in peanut butter” (252). This meager act of caring and concern for a sick child is illustrative of Albert’s capacity for a sense of resonance with both Henrietta and the larger community of care-givers built upon a shared accountability to others.81

---

81 Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*, 175.
Albert’s ethic of care need not be solely relegated to the realm of care giving toward the amelioration of physical health. As Townes suggests and helps us to see, care ethics and care-giving can be seen as moral acts toward others through which one shares and grasps the “emotional and social experiences of others and coming to see the world as they see it.” In a word, there is also a sense in which Albert gives, and likewise receives care by expressing empathy and concern for those who suffer, and shares in the joys of the joyful. Drawing upon Townes, I see this particular dimension of care ethics as an example of spiritual and psychic healing through shared empathy—putting oneself in the place of another and effectively making efforts to see the world as they see it. This is an important distinction to make in our construction of reciprocal masculinity because the ability to receive the experiences of another and to be transformed and influenced in response is a critical aspect of healing broken relationships. On this point, I return to the dynamic between Celie and Albert. As stated before, the uniting factor in Celie and Albert’s reconstruction of the brokenness of their relationship was their deep love for Shug. Shug was the emotional and sexual balm that soothed the souls of Celie and Albert’s wounded psyches—though their wounds arose from different sets of circumstances. Shug’s absence from their lives clearly seems to bring them closer together, though not at all in a romantic sense; Celie rejects Albert’s (re)proposal of marriage (283). In their reuniting over the momentary loss of Shug’s presence, Celie and Albert are able to recognize in one another a part of themselves. Losing Shug prompts each to feel and share the anguish of isolation and alienation. Celie articulates this shared reality with Albert: “Mr. _______ seem to be the only one understand my feeling” (259).

---

82 Townes, 175.
83 Ibid.
The ethic of care as practiced by Albert in this regard emerges through his sharing of pain, hurt, and also, the hope of being reunited with Shug with Celie—it is the interrelated and reciprocal *care-giving within companionship*. He supports her in her grief and they support each other while reflecting on the joy that Shug has brought them. Albert is also able to use this self-reflexive moment within companionship with Celie to further highlight his own pathologies and abusiveness rooted in insecurities over Shug and Celie’s relationship:

I wanted to kill you, said Mr. _______ and I did slap you around a couple of times. I never understood how you and Shug got along so well together and it bothered the hell out of me. When she was mean and nasty to you, I understood. But when I looked around the two of you was always doing each other’s hair, I start to worry (271).

More than this self-reflexive component, however, Albert connects his pain to Celie’s pain: “I’m real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me” (271)—further validating Celie’s assertion that Albert was the “only one understand” her. Care-giving through companionship is illustrated in the following exchange:

Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars (271).

In reflecting on their lives with Shug, Albert and Celie share a moment of recognition—of unity in the face of the existential crises of life, love, and loss. The reconciliatory dimension of this phase of Albert and Celie’s relationship is illustrative of the power of shared concerns and empathies uniting polemical realities and personalities. In this moment of recognition, both Albert and Celie’s shared pain and shared care-giving for the other prompts the possible realization of a new relationship. Albert was able to
momentarily place himself in Celie’s state of mind and state of being and likewise, she reciprocated. Each person’s reception and acceptance of the feelings and experiences of the other ultimately enables both to reflect on their shared interests and commonalities, while also creating space to open themselves to the experiences of each other in mutually beneficial and cathartic ways.

**Conclusion**

Albert and Tea Cake provided useful models to reflect on reciprocal masculinities as cast within womanist literature. The purpose of this chapter was to *extrapolate* meaning from the documented characteristics of both within the text. What this means is that we must take care to not read the specifics of our framing of reciprocal masculinity into either character’s motivations and incentives for acting as they do. Rather, we are free to consider the extent to which both embody or deviate from the reciprocal interpretation that the previous chapters have constructed.

The second chapter put Victor Anderson’s theory of the grotesque into conversation with the literary analyses of Tea Cake and Albert, while also giving some attention to Anderson’s commentary on “human enlargement.” There is a sense in which my construction of reciprocal masculinity likewise features a longing for human enlargement—a push for a greater sense of one’s identity and purpose beyond what is thought possible. The envisioning of reciprocal masculinity as presented here, like Anderson and James Baldwin have suggested, is built upon optimism and a demand for the ongoing human capacity for growth and reconstruction—a view of humanity that is larger, freer, and more loving. The construction, or rather, the theorization, of reciprocal masculinity is meant, as always, to be a *process*—an imaginative, self-reflexive process
that is never settled; never exhaustive; never final. I perceive this process as especially useful given the historical reality of racism and the impact on the perspective and imagery of black men. Highlighting the non-fixed, non-exhaustive nature of reciprocal masculinity is also a revolt against the normativity of any one masculine identity. A normative view of masculinity ultimately collapses into a fixed sense of gender identity and proves short-sighted and resistant to the prospect of growth, challenge, and evolving.

In *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*, Maurice O. Wallace outlines his theory of the “spectragraphic” in the perception and “reading” of black male bodies in the White imagination, and black men’s various literary, photographic, and sartorial practices in response to these perceptions. Responding to spectragraphic terror, or rather, the limiting enframement of racialized distortions of black male personhood and identity, has been a historical, cross-generational concern for black men in the United States. In recasting the perception and portrayal of black men within the womanist literature of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, I see my efforts within this chapter and the dissertation generally, as contributing to other projects that work toward the (re)enframement of black masculinity, especially as conceived in black theologies. I suggest that womanist literature and religious thought can impact black male self-reflection and self-direction by pressing us to reconsider, tap into, and enlarge the relational and care-giving dimensions of our personalities.

---

At this juncture, I now move into the second half of this dissertation, and further, I begin the more explicitly theological reflections that make this project the foundation for the development of a black male relational theology. Chapter four delves specifically into black male theological discourses—surveying the landscape of black male theological perspectives and the extent to which this work is built upon critical engagement with the relational orientations espoused within womanist religious thought and clarifying those areas that can be expanded. Drawing upon the work of Garth Baker-Fletcher, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn, I am particularly interested in the extent to which the selected authors draw upon womanist religious thought and how each interprets relationality, male identity, and conceptions of self in the context of communal spaces.
PART II: BLACK MALE RELATIONAL THEOLOGY DEVELOPED
Chapter Four:

The Impact of Womanist Thought on Contemporary Black Male Theologies

This project began with a conviction that womanist religious thought, including theology and ethics, had useful insights about human relationships and identity within the context of community that could expand the scope of black theological discourses and the configuration of black masculine identity. In the process of drafting and completing the literature review, it was important to pay keen attention to the examples of black male theologians who’ve made the engagement of womanist scholarship central to their work. Following this strategy not only provides a sense of the breadth of the collaborative work between black male theologians and womanism, but it also provided a model for how to do my own work as a black male theologian who likewise has made the interrogation of womanist thought critical to my research. The previous chapters have been centered on the theoretical construction of reciprocal relationality through an appeal to womanist religious thought and womanist literature. This chapter, marks the start of more explicit theological reflection on the relational framework constructed in the previous chapters.

For black male theologians, one way to approach the interrogation of womanist thought must be centered upon a self-reflexive hermeneutic—that is, there should be sustained attention to the ways in which womanist thought can impact how questions are asked, how they are answered, and further an unpacking of the ways in which gender identity impacts one’s theology. In this chapter, I specifically focus on the work of black male scholars who’ve provided a significant analysis of womanist religious thought and literature, with two goals in mind. First, I summarize the relational hermeneutic operative in a selected bibliography within the corpus of their work. Second, I discuss
the finer points of their respective relational interpretation(s) within the context of my framing of reciprocal relationality—noting areas of commonality and contrast, as well as raising additional interpretive questions. On this basis, I’ve selected three black male thinkers, Garth Baker-Fletcher, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn, whose work I identify as particularly receptive to womanist scholarship. I examine Garth Baker-Fletcher’s *Xodus: An African American Male Journey* (1996) and *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (1997). From Dwight Hopkins, I analyze *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (1993) and *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (2005). Finally, from Anthony Pinn, I make use of *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod* (2004) to clarify his humanist perspective, then I analyze *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (2010), and *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (2012). These texts are important because each in some way wrestles with the meaning, purpose, and function of self in relation to other selves within communal spaces. I endeavor to illustrate that the aforementioned black male perspectives are valuable to my construction of reciprocal relationality in that they encroach upon the importance of articulating more robust notions of human self within the context of community as a critical feature of black theological discourses.

Moreover, I draw upon their work in order to highlight some of the more prominent examples of black male thinkers who are methodologically and theoretically grounded in self-reflexive reflection on the intersection between black theological discourses and womanism. The selected bibliography(ies) analyzed within this chapter
were chosen on the basis of each work’s elaboration of the nature of embodied human relationships and how notions of self are impacted as a result.

**Methodological and Hermeneutic Distinctions**

Theological discourses are contextual and mediated by what is available to the reflecting, thinking religious community. Gordon D. Kaufman has noted that theology “is and always has been a human work: it is founded upon and interprets human historical events and experiences, and “is carried out by human processes of meditation, reflection, speaking, writing, and reading.”¹ As a process of imaginative human reflection, black theology is bound by the specific regional and cultural mores of communities of African descent. Every theologian brings to his or her intellectual process different faith claims, motivations, assumptions, questions, and biases that in turn help formulate their theological work as well as outline the trajectory of the questions posed and answers provided. In emphasizing the contextual nature of black theological discourse, I highlight and bring to our attention some of the areas of continuity and divergence of the theological perspectives in the scholarship and methodological sophistication of Garth Baker-Fletcher, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn.

I make these brief comments on context and experience in order to highlight the non-monolithic character of black theological discourses. In speaking of a “non-monolithic” character, essentially I am referring to the distinction between *black theology* and *black theological discourses*. The former carries with it a set of assumptions about the particular trajectory black religious experience and theology. The latter seems to create space for a variety of perspectives that do not necessarily rely upon the same

---

normative assertions about blackness, theology, or black religious experience. There is a growing diversity of theological perspectives among black scholars of religion. This is important to emphasize because to lump all black theologians under a generalized assumption about theological scholarship ultimately undermines the specificity of the work done, the methodologies incorporated, and the perspectives represented. Frederick Ware, for example, outlines three distinct “schools” of academic black theology: the Black Hermeneutical School, the Black Philosophical School, and the Human Sciences School. I appeal to Ware not because his typology is exhaustive, or that it offers the final word on black theological methodology. Rather, his typology provides space for a multitude of perspectives within black theology/black theological scholarship. For the purposes of the review of the black male theological perspectives in this chapter, I attend to the hermeneutical and philosophical schools.

The hermeneutical school of black theology, Ware asserts, emphasizes an approach to theological discourse that assumes the givenness of the Christian faith and Christian symbols as key source materials that inform theological content, which is largely encapsulated through the liberation motif. Included with scripture and Christian doctrine as sources for the hermeneutical school of black theologians are black culture and history, religious and secular songs, black literature, folklore, black women’s experience and spirituality. Ultimately, drawing upon a variety of sources, and guided by the norm of the Christian faith, “the task of the black theologian becomes the act of making explicit that which is implied in African Americans’ understanding of Christian faith.” Furthermore, this school seeks to articulate the profundity of the Black Christian

\[2\] Ibid., 39.
witness in ways that promote liberation and wholeness for the African American community.\(^3\) Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins, as representatives of the hermeneutical school, both have articulated liberationist Christian faith commitments, and this perspective comes across clearly in the selected bibliographies.

Liberationist thought, as the specific content of hermeneutical school black theological method, is informed by the biblical tradition, perhaps best expressed in James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone discusses the biblical model of liberation from oppression through the Exodus event in which God (YHWH) delivers the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, which Cone further juxtaposes with the divine intervention of God in the enslavement and emancipation of blacks in America.\(^4\) While liberation from oppression and dehumanizing circumstances is the prevailing interpretive scheme that has informed much of black theology, perspectives on the nature and form of liberation has not been completely uniform. J. Deotis Roberts, for example, defines liberation in terms of reconciliation, not only between humankind and God, but also between the formerly oppressed and their oppressors.\(^5\) Delores Williams also emphasizes “the liberation tradition of African American biblical appropriation,” but couples it with the “survival/quality-of-life” tradition of African American biblical interpretation within womanist theology.\(^6\) However, despite varying interpretations of the liberation motif within the hermeneutical school, Ware concludes that most liberationist black theologians

---

\(^3\) Ibid., 32-33.


agree on three critical points: 1) liberation is of ultimate importance, 2) liberation is an act of God, and 3) liberation is determined in the future. This assurance of the prospect of liberation as linear, and directed toward a particular positive or fruitful end of human history with the assistance of a transhistorical reality (God), indicates the presumption of teleological certainty that is a significant part of the interpretive scheme underscoring the motivation and incentive behind theory and method in the hermeneutical school.

The black philosophical school shares the same tasks, sources, and norms with the hermeneutical school—favoring description, analysis, evaluation, explanation, construction and revision, while not necessarily emphasizing the centrality of the Christian witness. The philosophical school, however, according to Ware, places greater emphasis on the task of revision—particularly as it relates to “the criticism and reconstruction of ideas…for the achievement of liberation.”

What becomes particularly noticeable when we consider the tasks of the black philosophical school is the place and importance of criticism, which may also appropriately be called the reconstruction of what has been considered foundational in black theology. In addition to thinkers such as Cornel West (pragmatic philosophy), Alice Walker (womanism), and Henry Young (process theology), Ware cites the importance of William R. Jones and Anthony Pinn as influential figures in the deconstructive and reconstructive task undertaken in the black philosophical school. Both Jones and Pinn make use of humanism in their respective methodologies in the interpretation of African American religion—Jones as a

---

7 Ware, 39.
8 Ibid., 69.
9 Ibid., 68.
philosopher of religion,\textsuperscript{10} and Pinn as a theologian. Jones provides a foundation for African American humanism within black religious studies through an extended critique of black theologians’ response to theodicy, and Pinn extends this critique into a theological critique of black theism.\textsuperscript{11} However, while Jones and Pinn both draw upon humanism in their work, it would be a mistake to suggest they come to the same conclusions about humanism or envision the function of humanistic orientations of religion in the same ways. Drawing upon the deconstructive/reconstructive task of the philosophical school of black theological method, Pinn positions humanism as a legitimate expression of African American religion, and disavows the certainty of a liberationist position.

Based upon Ware’s typology, Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins are best characterized as representatives of the black hermeneutical school theologians, while Pinn may be best characterized as a representative of the black philosophical school. The central tasks of the black hermeneutical school, says Ware, involve “description, analysis, evaluation, explanation, and revision” of black religious faith and thought as a correction of white-identified theologies and religious worldviews that have tainted central beliefs in Christianity such as the doctrine of God, humanity, and Christology.\textsuperscript{12} Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins also draw upon the aforementioned teleological certainties regarding the liberation characteristic of the black hermeneutical school, and come to similar conclusions about the nature and meaning of Christian faith and the impact on African

\textsuperscript{12} Ware, 31.
American life. For example, Hopkins speaks to this certainty when clarifying how theology “affirms and challenges how we act at the intersection between God’s liberating practice and humanity’s faithful practice with God.”

Likewise, Baker-Fletcher has described how “Xodus” sensibilities can enable black men to “claim God’s Spirit as the guide leading us on a Journey” toward greater empowerment in the creation of more wholesome societies for women and men. In both cases, the Christian God concept is taken for granted as a given.

To restate, hermeneutical school black theologians seem to operate from a confessional approach to theology that emphasizes a personal, interventionist God who works within human history to liberate the oppressed, marginalized, and brokenhearted to greater spaces of fulfillment, spiritually and materially. Much of this liberatory process is read from the perspective of the biblical witness, and as such, the Christ event and eschatological readings of this process are wedded to black liberation interpretations of human activity and purpose. The faith claims of this school of theologians undoubtedly play a critical factor in the description of God and human telos, and it is in this regard specifically that Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins are particularly distinguished from Anthony Pinn, who I now discuss as a representative of the black philosophical school.

The corpus of Pinn’s writing has been devoted to the formulation of humanism as a religious framework to the degree that it provides a vocabulary for articulating human orientation and place without the safeguarding of a God concept or other transhistorical reality. Specifically, later elements of Pinn’s work, which will be examined in the preceding pages, has been devoted to the development and articulation of African

---

13 Hopkins, *Shoes that Fit Our Feet*, 5.
American humanistic theology. One area of contrast between Pinn and Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins on the nature of liberation, however, pertains to the liberationist framework of the hermeneutic school of black theology. Unlike Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins, Pinn does not rely upon the biblical narrative or Christian symbols as a legitimizing framework. As an identified “strong humanist,” Pinn “questions the existence of God and the use of Christian categories, namely, theodicy and the concept of redemptive suffering, in black liberation thought.”  

Pinn’s hermeneutic of humanism wrests the problems and conflicts of human life from the mythological hands of a divine creator and places their resolution into the hands of human communities—thereby maximizing the potential for human creativity and ingenuity in response to said problems and conflicts.

Pinn’s view of black liberation, therefore, given his humanistic sensibilities, does not come to fruition through either the Christ event or through any reference to a transhistorical reality beyond our own. Liberation is reflected in Pinn’s earlier work, but is achieved from a different point of reference. Humanity’s success or failure is contingent ultimately upon human initiative and the capacity of human beings to resolve their problems. Pinn’s anthropology therefore posits “humanity as fully (and solely) accountable and responsible for the human condition and the correction of humanity’s plight.” Liberation, under this framing, is not tied to any sense of the sacred or of divine intervention, but is a valuable undertaking in itself because it is a process toward the “path toward the fulfillment of human nature and potential.”

---

15 Ware, 99.
18 Ware, 100.
provides a sense of the value of the process of liberation in terms of “perpetual rebellion,” which he names as the ongoing struggle for liberation from dehumanizing circumstances. As he notes, “Liberation is the norm; perpetual rebellion is the process.”

Liberation from oppression, furthermore, is never an assured certainty; humans have failed in their quests for liberation and will do so again, often with the best of intentions, but the struggle toward liberation is measured not by a final product or outcome, but in the struggle itself.

The above review of the methodologies of the select black theologians was an attempt to clarify areas of contrast in how they do their work. Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins, as representatives of the hermeneutical school, draw upon the black Christian tradition and the biblical narrative to provide the sources and norms for their constructions of African American religion and theology, whereas Pinn relies upon humanism as a philosophical tool for the expression of black religious thought. Further, while both sets of thinkers uphold the notion of liberation as a norm for their theologies, they also come to very different conclusions about how liberation is achieved. Hopkins ties liberation to African American spiritual and material empowerment as an authentic expression of Christian witness, and Pinn ties liberation to the maximization of human potential, ingenuity, and creativity.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Baker-Fletcher, Hopkins, and Pinn have all contributed a significant part of their careers foregrounding the need for more connective strands between black male theological discourse and greater analysis of sexuality and

---

20 Ibid.
gender and its impact upon the embodied realities of African Americans. In approaching their various texts, I’ve attempted to read the thinkers on the merit of their respective relational hermeneutics—specifically, reading each and clarifying the ways in which each scholar appeals to womanist religious thought and its impact on notions of identity and community. The relational framing I construct in this dissertation can be placed along the corpus of their select bibliographies due to my efforts to (1) suggest a turn to human relationality as a primary category within black theological discourse and (2) draw upon relational tropes within womanist thought as blueprints that expand black theological discourse and black male identity. With some of these distinctions now in place, we can begin our review of the theologies of each with specific attention to the pronounced relational orientations of their major works and the impact of womanist thought therein.

**Garth Baker-Fletcher’s Xodus Theology**

Through an extended interrogation of popular culture, gender theory, and African philosophy, Baker-Fletcher’s *Xodus: An African American Male Journey* (1996) articulates the means by which African American men can create “Xodus space,” a transformative identity through which black men can more fully discover and embrace a healthy manhood over against more harmful remnants cast in contemporary black life. This text is critical because it is representative of a brand of black male theological scholarship that explicitly cites the influence of womanism in the development of a renewed notion of black male personhood within the context of community. Baker-Fletcher’s call for the development of Xodus space is premised on the necessity for black men to do the necessary “heavy lifting” in ridding themselves of the alien features of white, Eurocentric, patriarchal modalities of maleness in order to unleash the creative and
communitarian potential within an “Africentric” perspective, or the centralizing of African/African American experiences as a shaper of culture.  

The proactive effort of black men to cultivate and sustain the development of more wholesome notions of self-in-community, presented in this work, is likewise a central component within my construction of reciprocal relationality. In his formulation of Xodus sensibilities, Baker-Fletcher emphasizes both the individual and society. Xodus is individual at the level of the black man, who must awaken to a new awareness—both of himself-in-community and of his movement in and through the world and to the consequences of that movement (particularly as it affects black women). Xodus creativity, therefore, is societal and thus, relationally oriented to the degree that black men can create structures for the inclusion of disparate voices and perspectives toward the penultimate goal of community liberation—the arrangement of “body-selves as part of an ongoing continuum” of human creatures. In considering the relational orientations of Xodus space and identity, I take my cues from chapter 3, “Taking Sisters Seriously” and its connection to womanist religious thought.

In chapter 3 Baker-Fletcher explicitly draws upon womanists to address the “criticism, experiences, and challenges of African American women” as a key step in the creation and inauguration of Xodus space and Xodus identity. Baker-Fletcher’s reading and engagement of womanism draws upon “womanist calls for a communitywide vision of liberation, an inclusive norm that values and honors the unique experiences of Black women as well as Black men, and [that] challenges African American males to work on

---

22 Ibid., xiii.
23 Ibid., xv.
our sexism as strenuously as we have worked to eradicate racism.”

Building upon extended conversation with womanist religious scholars, Baker-Fletcher cites the need for “liberatory body-selfhood” and “liberatory partnership” models in order to articulate the relational dimension of a relational perspective in his construction of Xodus thought. Liberatory body-selfhood is envisioned as a new way to embrace black masculinity on the individual level, and liberatory partnership is the relational construct that is extended from the foundation of body-selfhood.

Xodus men, notes Baker-Fletcher, open themselves up to masculine reinvention and reconstruction by first recognizing the capacity of black women’s stories to provide insight and a moral vision for living life. On this note, he draws upon the work of theologian Katie Cannon, who critiques black male sexism within the church and the relegation of black women’s energies, skills, and talents to the periphery, thereby jeopardizing black women’s agency and compromising the alleged liberatory ethic endemic to the black church’s life and mission. In addition to the damage done to black women’s agency and place within religious and cultural centers of black life, Baker-Fletcher also agrees with Cannon’s assertion that such a sexist context that ignores the participation and contributions of black women legitimizes their objectification, degradation, and subjection within black preaching and other modes of black rhetoric.

Baker-Fletcher links the eradication of sexism among black men, therefore, to a particular receptivity to the history of black women. Xodus identity requires “taking black women’s experience as source,” which means standing in solidarity with black women. It

---

24 Ibid.
25 Baker-Fletcher, Xodus, 28.
26 Ibid., 29.
“is the first step toward divesting ourselves of sexism because it moves beyond nodding and reluctant recognition to an appreciative willingness to let the whole story of black people be told, by all members of the community.”  

In addition to the centrality of the need to be receptive to black women’s experiences, histories, and stories, Baker-Fletcher also cites the importance of clarification regarding the nature of solidarity with black women in response to their experiences, histories, and stories. Garth Baker-Fletcher notes that genuine solidarity must incorporate a coalitional unity of black men working with black women in ways that go beyond “mere toleration of each other’s presence, forgiving occasional sexist slights, gestures, and attitudes,” but is premised upon an ongoing, long-term commitment to reconstruction and self-reflection regarding the tridimensional realities of race, sex, and class oppression. Key pieces of this solidarity with black women thrive through 1) an ethic of mutuality and 2) love-filled listening.

Through the ethic of mutuality, Baker-Fletcher draws upon Frances Wood’s articulation of “black male metanoia,” or the transformation and reformation black men’s attitudes toward sexism, as a foundation for the liberation task that places gender justice alongside racial justice. Within this ethic, “the metanoia required of black men calls for a reflection on the ways in which African American men have (1) internalized misogyny; (2) been in collusion with degrading images of women; (3) left male gender-privilege unchallenged.” The challenge of this ethic is critical to the formation of Xodus space,

27 Ibid., 29-30.
28 Ibid., 30.
notes Baker-Fletcher, in that it “goes to the heart of the…hard internal work African American men are being called to do.”

Secondly, through “love-filled listening,” Baker-Fletcher emphasizes the role of critical listening skills in genuine solidarity and masculine reconstruction. Referencing Renee Hill’s call for “the active and committed presence of lesbians (and gays) in Black churches,” Baker-Fletcher emphasizes critical listening that values and appreciates the image of God reflected in stories, thoughts, opinions, and criticisms of all persons without regard for sexual orientation. This mode of listening is ultimately an act of love because it recognizes the experiences and feelings of black women, and in doing so, black men are able to reveal the seriousness of their commitment to black women’s liberation as well as acknowledge black women’s humanity as expressed through their experiences and developing a willingness to be changed by the retelling of those experiences. In this sense, this mode of listening also provides occasion for “shared power.” Baker-Fletcher notes, citing Emilie Townes, that the deconstruction of traditional patriarchal models of relationships must be transformed to embody a “new form of shared power that requires openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change.” Critical listening—the deep acknowledgment and reception of black women’s stories and experiences, can provide black men the wherewithal to also acknowledge and critique our sexism. Here Baker-Fletcher promotes a mode of listening-as-relating that uses black women’s experiences as the means for self-reflection and self-growth toward more empathic, self-connected, and communal black male identities. As Baker-Fletcher says,

\[ \text{Ibid., 32.} \]
\[ \text{Ibid., 35.} \]
\[ \text{Ibid., 37.} \]
\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
“such listening becomes a way of becoming our best self—a self that is internally and externally connected to one’s thoughts, emotions, and actions.” It is this conception of the black, male “connected self”—one that reflects on sexism and practices intentional listening in order to be transformed by women’s experiences. Further, the connected self provides the basis for Baker-Fletcher’s conception of the “Becoming Bodyself” within Xodus relationships and community.

Becoming Bodyself

The Becoming Bodyself is a “self-in-the-making, open to reform, challenge, criticism”—it is a processual, evolving interpretation of black masculinity rooted and grounded in the mutual, interconnected attributes described above through womanist insights and critiques. Baker-Fletcher envisions the Becoming Bodyself as an ideal of black masculinity that one puts into practice and develops (and re-develops) over time. It represents a hermeneutic of black masculinity and black male identity that answers the challenges of community and solidarity—that is, the challenge of discovering and embodying new ways to be male and female that trouble the more patriarchal and sexist ideals we’ve been conditioned to accept as the “only way.” Baker-Fletcher’s Becoming Bodyself is a black masculine construct that functions and thrives within relationships of egalitarian partnering, the sharing of resources and stories, and the rejection of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

The Becoming Bodyself within Xodus relationality also creates private and public discursive spaces that eschew “sexist biblical hermeneutics that constrict the roles of

---

34 Ibid.
35 Baker-Fletcher, Xodus, 39.
women to the private sphere of domestic concerns.” On this point, Baker-Fletcher specifically devotes attention to the formation of Xodus space within domestic spheres and black religious spaces. For the Xodus man, says Baker-Fletcher, antiquated, nuclear-model notions of family, marriage, and fatherhood that singularly relegate women to the private sphere must be condemned and critiqued as unacceptable for a people committed to the full realization of communal liberation. Again, on this point, Baker-Fletcher illustrates the interconnected nature of right relationship within Xodus notions of relationality and community; he is unwilling to accept any notion or practice of relationship that fails to accept the complete humanity and personality of black women. As black churches are key components of both the dissemination and overturning of these biblical interpretations of sex and gender that promote the unquestioned “headship” of men, whether within the church or the larger community, Baker-Fletcher implores black men and women to become acquainted with black religious scholars, such as Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Martin, Renita Weems, Thomas Hoyt, and Vincent Wimbush, who feature more sexually inclusive biblical scholarship.

Finally, on a practical level, Xodus masculinity is responsive to a new era of public life that features the high influx of women into the public domain, competing for jobs and economic resources that men once monopolized. Women’s liberation movements, heightened feminist consciousness-raising, and social and political policies have “released women from a self-understanding that confined their aspirations to the raising of children, flooding the public sphere with highly motivated and educated

36 Ibid., 38.
37 Ibid., 38-39.
38 Ibid., 38.
women.”39 Xodus men are better apt to respond to this changing environment, says Baker-Fletcher, because they can recognize the need for men to develop a new consciousness about the nature and function of masculinity and manhood within egalitarian partnership. It is important, also, to further distinguish how Baker-Fletcher understands “partnering”—as this language lends itself to the perception that he situates heterosexual relations as the norm. Liberating, or liberatory partnership, is at the heart of egalitarian partnering. Xodus masculinity calls for the rejection of all sexist normativities, including the rendering of homosexual partnering as abnormal, as we noted above. “Partnering”, therefore, within this framing includes by necessity those modes of relating, living, and loving that may be seen as beyond the bounds of heterosexuality. These are also Xodus spaces.

Xodus space gives black men a different reference point for self-identity within community and further enables black men to deconstruct those ideas about community that serve to subordinate women, gays, and lesbians, and prevent them from realizing their full potential, in both private spheres, and within the larger spaces of communal life. Becoming Bodyselves sensibilities, which feature an organic, connected view of black male selfhood in relation to black women within the context of community, give black men the incentive and the theoretical means through which they can reimagine and refashion for themselves a new masculine identity.

**Liberatory Partnership**

The Xodus commitment to right relationship through Becoming Bodyselves is connected to a model of partnering that likewise engages in the praxis of deconstructing.

---

39 Ibid., 39.
through faithful action, patriarchal and misogynistic underpinnings of relationality within
community. Liberatory partnership, as Baker-Fletchers terms it, “means aiding each
other in ongoing self-critical process that creates healthy Becoming Bodyselves.”

There is a dialogical piece to Baker-Fletcher’s assessment of liberatory partnership that
shall be more fully explored at the end of this chapter. As liberatory partnership requires
embodied presence and the establishment of open, mutual, and reciprocal lines of
communication, Xodus men committed to this ideal of dialogue and engagement must
join womanists and other black women in churches and communal spaces. Promoting
Xodus space within our churches and communities, in addition to illustrating a radical
form of community that extends itself beyond the provincialism of male-dominated
spaces and speak, also creates sites “where Black women and men can hear each other’s
pain, insecurities, sufferings, and longings without reproach, fear, or intimidation.”

As an addendum, I would again restate for emphasis, that creating dialogically engaging
spaces in this fashion also extends itself to gay and lesbian communities—reciprocal
relationality within the context of community cannot be established in truncated ways
that ignore and downplay the equally real—equally valid experiences and insights of
those with different sexual orientations.

Reciprocal exchange of this kind, where one is able to receive the experiences and
feelings of others mutually, provides men the opportunity to be changed and transformed
through their acceptance and acknowledgment of the various life-worlds of women.

---

40 Baker-Fletcher, *Xodus*
41 Ibid., 40.
Similar to my construction of compound subjectivity (as a characteristic of reciprocal masculinity) developed in the previous chapter, the liberatory partnership model espoused by Baker-Fletcher acknowledges and makes an effort to insist upon genuine, life-giving space within which persons can realize their full potential. However, as Baker-Fletcher notes, the process of creating liberatory partnerships within churches and the larger community, is the particular responsibility of black men. This is perhaps a muted element of my own construction that Baker-Fletcher, in contrast, does not avoid.

Liberatory partnership is achieved in African American churches, as well as other communal spaces in the black community, when black men take it upon themselves to create safe spaces therein “for women to be fully human.” This is an important distinction that is critical for reconstructive vision of black masculinity in theological discourse, as it pushes for a more proactive stance from black men that eschews easy answers to ethical obligations regarding women and rejects half-hearted investment in the creation of liberating spaces for women and men.

A second text from Baker-Fletcher, which he co-authors with his wife, Karen Baker-Fletcher, is My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk (1996). The Baker-Fletchers model and demonstrate a form of “theological conversation” in which both reflect together on the classical topics of systematic theology, namely, God, Christ, and Humanity—finding areas of common ground as well as highlighting the importance of wedding theological reflection with ethics. Here I attend to Garth Baker-Fletcher’s chapter on humanity. Baker-Fletcher’s formation of Xodus anthropology seeks to revive and reclaim the “good and the beautiful” within lives of human subjects made in the

43 Baker-Fletcher, Xodus, 41.
image of God. There are two elements of Baker-Fletcher’s assertions here that are worth giving voice as they bear upon this dissertation’s exploration of relationality in black theology and black male identity: the notion of a *spiritual awakening* and a cosmocentric, interrelated conception of human life.

Spiritual awakening, says Baker-Fletcher, is an imperative process in the recovery for one’s “true self,” which entails the reconfiguration of one’s identity and prompts an internal renewal and recognition of one’s human dignity, ancestral ties, and the possibilities for effecting socio-political transformation in the lives and communities of others. This mode of awakening calls for the release of oneself from harmful and destructive modes of be-ing and toward, rather, self-formation and self-direction molded within the context of practices of wholeness, liberation, and salvation on behalf of self and others.

Also critical to Baker-Fletcher’s theological anthropology is the emphasis on the web-like characteristics and interrelation of all life. Xodus theology upholds a cosmocentric view of human life in which the “entire relationship of the community of LIFE rather than toward the private good of an individual human being”, becomes central. One person exists, therefore, for the well-being of the collective, including “people, earth, water, animals, macroscopic and microscopic,” because to locate and enact moral choice and human activity solely within the realm of the individual is to

---

45 Baker-Fletcher draws upon the philosophical imperative of the Nation of Islam ideology as espoused by Malcolm X—in which self-knowledge was paramount in African-American struggles to rid themselves of mental, religious, and cultural colonialism.
47 Ibid.
violate the communal ebb and flow of all existence. As noted of the communal personhood of Bantu cultures: “[one is] a person through the community of persons.”48 Such a point of view, which, Baker-Fletcher notes, is widely shared in many African cultures, is furthermore extended to include the ecosystem—hopefully prompting human communities to be good stewards of the environment.

Given the above examination of the Baker-Fletcher’s work, we may make a few general assertions about Xodus theological sensibilities on the nature of relationality. First, Baker-Fletcher emphasizes egalitarian partnering through solidarity. In Baker-Fletcher’s view, genuine solidarity features an ethic of mutuality in which there is both an impetus on the part of black men to correct sexism and misogyny (which he refers to as black male “metanoia”) as well as an ongoing effort to engage in “love-filled listening,” or the acceptance of others and their experiences coupled with a willingness to be transformed by the experiences in the process. Second, Xodus relationality features liberatory partnerships in which men and women, as “Becoming Bodyselves,” can engage in self-critical reflection on ways of living in more organic and interrelated fashions within community. Finally, Baker-Fletcher’s Xodus perspective on anthropology, or human nature, features a cosmocentric framing of humanity that is inclusive of not only the importance and value of both women and men, but also the larger ecological structure and web of life.

Xodus offers a useful blueprint for black male theologians to think through the implications of human relationality by linking gender criticism with theological reflection. However, many questions persist regarding the constructive framing of his

48 Ibid.
project. Let us attend, for example, to Baker-Fletcher’s use of the theo-political activism and thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X as tropes in the development of an Xodus epistemological posture. To be sure, there is much to be gleaned from their examples as “elders” to whom we in succeeding generations can look for guidance in some respects, but are these the best examples available for self-reflexive Xodus space? I raise this question for a few reasons. Within both chapters on King and Malcolm X, Baker-Fletcher provides little attention to the deeply conservative and sexist underpinnings of both King’s and Malcolm X’s political and religious leadership.49

In failing to comment further upon these flaws within the perspectives of both men, it seems Baker-Fletcher missed an opportunity to further highlight another dimension of Xodus masculinity that he delineates early on—namely, that Xodus formation within black men is processual—it “is both something that is and is yet to be.”50 In analyzing the manner in which King and Malcolm X’s chauvinism is a reflection of pathological black masculine identity in which all African American males participate, Baker-Fletcher could have offered commentary on the capacities for black men to change, evolve, and grow into embodiments of his Xodus framework.

What is at issue, is not Baker-Fletcher’s choice of those figures within his reading; rather, the more pressing issue is how he reads them in light of his concerns with the processual nature of Xodus identity formation in black men. The basis of the critique I offer of Baker-Fletcher here is likewise one element of the analysis I’ve done on Albert and Tea Cake in previous chapters. In my reading of both, I highlight the processual, yet inconsistent embrace of a masculine identity premised upon a relational proclivity

49 Ibid., 33-34.
50 Baker-Fletcher, Xodus, 5.
characterized by reciprocity. The gradualized and processual nature of both Albert and Tea Cake’s development is critical to emphasize because it takes seriously the idea that masculine identity reformation and revision is never a finalized state of character and that failure is an always present possibility. In emphasizing the processual nature of this relational transition as formulated within womanist literature, I hope my construction takes Baker-Fletcher’s ideas and seeks to illustrate the steps involved in an experimental trial-and-error maneuvering of masculine reconfiguration. Both Baker-Fletcher and I make an effort to outline how reformation and transformation is a processual possibility for black men through the incorporation of womanist ways of relating with and toward others.

I also found recourse and a point of contrast for my own analyses of black masculinities in womanist literature through some of Baker-Fletcher’s interpretations of Xodus manhood based on mythic, ancestral tropes. The fourth chapter “analyzes the positive and negative valences of Black male myths—Sambo, John Henry, High John de Conquerer, and Nat Turner”\(^\text{51}\)—in order to demonstrate how African American (male) communities can draw upon such mythic models in order to engender courage and develop resistance strategies to counter discursive and material violence against black bodies. While Baker-Fletcher’s interpretation of the subversive qualities of black folk myths is indeed helpful for black male self-esteem in an American social context built upon black dehumanization, there are some questions that emerge pertaining to the selection of the masculine tropes under scrutiny—similar questions I faced as I wrestled with the significance of Albert and Tea Cake. Baker-Fletcher’s citations of these mythic

\(^{\text{51}}\) Ibid., xv.
figurations (Sambo, John Henry, etc.) reify the centrality of the black male body as the locale through which communal liberation is achieved. It is through the embodied capacities of these mythic figures that Baker-Fletcher elaborates his redemptive interpretation of black masculinity and embodiment.

I also, as previous chapters illustrated, have likewise made use of male literary figurations upon which I frame a new understanding of black male identity and embodiment, but my hermeneutic differs somewhat from Baker-Fletcher’s interpretation of these mythic symbols in that I draw upon the progressive, relational themes and characteristics of the male figurations within womanist literary source materials—particularly as it pertains to their interactions with black women within the literature. I do indeed highlight male stories and experiences within the literature, but the difference is that I draw upon the full spectrum of their promise and their shortcomings as a means of addressing and meditating on black masculinity and identity. It seems we can also make use of Albert and Tea Cake as additional “mythic” tropes through which we can provide a redemptive picture of reconfigured black masculine identity, a picture that is inconsistent, one that ebbs and flows, and one that is a work in progress. None of this is meant to slight Baker-Fletcher’s use of these materials to inform his theology; however, I want to make clear that a key distinction is my explicit usage of womanist literature as the basis for my interpretation of a particular reading of communality and black male self-identity from a relational vantage point. Given Baker-Fletcher’s commitment to liberatory partnerships is premised upon organic “Becoming Bodyselves” within the context of community in the creation of Xodus space, attention to the relational capacities and behaviors of male figures as cast within womanist-identified scholarship
and literature, as I have highlighted, would be a necessary element of the partnership that
*Xodus* frames.

In my own reading of Albert and Tea Cake, I clarified that both are, at varying
points, illustrative of male pathology and promise—that both are inconsistent
representations of the relational vision we’ve explored. In addition to the promise that
these figures have in assisting our reflection on the reciprocal possibilities of black
masculinity, we must again acknowledge those facets of their example that serve as
cautionary tales.\(^52\) On this account, *Xodus* may have offered another dimension of
theoretical depth had he made use of black female literature, or more particularly, black
female literary portrayals of black masculinity as a key resource for the construction of
tropes that offer insight into the development of models of black masculinity that
challenge the problematics of sexism and misogyny. In drawing explicitly upon
womanist-identified literary framings and womanist theo-ethical insights as the litmus
test for black male self-reconstruction as an interior examination into reciprocal
relationality, my interpretive scheme, while far from perfect, makes an effort to address
some of the issues noted above.

Finally, in *My Sister, My Brother*, Baker-Fletcher’s reading of “spiritual

---

\(^52\) Both Albert and Tea Cake are cautionary tales to the extent that they failed at points to
be fully relational selves. The “cautionary” description is apt insofar as they demonstrate
the consequences (domestic violence, womanizing, etc.) of a one-sided understanding of
themselves in relation to others, or within the concept of community. In this work, while
the pathological cannot be under explored, it is still appropriate to outline positive lessons
we can glean precisely because first, its easy to dismiss both characters outright because
they are problematic, and in doing so, I would argue that such a dismissal fails to
highlight Alice Walker’s creative literary interpretation of the ability of men to change.
Second, attention to these positive transformations, again, underscores the capacity for
black men to evolve, and further notes how we all, as Garth Baker-Fletcher has noted, are
“recovering sexists” working and striving to embody more wholesome masculine
identities.
awakening” as both a necessary feature and the foundation of rediscovering one’s “true self” in egalitarian partnering invokes the relational concerns that characterize this project. Baker-Fletcher’s concept of true selfhood suggests a renewal—rediscovery of one’s essential humanity, a topic I go on to discuss in more detail in the final chapter. Additionally, Baker-Fletcher’s framing of a cosmocentric theological anthropology creates space for an interrelated conception of human connectivity that parallels my interpretation of the reciprocal nature of human relationality. Specifically, here Baker-Fletcher wedds womanist relationality to a conception of cosmological interrelatedness. However, the key difference that I highlight is my assertion of the capacity for black female mechanisms of achieving interrelatedness to be informative in determining the nature of human relationships and in the reconstruction and reconfiguring of black male identity. Walker’s universalist conception of community, which is premised upon the interrelated experiences of black women’s efforts to be in solidarity amongst themselves and others, provides theoretical grounding not only for Baker-Fletcher, but also for this project in terms of outlining the nature of human activity on behalf of, and with, others.

Dwight Hopkins, Black Women’s Spirituality, and the Communal Self

Dwight Hopkins’ *Shoes that Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (1993), argues that the heart of black theology is discovered in the justice beliefs of poor African Americans’ religious convictions and practices. Through an interrogation of the folk religious practices of the enslaved within the secret religious meetings, black women’s embodied spirituality, folk stories, and black political

---

arrangement, Hopkins sets the terms for the development of black theological discourse that “fits” the context of contemporary African American religious experience. What is of particular concern here is Hopkins’ analysis within the second chapter, which focuses on black women’s spirituality as a significant source material for black liberation theology. In addition to African/African-American folk tales, Hopkins draws upon black women’s spirituality, as developed within the literary writings of Toni Morrison, as a valid expression of black religious experience. Morrison’s work is useful, Hopkins notes, because it entails “the resources for survival and freedom” over against the othering of black women, a process of dehumanization that Morrison calls “the Thing.”

Thingification is a “demonic, sterile, and life-denying spirituality that oppresses poor black women.”

Likewise, in response to this social, cultural, and embodied push to dehumanize black women, Morrison notes that black women have become adept at retrieving the inner resources and convictions that assert autonomy and full personhood, which she refers to as “the Funk”, which “comprises women’s spirit of liberation,” and is “found in values and traditions used by poor black women in order to survive and free themselves from the evil grip of the Thing.” I agree with Hopkins’ inclusion of the insights of black women’s spirituality, namely the power of human relational connection, which he refers to as the “values of connectedness.” In the novels of Toni Morrison, Hopkins notes that womanist spirituality entails black women’s connectedness “to the poor black woman herself; to her immediate community; to her broader community; and to

---

55 Hopkins, Shoes, 51.
56 Ibid.
57 Among others, Beloved, Sula, Tar Baby, and The Bluest Eye.
Below, I attend to Hopkins’ reading of womanist self-connectedness and communal connectedness.

Of womanist self-connected spirituality, Hopkins notes that healthy black female selfhood is the precursor to a more wholesome response to the extended community. The value of such internal, spiritual connectedness, it seems, resides in the power it provides for one’s empowerment to love herself into healthier modes of connection and relationship with others. Hopkins says of the capacity of self-connectedness to inform identity:

Ultimately, the value of self-connectedness empowers poor black women to re-create themselves away from the dictate of whiteness, the limitations of poverty, and male chauvinist demands and toward the self-authority to be free granted by God’s spirit.  

Likewise, with Hopkins’ reading of communal connectedness in Morrison’s novels, this mode of connectedness unpacks the spiritual underpinnings of the intimate dynamics that enabled black women to resist “pressures of harmful forces that would isolate black women from those whom they cherish in their close spiritual bonds.” Clinging to the ties that enabled the survival of black families during and post slavery, the communal connectedness of womanist spirituality is based upon a sense of human togetherness extended to black women’s immediate community—that is, “their families, their relation to other black women, and their intimate dynamics with black men.”

I consider the communal connectedness of womanist spirituality within Hopkins’ construction of black liberation theology important because it highlights some of the reciprocal dynamics that

---

58 Hopkins, 60.
59 Hopkins, Shoes, 63.
60 Ibid., 63–64.
61 Ibid., 63.
are explored throughout this project. This mode of connectedness emphasizes a “when one wins, all win” approach to human relationships—that is, a relational ideal in which people are able to maintain their individuality, integrity, and self-worth without denying the value of other selves. Of the relationship between Nel and Sula within Morrison’s *Sula*, Hopkins emphasizes the depth of their friendship as a model of “woman-to-woman connectedness”—which illustrates “how to be with someone else and not smother the person in the process.” Such bonding experiences between black women of all classes cultivate a respect for the selfhood and humanity of others—an awareness and acknowledgement of other selves’ integrity. One takeaway from communal connectedness for black men, as Hopkins suggests, is the formation of a new kind of relating with black women. Communal connectedness as outlined within womanist spirituality and relationality, “has potential, with the just cooperation of black men, to foreshadow a new example of black female-male vibrant complementarity.”

*Shoes that Fit Our Feet* surveys resources that should comprise the constructive task of black liberation theologies. In drawing upon this dimension of womanist notions of relationship, Hopkins endeavors to create a black theological discourse more sensitive to black female epistemologies and toward the realities of sex and gender restrictions in order to render it more accountable to the voices of oppressed and silenced communities. Further, as theology is, as Hopkins notes, about affirming and challenging “how we act at the intersection between God’s liberating practice and *humanity’s* [italics mine] faith practice with God,” then theology is also tied to the

---

63 Ibid., 67.
64 Ibid., 218.
manifestations and trajectory of human activity and liberation—which touches upon my concerns with the interior dimensions of relationality. In highlighting the restraints placed upon black women by black men as well as larger sexist contexts, with specific attention to how black women garnered mental, spiritual and communal fortitude in response, Hopkins is able to elaborate upon black female ways of relating both within and among themselves and toward the world.

*Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (2005), a text in theological anthropology, pushes closer to my relational concerns. Theological anthropology analyzes the social, political, and cultural realities of human life and reflects on human meaning in light of such realities. Hopkins’ theological anthropology makes use of black folktales as major sources and argues that these sources feature a construction of the self that clarifies the meaning of being human within community. Drawing upon African philosophy and ethics, Hopkins notes that central to African cosmologies and worldviews is the presence of a perpetual, collective-based selfhood—a relational posture that recognizes the role that communities play in the development of human selves, because “neither the self nor selves is viable in a salutary and vivifying manner without the other. One makes the other real.” Hopkins’ emphasis on a collective approach to human community privileges notions of power, movement, and agency anchored in the creation of space for others (selves).

Viewing the individual self or selves as occasioned by our collective communities of origin and our environs have reciprocal dynamics because it creates a view of human

---

65 Ibid., 5.
67 Ibid., 82.
relations in which we quite literally create one another via the processes of exchange, dialogue, and sharing—the self is made by other selves, and likewise participates in the making of other selves. In Hopkins’ examination of gendered notions of self, he further notes that “gender hierarchy subverts the affirmation of community, common values, and the common good.”

This portion of the text briefly engages African feminist theologians and is helpful to the degree that it illustrates the basis for an African-oriented theological anthropology that recasts and resurrects social and cultural concepts of male and female and grounds it within a more communal framing. Building upon this reconstruction of the human as more communal in nature, Hopkins also locates the “delay [of] one part of the human compliment” to the problem of male privilege. Hopkins notes that unequal and unchecked forms of male privilege “abbreviate” female selves and restrict women from exploring and “adding even more resources, talents, abilities, imagination, and joy to the entire storehouse of total humanity.”

Generally, the reviewed work above features a strong appreciation for black women’s literature and African/African cultural productions as critical in Hopkins’ theological perspective. His attention to the work of Toni Morrison in Shoes illustrates how black male theologians have womanist literary sources as a useful tool for theological and ethical reflection—which is in part a motivation for my analysis of Walker and Hurston. From this source material, Hopkins highlights the black women’s values of “connectedness” which can be applied to our conversations about the reconstruction of gender identity and relationships toward a more reciprocal framing of

---

69 Ibid., 116.
70 Ibid., 114.
71 Ibid.
human connectivity. And of theological anthropology, as presented in *Being Human*, Hopkins draws upon African philosophy to extrapolate upon a collective interpretation of human selves—paralleling the interrelated dimension of my framing of reciprocal relationality, and raises implications about of black male privilege and the impact upon the expression and flourishing of black women’s personhood.

One area of distinction between my framing and Hopkins’ perspective on relationality is rooted in my introduction of philosophical ethics within my particular framing human relationality. Specifically, I put the philosophical ethical framing of Martin Buber into conversations with womanist religious thought on human relationality—particularly as evident in the work of M. Shawn Copeland. Buber, as I have continued to state, provides an in-depth description of the interior, primordial apparatus of relational connection and the role/place of the human self within this connective description. The work of Copeland provides a more significant insight into the centrality of the body in this dynamic—giving Buber’s abstract framing more life, and flesh. Fusing both—the primordial underpinnings and the embodied components of relationality, provides this dissertation an added level of theoretical depth, which, I believe, offers a new perspective on what Hopkins has asserted regarding the capacity of womanism and womanist spirituality to inform human connection.

I also differ from Hopkins somewhat in that I’ve drawn upon womanist notions of relationality as a resource to reconstruct black male identity. Hopkins’ text does not provide a sustained critique of black masculinity *as a consequence of his engagement of womanism and black women’s spirituality*. To be fair, however, Hopkins does provide attention to the male chauvinism in the political leadership and social analyses of Martin
Luther King and Malcolm X in order to critique black political and religious institutions for its sexism and exclusionary policies toward black women—thereby stultifying the progress of freedom struggles.\textsuperscript{72} In examining King’s staunchly conservative gender politics, as well as Malcolm’s initial conservative politics, then his transition toward more progressive views once he left the Nation of Islam, Hopkins is correct in noting that both men’s patriarchal theologies hampered their capacity to recognize the profound contributions of black women to virtually all facets of the freedom movement.

I also go further than Hopkins’ push for a sustained assessment of gender within black political and religious institutions by addressing what I consider to be a core issue: namely, the deconstruction and reconfiguration pathological and patriarchal masculinities that serve to ostracize black women. I attempted to do this through my analyses of Albert and Tea Cake’s respective relationships with Celie and Janie. While Hopkins is clear that black women’s spirituality and particularly, black women’s literature can inform the task and norms of black theology, as well as serve as conduits for the voice of a “God who freely chooses to reveal an emancipatory spirit,”\textsuperscript{73} what remains unsaid within the text, and what I have sought to address, are those implications regarding black women’s spirituality and womanism to inform black men’s reflection on the reconstruction of black masculinity. So for example, Hopkins critiques both King and Malcolm X’s position on women as a weakness in their political and religious philosophies—thereby demonstrating the importance of black women to both the religious life and empowerment of black communities. I consider how black women and their insights are important to reconstructing notions of black male identity and

\textsuperscript{72} Hopkins, \textit{Shoes}, 191-194.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 70.
relationality. While, Hopkins points to flawed gender politics as a weakness of black male political and religious leadership (a characteristic that likewise hampers the mission, outreach, and functioning of black churches), I do something different by analyzing how black women’s insights as cast within womanism can impact black male notions of self within community—which may address the root of said flawed gender politics.

Additionally, there does not seem to be an address of the dialogical underscoring of black male theological engagement with womanism. On this matter, I agree with Garth and Karen Baker-Fletcher that Hopkins “extrapolates from the writings of Morrison” without “true conversation or dialogue with womanist theologians and ethicists.” In fact, this is a critique that may even apply to this dissertation. I too, am open to the charge of being non-dialogical. Given this, and because of the high regard for the role of black women’s literature in our theological projects, I can only suggest that for future projects, it is vital to be more proactive in incorporating intellectual exchange in the ways that the Baker-Fletchers have modeled. Where I extend some of the work presented in _Shoes_, is my self-reflexive emphasis on how womanism and womanist source materials can inform radical notions of the black-male-self-in-relation-to-community-and-society through sustained engagement on the part of black men. In doing so, I make an effort to draw upon the conversational impetus that the Baker-Fletchers highlight.

I also found Hopkins’ gender critique of selves/self in _Being Human_ insightful for its attention to the issue of black male privilege. His critique prompted my own attention to this issue, which has been scant, and presses me to give it some additional

74 Baker-Fletcher, _Xodus_, 34.
consideration. The debates surrounding the concept of black male privilege in a white, racist American context has been contentious and passionate.\textsuperscript{75} It seems that much of the conflict stems from misunderstandings regarding what privilege is and how it functions in a material, concrete manner within a relational context. Privilege is relative. Sociologist Dr. L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy defines black male privilege as follows:

My working definition is really a system of built-in and often overlooked systematic advantages that center the experience and the concerns of black males while minimizing the power that black males hold, which is a fancy way of saying, we are absolutely used to talking about African-American men in crisis. And we can talk about this crisis so much that we miss the ways in which black men are oppressed and can also serve as oppressors.\textsuperscript{76}

Lewis-McCoy upholds a self-reflexive mode of analysis when looking at the lives and experiences of black men. Specifically, he argues that examining black male privilege compels one to consider the ways in which black men can oppress as much they are oppressed. Black men’s position within a racist cultural context does not preclude their capacity for doing harm to women in grievous ways; this is a theme made clear in the writings of both Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston and in most of the prominent works of black women’s literature. As noted above, Hopkins opines that the perpetuation of male privilege effectively stunts the full realization of selfhood by women. In exploring this theme in the previous analysis of womanist literary sources vis-à-vis Albert and Tea Cake, I’ve sought to take seriously the interrogation of the manner(s) in which black men can and do exhibit the pathologies of dominative masculine identity, thus

exhibiting further, a marker of privilege.

Another glaring feature of black male privilege that Hopkins illuminates is the problem of *fractured communal solidarity*. As Hopkins has noted that male privilege places a premium on male authority and place especially as it relates to women, this privilege also likewise splinters communal solidarity by pressing for the unity of one group at the expense of another. In other words, notions and assumptions of black male privilege pit black men against black women through its breeding of feelings of superiority in black men, and feelings of resentment and inequity in black women. Lewis-McCoy’s analysis sheds some additional light on the resistance of many black men to acknowledge their privilege. One element of this resistance involves the protectionist push to preserve group “solidarity”—that is, male hegemony and power. Here, black men who dismiss the idea of their privilege effectively shame or silence black women who point out black male sexism and misogyny—suggesting that any criticism of black men is then appropriated as a tool of white racism to further subjugate black men. Given these issues in the debates surrounding black men and concepts of male privilege, I offer a critical, but admittedly inadequate observation.

In my view, it seems that “privilege” can in one sense be framed as “compensatory,” that is, yielding certain (material) benefits within the realms of social and political relations. There is evidence of compensatory privilege that black males have garnered, particularly when we consider statistics on black male income earnings compared to that of black women with equal and in some cases, higher educational credentials and training. The privileges that black men acquire are by no means

---

exhaustive, and they are still tempered by the existing racist structural apparatus in America. On the other hand, it seems plausible that privilege is also marked by an intangible quality—an unspoken, unquantifiable “edge” that escapes our consciousness but nonetheless ameliorates black male experiences in ways we do not even imagine. Admittedly, this is an unsubstantiated assertion, but one that deserves more attention. Perhaps black male privilege in this sense, can also be framed as an unspoken, unrealized (subconscious) type of assurance—a balm that soothes our ego and self-perception as always already embodying authority, voice, influence, and place, even within the confines of a racist and sexist society and its subcultures. The point is not to trivialize the gendered nature of privilege and power with these observations, but rather to highlight the need for more complexity in current interpretations of black masculinity and the politics of gendered positionality and privilege in American culture. In my work on the construction of reciprocal notions of self and masculinity as a possible corrective, I think my attention to this matter can build upon and offer an addendum to Hopkins’ concerns with the reconstruction of black male selfhood that reverses the values of privilege and power.78

**Anthony Pinn, Humanist Ethics, and Embodiment**

With our final analysis of the work of Anthony Pinn, we encounter a mode of black theological discourse that makes use of a different normative framework than those within the work of Baker-Fletcher and Hopkins. Notably, it is Pinn’s humanism that is largely the basis for his theological assertions on embodied relationality. In *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod*

---

(2003), Pinn traces humanism from the mythic lore of Greek antiquity, through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and finally to the distinctiveness of African American humanism. From Greek mythology, Pinn appropriates the story of Prometheus and his assistance to humanity through the sharing of fire from Mount Olympus—an act that resulted in human fulfillment and ultimately led to Prometheus’ punishment at the hands of the gods. Pinn reads the Prometheus account as “an important symbol for humanism,” that is, “an orientation or model meant to topple superstition and nurture the best of humanity’s intellectual and physical abilities.”  

Humanism, on this count, therefore, is a philosophy and way of life that enlarges human potential, creativity, and strength.

This basic impulse endemic to humanism for human evolution and progress expands, says Pinn, into the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, in which the deconstruction of Christian theocracy and superstitious ideology became the incentive for pragmatic and more importantly, scientifically reasoned approaches to unpacking the mysteries of human life and the physical world. Such distinctions as these that underscore the ideal and practice of humanism, also contributes to the development of a uniquely African American brand of humanism. Given humanism’s Eurocentric and White, Anglo assumptions of human freedom, worth, and integrity, the experiences of African Americans create a formidable dissonance between the reality and idealism of those assumptions. African Americans are

the “underbelly” of the Renaissance and Enlightenment in that the advances that shape these two periods occur in part because of the slave trade, and the overdetermination and dehumanization of Africans. Mindful of this, one can safely say African American humanism is a reaction against modernity and its ramifications. The “freedom” upon

---

which modernity rests, at least in part, was not meant for Africans; rather, African American bodies provided the raw material for this freedom embraced by Europeans of means.80

The circumstances under which African Americans embraced humanistic principles, therefore, arose under drastically different social and cultural perceptions of their humanity. Due to these differences, Pinn selects a different model for the trajectory for African American humanism. Interpreting the biblical story of Nimrod as a meditation on humankind’s capacity to “challenge the constructive and technological dominance of God,” Pinn extrapolates upon the humanistic impulse for fulfillment and creativity over against trans-historical figures that stifle human mobility; here, God is Restraint—a shackle on human ingenuity and promise.81 As Prometheus was responsible for bringing light (and thus enlightenment) to human communities, Nimrod, from an African American humanistic standpoint, likewise “brings to humanity recognition of new possibilities by taking what once belonged to the gods and giving it to humans for their use in the furtherance of their intellect and cultural expressivity.”82 In addition to Nimrod’s usefulness as a symbol of human creativity and the capacity to “push the envelope” regarding what is divinely sanctioned human possibility, Pinn also notes that Nimrod is useful to African American religious reflection given the association of Nimrod with Africa and the cursed lineage of Ham. In contrast to exegetical and theological readings of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel that demonize him as a rebel or

80 Ibid., 2-3.
82 Ibid.
as an exemplar of human hubris, Pinn’s humanistic reading enables Nimrod to take on a new significance to the degree that Nimrod’s story can serve as reflection on the effort to maximize human potential, fulfillment, and happiness.⁸³

African American humanism, as shaped by the historical and philosophical interpretive schemes referenced above, emphasizes an understanding of humanity as solely responsible for the human condition and its plight; a suspicion toward or rejection of supernaturalism combined with an understanding of humanity as an evolving part of the environment; an appreciation for African American cultural production and religiousity; a commitment to individual and societal transformation; and a controlled optimism about human potential and pathology.⁸⁴ Pinn, however, is careful to note that the rejection of the God concept is not the most significant element of humanist principles in African American communities, nor does it fully encapsulate the African American humanist position.⁸⁵ Without belaboring this point, I feel it is critical to introduce another core element of Pinn’s humanism as it bears upon this project’s examination of relationality—that is, the implications of lived humanism and how this shapes ethics within the context of community.

As materialists, humanists hold the view that the possibility of a good life within the natural world is the best that we can hope for.⁸⁶ This assertion centralizes the importance of the physical, enfleshed body and its properties—rendering the body the sole means by which life is experienced in its complete fullness. It is therefore incumbent, in this view, that humanist ethical principles reflect a posturing with respect

---

⁸³ Ibid., 4-5.
⁸⁵ Ibid., 8.
⁸⁶ Ibid., 40.
to embodiment and embodied activity within community “that promotes health and justice in light of the antibody [italics mine] culture promoted by (religious?) fundamentalism,” and that holds in tension a realistic appraisal of the human potential for just living.\textsuperscript{87} Human well-being, happiness, or fulfillment, and just relations within community, therefore, are a byproduct of service to others through the medium of the enfleshed body. On this note, Pinn’s humanism, or more specifically, his emphasis on the embodied character of moral and ethical obligations to others within community, is an insightful dimension of his work that offers much to my construction of reciprocity.

Anthony Pinn’s \textit{Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought} (2010) represents an effort to outline the construction of black theology as body theology.\textsuperscript{88} I attend to Pinn’s deconstruction of the black male body in the third chapter, in which Pinn challenges the primacy of the black male body (and perhaps black male perspectives) within black theological discourse. Drawing upon womanist sensibilities on the significance of embodied reality as a source of theological and ethical insight, Pinn interrogates the black male body—problematizing both its moral and ethical slippages in its movement(s) through the world, and further demonstrating how such fluidity impinges upon, in negative ways, the life-worlds of black women.

Pinn’s work in outlining the ways in which embodiment and privilege functions in the lives of racialized men is critical to black theological discourse for two reasons. First, a rigorous interrogation of the black male body avoids the problem of rendering the black male body invisible. Sustained attention given to the meaning of black male embodiment

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid. 39-40.
disallows a methodological “shadowing” of black male embodiment in relation to others, particularly black women, meaning that black men cannot read themselves out of their theo-ethical assertions or theologize without considering the consequences of the effect of embodied male ways of relating on women. Second, placing the consequences of the black male body’s proclivities for sexist and patriarchal behaviors toward black women on full display further highlights the necessity for rethinking the nature of relationality through the lens of gender. This theoretical “exorcising of the black male body” acknowledges the black male body’s weight and presence, and further seeks to “render problematic assumptions concerning the knowledge and power that privilege [black] male bodies.”

Pinn’s engagement with black male embodiment is an element of his theological perspective that I will build upon within this dissertation, because the problem of embodiment prompts recognition of the manner in which attention to the black male body has both physiological and discursive weight.

In referring to body and its “weight”, I have in mind what Susan Bordo notes regarding the body as a “lived” reality that can be an (material) instrument and (a culturally coded) medium of power. The movement of human bodies, to be sure, has consequences. The trajectory of human bodies carry the ability to leave its own footprint(s) in ways that yield moral, ethical, and political consequences within human relationships. Regardless of the race(ing), sex(ing), and class(ing) of black male bodies, such dimensions still ground an embodied male privilege that inevitably affects the manner in which black women experience the world. Pinn’s recognition of the need to

89 Pinn, *Embodiment*, 64.
“check” the black male body—to clarify and criticize its capacity for reifying strategies and practices of destructive force and for human connection, illustrates the value of theologies of embodied relationality and human connection—highlighting the moral and ethical obligations of human selves among other selves. The logical outgrowth of added theological investigation of the black male body would involve a systematic account of the sources, motivations, and implications for the reconstruction of the ways in which black men understand themselves in the midst of other selves, notably black women.

The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology (2012) formulates a nontheistic humanist theology mapped through the collective embodied existence of African American life and the journey toward complex subjectivity—the pursuit of greater life meaning and a fuller range of life possibilities. Like the ideas found within Embodiment, Pinn continues to develop theological discourse in a way that privileges the presentation, arrangement, and significance of body/ies. I comment upon two areas within this text as they relate to relationality: Pinn’s construction of “p(l)ace” and his mapping of humanist ethics through the lives of Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman.

As noted above in humanistic principles and philosophy, within nontheistic African American humanist theology there is no transcendental reality or sacred text that solely orders human existence or human teleology. Rather, this mode of theological inquiry draws from a variety of sources:

Nontheistic theology, then, makes use of African American literature...with as much vigor as text considered sacred within theistic

---

91 Pinn, Embodiment, 64.
theological discourses…African American literature and biblical stories are simply part of cultural production, the cultural matrix of human expression. Nontheistic theology also draws from the visual arts and other modalities of expressive and material culture for insights regarding the quest for complex subjectivity.  

A few of the “ordinary” (read mundane) sources for African American nontheistic humanist theology that Pinn cites are photographs and architecture. Of architectural “p(l)ace”:

the conscious and dedicated arrangement of “p(l)ace” (physical or mental) so as to give time and space deep significance as recognized location where embodied bodies engage in the quest for complex subjectivity within the context of ordinary life.

Humanist “p(l)ace” has an alternative function beyond common associations with a physical locale: p(l)ace is an epistemological space in that it creates the boundaries within which one can wrestle with the existential quandaries of human life. Bodies meet in such reflective spaces, whether the local barbershop or Starbucks, in order to make a concerted effort to map out, as Pinn says, the cartographies of life meaning that serve to enhance one’s sense of one’s significance and weight within the material world.

The p(l)aceing of bodies, in this formulation, presents some interesting notions of human relationality. An important facet to the framing of p(l)ace, as Pinn makes clear, is the reconstruction of community as the central category of African American humanist theology. Often, notably within theistic spaces, “community” entails a framework of shared meanings, beliefs, and commitments believed to increase the possibilities of

---

94 Ibid., 16.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 26.
concerted actions within the world. Such relational fixity within the context of community, for Pinn’s framing, however, “is much too clear-cut and much too firmly expressed through a teleological take on the outcome of activity.”\textsuperscript{97}

Pinn offers a different conception of community that is not solely defined by a “matrix of complex and thick relationships between various forms of life,” but rather contains all the consequences and outcomes for embodied bodies in pursuit of complex subjectivity. From a relational point of view, Pinn’s notion of community (and p(l)ace as a function of community) prompts a sober recognition of the unfixed, messy, non-linear nature of human relationships and connection—speaking to a certain type of riskiness that is inherent in any effort to create collective or communal space.

Such recognition obviously problematizes my efforts to conceive of reciprocal relationality within black theological discourse,\textsuperscript{98} but keeping a healthy notion of risk in creative tension with these efforts will undoubtedly lend my project a more realistic extrapolation of human activity and possibilities within the context of embodied community. In taking this point regarding the tension inherent within all communal exchanges of human selves seriously, there is no corrective, only an effort to temper my constructive work on reciprocal relationality and the seeming optimism regarding the process of arranging and establishing reciprocal relationships, both theoretically, and in practice. The messiness of the endeavor demonstrates that the process itself is never guaranteed to be successful. True reciprocity, which I’m situating as a different take on

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{98} Upon further reflection, it seems that there are perhaps areas of my relational heuristic that are assumed—namely, there is a certain element of “neatness” involving the reinterpretation and reconstruction of black male identity in ways that draw upon womanist ways of relating. Pinn’s framing disavows any such assumptions that the reinterpretation and reconstruction will be successful.
notions of human relationality within black theological discourse, will therefore have to be grounded in a realistic assessment of risk. Even in the midst of “risky” patterns of human relating, the pursuit of just relationships and the equal sharing of power remains the primary objective within my formulation.

A particularly foundational element within the tropes of Pinn’s framing of African American theo-ethics is the development of the notion of “the good” that maintains the subjectivity of the embodied self in relationship to others. Through the experiences and activities of the three figures examined, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, Pinn outlines the ethical implications of: being good (internally) in order to do good (externally), claiming embodied space through physical resistance, and seeking embodied geographical freedom.99 In the ethical model premised upon the three, self-formation is always held in tension with, concern for, and in connection to the presence of other embodied selves:

Tubman, like Douglass and Thoreau, understood ethical activity to involve steady effort to be good, and from that inner determination [italics mine] would flow proper care for and interactions with others—both those with whom we are most familiar and a more general commitment to response to pressing need with the context of a more elaborate matrix of belonging.100

Pinn’s reading of Thoreau’s near-hermetic lifestyle demonstrates that

…ethics has as a core concern the creation of space and time wherein individuals and groups are able to refine the embodied self—to better develop their humanity—and from that internal improvement generate patterns of and postures toward our external commitments and relationships.101

Thoreau frames through an internal impetus in which meditative reflection is the primary

---
99 Pinn, The End of God-Talk, 93-111.
100 Ibid., 110-111.
101 Ibid., 93.
means. In his view, the inward turn toward the embodied self/subject becomes the means by which good or right action is extended toward other embodied selves/subjects. The way out (toward others) begins from an individual focus on developing “the good” from within, which shifts the focus of human relationality.

The Walden experience that Thoreau documents, and which Pinn lauds as an interpretive framing of one element of African American humanist theo-ethics, suggests that one’s moral and ethical relational patterns toward others are generated from internal soul-searching. Thoreau’s Walden, like Jesus’ Gethsemane, provides an opportunity for reflection upon oneself and one’s humanity—from which one can then “generate patterns of and postures toward external commitments and relationships.”

Because Thoreau’s Walden experience pushes for the doing of good (within collective community) because one is good, there is a basis in Pinn’s theo-ethics upon which I can elaborate further my concerns with establishing a reciprocal view of human relationships. Thoreau’s internal reconfiguration of the geographies of time and space for the purposes of enacting an “outward activism sensitive to individuals and communities” provides a space for further collaborative work within my project due to the external push toward others—a key component to my interpretation of reciprocal relationality. Pinn’s reading of the life of Thoreau as a model for “internal improvement” has relational implications in the way this project outlines to the degree that internal drives feed into the drives, directives, and incentives cast on behalf of others. In this sense, making use of Pinn’s interpretation of Thoreau will help to preserve a sense of individuality in the process of becoming reciprocal selves; self is preserved rather than negated.

---

102 Pinn, The End of God-Talk, 95.
103 Ibid., 93.
Frederick Douglass’ altercation with his overseer, Covey, presents an interesting case within Pinn’s collective theo-ethical framing because the suggestion is that embodied struggle with other bodies, individual or collective, is capable of generating the formation of a human subject. Pinn highlights both Douglass’ embodied resistance against ontological and physical violence and Douglass’ newly formed awareness of himself as a human being in light of this life-altering encounter, and recasts such as an important foundation for African American humanist ethics. In the struggle with Covey, Pinn says, Douglass is able to recognize him(self) as a new creation, albeit within a limited geography:

This claiming of self was not full freedom; rather, it was promotion of a new being made possible through an alternate ethical relationship to self and others, one premised on exercising humanity through the demand of embodied time and space.¹⁰⁴

Pinn draws upon Douglass’ strident defense of his humanity as a “platform highlighting the physical geography of life—the embodied occupation of time and space—as the proper venue for ethical thinking and acting.”¹⁰⁵ Within this contestation of the sanctioned racial, physical, psychological, and social boundaries of 19th century America, there is still an ethical imperative embodied by Douglass, as Pinn correctly notes, that demonstrates the need for the collective movement (struggle) of bodies, whether convergent or divergent, in the making of human worlds and selves. Douglass’ example is a reminder of the communal nature of self-formation, which is a welcome supplement to my reading of the importance of womanist communality in the reconstruction of black theology and black masculinity.

¹⁰⁴ Pinn, The End of God-Talk, 106.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
Finally, Pinn’s reading of the ethical underpinnings of Harriet Tubman’s anti-slavery efforts also speak to some of this project’s concerns with reciprocity. Tubman’s practices of freedom through her sojourns between the north and south via the Underground Railroad represent the shifting of the contexts of power and mobility within slavery, which Stephanie Camp refers to as the “geographies of containment.” In *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Acts of Resistance in the Plantation South*, Camp argues that attention to the subtler forms of resistance in black bondswomen’s lives in order to add complexity to our understanding of American slavery. To fully grasp and appreciate the lengths to which black women went to place their bodies in healthier spaces, Camp notes that we must shift our attention “from the visible and organized to the hidden and informal, as well as rigorous attention to personal topics, that for enslaved women…also [became] political arenas.”

It was within the “hidden and informal” sites that the black female enslaved created “rival geographies” over against the geography of containment that defined the institution of slavery. Of this restrictive geography, Camp observes:

> At the heart of the process of enslavement was a spatial impulse: to locate bondpeople in plantation space and to control, indeed to determine, their movements and activities...lawmakers and slaveholders had laid out, in their statues and in their plantation journals, a theory of mastery at the center of which was the restriction of slave movement.

Like Pinn, Camp explores the significance of black female bodies trespassing “restricted” geographies. African American humanist theo-ethics takes from Tubman an “approach to ethics that takes seriously the nature and meaning of embodiment as

---

mapped through the trope of physical space configured and negotiated.” Pinn’s use of Tubman as an ethical trope within his African American humanist hermeneutic is significant in that he troubles the premium placed upon masculinity as the sole embodied geography and therefore avoids the “implicit assumption that the ethics of African American humanism can be outlined strictly in terms of the male body and a masculine posturing toward movement in and against the world.”

Pinn’s reading of Tubman’s activities, as I understand it, is also marked by a turn to relationality due to Tubman’s relentless pursuit of the movement of bodies plural to greater spaces of meaning. In Tubman’s pursuit of complex subjectivity vis-à-vis the liberation of enslaved black bodies from bondage, she demonstrates an understanding of relationality that is premised upon a safeguarding and valuing of black bodies, but it also points to Tubman’s embracing the reciprocal underpinnings of this project to the extent that she was “called and anointed for service to safeguard the abused and vulnerable”—suggesting that she engaged in such transgressive movements over restricted geographies primarily for their well-being, and moreover, for the cause of black, collective, embodied freedom.

Pinn’s humanistic sensibilities and the impact on his view of ethics and relationship are quite illuminating for the reciprocal framework in this project. The sustained theme surrounding the centrality and integrity of the material body within his theology, while grounded in his humanism, is also repeated and reappropriated through his engagement of womanist religious thought. As he notes: “Womanist existential

109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 110.
sensibilities push theologians to entertain the possibility of transforming black theology into a proper body theology,” and thus “genuinely concerned with the implications of existence (and meaning) present in the physical body and the body as metaphor, mining the body for its theological import.”

The value of Pinn’s work for my own can be linked to his connection of the ethical implications of embodiment to both womanist thought and black theologies—creating a theoretical fusing of all discourses to construct new ways of discussing community and how communities function through deeper interpretations of relationships. Particularly insightful, however, is Pinn’s attention to black male embodiment and how black male bodies impact women’s space is a useful inroad to discuss some of the features of my concerns with revising black masculinity. My attention to the reconstruction of black masculine identity by drawing on womanist literature can be read as an expansion of Pinn’s interpretation and critique of the impact of black men on black women’s bodily and discursive integrity.

Many of my critical questions concern the interpretation Pinn provides on Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as tropes for the configuration of an African American Humanist Ethics. Specifically, Douglass and Tubman, as Pinn notes, are willing to experiment with ethical violence as a means to create healthier spaces of meaning and fulfillment for themselves and others. Douglass accomplishes this by outlasting Covey in their fight and thus demonstrating his personhood, and Tubman reveals her pragmatic flirtation with violence by threatening to do harm to those who showed any reluctance or weakness in her freedom expeditions. The critical question I raise in response to these readings is whether violence recast as an exercise of humanity

111 Pinn, The End of God-Talk, 63.
through a reconfiguration of embodied time and space is useful within a construction of reciprocal relationality as an ideal for black male identity formation?

I raise this question to consider the resulting implications of appealing to embodied violence as a theoethical framework for both relationality within black theological discourse, but more importantly, for the reconstruction of black male identity. The criticism is not against individual or communal struggle for material advancement or ontological freedom. I’m merely questioning the viability of these figures for any theoethical framing for communal solidarity and relational cohesion. This becomes a particularly compelling consideration as I reflect on the prospect of Tea Cake’s violence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After all, Tea Cake did demonstrate, at many points, strong proclivities for violent behavior against Janie. I’ve gone to great lengths to be as forthcoming and as candid about Tea Cake’s unfavorable, misogynistic, and relationship-killing tendencies and behaviors. What makes my reading of Tea Cake distinct from Pinn’s reading of the altercation between Douglass and Covey, is a difference regarding our sense of the instructive capacities of both.

Pinn’s safeguarding of the integrity of material bodies is central within his construction of humanism, therefore, his theoethical system maintains a utilitarian posturing with regard to the possibility of violence as a means of self-preservation and as a possibility of realizing freedom and wholeness. In this sense, Douglass’ violence may be read as an instructive model for the extent to which persons may go to assert their humanity and personhood. In this sense, Douglass’ violence and Tubman’s pragmatic willingness to use violence for freedom may be considered *liberative violence-as-self-preservation*. In contrast, I argue that Tea Cake’s violence is also instructive, but for a
different level of interpretation. Tea Cake’s violence was not liberating. Tea Cake’s violence was not about self-preservation or survival. Tea Cake’s violence toward Janie is rooted in coercion, domination, and giving off the illusory image of control within a patriarchal context that privileged and valued female subordination. In this sense, we can never suggest that Tea Cake’s violence is on par with the liberative violence-as-self-defense in Tubman and Douglass. If anything at all was preserved and rendered intact through Tea Cake’s violence against Janie, it was only the shaky apparition of himself as an aggressive man in control of a woman.

Tea Cake’s violence is irredeemable in terms of the construction of a relational identity. However, the way in which Tea Cake’s violence is instructive and useful is its capacity to illustrate the consequences of sexism and violence toward women as a detriment to community and relationality. In other words, in absorbing the whole of who Tea Cake is, the good and bad, we are compelled to highlight that which we can draw upon to weave into a more relational identity and reject that which runs counter. In this sense, Tea Cake’s violence illustrates vividly exactly what we’re fighting against and rejecting in our consideration of the direction of black masculinity and identity. Tea Cake’s violence is useful because it provides a glimpse of how such self-understanding has potential to not only wreak havoc in the lives of others, but also houses deadly consequences through the prospect of self-destruction. Tea Cake’s adoption of a patriarchal identity and his mistreatment of Janie are therefore instructive in that his example can inform our ability to glean what is not acceptable within the formation of black masculine identity.
There also arises the question of what Janie’s violence against Tea Cake can reveal—how it may be instructive. In sum, it is a worthwhile consideration to view Janie’s violence as an ethical act. One could argue, that the final scene between Janie and Tea Cake ending in his death at her hands, parallels with Pinn’s reading of the Douglass/Covey fight. Tea Cake, like Covey, attempted to establish a deadly arrangement of power and control in which he would overpower and likely kill Janie in the process. Janie, however, like Douglass, embodied an ethical impulse for self-preservation that contradicted the relationship forcefully sought by Tea Cake (and Covey in the case of Douglass). The point in drawing these comparisons is to highlight the different ethical postures that underscore Janie’s violence against Tea Cake and vice versa. Janie’s was rooted in embodied and spiritual self-preservation, whereas Tea Cake’s is more the result of an insane lust for power and control over another.

Yet, there is also a womanist quality that characterizes Janie’s act of violence, though neither Hurston nor Janie would or could have called it such. On this point, I think about the prospect of what we may refer to as radical self-love. Janie’s devotion to Tea Cake and their marriage is unquestioned—through all his faults, and between the discord and physical abuse, she remained at his side. What she would not do, however, is allow her love and devotion to override her integrity of self. As Alice Walker has noted of womanist sensibilities, womanists love themselves, “regardless”. The extent to which Janie illustrates this ethics of regardlessness in preserving her health and livelihood, is a manifestation of the radicality of womanist conceptions of self-love and self-preservation. This is another way in which Janie’s violence against a murderous Tea Cake takes on a different ethical posture that cannot be so simply dismissed. Janie’s
radical self-love, we may say, again reflects an ongoing tension between self-preservation and outward expressions of violence against others.

Ultimately, however, my concern here in raising these issues, is not the prospect of violence in defense of one’s well-being and life options as Pinn seems to address in his hermeneutic. The issue is the efficacy of appropriating literary examples and tropes for whom embodied force is their central significance. And because this dissertation is particularly concerned with establishing a more relational interpretation of black male identity, it is important to take care to select figures that feature other modes of self and identity aside from harmful expressions of masculinity. While this is not Pinn’s project, this is nonetheless the theoretical burden that I bear within my own. To draw upon models that suggest that freedom—whether physical, spiritual, or psychological, can be acquired by embodied force, would appear to reify some of the problematic elements of black masculine identity that this project seeks to reform. Specifically, I would argue that the reliance upon models whose central theoretical importance is rooted in embodied violence, (couched in terms of a forceful embodied reconfiguration of time and space), or even the possibility of embodied violence, and/or hypermasculinity, do damage to reciprocal relationality. While violence remains an alternative within Pinn’s African American humanist theo-ethics in the pursuit of more wholesome relationality within oneself and with the world, my project, particularly through my reading of Tea Cake, calls into question embodied violence as a relational construct. I do this from a cautionary standpoint because any mode of male violence, intentionally or not, has potential to collapse into the same pathologies that dictate violence and hypersexuality as

---

the litmus test for (black) masculinity.

The work of Baker-Fletcher, Hopkins, and Pinn represent some of the prominent black male voices within theology that have taken seriously the necessity of engaging womanist discourse and the implications of womanist scholarship as a critical component. While these three figures have been central to this chapter, this should not suggest that they are isolated. There are other theologians and scholars of African American religious thought whose attention to sexuality and gender are additional perspectives that model the kind of work I seek to do with womanist thought. For example, Roger Sneed’s *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (2010) challenges black liberation and womanist theologians and ethicists to be more intentional about the consideration of homosexuality as a significant resource for black religious thought and also more representative of the diversity of African American life.¹¹³

In addition to Sneed’s assertion that womanist theology has been a useful tool in bringing to light various intersections between black homosexuality and black religious thought,¹¹⁴ Sneed’s “ethics of openness” is particularly insightful for its relational orientations. The ethics of openness emphasizes the need for an appreciation of human life, activities, and aspirations in all its diverse expressions.¹¹⁵ What is critical about Sneed’s ethical formulation is that such an ethics cannot, it seems, exist without not just recognition, but also deep appreciation and engagement with the individual human as he or she is situated within the context of community. This modality of openness requires a

---

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 54.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., 179-180.
certain posture, a recognition of others which then enables one to ascertain the best mechanism(s) to create circumstances in which human happiness and fulfillment become more of a reality.\textsuperscript{116} However, the particular look of this ethical system is still undeveloped, as Sneed only comments upon the initial contours, motivations, and incentive behind openness ethics.

Other useful scholars who include sexuality and gender as critical realms of interpretation within black theological discourse include Clarence Hardy, III and Horace Griffin. Hardy’s book, \textit{James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture} (2009) examines Baldwin’s writings as an informative resource in thinking through the tensions between black holiness culture and sexuality, gender, and embodiment.\textsuperscript{117} One of Baldwin’s essays, “Here Be Dragons”,\textsuperscript{118} which Hardy III mentions, not only grapples with the anxieties of black manhood that often undergird misogyny and homophobia, but also comments upon the fluid-like nature of gender. Hardy III’s attention to Baldwin’s unpacking of such problems yield insights into how black religious culture feeds into and contributes to the development of problematic notions of black masculinity.

Griffin’s \textit{Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches} (2010), makes use of pastoral theology and black liberation theology to push for greater attention to homophobia as a substantive issue in black church

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{117} Clarence E. Hardy, \textit{James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009).
\textsuperscript{118} “Here Be Dragons” in \textit{Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality}, 208-218.
communities. Griffin seeks to reconstruct black Christian attitudes about homosexuality by situating the mistreatment and stigmatization of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer communities within the same constellation of bigotry exhibited in slavery. Griffin’s critique of “traditional approaches” to pastoral care for homosexuals goes further by suggesting a more wholesome conception of church community and family, in which homosexuals are not “problems,” but rather, are one of the many diverse expressions of human creativity. Griffin’s work presses for a reconstruction of certain attitudes, vantage points, and notions of black-male-self-in-community in ways that I’ve sought with regard to black male identity, though his focus obviously is on the question of homophobia with black religious spaces.

Finally, ethicist Darryl Trimiew echoes some of my relational assertions in Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community (1993). Drawing upon Reinhold Niebuhr’s typology of moral experience, Trimiew notes that to be a human self “is never an atomistic individual unrelated to society” rather, a self is always understood as the counterpart to other selves. From this assertion of an interrelated responsibility enmeshed in human life and development, Trimiew constructs “responsibilist ethics” guided by the ethical reasoning and praxis grounded in the moral behavior(s) of communities under oppression. It is on this foundation that Trimiew goes on to recast the theological and ethical concerns of human relationships by answering the following questions of Niebuhr’s typology: to whom (or what) am I responsible? For

---

120 Darryl Trimiew, Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 2.
whom (or what) am I responsible? To what moral community do I belong?121

Ultimately, the end goal of this moral exploration and experimentation highlighted through the activity of the responsible self, is “discovering how [one] contributes to the process of marginalization (and this is of key importance for black male scholars to uncover) and how that contribution can be ended and replaced by an approach that helps people meet their basic human needs.”122 In his documentation of the varied historical actors, men and women, who have acted as “responsible selves” in the midst of, and for the well-being of other selves, Trimiew’s book is a welcome supplement aiding my ongoing efforts to find new points of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing and constructing alternative interpretations of black masculinities and ways of being relational within theological discourse. My project, of course, makes a similar contribution to theological discourse, but instead, draws upon womanist source materials, masculinity studies, and cultural criticism to frame the contours between reciprocity and black male self-formation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter sought to identify some of the prominent black male theologians who’ve been faithful conversation partners with womanist scholars of religion. In many ways, their views on relationality and community, while emerging from different philosophical perspectives (and faith traditions), all demonstrated a sustained appreciation for, and engagement of, womanist discourses. In aligning my own perspective on reciprocal relationality with the views espoused, I sought to expand the very same collaborative impetus of the male theologians reviewed, while also sharpening

---

121 Ibid., xix.
122 Ibid., 104.
my own capacity for articulating the extent to which womanist religious thought and the concept of theological conversation has informed my perspective of human relationality, community, and black male identity. The next chapter makes an effort to build upon some of the implications within the work of the black male theologians reviewed. In turning to relationality as a key concept within theological reflection, the fifth chapter constructs an initial framing of what I term *black male relational theology* and the role of dialogical centralism.
Chapter Five:

Black Male Relational Theology and Dialogical Centralism

This chapter frames a methodology built upon insights from the previous chapter’s review of black male theologians. In some ways, my project has now come full circle. I began with a certain conviction about the nature of relationality and relational orientations as presented in womanist thought, which I grounded in womanist theology and the philosophical/religious ethics of Martin Buber. I then applied that framing within my reading of womanist literature and a critique of black masculinity. I’ve now come to a juncture where I am pressed to consider how to mine reciprocal relationality for its theological import. I develop black male relational theology, through its framing, dialogical centralism, and I draw heavily from the theology of conversation as espoused in the work of David Tracy.

I complete this chapter with some attention to the look—the mechanics, of dialogical centralism within collaboration between womanist scholars and black male theologians, my specific target audience. Specifically, I complete my assessment and construction of dialogical centralism by considering the prospect of failure and the breakdown of the relational exchange that may transpire within this collaborative venture, as well as wrestle with the implications of consensus within collaborative dialogue. A realistic appraisal of the prospect of failure and other issues within the dialogical encounter can help safeguard the ideas presented throughout this project from a simplistic romanticizing of womanist insights on relationality, community, and communication.
Audience and Normative Definitions

Black male relational theology is a theology of human connection geared toward the expression and development of reciprocal selfhood in the activity and life of black men within the context of community. This is a theological endeavor, to be sure, given the place and importance of human purpose and direction within communal spaces. Gordon Kaufman notes that part of the “proper business” of theology involves sustained critical thinking and reflection on the categories and symbols upon which humankind is ultimately and preliminarily concerned—a perspective shared with Paul Tillich, whom Kaufman seems to parallel. Among these symbols are the “confessional” elements, such as God, church, faith, and scripture; but also included are more open-ended symbols that are explicitly anthropological in nature, such as man and community. Therefore, to the degree that my framing of reciprocal relationality and its constitutive parts prompt reflection on an understanding of community and personhood and its desired end or purpose, we may appropriately view this interpretive work as theological in nature, but that is also applicable in an interdisciplinary manner with connections to ethics and gender studies.

If it is true that every human culture finds different ways of articulating its meanings and worldviews, then notions and formations of community are part of the human construction of life meaning. In this project, I advocate for a particular renewal of human self and human self-in-community, as the process of clarifying the varied dynamics between self and community seem correlated to human efforts to create life meaning and cohesiveness. My work in this chapter and throughout the project draws

---

upon this effort by reinvigorating black theologies through a shifting of the categories of human relationality and connection, and provides attention to reformulated conceptions of black male identity. All these interpretive framings, from my perspective, encroach upon theology in that I reflect on the formation of reciprocity within human relationality as a mechanism of cultivating a sense of life meaning, purpose, and function in black religious scholarship as it effects black men and women.

I therefore envision black male relational theology not as a discourse meant to centralize or prioritize the perspectives and experiences of black men over against that of black women, but rather, as a reflective, theological venture that considers how black men can tap into and cultivate relational identities grounded in the well-being and humanity of women and men and their larger communities. My target audience, again, is best understood as black male scholars of religion and theologians. I target this group for a few reasons. First, it is representative of my intellectual and social location, and it therefore makes sense to frame this chapter mindful, given the work of the previous chapter, of my theological perspective as part and parcel of a larger conversation involving black male scholars. Specifically, I aim to engage the possibilities of shifting the categories of black theological discourses in ways that are more sensitive to the relational impact of womanist religious thought. Second, what I’m attempting to develop with black male relational theology is the beginning of a systematization of the implications of the previous chapters’ engagement with womanist religious thought and literature, and further, provide an application of these implications toward relationality, community, and black masculinity in black theology.
In my efforts to construct reciprocal relationality as well as envision a reciprocal masculinity through the lens of womanism, an equally critical component of these interpretive exercises has been an emphasis on the concrete dimension of reciprocal relations between black men and women and as articulated theologically. By this, I mean I have constructed the notion of reciprocal relationality with attentiveness to the praxis, or the practice of this relationality within the quotidian spaces of everyday interacting and relating in community in ways that provide a deeper sense of human connection and interaction, which I have deemed “dialogical centralism”. My construction of dialogical centralism is representative of a kind of prolegomena for the methodological considerations of black male relational theology—that is, a guideline for engaging womanist scholarship, which I outline through: 1) establishing and respecting the boundaries of womanist discourse as safe space and 2) avoiding the problems of womanist source appropriation by remaining committed to ongoing male self-reconstruction through self-reflexive dialogue, and 3) recovering the art of listening.

Reciprocal relationality, given its conception of the self as connected to others and as attuned to the well-being and flourishing of others, cannot be divorced from its material implications within social contexts. The concretization of self and other, in reciprocal recognition, therefore, should guide our reflection on the nature and practice of reciprocal relations. To elaborate further upon the concrete, or material world(s) of social subjects, I now turn to Mary McClintock-Fulkerson’s feminist theological interpretation of concrete social practices in the liberation of the oppressed.

In Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology (2001), McClintock-Fulkerson argues that the formation of a more inclusive feminist theology
necessitates the rejection of identity politics, or the idea that women share characteristics universally, and instead, the embrace of interpretive schemes that unpack the discursive power dynamics that often shape how people are characterized, responded to, and treated. McClintock-Fulkerson states, feminist theological method must embrace modes of interrogation that allow for “more access to the role of our own definitions in constructing the other, as well as make us understand that we have no access to the real outside of our power-laden constructions.”

In deconstructing the “power-laden constructions” of our biased and prejudiced conception of those we deem “other,” we become more effective as persons of faith and as those who work as allies with the marginalized—more aware of and receptive to the respective material realities of those communities. McClintock-Fulkerson’s “attention to the concrete other,” as a guiding frame of reference in her feminist discourse of liberation, is what I want to particularly focus on as a way to introduce *dialogical centralism* as the interpretive frame for black male relational theology.

McClintock-Fulkerson notes that a concretized conception of social arrangements places the onus of social change and the practices of liberation upon persons within the context of community through an appeal to God and through the recognition of “the possibilities of will-to-power in any concrete practice.” Persons within and beyond communities of faith, therefore, have the power and potential to enact right relationship within social exchange. McClintock-Fulkerson’s emphasis on the “concretely social” underpinnings of human relationships acknowledges how subjects are, among other

---


3 Ibid., 4.
discursive actions, “produced out of the pernicious effects of a patriarchal and capitalist social order.” There is, thus, a distinction between the social body the individual body in that the features of given societies—its political, economic, religious, and sexual ethos, correlate to the denouement of human personality and subjectivity. Each human person, is a composite of, among other things, learned behaviors, ideals, familial patterns, and world-pictures. These are all features that are properly associated with the realm of the social world, and as such, hold sway in the socialization process that frames human growth and development into thinking, reflecting, and acting subjects within various publics and communities. But as McClintock-Fulkerson notes, there are destructive consequences that emerge within the socialization process, as not all systems and frames of reference for human relationships are positive, and therefore, must be interrogated and deconstructed.

Taking this observation from McClintock-Fulkerson to heart, my efforts to reconstruct terms of human relationship, as well as revise the nature of black masculinity, can also be seen as a mechanism for redressing the “pernicious effects” of patriarchal, sexist, and misogynistic ideologies and identities that have impeded the experiences of women and likewise, have narrowed the life options and the flourishing of identity for black men. The social character of life has material consequences, and any interpretation of relationality within the context of community must consider the consequences of behaviors and the ideologies that underscore those consequences. What this means for black men, who I’ve identified as the subjects of this interpretive reflection on the reconstruction of self and self-in-relationship within community, is that we are charged

\[4\] Ibid.
with cultivating the process of reformation that hopefully serves to mitigate the harm resulting from behaviors and actions that have done damage to our relationships and communities.

The process of reconstructing self and self-in-relationship within community, therefore, begins with black men—it begins with black men’s awareness of and self-critique of the danger of sexism and misogyny. The gradual process of this reconstruction, as I’ve emphasized in my reading of the black men in the womanist literature of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, is not solitary, but is rooted in a communitarian impulse embedded in the deeply social character of human life. The effort to correct sexism, misogyny and all the vestiges of a patriarchal identity requires—demands—the insights, critique, and as this chapter asserts, engaged conversation with the communities most negatively affected. This means that the way forward involves the ongoing process of dialogue followed by critical self-reflection.

Garth and Karen Baker-Fletcher note that genuine exchange—genuine dialogue, is an ongoing process of mutual exchange that “neither pits ideas against one another, nor gives token nods to each other.” Genuine dialogue is “necessary for real theological and ethical change to take place in the academy, church, and community.” When black scholars engage black women—and engage womanist scholarship, the marker of genuine dialogue within these spaces is the extent to which we are transformed by the encounter. We are pressed to be as shaped and transformed by the dialogue with black women, as they likewise are shaped by our experiences, perspectives, and ideals. Beyond the banalities of mere lip service or patronizing postures that rely more on grandiose

---

5 Baker-Fletcher, My Sister, My Brother, 16.
platitudes than on concrete practice, the dialogical methodology that I propose insists on a form of theological reflection that is born of the experiences, feelings, and critiques of black women, and womanism within black male/black female conversation.

**Black Male Relational Theology and Dialogical Centralism**

Dialogical centralism is the theological methodology I propose in black male relational theology. I frame this particular mode of dialogue while drawing upon the conversational theology of Catholic theologian David Tracy. In this framing, however, I also have in mind Anthony Pinn’s theory of *relational centralism*, his method for the investigation and interpretation of black religion. Relational centralism is an interdisciplinary method of study—combining insights from psychology of religion’s work on conversion, history of religions, and art criticism focused on abstract expressionism and pop art—through which the relationship or resemblance between modes of black religion is explored in terms of their shared referent.6

Pinn makes use of this methodological approach in order extrapolate upon the distinctive features of black religious thought and behavior—emphasizing both the historical manifestations of religion and the particularities of religiosity within African and African American cultural contexts. As Pinn notes, relational centralism, through its holding in tension the universality and particularity of religion as a human phenomenon and field of study, interprets black religion as operative “within particular historical moments” but yet, embodies “the common impulse undergirding all historical manifestations of religion.”7 For example, the study of the psychology of religion, history of religions, and art theory may assist with the interpretation of religion as a uniquely human phenomenon, while African American literature, religious history, and

---

7 Ibid., 197.
cultural criticism provide a means of interpreting the distinctly African/American manifestation of religion. Pinn draws upon these various disciplinary sub-fields, therefore, in order to hold in tension the universal and particular dimensions of African American religion.

What I specifically glean from Pinn’s concept of relational centralism, is a rationale for the pragmatic appropriation of diverse theological perspectives through which I construct dialogical centralism. In Pinn’s view, there is a pragmatic, interdisciplinary approach to the study and expansion of African American religion. There is, to be sure, a willingness to experiment with diverse theological, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives to inform his theory of religion. Likewise, for my own project, expanding the disciplinary bounds of my construction of reciprocity and its constitutive parts, requires an element of caution. This precaution is directly linked to the theoretical foundation in womanist religious that I’ve asserted as central to the project.

Given my insistence upon the centrality and significance of womanist religious thought and varied other womanist source materials, it has been important for me to ensure that these resources play key roles in the critical apparatuses within this work. While I do not falter in this conviction, this chapter slightly departs from the more explicit centralizing of womanism and womanist-identified resources as key to informing my respective reflections in the remaining pages of this chapter. Pinn’s notion of relational centralism, as a theoretical articulation of black religion, enables me to adopt the same interdisciplinary impetus to construct dialogical centralism—that is, specifically, a willingness to make use of resources that aren’t womanist in orientation while still acknowledging the overall importance of womanist scholarship to my work.
While I primarily draw upon theological and ethical perspectives in this chapter that are beyond the framing of womanist thought, it seems important to likewise hold in tension the alternative voices and perspectives that illuminate and inform dialogical centralism. With these key assumptions behind my methodological scope thus defined, I now turn to David Tracy.

*Dialogical Centralism and Conversation*

Among the many problematics of our contemporary cultural milieu, is the question of how best to respond to the realities of plurality, ambiguity, and difference as a shaper of communication, commerce, and general understanding in our globalized context. In a world of “others”, it becomes very easy for one to feel out of place, alienated, and lost. It is for this reason that David Tracy outlines a theology that is inclusive and grounded in a pluralistic, postmodern epistemological framework—meant to assist persons of faith in navigating the terrain of a multi-faceted society and culture. Recognizing this distinction, it is important to note that it is *not* Tracy’s pluralism that is to serve as an anchoring point for dialogical centralism. Rather, it is Tracy’s interpretation of conversation as response to otherness within his pluralistic theology that is particularly illuminating.

Tracy notes that our pluralistic, global culture “impels everyone—every individual, every group, every culture, every religious and theological tradition to recognize the plurality within each self, among all selves, all traditions, all cultures in the face of the elusive, pervasive whole of reality.” It is in this sense, the formation of thoughtful responses to the questions of difference, otherness, and diversity within our pluralized

---

8 David Tracy, “Defending the Public Character of Theology: How my mind has changed,” *Christian Century* 98 (1 April, 1988), 355.
context, that Tracy constructs his hermeneutic of “conversation” as a paradigm for theological reflection and discourse. One of the distinctive features of a pluralistic society, says Tracy, is the absence of any hegemonic “center,” or way of life or living. Pluralism necessitates the awareness and “acceptance of the full significance of the presence of many [centers]”\(^9\):

A fact seldom admitted by the moderns, the anti-moderns, and the post-moderns alike—even with all the talk of otherness and difference—is that there is no longer a center with margins. There are many centers. Pluralism is an honourable but sometimes a too easy way of admitting this fact. Too many forms of modern Western theological pluralism are historicist, but too a-historical as well as curiously a-theological in their visions to allow for the unsettling reality of our polycentric present. There is a price to be paid for any genuine pluralism…there is no longer a center…And the conflicts about how to interpret the Western present…can often prove to be either blunt or subtle refusals to face the *fascinans et tremendum* actuality of our polycentric present.\(^10\)

The polyvocality of our present-day context therefore compels us to cultivate different, more creative ways of living and responding to a world of “others”. It is the recognition of the fact of plurality—notably the recognition of the many ways of living, acting, and worshipping, that occasions the necessity of pluralism as a theologically significant perspective. There are ways in which Tracy’s emphasis on plurality and conversation finds a welcome complement in womanist theo-ethics. Emilie Townes echoes the necessity of the meeting of diverse minds and perspectives through her construction of the expansive “womanist dancing mind”. Drawing upon Toni Morrison’s


essay of the same name, the womanist dancing mind, says Townes, is an interdisciplinary
method of religious, ethical, and theological discourse characterized by an openness to
others—welcoming “the unknown rather than rush[ing] to name it, control it, an
dominate it.”

The womanist dancing mind is a welcome supplement to the conversational,
pluralistic theology that Tracy constructs. The embrace of differing perspectives as
critical to the expansion of womanist theology and ethics that Townes presses for here is
rooted in an open-ended exchange between persons and personalities meant to create
fruitful spaces of collaboration that impact scholarship and activism in the 21st century.
A dancing mind, therefore, weaves and creates with the presence of other voices—it
thrives off of the hope of building a new future that is more life-giving, humane, and, it
seems, reciprocal. Townes’ womanist dancing mind, allows space—demands space for
the acceptance of other voices, because in these spaces of hearing and listening to voices
other than our own, we are able to “learn from each other’s struggles,” in order to “better
engage in more rigorous and thoughtful scholarship and action.”

Tracy, like Townes, views the embrace of plurality as an ethical and religious
imperative—one that hones in on a central element of the nature of religion itself. Additionally, what becomes paramount through embracing pluralism is the creation of
ties to those communities, peoples, and perspectives outside of ourselves. As discerning

---

13 Ibid., 247.
persons seeking to create a more liveable world for self and neighbor, pluralism pushes us “to develop better ways as selves, as communities of inquirers, as societies, as cultures, as an inchoately global culture, to discover more possibilities to enrich our personal and communal lives.”

Should we hope to meet the challenges of the pluralistic age, we must uphold an openness to otherness. Within the discursive space of openness to otherness, Tracy is able to elaborate further upon the importance of dialogue and conversation by highlighting how each are central to the building of community and are ultimately responsible and collaborative. This means that the differences and/or conflicts that arise in the midst of dialogical encounter are not dialectical oppositions, but rather meant to be creative and constructive. As we transition to the crux of my framing of dialogical centralism, however, we must also take into account the deeply political dimensions of the nature of dialogical encounter, framed here through the lens of Tracian conversation. From my perspective, there are three dimensions within the act of conversation that are useful for the descriptive picture of dialogical centralism: 1) the integrity of the “other” as other within conversation, 2) the risk to self-understanding within conversation, and 3) the search for truth through attentiveness within conversation.

17 David Tracy, Dialogue with the Other: The Interreligious Dialogue, (Louvain: Eerdmans/Peeters Press, 1990), 30.
When I speak of the integrity of the “other” within my framing of the dialogical encounter, I do so mindful of Tracy’s cautionary warning regarding our “secret wish to still be [center]”\textsuperscript{18} of the dialogue, thereby making the subject of our liberatory discourses and praxis ourselves and not those most vulnerable.\textsuperscript{19} To engage in true, genuine conversation, it is incumbent upon those seeking conversation to disabuse themselves of the temptation for self-projection toward, or upon, the other. We cannot see the other “only as projections of our modern selves, our desires, wants, [or] needs.”\textsuperscript{20} In a word, our assessment of the other with whom we dialogue has no bearing—no relevance; rather, the “other” stands on her own within the dialogue and has her own integrity. Focus on self in the act of conversation is inappropriate, and perhaps, unethical. This is important because often when we make an effort to engage the other, there is pressure to achieve and establish a sense of commonality and common ground, that we, in our great zeal, have a tendency to absorb the uniqueness of the other’s perspective and experiences into our own. In doing so, we are making of the other a proxy for our own desires and wishes for connection. This ultimately detracts from the significance of the other and the other’s voice and perspective, and we stand to lose the opportunity to gain a new perspective on reality through the pursuit of a one-sided dialogue in which amplification of one voice, and not the unity of voices, takes precedence.

Second, conversation risks a type of violence—not violence in an embodied,

\textsuperscript{18} Tracy, “On Naming the Present,” 67.
\textsuperscript{19} This concern speaks to the tendency to situate oneself and their interests as the basis for connection with others; a good example of this in our present politico-racial climate is observable in the #AllLivesMatter response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement in order to downplay the capricious reality of black and brown life in an increasingly militarized police state.
\textsuperscript{20} David Tracy, \textit{Dialogue with the Other}, 4, 6.
physical sense as one fears the violence from war, but rather, violence in terms of *breakdown*—the disruption of one’s own self-conception, self-image, and self-understanding. In a word, the very way in which one articulates self-meaning and identity is threatened by this modality of conversation. Engaged, committed dialogue with the other is a dangerous undertaking. It is dangerous because the disclosure of the other risks our own self-deconstruction and self-destruction. Such deconstruction and destruction is a violent act. It is a violent process because it renders *unfixed* the static articulation of our sense of self, or rather, the perception of our sense of self. The means that the disclosure of the other troubles “self-reality” as the self knows it.

To genuinely receive the unadulterated criticisms and insights of others within any dialogical exchange—to open oneself to the interiority of others vis-à-vis their insights, criticisms, and unique take on life through their own experiences, is to gain a new awareness of reality beyond what one may presently conceive, thereby risking the annihilation of our present self-understanding and reality, and in turn, facing the possibility of transformation. We are, when open to conversation, as shaped by the self-disclosure of the other as they are by us. This reciprocity of conversation embraces and validates the humanity of the other and results in our own growth because listening to those other voices enables us to “hear, above our own chatter, [possibilities] we have never dared to dream.”  

Dialogical methodology of this kind yields the possibility of genuine mutual reflection within the context of community, because it presses for a conception of self-identity that is grounded in the experiences of others, which has potential to yields transformative possibilities and practices of reciprocity in the creation

---

21 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 79.
of a more livable world among various selves.

Finally, conversation can be said to be about the realization of truth(s). Tracy views truth as experiential disclosure—a manifestation of rightness. As he goes on to explain:

The realized experience of the truth-character…is an experience of its purely given character, its status as an event, a happening manifested to my experience, neither determined by nor produced by my subjectivity…I may accord this experience the status of a claim to truth as the manifestation of a “letting be seen” of what is, as it shows itself to experience.

Truth(s), in this sense, are completely contextual and arise from the disclosure(s) of self. There does not appear to be one, sole, manifestation of (T)ruth, but rather, the possibility for many truths contingent upon the plethora of disclosures within conversation. Conversation, in this sense, is also about the openness to experience (and possibly be molded by) the meanings generated by contact with the other. These meanings have the capacity to disclose a new reality and new truths, “to anyone willing to risk allowing the disclosure to happen.” Truth as outlined here is not the product of a solitary life, or a one-sided set of experiences; rather, “the manifestation of truth is the first fruits of a truly dialogical life.” It is through meaningful conversation and exchange with others that the possibility of truths can be established.

I would also note that the dialogical foundation at the heart of the revelation of

---

22 Ibid., 28, 29.
24 Ibid., 67
truth also further humanizes the “other”. If the other is indispensable to our self-understanding and our grasping of truth and knowledge, then she can never fail to be the incentive of our initiating the conversation. If the possibility of truth is indeed the product of genuine conversation, it is critical that the other is approached in her alterity—as a distinct, separate, and necessary partner within the dialogue. As partner, the other brings her own insights, questions, experiences, and resolutions in the realization of truth(s). The quest for these many-sided truth(s), is thus, a communal, interrelated endeavor. When one is allowed to dominate, there is no genuine conversation, and when no question other than our own is allowed, conversation is impossible and the possibility of the realization of truth is diminished.26

**Dialogical Centralism in Black Male Relational Theology Outlined**

As noted before, dialogical centralism is the standard of black male relational theology. Drawing upon the work of David Tracy above helped elucidate the nature of the dialogical methodology through his interpretation of the theological significance of conversation both as a methodological principle in theological discourse and as a model for human life and community within a pluralistic context. Now, however, I seek to weave some of the implications of the above commentary into a specific response to the question of how dialogical centralism is put into practice in black male theologies, and what are the ways in which womanist thought is addressed? In other words, how can black men dialogue with womanist thought? I have in mind three meager suggestions for this course of action which are to be elaborated upon in the remaining pages: 1) respecting the boundaries of womanist discourse as protected space; 2) avoiding the

26 David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 95; *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 18.
problems of womanist source appropriation through focusing on the self-reflexive impact of womanism on black men; and 3) recovering the art of listening.

**Womanism as Protected Space**

I briefly touched upon this issue in the chapter one. As noted before, Emilie Townes has described womanist scholarship’s “bias”—the unapologetic centralizing of black women’s experience as the experiential medium through which the black community’s religious, theological, and ethical assertions are evaluated. This “bias” speaks to womanism as a protected space—a discursive, intellectual, creative, and life-giving realm of black women’s self-expression organically linked with the life-blood and cultural mores generated by black female communities. As Karen Baker-Fletcher has also noted, womanism has been an “oasis” of black female empowerment and expression in the desert of male domination and patriarchy. In recognizing womanist discourse as a protected space, for black men who engage womanist sources, what I press for is a type of sensitivity to this protectionist stance. This sensitivity is not fluffy sentimentality. It is sensitivity that recognizes the unique historical and social location of black women as well as accepts black women’s expressed need for sisterhood and dialogue on their own terms, and possibly within their own space(s).

Sensitivity to black women’s need for insulated space and place within womanism thus means engaging womanism with a *peripheralist* mindset. As we have seen from Tracy’s pluralistic account of the theology of conversation previously discussed, the engagement of others in a genuine dialogue requires the muting of our attachment to an individualized disposition. In engaging black women’s resources, we

---

27 Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul*, 2
cannot be “the center.” We cannot hope to dialogue and collaborate with womanists if we hold any expectation that our interests or voices as black men will be held central within their discursive and intellectual spaces. Black male interests within these spaces are not “center stage”—they are secondary in that, by engaging and conversing with womanists within these spaces, our own perspectives may be enriched through the process. This, possibility, however, cannot be placed upon the shoulders of womanists with the expectation that they meet it. Engaging womanists from a peripheralist, or what we may refer to as an “outsider” vantage point, enables us to contribute to the preservation of the integrity of womanist discursive spaces, while also, hopefully, establishing trust within our collaborative work because we highlight the insights of black women while intentionally distancing our own. This is an important move, because encroaching upon this space assuming our interests and insights are immediately welcome or central, seems essentially an exercise of privilege—namely, that we can throw our “intellectual weight” around through the expectation that our presence and perspective is taken as a theoretical given. Taking this approach does not lessen the very realness of black men’s plight, nor does it suggest that black men’s voices are not useful or legitimate. Rather, heightened sensitivity to womanism as protected space(s) for black women’s meaning-making pushes for the recognition that there are realms in which black male perspectives are not central, and that it is preferable that black women make use of their own creativity and political formation among other black women.

Womanist safe space is constructed according to the canon of the meaning(s) and methodologies formulated by black women. The challenge for my work is rejecting the temptation to appropriate their work without reflection. It is the meaningful reflection on
these sources that creates the possibility for a perspective through which I can both critique and reconstruct the problematic intersection(s) between maleness and theological discourse. However, in acknowledging this particular element of my approach to womanist thought, I do not intend to singularize womanism as my sole intellectual influence. Womanist resources and materials, and not womanist space, are central to my interdisciplinary approach to black male relational theology. I privilege womanist materials while also supplementing that scholarship with other disciplines that push me to expand upon black theological discourse while being sensitive to the methodologies that ground the greater expression and implementation of patriarchal criticism, male self-reconstruction, and religious responses toward the creation of a more liveable world in which justice and social transformation are the rule and not the exception.

Womanism and Self-Reflexive Engagement

For black men, womanism embodies an instructive component. I make this statement in order to segue into a response now regarding womanist source appropriation in contrast to engaging womanism in a self-reflexive manner. We’ve noted before that womanism, as Stacey Floyd-Thomas has said, yields “epistemological treasures,” that can be utilized by those who do not self-identify as womanists. In my dialogical approach to womanist religious thought, I interrogate how womanist ideals of community and relationality can both create new ways of understanding human relationships, as well as provide a compelling mechanism for reconsidering the nature of black masculinity. In other words, in entering dialogue with womanism, the muting of my own perspectives, or the recognition that my perspective cannot and should not be centered, lends itself to the process of discernment on how womanism can impact the lives of black men.
Womanism has clearly given black women a means of articulating and expressing the distinctiveness of their experiences and highlighting the organic quality of black women’s intellectual culture. However, while these sources are shaped by black women with the centrality of black women’s lives in mind, womanism is not so insular that those beyond womanism’s purview cannot incorporate the insights from womanism intellectually and personally.

I believe that black male religious scholarship must incorporate a sustained awareness of the internal and social anxieties that cultivate problematic ways of being male. In part, this means black male scholars of religion would do well to continue interrogate the problematic intersections of black masculinity as cast in America society generally, and within black communal spaces specifically. Kelly Brown Douglas spoke of this modality of communal self-critique in terms of a “bifocal” commitment to communal wholeness through intentional self-critique.28 To this end, it is vital that black male scholars begin their work with the commitment to an ideal that I’ve repeated consistently—the necessity of self-critique. This is manifest in a commitment to challenging, criticizing, and ultimately rendering obsolete all those facets and formulations of black thought and male identity that engender destructive capacities and consequences for women.

The consistency of this commitment to ongoing critique is both the responsibility of black men—their intentional push for ongoing self-renewal and reformation, and is grounded in a commitment to ongoing dialogue. This challenge addresses the meaning and construction(s) of black male identity, embodiment, and masculinity. The

reconstruction of black male identity over against harmful models of masculinity that have been cemented into black psyches (collectively) and somehow recast as “authentic” and positive—is a critical element of anti-sexist, anti-misogynistic, and anti-patriarchal black religious scholarship. This challenge also serves as a call to begin the hard internal work and cultural criticism that extends beyond phallocentric and death-dealing images of the “black macho” trope we’ve inherited from flawed gender role adherence and other deficient segments of our culture. This also means a reclamation of our male bodies—recovering them from the faulty distortions levied by white supremacy and our own cultural pathologies.

Not to belabor this point, Tracy’s admonishment regarding a rejection of the desire to be “the center,” again resurfaces. By privileging the insights and experiences of black women, womanism can serve as a compelling reference point to guide black men, and black male scholars to better consider, acknowledge, and challenge to wrestle with the consequences of male privilege and further press black men to acknowledge how this privilege contributes to patriarchal and misogynistic practices and ideas in very real ways. In a word, the reflexive component of this mode of dialogue enables black male theologies to be more explicitly grounded in collaborative exchange—speaking to the communal themes and articulations of womanist thought. As a black male theologian, I consider this objective of particular importance.

Reflexive dialogue within dialogical centralism is critical to my overall theological methodology because it values the process of theological reflection within communal exchange and conversation. Reflexive dialogue also seeks the transformative possibilities that arise during this process, and rejects what the Baker-Fletchers have
referred to as “token nods” within conversation with no concern for the dynamic qualities of the exchange. The emphasis on dialogue within this self-reflexive approach is an important facet for a few other reasons. First, this mode of dialogue is processual. It is ongoing with no expectation of completion or finality. Dialogue within the spaces of theological reflection evolves and grows and expands, based upon the religious experiences of the participants, and the exchange of ideas as developed over the course of time. In the case of black men, we respond to the insights and experiences of black women from a standpoint that is both critical and that embodies an epistemic distancing, as we can never fully immerse ourselves into the life-worlds of the black women that womanists represent channel through their materials. In this sense, the dialogue commences when black men embody and practice a willingness to listen (more on listening below) and be critically affected by womanist scholarship.

Second, genuine reflexive dialogue is not one-sided; it privileges the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and experiences in ways that privilege the capacity for transformation and change. Dialogical engagement with womanist source materials, cultural criticism, African American gender studies, and theology, requires grappling with my particular approach to reflection on religious experience as a black man. It is more fruitful—more respectful of the collaborative process, to engage these resources with specific questions and thematic schemes that serve as the backdrop for my theological concerns as a black male. My interests as a theologian are driven, therefore, by a desire to expand the nature and meaning of what it means to be human selves within community and within relationships and what it means to fully embrace black masculinity in life-affirming ways.
The self-reflexive approach to the engagement of womanist religious thought, avoids the problem of source appropriation and “token nods” by clarifying the specific ways in which womanism is a dynamic and compelling source for theological and religious reflection. Incorporating the insights from womanist thought into one’s theological work and possibly, within one’s personal life, indicates the extent to which one fully interrogates and takes seriously the critiques and insights black women have offered regarding black men, and how black men can reconceptualize their identities and sense of self within community in ways the promote and cultivate new generations of scholars, artists, and leaders who work to carve out a more liveable world for women and men. In a word, application and not appropriation is the primary objective in the interpretative and collaborative work I do with womanist scholarship.

Recovering the Lost Art of Listening

In a New York Times article “The Science and Art of Listening,” neuroscientist Seth Horowitz makes a distinction between hearing, as the activity mere auditory perception, and listening, which he goes on to describe as intentional and focused attention toward auditory perception. Listening is an expansion of hearing, in that “when you actually pay attention to something you’re listening to, the signals are conveyed through a dorsal pathway in your cortex, part of the brain that does more computation, which lets you actively focus on what you’re hearing.”29 Listening is the processing of cognitive, auditory perception. What is particularly useful for our construction of dialogical centralism in Horowitz’s distinction, is the intentionality that underscores the

29 Seth Horowitz, “The Science and Art of Listening”
act of listening. Listening, not hearing, in the process of dialogue with others, requires the intentional reception of the other without pretense, and without any desire or expectation to short circuit the tenor of the conversation, and thus, diminish the possibility of seeking truth. To my mind, there are at least three motivations that characterize this mode of intentional, active listening over hearing: *listening for the sake of the other, listening for the sake of self, and listening for listening’s sake.*

Listening for the sake of the other is not merely about the validation of what the other says. Rather, it is a listening that humanizes the other because in the act of listening, the other is acknowledged as worthy of our intentional attention. I also express caution in thinking about the role of *curiosity* in listening for the sake of others. Curiosity-in-listening suggests a cursory, and thus, inauthentic attention that seeks the self-serving piquing of interests rather than for the benefit of the other. In other words, curiosity is solely about the desires of self. Listening for the sake of the other affirms that the other is valuable, that they are unique, and that their presence is an indispensable part of one’s existence. In this sense, listening for the sake of the other achieves what Arvidson referred to as a “moral moment,” which here is framed as dialogical exchange between persons in which both are received with intentional attention.

While I made a distinction regarding curiosity and listening for the purposes of distancing my construction from the pursuit of self-interest, there is still yet a beneficial slant to the art of listening. For when we listen for the sake of the other, this should not suggest that self-interest is not a factor, though far from primary. Listening for the sake of self, listens for the possibility of transformative moments that may arise within the act of dialoguing with and listening to others. This listening listens for the hope of an
impact. True engagement in conversation, as we’ve noted above from the work of David Tracy, always yields the possibility of the emergence of new realities through the self-disclosure of others. The self-disclosure of the other in conversation can press us to “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.”\textsuperscript{30} We thus listen for our sake to the degree that the dialoguing with the other gives us the tools for the kind of internal reflection that propels us toward the consideration of a new sense of self and being.

Finally, listening for the sake of listening is a way of navigating the conflict of conversation. It is through listening—the intentional attentiveness toward the other in conversation, that meaning is created and sustained. Tracy opines that we “find ourselves by losing ourselves in the questioning” of the dialogical exchange. Listening within dialogue enables us to explore possibilities that are introduced through the disclosure of other voices. In receiving and acknowledging the voice of others through intentional attentive listening, the dialogue in itself becomes the means by which both self and other increase and grow. I identify a reciprocal slant to this particular understanding of listening, in that one listens to others, not out of convenience, or out of pity, or out of a sense of desperation in face of the disclosure of the other. Rather, listening for listening’s sake embodies attentive listening simply because the presence and voice of the other warrants acknowledgment and recognition. Even this aspect of attentive listening, is not without its own set of risks, which in Tracy’s view is embodied in the always-possible conflict within conversation and argument. The prospect of argument arises because “we

\textsuperscript{30} Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 19.
may so believe our own intentions that we become deaf to other voices.\textsuperscript{31} There are times when competing voices within the dialogical encounter come to an impasse, in which “conflicts emerge, positions harden, [and] differences in interpretations increase.”\textsuperscript{32} The clash of conflict, however, which we may also frame as argument, is not to be avoided. At their best, arguments are vital to conversation in that they can propel the conversation forward and impact the participants.\textsuperscript{33}

Conflict in conversation, or argument, therefore also provides a means of recognizing difference in particularly meaningful ways. Garth and Karen Baker-Fletcher, in outlining the dialogical methodology that underscores their Xodus and Womanist theologies, echo an appreciation for conversational conflict through an appeal to “diunital thinking,” which they consider useful aspect of dialogical theology as it involves an appreciation for the “tensions of difference”. The emphasis here is a “both/and” epistemology in lieu of an “either/or”—in which multiple perspectives, insights, and experiences are preserved and given equal footing within conversation. The process of conversation, dialogue, and attentive listening, from a diunital perspective, “affirms the facticity of contrasts, opposites, and apparently conflicting co-existence[s].”\textsuperscript{34} This is an important piece of active, attentive listening within collaborative engagements with womanist religious scholarship because there are sure to be occasions when the dialogue is heated and uncomfortable for the participants. However, even in the face of this, the impetus must be, as conversational theology dictates, the gracious and attentive and engaged listening-in-response.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 23.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{34} Baker-Fletcher, \textit{My Sister, My Brother}, 16.
Possibilities Only: Dialogical Centralism, Irredeemability, and the problem of consensus

Up until this point, it may be reasonable to assume that any attention I’ve given to the breakdown or failure of relational identity formation within the context of community, has been largely theoretical. That is to say, I’ve not grappled with a particularly disturbing question: In the process of black men’s efforts to reconstruct their identities and self-understandings, what may we say when faced with the possibility of irredeemable sexism and misogyny—the notion that these features of black male identity are beyond any tangible correction? There are a few comments that come to mind in considering these possibilities. First, it is worth noting that the process of dialogue always embodies the possibility of risk, and with the possibility of risk comes communicative failure.

On the surface, such a statement may seem self-evident. After all, conversation, or any form of engagement between different communities can give rise to other possibilities, scenarios, and conflicts that are largely unforeseen in the initial stages of the dialogue. However, this is an important point that necessitates our attention. It is vital to maintain a realistic appraisal of risk and failure within dialogical work and to maintain that realistic spirit regarding possibilities of black men to accept the transformative capacities of this level of conversation. As an example, in the previous chapters when I analyzed Tea Cake in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, I made an effort to be intentional about acknowledging all his warts. I wanted to be fair and even-handed in my reflections on his misogyny, violence, as well as his potential for illustrating elements of his personality that were more organic and reciprocal. In taking his pathological tendencies
seriously and confronting them head on, I wanted to also be intentional about discussing the pitfalls of masculine identity formation.

That is, in looking at the whole Tea Cake, the analysis attempted to give an account of the irredeemable features of reprobate pathological masculine identity and how these problematic elements of masculinity may be useful for examining black male identity construction. However, I did not, within that chapter, entertain the possibility that perhaps Tea Cake was beyond healing. In this chapter, I hope to expand my thinking on this element of the conversation regarding black male redemption.

Tea Cake’s death provides a sobering glimpse into the death-dealing constraints of pathological masculinity. He literally has to die, not just for Janie’s self-preservation, but seemingly for his own good, lest his insanity metastasize and progress further into the very masculinity that Janie wanted to escape in a friend, confidante, and lover. Tea Cake’s unfavorable qualities can inform our meditation on the framing of the dialogical encounter between black men and womanism by providing a way of thinking about the prospect of disconnect and the potential for the breakdown of communication. We must at least consider the possibility that not all of the insights and perspectives available within womanist discourses, no matter how compelling, will make the same transformative, challenging impact upon all black men. It is possible, at the least, that the inner Tea Cake within in all men may prevail. Optimism regarding the goals and potential of dialogue between our communities is useful, perhaps even hoped for, but this optimism must be tempered with an honest assessment of the emergence of the anxieties and confusions of the human condition that give rise to an insane Tea Cake, or any man with an attachment to patriarchy and misogyny as foundational to his sense of self.
Secondly, it seems important to note that in dialogical work of this kind, we are never assured of consensus within collaboration. In other words, there is never going to be uniformity in collaborative dialogue, because we will inevitably, as Tracy noted, hear the “chatter” of our own voices and perspectives. Conflict in conversation thus remains a constant, and this is a useful assertion to remember within our efforts at dialogue. It is furthermore important to note that even within womanist spaces, total uniformity of thought is highly unlikely, arguably, undesirable. In breaching this topic, I have in mind early “roundtable” discussions amongst the pioneering womanist scholars in religious studies. In one such discussion that took place in 1989, “Christian Ethics and theology in Womanist Perspective”, pioneering scholars Cheryl Sanders, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Katie Cannon, Emily Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, and Bell Hooks examine, from their varied theological and ethical perspectives, whether the term womanist provided an appropriate frame of reference for the ethical and theological statements generated by black women.35

In this discussion, Cheryl Sanders criticizes the usage of “womanist” as the appropriate methodological and theoretical lynchpin adequate for black women’s “Christian ethical and theological discourse.”36 Theologically, in Sanders’ view, Alice Walker’s designation and construction of the context, criteria, and claims of womanism are at worst, irreconcilable with the tenets of the Christian faith, and thus, unsuited for black women’s historical and contemporary expressions of that faith. Sanders claims that womanism, or rather, the label “womanist”, is a “secular category whose theological and

36 Ibid.
ecclesial significations are rather tenuous.”37 She thus centers her critique of the suitability of womanist thought for theology specifically upon what she deems as a type of non-prioritizing of a Judeo-Christian God as the catalyst for black women’s freedom. She notes, for example, that black women’s freedom within a womanist framing, is not dependent upon any expectation or lack thereof, of divine intervention.

The prospect of a transhistorical reality, whether “God or Jesus or anybody else,” is not a major source of concern, says Sanders.38 On this point, Sanders assumes a certain acceptance of (Christian) theism as formative in black women’s theological assertions that Walker’s conception of womanism, at best, problematizes. Per Sanders, womanism offers “scant” attention to the sacred at all, and in the areas of Walker’s definition that do privilege an idea of the sacred (i.e. a womanist “loves the Spirit”), there is no real distinctiveness among other elements of the material world (i.e. “loves the folk” or “loves food”). On the suitability of womanism as a theological point of reference, Sanders ultimately suggests that womanism “marginalizes” the sacred within black womens’ experiences—opting instead for a worldly premise founded upon self-assertion and the capacity for self-naming.

Another element of Sanders’ critique hinges upon the suitability of womanism for ethical and moral issues—specifically the topic of sexuality. On this point, Sanders clearly draws upon heteronormative conceptions of the black family structure and a discomfort with homosexuality to discuss her uneasiness on the possibility of womanism to inform issues that have moral and ethical implications. Womanism, in Alice Walker’s

37 Ibid., 86.
38 Ibid., 86.
definition, validates sexual and non-sexual love relationships between black women. Walker also notes that womanism is grounded in the survival of both women and men.

Here, Sanders perhaps offers her most devastating critique of womanism as useful for women within the black church, as the practice of homosexuality, in Sanders’ view, does not “promote the survival and wholeness of black families.” As supporting evidence for this claim, Sanders points to the large number of single-parent families, high rates of welfare dependency, and poverty—and links the resolution of these social ills to greater education regarding marriage and parenthood, thus exposing Sanders’ heteronormative bias. There is also a hint of Sanders’ suggestion of a moral and ethical dissonance between womanist nomenclature on sexuality and the sexual ethics espoused within the black church. In the final analysis, Sanders believes womanist conceptions of sex and sexuality are ultimately “ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.”

In the responses to Sanders’ critique that follow, the remaining womanist and feminist scholars express appreciation for her strident criticisms, but also do not mince words about their disagreements with both Sanders’ conclusions about the direction and purpose of womanist thought and its relevancy for black religious studies. Katie Cannon, for example, takes particular issue with Sanders’ assertion that womanism is mainly a secular terminology and philosophy. Cannon argues that womanism provides a more than appropriate reference point for theology and ethics. As a womanist Christian ethicist, Cannon presses for a “womanist liberation theological ethic” that privileges a critical reappropriation of “Afro-Christian culture” that questions and examines moral

---

39 Ibid., 90.
40 Ibid.
deliberation that empowers black women to challenge the nature and practices of patriarchy and misogyny within their churches.\textsuperscript{41} Through this framing, Cannon effectively places black women at the center of ecclesial mission and life and preserves a connection between womanist thought and Christian praxis.

As another example, Emilie Townes disagrees with Sanders on the basis of a “conceptual error” regarding Sanders’ staunch reading of lesbian themes into Walker’s definition of a womanist, which Walker noted was a woman who potentially loves and prefers other women, sexually or platonically. Townes argues instead that Walker intended womanism not solely as a declaration of lesbian lifestyles or homosexuality generally, but rather, womanism attempts to define a style of living that includes space for a variety of black female voices, perspectives, visions, and as it relates to black female sexuality, different ways of loving.\textsuperscript{42} Townes writes: “The focus I find in Walker is a concern for survival and flourishing of the Afro-American community in its diversity: age, gender, sexuality, radical activity, accommodationist stance, creative promise.”\textsuperscript{43}

In avoiding superficial litmus tests of authenticity for who is womanist and how they are so, Townes’ push for the allowance of greater ranges of diversity and perspectives within womanist discourses fulfills and prioritizes a womanist imperative that privileges the role of self-naming and self-definition, no matter how disparate or contradictory such categories may be—as Townes opines: “Moral autonomy for

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 92-93.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
Walker’s womanist is a woman’s ability to define and celebrate herself and her people.”

There is thus, an ethical proclivity in womanism that is grounded in an appreciation for the many expressions of humanity and human personality.

Why is this important? Why the commentary on a roundtable discussion between womanists and black feminists on the topic of ethics and theology? It was important to provide a glimpse, though not exhaustive, of some of the theoretical and/or methodological issues that emerge in the midst of passionate debate among self-identifying womanists and their critics. Such discussions illustrate the diversities of opinion, as well as what we saw in the work of David Tracy regarding “conflict in conversation.” Womanism, like any other discourse, is not a static, ungrowing, “bulletproof” intellectual construction. Rather, it is a living, breathing, and evolving concept that has yet to reach its full expression. For this reason, moments of clarity, resulting in the raising of new questions and criticisms regarding the reconfiguration of womanism’s direction, functionality, and purpose, are to be expected. Because of what is at stake, personally, intellectually, and politically regarding the answers womanists provide to these emerging questions, conflict is, again, a constant.

Conflicts and differences of perspective such as what was explored above are necessary for the growth of ideas and concepts for rapidly changing contexts and the shifting interests of the communities most affected. Consensus within dialogue, in this sense, is not something that is always desired. Rather, within my framing of dialogical centralism, passionate debate and discussion among womanists and black men in the various fields of religious studies should be a welcome expectation that avoids the

---

44 Ibid., 95.
banalities of easy answers, feel-good platitudes, and the flight from uncomfortable
dialogical exchanges. For black men who are compelled to engage womanist discourses,
our objective, it seems, should include upholding our commitment to this level of
engagement and collaboration without apprehension of the possibility of disagreements
and divergent perspectives. These are common features of any conversation involving
dedicated, committed peers and are necessary for the struggle to cultivate greater
methods of doing theology and ethics within black religious studies that address gender
and sexuality.

Conclusion

This chapter primarily sought to construct a relational impetus within the
theological discourses of black men, as well as articulate the methodological
underpinning that could direct this relational orientation. While it is clear that I’ve
singled out black men as the primary audience for this modality of theological reflection,
the implications from of this discourse can be expanded and modified in other
communities. If there is anything, for example, that Alice Walker’s description of the
trajectory of Albert’s plotline within The Color Purple can teach us, it is that black men,
no matter how destructive and death-dealing, are not beyond hope or irredeemably sexist
and misogynistic. However, as the latter part of the chapter discussed, it is important to
maintain a tension between the optimism regarding black men and the prospect of
reconfiguring their relational and masculine identities, and the possibility of failure and
disconnection within the collaborative process. In any case, I have made an effort in this
chapter to provide a realistic affirmation of the possibilities of black male relational
identity to which black theological discourses can offer more attention. In transitioning
into the final chapter of this dissertation, I speak this affirmation of black male relational identity into existence.

In the final chapter, I ponder the possibility of “black male self-(re)covery”, which I argue is a possible result of the gradual, ongoing acceptance of reciprocal relationality. (Re)covery, as I interpret it, is an ongoing commitment to the revising restoration of black male relational selfhood. (Re)covery prompts the realization of the non-fixity of black masculinity. (Re)covery is the always but coming act of returning “home” within oneself—free from the restrictions of patriarchal, misogynistic, and phallocentric approaches to human relationships. The (re)covery of a wholesome, healthier notion of black masculinity and black male identity that is more aware of, and emphatic about the well-being of women and others is cause for celebration. It is cause for celebration because (re)covery is in part a victory in the renewal of one’s existence—specifically oneself in relationship to community. (Re)covery accepts oneself as a valued self in relation to others. In outlining the notion of (re)covery, I draw upon Paul Tillich’s conception of the “New Being” as a way to lend the regenerative nature of the process of (re)covery more existential and theological weight.
Chapter Six:

On the Possibility of Black Male Self-(Re)covery

Man as he exists is not what he essentially is and ought to be.
He is estranged from his true being.

—Paul Tillich

This final chapter provides commentary on a conception of black male identity formation in terms of renewal. It is fitting to introduce this chapter speaking in terms of renewal regarding the material and discursive reality of black male identity. Renewal implies a transitioning of sorts—a revision of the present state of things. Invoking the language of renewal provides a refreshing way of talking theologically about the nature of human self-formation and purpose as it relates to black male identity. I reflect on the nature of black men’s transitional renewal of a more reciprocal understanding of relational selfhood. I define this mode of renewal as black male “self-(re)covery”. Self-(re)covery, as I interpret it, is an ongoing commitment to restore reciprocal selfhood. It is the emergent possibility of embracing an identity as grounded in, and that shares with, the selfhood of others. The (re)covered self seeks freedom from the restrictions of patriarchal, misogynistic, and hierarchical approaches to human relationships.

This chapter’s focus on how black men may reflect on the embrace of self-(re)covery is both an existentialist vision and a reflective theological venture. It is existential to the degree that it clarifies a particular element of the uniquely human experience of one’s existence, place, function, and destiny within the context of a community of human selves. Theologically, my work here shares parallels with what Joerg Rieger has referred to as the “theology of identity” in his God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology (2001). In Rieger’s perspective, the
changing global marketplace and the postmodern, plurality of religious expression demands a reviving of the theological paradigm that rethinks the classic, traditional symbols and texts of the church, and perhaps more critically, the human self in the midst of this context. Rieger proposes a turn to the self in theological reflection—specifically interrogating how selves are impacted by and related to modern and postmodern structures of exclusion and oppression. Basing his reading of the self upon Friedrich Schleiermacher’s conception of the centrality of human feeling, intuition, and experience as the primary category of the religious, Rieger ultimately places emphasis on the centrality of human self/selves within theological reflection to promote the cultivation of values “such as interdependency, connectedness, and wholeness”, which set the terms for addressing and correcting patterns of exclusion and hierarchical relationships and for the doing of theology.

Reiger advocates an “entrepreneurial” quality of the human creature to turn to new notions of self within community. The entrepreneurship of human personality is a pragmatic openness to innovative approaches to wholesome identity formation as a response to oppressive realities premised upon exclusive and asymmetrical power-laden relationships. My relational framing as presented throughout this dissertation is also theological in this regard, in that I reflect on the nature of embrace and inclusion as key to my reconfiguration of both self-identity and community in black theologies. However, I do not frame my assertions on identity formation and community in terms of Christian theology in the proper sense. Alistar McGrath notes that Christian theology is ultimately

---

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 17.
God-talk from a Christian perspective, grounded in a categorization of the classic debates including but not limited to, biblical studies, Christology, the doctrine of God, ecclesiology, and the doctrine of grace. There is, thus, a confessional slant embodied in Christian theology that goes beyond the scope of this chapter and the project as a whole. My work does not reflect, nor do I have a desire to engage, an apologetic reflective venture premised upon an assumption of the “truth” of the Christian faith for postmodern times and communities.

However, I recognize that my work does pose a dilemma regarding the accessibility of my framing of community and relationality to non-Christian audiences. The reciprocal vantage point I’ve articulated throughout the previous chapters is grounded in an interdisciplinary collaboration and engagement of womanist religious thought and literature, philosophical ethics (Buber), and gender studies, but there is an unmistakably Christian undertone to the tropes and theoretical structuring developed. Keeping this fact in tension with my desire to formulate a relational theory within theology that may resonate with non-Christians and persons of various religious, ethical, and theological sensibilities, I am compelled to at least consider possible ways this work may yield some appeal by situating my theological framing within secular discourse(s). Specifically, I have in mind the deeply anthropological implications of my theological reflections on relationality and community. On this point, Ludwig Feuerbach’s insistence that “theology is anthropology” takes on a newfound significance as it relates to the dilemma of establishing a warrant for why and how my work can appeal to non-Christians and even non-theists.

---

Feuerbach deconstructed the problematic supernaturalism of Christianity in *The Essence of Christianity*, but did so through a radical hermeneutic of suspicion toward the perceived distinction between the divine and human subject. In Feuerbach’s view, the human community was essentially worshipping, revering, and reflecting on its highest ideals and notions of self through theology—appeal to God is no more than a superfluous illusion that masks the human being and human institutions. I invoke Feuerbach to highlight, meagerly, one area of emphasis that could be used as an inroad to non-Christians, and that is repeated by Paul Tillich: the centrality of human existential realities and its implications for notions of relationships.

The human, as a relational animal, exists and subsists within societies, communities, and social groups. Taking Feuerbach and other secular and/or non-theistic viewpoints seriously, to talk of theology is ultimately talking about the reflections and insights of these varied societies, communities, and social groups of which human beings are central. In this sense, theology is a reflective apparatus hewed from the fabric of human experience and existential concerns. Part of this fabric would include, I believe, the particular and innovative ways in which human communities make sense of, and structure themselves in response to their varied experiences.

The humanistic and social emphasis on relationality—the mechanisms through which human beings construct and make worlds, coupled with additional insight into how these modes of relationship can be strengthened, is a project/program that Christian and non-Christian alike may embrace. My reading of Tillich and his existential slant to

---

theological reflection, highlights the human-centric dimension of self-(re)covery and relationality.

Tillich is attractive because of the deeply existential character of his theology—he does not shy away from the profoundly human element of religious experience. (Re)covery, in my estimation, is vested with what Tillich terms “ultimate concern”—or those facets of human existence that elicit humankind’s most engaged, serious, and devoted yearnings as it relates to being or non-being. Part of the main thrust of my work holds that a critical feature of human existence involves the ways in which human personality and selfhood is conceived and articulated within the context of a community. While Tillich spoke of ultimate concern as that which concerns our being or non-being, my framing privileges a particular structuring of human being within the context of community. If Tillich is correct in noting that “being” refers to the whole of human reality as it is known to human communities, then how human reality is \textit{structured} becomes a critical component of the theological paradigm as it relates to the turn that I have proposed here regarding the reconfiguration of self within community in black theological discourses. The “concern” before us in the construction of new modes of relationality and relating, becomes situated within uncovering the impact that our ways of relating have on others and how they impact ourselves.

Drawing upon Tillich’s theology of culture with specific attention to his ontology of the existential condition of humankind, the first objective in this chapter is to provide a snapshot of the concept of estrangement and its impact on human existence and

specifically, self-formation in the lives of black men. I then apply the Tillichian notion of
estrangement to discuss black male “self-loss” as rooted in the pathological acceptance of
relational approaches rooted in sexism and misogyny. It is important here to note that the
self, within my formulation, is the reciprocal self—an envisioning of human personhood
and personality that is grounded in and has its essence in the other. Self-loss, in my
understanding, is ultimately the breaking down—the rupturing of the possibility of a
relational identity. What causes such a breakdown and short-circuits black male self-
understanding and identity in particularly negative ways may be varied, and I dare not
presume to have an exhaustive answer. In part, it may be the case that some men, to
revisit bell hooks’ interpretation of “integrated living”, embrace a “compartmentalized”
version of self—stemming from experiences of trauma or alienation. And perhaps, as we
considered in the previous chapter, some men are simply willfully obstinate and find a
misguided sense of fulfillment in embodying identities and self-images that are anti-
relational; though this remains, still, to my mind, a rather extreme possibility.

In any case, the failure to embody a relational identity, despite the catalyst,
ensures a destructive force within communal spaces and relationships, and my work in
this chapter seeks to think further about the renewal process of self-formation as critical
in correcting the problems engendered by pathological masculine identities. On this
point, the second and final objective of this chapter involves the reinterpretation of
Tillich’s concept of “New Being” to specifically redress black male self-(re)covery as the
gradual embrace of regenerated reciprocal selfhood.
Existence, Essence, and Estrangement

This chapter—this entire project really, accepts as normative the view that existential insight into the human condition is a useful source for theological reflection. One cannot, for example, interpret the rich cultural resources available within womanist source materials and writings, without delving into the existential realities of black women in American society and abroad. Awareness and examination of these realities provides an appreciation for the unique ways in which black women have articulated and framed identities and voices, from a variety of theological, ethical, literary, and artistic perspectives. Likewise, I believe that theological discourses must speak and respond to the contemporary situations in which human beings find themselves. Theological reflection cannot be divorced from human culture, because it is toward the human condition that all theological and religious thought responds. It is also important to address the deep connection between the nature and function of symbols and Tillich’s theology. Tillich viewed all religious language and symbols, such as “God”, as a revelation or disclosure to the human mind: “Religious symbols do exactly the same thing as all symbols do—namely, they open up a level of reality, which otherwise is not opened at all, which is hidden.”\(^8\) The strength of the symbol is its ability to point to some other reality beyond itself.

The connection between Christian symbols and the human condition grounds Tillich’s theological methodology, which he frames as the method of correlation. The method of correlation emphasizes the critical importance of analyzing the existential significance of the human situation—noting that this situation provides the raw data to

which theology responds. Theological reflection is, therefore, wedded to the human condition in a creative, dialectical synthesis. The varied dimensions of human experiences prompt the emergence of existential questions—questions that press consideration of, among other issues, finitude, death, anxiety, suffering, and freedom—all of which are ideas that ground classical and contemporary religious and theological language.

Tillich’s emphasis on the intricacies of human existence and the various expressions and sentiments of human culture, create space for existentialist thought—which Tillich draws upon to explicate the nature of the human situation which theology addresses. This observation leads me to state summarily, the hallmark of Tillich’s interpretation of the nature of human existence: estrangement. Estrangement here is defined in terms of separation, disconnection, and the rupturing of self within community, and as such, provides a particularly useful way of reflecting further on the intersections between black men, theology, and relationality as explored within this project. However, before analyzing Tillich’s ontological interpretation of estrangement and its implications for African American men, it is necessary to comment upon the distinction between existence and essence in Tillich’s thinking, as this distinction provides the foundation for Tillich’s interpretation of estrangement.

Existence and Essence: Ontological Considerations

In the first volume of his Systematic Theology, Tillich referred to the distinction between essence and existence as “the backbone of the whole body of theological

---

Tillich’s clarification on the categories of existence and essence is properly a critique of humankind’s “is-ness” and “ought-ness”—that is, what the human creature is at her core, and what the human creature could be and aspire to. So once again, we come to prospect of human enlargement—a creative (re)imagining of the bounds of human personality, development, and self-understanding within community. For Tillich, human existence is material existence—the life-worlds of human communities in time and space. The human creature does not subsist sui generis, but exists within specific contexts, times, and places. In sum, human beings have “a world, a structured universe to which it belongs”.

When Tillich refers to existence, he is specifically attending to embodied, enfleshed human conditions and the web-like character of human life. Etymologically considered, existence is rooted in the Latin existere, which literally means to “stand out”. To exist, or rather, to speak of existence, is an affirmative declaration of the existing entities’ being. To exist, or to be, as Tillich notes, can be defined as finite material presence within the physical world. That which exists, has its being and existence because it stands out of the inverse of its being: non-being. Existence counters nothingness/non-being. While it is questionable whether human beings can ever really have an epistemological grasping of non-being or articulate this grasping of non-being, what Tillich seems to suggest specifically is that the threat of non-being looms over human consciousness.

---

11 Ibid., 204.
Non-being is the category that best encapsulates the foundation of Tillich’s “ultimate concern” thesis. For Tillich, humankind’s innermost desires, fears, and questions are weaved into concern over non-being. It is the universal human drive to respond to the prospect of non-being in myriad ways that provides the form and content of theology. Non-being is also a marker of finitude. Human beings exist, but are finite, thus indicating a dual reality in both being and non-being. Despite the human capacity for plural potentialities of being, ultimately, to exist means to stand out of one’s own non-being, or to stand out against the backdrop of several modes of being.

There may be temptation to view the “standing out” of existence in a combative light. According to Tillich, Plato associated the realm of material human existence with folly, distortion, and ultimately, evil, and located “true being” in the essential being, that is, within the realm of ideals and virtues.\(^\text{14}\) It is more appropriate, however, to frame existence in the Tillichian sense through notions of affirmation and self-actualization in response to the threat of non-being. On this point, I am particularly mindful of his assertions in *The Courage to Be* (1952), specifically that existential courage enables self-affirmation in spite of the looming threat and palpable rupturing of nonbeing. Tillich writes, “It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of nonbeing upon itself by affirming itself either as part of an embracing whole or in its individual selfhood.”\(^\text{15}\) Existence is thus representative of a state of being/non-being that humankind must live through. The conquering, or rather, the transcendence over/living through existence is the ground for what Tillich frames as essential humanity.

Whereas existence is the material manifestation of the human ontological predicament, human essence, or essential humanity, represents the ideal—the actualization and fulfillment of one’s potentialities toward heightened humanity. Essence is the “nature of a thing”, but essence is also the ideal from which human being and personality has become distorted. Tillich interprets human essential being through the biblical Fall as recorded in the book of Genesis, chapters 1-3. The fall of humanity, as will become more apparent, provides the theological and ontological segue into the explicit character of Tillich’s interpretation of estrangement as the central characteristic of human existence. For Tillich, the essential humanity within the Garden of Eden is a guiding description of “the transition from essential to existential being.” Tillich treats the Fall not as a fall from perfection to sinfulness, but “primarily as a fall from essence to existence”. The Fall, writes Tillich, is an ongoing, evolving tension between the ideal of essence and the reality of existence. Eden, symbolically, represents humankind’s essential state of being—the state of “dreaming innocence” that describes “ideal humanity which exists without knowledge of or anxiety from the perturbations normally associated with real (material) human existence.” In contrast to more classical interpretations of the biblical Fall that relied too heavily upon fatalistic notions of

---

20 On this point, I have in mind John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love*. There, Hick surveys classical responses from church fathers and theologians on the issue of theodicy/the problem of evil. One example of a fatalistic, original sin framing of the Fall that Hick examines is the predestination theology of reformed theologian John Calvin—Calvin noted in the *Institutes* that “Adam’s fall” perverted and distorted the whole order
original sin, Tillich’s “dreaming innocence” preserves the integrity of human freedom within Eden through an appeal to “non-actualized potentiality”. Whereas classical interpretations of the Eden narrative centralize original sin as the key motif and thus, the reason for the human existential predicament, Tillich speaks in terms of original innocence and the original freedom to actualize oneself into existence.

In Tillich’s estimation, there is no Pre-Fall state of perfection or sinlessness. Rather, the mythic Adam and Eve emerged in a state of dreaming innocence because, in their essential being, they did not and could not know, or rather, experience, any actual stage of human development. The Eden narrative provides, then, a theology of human development—calling to mind the various stages of childhood sexual and psychological maturation. Adam and Eve were for a time “unperturbed” by the dusty, convoluted features of actual existence, but remained within a realm of potential existence. Shielded from existence, if you will, their innocence is grounded in their “lack of actual experience, lack of personal responsibility, and lack of moral guilt”. Their essential state of being indicates mode of being prior to actuality, existence, and historical circumstance. Pre-Fall, there was therefore no real, tangible “existence”—only the potential for existence. “The symbol Adam before the Fall must be understood,” therefore, as “the dreaming innocence of undecided potentialities.”

Tillich’s word choice regarding the potentiality of human existence in the garden is telling. He notes that prior to the Fall, there was undecided potential for an actualized existence. The appeal to the notion of a deliberative, decision-making process prior to actual existence of nature in heaven and on earth”. See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1997), 119.

22 Ibid.
grounds Tillich’s situating of finite freedom of choice as the precursor to humanity’s transition from essential being to existence, and thus, also grounds the source of human estrangement.

*Finite Freedom as the Precursor to Estrangement*

For Tillich, human freedom as finite freedom, ultimately finds its source in God. Tillich’s symbol for the God concept is the typically expressed as the “Ground of all Being” or “Being-itself”. Tillich’s God concept is an admittedly difficult concept to describe, but briefly stated, God as “Being-itself” is best articulated as the “unconditioned”. To speak of God as unconditioned (B)eing-itself is essentially an affirmation of God as the generative force behind all free (b)eing—or the power of all being. God as Being-itself is unaltered, undiminished, and untarnished, and it is this highest modality of being that gives rise to all forms of being. Freedom, within this interpretation has two modes—divine freedom which we might call the Freedom above all freedom, and human freedom, which is finite, and therefore limited in its existential character.

We have stated above Tillich’s distinction between essence and existence—noting that humankind is presently situated within existence. As a distortion of essence, or essential humanity, *existence* is materialized—acted upon, through human deliberation and decision-making, an indication of limited modes of freedom. Following the Edenic fall, humanity no longer thrived in “dreaming innocence”. In graduating from this childlike spiritual infancy into mature, existential reality marked by finite freedom, the capacity for choice became an accompanying feature of existence. Existence, however, to recall, is a distortion of human essence—thereby negatively implicating the resulting
human capacity for choice. We may consider this distinction made part of the more Arminian character of Tillich’s notion of free will and theological anthropology. Here, Tillich articulates the problematic of human free will and the inevitability of the misuse of this free will.

Human freedom is finite freedom. For Tillich, finite freedom is restrictive freedom—that is, freedom confined by human destiny and purpose. Freedom and destiny limit one another in humankind’s material reality. There are several poles of human freedom according to Tillich: the freedom of language, of critical reasoning/questioning, moral deliberation, and creativity and ingenuity. The final pole of Tillich’s extrapolation of freedom is identified as the cause of human estrangement: “Finally, man [sic] is free, in so far as he has the power of contradicting himself and his essential nature.” Humankind can reject its essential, or rather, ideal, humanity. While finite in character, Tillich makes it a point to note the rootedness of human freedom within the infinite. For it is image of God within humankind that “gives the possibility of the Fall [from essence]”, and it is “only he [sic] who is the image of God [that] has the power of separating himself from God.” On this reading, humankind’s greatness and its ultimate downfall are linked; it is the human connection to the ground of Being represented by the God symbol that is the source of its essential significance, and it is this very same Being that gives rise to the possibility of freedom/essence misused, encouraging the emergence of estrangement.

24 Ibid., 31-32.
25 Ibid., 32.
26 Ibid., 33.
Up to this point, I have spent a significant amount of time reviewing the existential character of Tillich’s theology and doctrine of the human being. I now draw upon his concept of estrangement before I shift toward a more explicit analysis of the impact of estrangement on African American men. I use Tillich’s concept of estrangement as a way to discuss the alienation and isolation of self-displacement.

Not what we Ought to Be: Paul Tillich and Human Estrangement

In Tillich’s view, estrangement is the most apt descriptor of the human condition and behavior—it pervades every individual act of freedom.\(^{27}\) This provides a frame of reference for understanding how individual finite actions go on to have great impact on others. If estrangement is actualized in every action employed by finite beings, then the misuse of freedom—or rather, the rejection of the obligations of ethical freedom, then the anti-relational tendencies of perspectives that bolster hierarchical relationships come more vividly into focus. So for example, if we factor in societal constructs pertaining to race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status, the concept of estrangement takes on different levels of intensity and meaning, particularly for the communities for whom the interlocking of those factors produces a marginalized, or alienated existence. Across cultures—across contexts—across regions, the unfinished, ongoing story of human existence is characterized by the interplay between freedom and destiny. Humankind’s freedom, as noted, is the source of its eventual estrangement, and it is this element of human personality that tragically embodies the capacity for its estrangement.

Estrangement is not mere separation. Separation alone suggests material splintering. Estrangement, however, is an ontological description of the state of

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 38.
humankind and the source of its existential crises. Per Tillich, existence in toto is
estrangement; men and women are estranged from themselves internally, from others,
and from God.28 Estrangement is ontological displacement—the state of human beings in
their material existence is not what they essentially are and ought to be.29 There are three
branches of human estrangement, which are all wrapped up in humankind’s ultimate
estrangement from God, others, and from themselves: estrangement as “unbelief”;
estrangement as “hubris”; and estrangement as “concupiscence”. Unbelief relates to
humankind’s rejection of the ground of its being, God and instead, through its own
processes of actualization, seeks within itself all knowledge, power, and guidance.
Unbelief is the rupturing of humankind’s “cognitive participation in God” as the center of
human being.30 Unbelief is the rejection of God as the ground of human life and being.
As the “first mark” of estrangement, unbelief undermines and deracinates the roots of
human essential goodness and significance by establishing a qualitative dissonance
within the God/human dynamic—unbelief rejects acceptance of being as belonging to the
ground of Being.

Estrangement as hubris is essentially anthropological exaltation. Tillich defines
hubris as, literally, human self-centeredness through self-elevation. Humanity’s
capacities for reason, language, and creative reflection are the source of its greatness, and
therefore give human beings the experience of being the center of themselves and their
world.31 Such qualities are also the source of great temptation. As Tillich notes in
Morality and Beyond (1963), humankind has a world, but is not bound to it—that is, not

28 Ibid., 44. Theology of Culture, 210.
29 Ibid., 45.
30 Ibid., 47, 48.
31 Ibid., 49.
subject to it in a totalizing manner. Rather, human beings have a limited capacity of self and world “transcendence”—through imagination, the powers of reason, and ingenuity.\(^{32}\) Realizing the freedom to experience relative transcendence and mastery over the world (holding finite freedom and power), enables humanity to also realize its “potential infinity”, and it is in this event, the grasping of potential infinity within oneself, that may prompt one to push the bounds of their status and attempt to elevate himself or herself beyond the strictures of finite being.\(^{33}\) In this sense, hubris takes unbelief a step further, in that not only do persons turn away from the ground of their being, but furthermore, make of themselves the \textit{totality} of their own being. Hubris makes humankind the proxy for Being-itself—resulting in a dizzying juxtaposition between modest self-affirmation and arrogant self-elevation.\(^{34}\)

Finally, estrangement is also marked by what we may refer to as greed, which Tillich calls labels \textit{concupiscence}. Concupiscence is the desire to absorb the whole of reality into oneself. This is an admittedly broad category of analysis, but Tillich singles out a few examples, namely in terms of human desire for knowledge, sexual fulfillment, and power. Desire is not the guilty culprit—nor is it shameful. What makes desire an actor within the plotline of estrangement, however, is its role as “the unlimited character of the strivings for knowledge, sex, and power”. This is the feature that makes otherwise ordinary human quests for fulfillment symptoms of concupiscence.\(^{35}\) Concupiscence therefore has great capacity for cultivating a hierarchical society premised upon

\(^{33}\) Tillich, \textit{Theology of Culture}, 49, 50.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 53.
domination—both of persons and resources, though within this framing, “persons” and “resources” would function interchangeably, as both become a mere means to an end for someone else’s self-interests and aggrandizement. The distancing of self from other through the indiscriminate acquiring of resources, material or otherwise, therefore reifies the divide that Tillich describes as woven into human existence.

Each of the above categories of human estrangement rests upon a relational impetus. Each concerns itself with a particular interpretation of the God/human/communal paradigm, or rather, God/self/communal selves. Tillich also casts these features of estrangement as manifestations of “self-loss” and “world-loss”. Unbelief and hubris compel humankind to reject essential being, while concupiscence, or greed, creates fissures within the community of human selves, resulting in separation rather than cohesion. Self-loss is therefore the loss of the human center ontologically and relationally. This is the disintegration of the source of humanity’s ontological foundation and character, what Tillich describes as the process of “falling to pieces”.

The concept of self-loss is vital to my construction of reciprocal relationality because it is primarily the loss of relational self-identity that I’ve identified as part and parcel of black men’s embrace of pathological masculinities rooted in coercive, aggressive, and misogynistic approaches to relationships. Even borrowing Tillich’s phrasing regarding “falling to pieces” gives additional insight and context to what I wrestle with here. Self-loss is essentially compartmentalized living. No connection. No ties. No community. There are vague “pieces” of oneself, but there is no real meaningful whole without being anchored in a relational configuration of one’s identity. The

\footnote{Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, 61.}
“pieces” of self-lack coherent unification because the fragmented self exists, or rather subsists, within isolation and not unity. Without its foundation for being, human connection to a world is also threatened, because there is no longer any ontological basis for a connective apparatus. Here, there is no relationship to world—no connective strand within human self or existence; there is only human awareness of the empty shell of human self.

Human estrangement, therefore, is not a solely isolated phenomenon without consequence for other areas of human life, particularly the relational. Estrangement, as a characterization of the fragmented, broken human state of being in relation to self and community, fits within the overall thematic concern of this dissertation regarding reciprocal relationality within theological discourses. What I analyze at this point, however, are some of the causes, features, and consequences of estrangement within the lives of African American men and the impact this estrangement has on black male personality. In this part of the analysis, I draw upon, Tillich’s notion of estrangement as the manifestation of disruption within one’s self, or “self-loss”. What may contribute to African American men’s self-loss, or the perception of such loss? And more importantly, how might African American male selfhood be recalibrated in response? These questions guide the remaining half of this chapter.

**Sexism, Misogyny, and Black Male Self-Loss**

The notion of “self-loss” provides a way of articulating the anthropological displacement of human self within community and within the world generally. Tillich defined these features through the concept of estrangement and separation as the categorical given of human experience. Further, Tillich has been illuminating in
illustrating how estrangement can be both internal and external. Internally, estrangement is an ontological reality to the extent that human creatures can be divorced from their true identities—their true selves. However, estrangement is also a description of the ways in which people are distanced from one another—suggesting the breakdown of relationality and community. For all Tillich’s strengths in his interpretation of estrangement and human alienation in community and within themselves, he does not particularly attend to the cultural and social markers such as race, class, and gender that may indeed yield tremendous impacts upon one’s self-conception and identity. In this portion of the chapter, I bring some of these ideas into the conversation through an analysis of sexism and misogyny—specifically as a source of estrangement within the lives of African American men. It is my view that sexism and misogyny within African American masculine identity is cause for the kind of “self-loss” that blinds oneself to a more wholesome, humane essence: that of reciprocal self-hood.

Much time and analysis has been devoted to the topic of Black men’s and women’s alienation and displacement in the United States and abroad, particularly within African American literature, psychoanalytic theory, and sociological studies. When Richard Wright was in the process of writing *The Outsider* (1953) between 1951-1953, he was spending much time in Europe and was in conversation with key writers and philosophers of the day, including Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. However, he was also enduring numerous financial, personal, and family woes. Specifically, as Hazel Rowley notes, Wright interest in existentialism was in part bolstered by persistent feelings of dread stemming from his being undesirably tied down to aging and ill relatives and family—whom Wright ultimately blamed for his lack or
productivity and writing difficulties during this period. Margaret Walker echoes the strong existentialist influences on Wright, specifically citing Wright’s close reading of Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Dread* and its impact upon both *The Outsider* and its ability to mirror Wright’s own thinking at the time. Drawing on these experiences and his readings of existentialism, of which Walker notes that alienation and displacement are central theme, Wright began to grapple with the meaning and consequences of individual freedom—the struggle with which led him to create in the character Cross Damon, a “hero” who “was a man determined to be free—free of illusions, ideologies, and responsibilities”—further, Wright’s Damon is compelled to act—he is endowed “with the freedom to create an essence”—even if that essence is destructive.

Owing to its existentialist influences, *The Outsider* features the story of Damon, who struggles with the continuum of dread-inducing constraints that include alcoholism, an unfulfilling job, family woes, and a pregnant lover. Wright creates in Damon the tragic picture of a black man who is mystified by the absurdity of the human condition while also seeking to resolve the problem of restrictive freedom. It clearly established in each of Damon’s actions, particularly his committed murders, that he makes premeditated decisions and is not a victim of fatalism. The idea of chance and determinism is absent from Wright’s portrayal of human action and agency in *The Outsider*. Damon’s

---

39 Ibid., 234.
40 Rowley, 402.
42 Ibid., 164.
problematic decisions and pressure cooker lifestyle in response to the absurdities of his life ultimately compel him to assume a cascading identity subterfuge and violence that renders him “always already under surveillance [of] the white dominant culture acting as a virtual panopticon for any black male.”43 Damon’s efforts to reject “the spectacle the dominant culture creates for him” by formulating new identities, and thereby cope with the alienation and restricted freedom embedded within his existence as a black man, ultimately serve to be his fatal downfall.44 The portrayal of Cross Damon embodies the grittiness of black male life in the urban north, a consistent thematic in Wright’s literary canon, and still speaks to the desperate yearnings and pressured existences of black men grappling with the interplay of restriction and freedom who also find themselves on the outskirts of mainstream society with no recourse or anchoring, but yet still seek out a path upon which they can carve out a sense of meaning in what appears to be a meaningless existence.

Also important in grappling with the nature of black men’s feelings of isolation, despair, and displacement, is psychological theory. Within psychoanalysis (and colonial social theory), Frantz Fanon is particularly illuminating regarding the loss, or rupturing of self-identity in black people and other colonized subjects. Writing on the lived experience of black women and men in his Black Skin, White Masks (1952), Fanon observed that “Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed

its own.”45 Per Fanon, blacks were forced, via the processes of colonialism and imperialism, to refer to themselves and the whole of their being from a double-sided frame of reference—that is, from their own perspectives and that of the white elites in power. He writes, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”46 Revisiting the DuBoisian double-consciousness theory, Fanon describes here the dual “realities” faced by blacks in the Diaspora in regions where whites are the dominant social group. Black women and men, in Fanon’s reading, are painstakingly socialized in ways that bolster internalized white supremacy, ultimately fostering a self-hatred demarcated by obsessive accomodationism and assimilationism within white society. For it is “from within”, as Fanon writes, “that the Negro will seek admittance to the white sanctuary.”47 “Admittance” into the mainstream of white society takes place in myriad ways, notes Fanon, but what I want to emphasize on this point in Fanon’s reading is the cost of such admittance—a latent desire to be white. Internalized white supremacy—or even a preoccupation for embodying Euro-centric ideals and norms, yields negative consequences for black sense of self and identity.

Summarily, in Fanon’s view, blacks are ontologically locked into their blackness—they are determined by their black bodies; the black body seals black men and women into the construction of blackness that whites have cemented through centuries of colonialist-oriented white supremacy and Eurocentric norms. Fanon, therefore, undertakes a psychoanalytic interpretation of this matter to uncover the basis for black men and women’s feelings of inferiority and other neuroses related to the

46 Ibid., 110.
47 Ibid., 51.
failure to attain whiteness. The perils of the perpetual struggle for assimilation and accommodation toward white society, for black men, says Fanon, results in the precarious situation of anxious wrestling with the “shaky position” of otherness.

Speaking of a fictional character from a novel, Jean Veneuse, Fanon notes that Veneuse represents a “neurotic” casualty of colonialist black-white relations that can enable our understanding of the psychological foundation of much of the alienation and self-displacement that blacks often face as “others” within a white and racist society that ostracizes them.48 The work of Fanon, therefore, illustrates the alienating factors, dispositions, and internal anxieties that impact the lives of black people in ways that go on to be detrimental individually and in ways that cause fissures in relationships among others.

It is also the case that systemic factors can inhibit black men’s quality of life and relational healthiness. Mabry and Kiecolt’s study (2005) on the interplay of race, anger, and alienation showed a correlation between feelings of loss of control over one’s life and destiny as a root cause behind “chronic rates” of African American expressions of anger.49 Mabry and Kiecolt note that significant aspects of alienation that influence rates of anger are sense of control and mistrust of others. As the phrasings suggest, sense of control refers to one’s perception that he or she can achieve their desired ends, and mistrust refers to ideas that others are unsupportive or act in self-interest alone. Such feelings of alienation that feed into the higher rates of anger in African American women and men, are premised upon a variety of social factors, including economic disadvantages

48 Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, 79.
and personal feelings of discrimination. Furthermore, these particular factors, a loss of a sense of control and mistrust had adverse effects on the physical *expressions* of anger and mistrust, which ranged from verbal manifestations (i.e. yelling, swearing) and perpetually negative and fatalistic assessments of life.\(^{50}\)

In noting the range of the responses of anger in blacks, the authors note that because of the severity of the factors that give to anger (i.e. higher poverty and discrimination), such encounters and interactions with these features regularly may leave one with a “short fuse” that ultimately results in misguided anger and rage that impacts negatively family and loved ones.\(^{51}\) While this study is not exhaustive, it is helpful in providing a description of the systemic forces that may negatively impact not only African American men, but also yield more negative consequences in that the unhealthy expressions of anger can dismantle relationships with others. This does not condone expressions of anger and rage from black women and men, but it does provide context for the matrix of anger, violence, and aggression that adversely affects the cohesion and harmony within relationships.

These above resources provide a brief sketch of some of the varied societal and psychological causes that contribute to African American men’s feelings of alienation and displacement. The common denominator that often underscores these analytical frameworks is the pervasiveness of white supremacy and culture, and its impact upon the life options of black men and women. While not trivializing these stark realities and acknowledging them as legitimate shapers of African American experiences, it would be a mistake to assume that the *racialist gaze* and its institutional manifestations alone are

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 89-90.

\(^{51}\) Mabry and Kiecolt, “Anger in Black and White,” 86.
particularly responsible for producing the feelings of alienation and self-loss invoked above within the minds and spirits of black men. It is not solely that black men, as Fanon reminds us, are “overdetermined from the outside” by whites or white power structures. This is true. However, an additional piece of this analysis that I single out revolves around the question of those harmful elements of black male identity that likewise produce alienation and estrangement through the loss of a core identity that is more human(e) and relational. As I endeavor to illustrate, sexist and misogynistic ways of relating to women can be interpreted as significant elements of black male estrangement and alienation—fostering not life and freedom, but rather, death and communal breakdown, and thus, a rejection of the reciprocal thematic with which this project operates.

Sexism and misogyny are manifestations of death within self and community. What is sometimes not addressed, however, is how black male selfhood suffers as a result of this deadly sexist and misogynistic identity formation and self-conception. Sexism and misogyny promote broken ways of relating to and with women, and result in the formation of an isolated, self-contained identity that is not receptive to others, nor is concerned with the others’ flourishing and well-being. There is no possibility for reciprocity with sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy, because there is always assumption of superiority and normative humanity and agency over another. Within this framing, self-formation rooted in misogyny and sexism neither creates ties nor builds networks with others. The possibility for reciprocal relationality becomes virtually impossible because one refuses to participate in the enhancement and fullness of others.52

52 Hopkins, Being Human, 87.
In my view, sexist and misogynistic identities within black men promote estrangement and alienation from others. They are polemical opposites to any relational framework, not just the framing articulated within this dissertation. The source of one’s strength is not their isolation—their “set apartness” from others; rather, it is the presence of the other that generates and sustains one’s very own being. In sum, one finds and has a self through relationship with others. Thomas Parham refers to this aspect of self-knowledge and self-formation as the principle of harmony—accessing the communal, mutualized body of selves “for one’s source of sustenance and support”. Healthy self-formation is therefore always tied to the community within which one grows and develops. Connection to others, and a commitment to the other’s well-being as a constitutive aspect of one’s identity is the rule and not the exception, because all human creatures thrive when they are able to see their humanity embodied in others. From this perspective, the relational and reciprocal self represents the core of human identity.

Dwight Hopkins echoes many of these assertions in Being Human.

In Hopkins’ reading of the values of self in African communities, he highlights the principle of harmony and balance as a central goal within concepts of reciprocity in community. Hopkins writes that if “we see ourselves in the very being of others in community, in extended family, and in those at a distance, then levels of harmful friction and damaging anger can decrease.” The values of reciprocal interpretations of oneself within community, yield potential to revise and restructure broken relationships and strained human ties. More importantly, however, a turn to the values of reciprocal

54 Hopkins, Being Human, 88.
relationality as an ideal to put into practice, can be a critical resource in the generation of values that contribute to the mitigation of not only interpersonal conflicts related to sexism and misogyny in men, but can likely be extended and contribute to civil peace and less tension between various territories and countries.\footnote{Ibid.}

Above, I briefly invoked the language of “harmony” to discuss the how African concepts of self are imagined. Harmony suggests a “coming together”—a reunion of sorts, of entities that were once separated. More needs to be said, however, regarding the heightened humanity that is cultivated through overcoming estrangement and separation through the embrace of the values of reciprocity. We can never escape our humanity. We are finite. We are enfleshed. Given these anthropological certainties, our best hope of thriving and reaching the fullness of our potential both individually and collectively, is to find better ways of relating to, and living with one another in our mutual enfleshment. There is, I believe, “self-healing”\footnote{Parham, et al., 96.} potential embedded within the envisioned values of reciprocal relationality in that those ideals provide one with the wherewithal of potentially reimagining their humanity in more wholesome and affirmative ways. The relational and reciprocal self restores a sense of balance within human selves by affirming within humans beings that which is best and most powerful within them: the connection to other selves.

One becomes estranged, within this framing, “when a person acts in opposition to one’s nature”—when “he or she loses his or her self-essence, as well as balance.”\footnote{Ibid., et al., 96.} I would also submit that key in the quest to address, challenge, and correct black male
misogyny and sexism is an identity congruence that privileges reciprocal orientations that I’ve examined and explored within womanist religious thought. Achieving a sense of reciprocal congruence within black male identity enables, hopefully, black men to resolve the disconnect engendered by misogynistic and sexist identities, and embrace a more organic, relational identity, that values the humanity of others in ways that accept and appreciate, in lieu of coerce and dominate. Reciprocal relationality is a call to embrace the identity of a new being. It is, however, just a call—an opportunity—a possible expression of human personality and self-conception. The onus is upon black men—all men, to either reject or accept the obligations embedded within this possibility. In this next and final portion of this chapter, however, I focus more on the acceptance of reciprocal relationality as critical to a heightened sense of one’s identity and humanity within community—a process I frame as self-(re)covery.

**Self-(Re)covery: Accepting the Acceptance of Reciprocal Relationality**

In “The New Being,” Paul Tillich discusses what he considers the center of the Christian faith, and weaves this into a response for humanity’s existential situation. What is critical in the Christian message is Christ’s capacity for living into “New Being”—his acceptance and fulfillment of a new reality in human history. Jesus was “the Christ” because he inaugurated and fulfilled a new state of things in human life. Tillich’s Christology is therefore not “high” Christology in the strictest sense (i.e. regarding the status of Christ’s humanity and divinity), but rather, is symbolic and applied to the human realm of existence—namely the nature and direction of human relationships within community. Critical for Tillich’s Christological interpretation is the transitioning—the

renewal of human existence toward a heightened sense of humanity rooted in reconciliation, reunion, and resurrection.\textsuperscript{59} What I illustrate in this portion of the chapter, is the usefulness of Tillich’s concept of New Being as a descriptive vision of the (re)covered black male self.

I began this chapter invoking the concept of renewal as critical in black male identity formation. Tillich, likewise, makes use of notions of renewal to discuss his conception of New Being. New Being encapsulates new relationality—including reconciliation, reunion, and resurrection, and thus represents a new conception of humanity and human relationships. Tillich is quite clear regarding the importance of reconciliation as it pertains to the embodiment of New Being:

Being reconciled—that is the first mark of the New Reality. And being reunited is its second mark. Reconciliation makes reunion possible. The New Creation is the reality in which the separated is reunited. The New Being is manifest in Christ because in Him the separation never overcame the unity between Him and God, \textit{between Him and mankind} [italics], between Him and Himself…In Him we look at a human life that maintained the union in spite of everything that drove Him into separation.\textsuperscript{60}

In Tillich’s view, Jesus is New Being because of the undisrupted unity he maintained relationally—in this case, the relationship(s) between Himself and God, humankind, and within Himself via uncontested divine and human natures. New Being reconciles itself to others and to community. For our purposes, New Being becomes a way of articulating the restoration and renewal of a more wholesome, relational, and connected identity. It is also important here to clarify the terms of human existence and the impact on New Being. New Being cannot be grasped beyond or separate from the relational condition of human existence.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 22.
existence—namely, the state of estrangement. To conceive of New Being as a separate state in contrast to human existence invalidates its significance because New Being is the fulfillment of human potential and promise over against estrangement. Tillich articulates New Being as a new conception—a new eon of human reality and consciousness within a communal context. Jesus embodies this ideal through his full participation within the bounds of human estrangement, even to the point of anxiety and death,\(^6\) and still maintained a relational identity rooted in absolute, unmolested unity with God and humankind. Jesus lives into New Being within the context of community, thereby overcoming and bridging the gaps between what humankind should be in contrast to what it is.

What I take away from Tillich’s read of New Being and its application for this chapter, is an answer for how we can articulate the renewal of black male identity/masculinity within a relational framework. As Tillich’s New Being is posited as the renewal of human essence over existence, I suggest that it is reciprocal selfhood that black men can renew, restore, and (re)cover within our own existential condition(s). The embrace and acceptance of reciprocal selfhood within the larger community and within human relationships is an act of (re)covery—the process of accepting the acceptance of one’s true self-in-community. Self-(Re)covery is an ongoing process of commitment to renew reciprocal relationality within the context of community. It is the always but coming act of returning and embracing relational identity. The renewal of relational identity provides black men the chance to embrace that part of ourselves—of our

---

\(^6\) On this point regarding Christ’s “participation” in existence under the conditions of estrangement, Tillich cites the New Testament’s description of Jesus’ agony regarding his impending crucifixion as the complete extent of his participation in human finitude. See, *Systematic, Vol. 2*, 125.
identities—that has been lost, distorted, or rejected due to an acceptance of sexism and misogyny—both of which are responsible for much of our estrangement from ourselves and others. Accepting and embracing a reciprocal identity is both the acceptance of grace for oneself and the acceptance of renewed identity. Grace is embedded in acceptance because accepting renewed identity requires a willingness acknowledge one’s value as a human being, and thus, that in spite of the flawed character of one’s humanity, he or she is not beyond redemption. It is self-affirmation “in spite of”.

For Black men, accepting reciprocal relationality is an openness to continual renewal of self through self-(re)covery, but is also an openness to the reception of the other. Openness as a means of continual renewal is the receptivity to the prospect of change and growth premised upon engaging others. Roger Sneed reminds us that any ethic of openness by necessity must feature the recognition of others. I would also add, however, that the openness and recognition is mutually constituted—that is, the other also recognizes us. The mutuality at the heart of this process prioritizes the presence and well-being of the other. Second, mutual recognition also illustrates that the other has a distinctive identity and agency and is not subordinate to any gaze or projecting by the self. I highlight this point also as a way to clarify the “accepting acceptance” of reciprocal relationality. In approaching others earnestly in mutuality and reciprocity, one opens, but not subordinates oneself, to the reception and gaze of the other.

Reciprocal relationality, therefore, accepts the vulnerability of possible acceptance or non-acceptance within the process of relating. Indeed, the vulnerability of these possibilities coincides with the lack of certainty within the relational encounter. In

---

chapter four, I spoke of this element of acceptance and non-acceptance within relating in terms of risk. Not to belabor this point, it is important to maintain a realistic appraisal of the deeply messy character of human communication and relating within the context of community. Genuine, earnest acceptance of the other does not always ensure that our efforts are reciprocated. However, our incentive must not falter; the other’s well-being is the priority. We accept and engage the other for the other’s sake. Self-(re)covery is an ongoing restoration of black male identity and masculinity through an openness to the acceptance of others. We’ve spent much time above clarifying, notably in our analysis of Paul Tillich, the distinction between human essence and human existence. Essence represents what human creatures “ought to be” and existence describes what humanity is. What I’m pressing for consideration is reciprocal relationality as the ground of human essential being—this relational identity represents the best of ourselves, and what we can aspire to be within the context of community.

In (re)covering this dimension of our personalities and identities as black men, what we are in effect demonstrating is our willingness to reconsider and revise our sense of self in relation to others. We are (re)covering that part of ourselves that creates wholeness, cohesion, and harmony as we live with each other. We (re)cover that part of ourselves that rejects any mode of dehumanization or that lessens and distorts the humanity of others—especially women. We may even say that self-(re)covery is the highest ideal of self-affirmation. Tillich refers to self-affirmation as the achievement of victory over the threat of nonbeing that is always already embedded within human existence. More than mere self “pep-talk”, self-affirmation reclaims that element of
essential being that transcends human finitude. Affirmation presses for the realization of a heightened sense of human purpose, destiny, and relationship.

Patriarchy, manifest through sexism and misogyny, are threats to black male being and identity because both ideologies, insofar as they thrive on dehumanization of women, simultaneously distort and pervert the essential being at the heart of black male identity within communal spaces. The vestiges of patriarchy are about the business of communal genocide because the well-being and full potential of others, namely women, becomes an afterthought—less than an afterthought, if a consideration at all. Self-affirmation through self-(re)covery then becomes a way of articulating and living into relational identity within the context of community. The process of (re)covering essential selfhood therefore enables black men to become more sensitive to who we are essentially (relational), to challenge where we are and what we do in our present ways of relating, and hopefully, begin the painful ebb and flow of reflection and discernment on learning to accept and embody reciprocal selfhood.

*No Finality: “Salvation” and Always (Re)Covering (Re)Covery*

It is perhaps odd that I should begin this final section of the chapter discussing the lack of finality in the process of (re)covery. Finality becomes, nonetheless, a critical part of any discussion on black masculinity, black male identity formation, and womanist critique. By this, I refer to the “so what?” question. What is the end result of this admittedly long and extensive self-reflexive process of reciprocal self-(re)covery? In a word, there is no end. There is no result. And more importantly, any expectation of such should be held with great suspicion. “Finality” suggests a finished state of things. The term implies that a respective entity has reached its full potential and has, in fact,
evolved—that it is above any possibility of change or alteration. For our purposes, it is therefore undesirable that black men, or any man, should desire finality in the pursuit of a greater sense of relational identity. Not only is this finality undesirable; it’s impossible. It is impossible, because we never fully, completely, or totally rid ourselves of the shackles of patriarchal identities. At best, we can mitigate the harmfulness, but it is unrealistic and somewhat utopian to presume outright transformation in a totalizing sense.

I’ve noted before an appreciation for Garth Baker-Fletcher’s reminder that men are always already “recovering sexists”. We never “get it right”. We will always struggle with sexism. Such an assertion may seem grim, but I prefer to use it as incentive in how I’ve framed (re)covery of the reciprocal self in black men. In this sense, Baker-Fletcher’s words here prompt an awareness of the need for self-critique as always (re)covering (re)covery. By this I mean that the process of freeing oneself from the throes of patriarchy is life-long, replete with ebbs and flows, setbacks and disappointments, and “backsliding”. This reality of ongoing failure in realizing this relational and personal ideal, thus requires an ongoing commitment to deconstruction and reconstruction of distorted notions of masculinity and maleness through sustained engagement with the experiences and insights of women. In always (re)covering (re)covery, we acknowledge that we’ve not fully embraced a true sense of self-within-community and we never will. We recognize that we are not what we should be. And in spite of the non-finality of this process—in spite of the lack of full embodiment of a reciprocal identity, we nonetheless press on with hope within the process of (re)covery.
In our commitment to (re)covering (re)covery, we also hold ourselves accountable for our efforts to continue our reflexive work—that we are open to new insights—new lessons, wherever they may emerge. If we accept that there is no finality in the process of (re)covery, we must also accept that we will never really “get it right” as it relates to sexism, misogyny, and other social ills that hamper our communities and relationships. By embracing the always but coming, perpetually transitional process of (re)covering (re)covery, we accept the obligations we have regarding the need to continually keep ourselves “in check”, because we realize we will always have a shortsighted, truncated grasping of what it takes to realize the fullness of the relational identity we aspire to embody. Perhaps another way of articulating this assertion is that the goal of (re)covering (re)covery of reciprocal selfhood is the process of (re)covery itself. Joy and self-affirmation is found within the self-reflection and discernment of the process itself; final expectations and/or end results are non-issues.

As I bring this final chapter to a close, I describe the soteriological dimensions of what Tillich discussed as critical to the acceptance of New Being and how that illuminates further what we’ve discussed regarding black male self-(re)covery. New Being, as the fulfillment of a new human reality as revealed in the person of Christ, is not simply a transhistorical phenomenon that grasps human beings. There is, rather, a participatory impetus within the concept of New Being that makes humankind directly responsible for the realization of its essential humanity. Theologically, in Tillich’s view, Christ may provide the means through his absolute unity with the ground of being—of accepting New Being, but the acceptance itself—the embodiment of the relational
principle, individually and communally, is the lot of humankind. Humankind participates in the relationality of New Being in order to find its essential humanity.

Tillich writes that the significance of New Being is “expressed in the symbols of subjection to existence and of victory over existence, [and] can also be expressed in the term ‘salvation’”. And ultimately, Tillich continues, the question of human salvation as it relates to New Being, is the question of what it means “to be or not to be.” Salvation, here, as it pertains to the character of humanity and being, functions not as a matter of divine judgment, condemnation, or even atonement. Salvation is perhaps better understood as an act and process of healing—that is, the healing of human selfhood—improving and heightening what it means to be human, by reuniting that which is estranged. For our purposes, we may say that there is healing in black male self-(re)covery in that reciprocal relationality, which I’ve positioned as a reasonable articulation of the essence of human identity, is restored and promotes health and healing within the gaps of broken relationships.

Fulfillment in self-(re)covery is found not in the end result of the process, but rather in the salvific participation and practices of “healing” essential humanity and relational identity within the context of community. The participatory element of self-(re)covery that I have articulated is premised upon the idea that recognition of the self means that there are connective strands and ties to others beyond oneself. M. Shawn Copeland, who we examined in the first chapter, spoke of “eucharistic solidarity” as an embodied sharing of space and place in ways that press for healing and reconciliation within broken communities and between individuals. In describing this model, Copeland

---

65 Ibid., 166.
invokes a participatory impetus, in that the communal practices of solidarity entail an intentional and focused willingness to embrace mutual openness and obligations to and from others. That is, those who are serious about the communal and internal work needed to practice healing and reconciliation within their relationships must also take seriously the need for full participation and commitment. The participatory ethic on this point cannot be overstated. I would submit that my articulation of the practices that comprise ongoing black male self-(re)covery, entail a proactive drive that works to address the estrangement and disuniting elements within black male identity formation and its impact on relationships.

Black male self-(re)covery cannot function without black men’s express participation and commitment, however, it is important to also avoid the kind of rigid and totalizing praxis that creates a fanatical utopian vision of participatory black male self-(re)covery that ostracizes those who may deviate, or, in some cases, reject outright the nature of the conversation outright. By this, I simply mean that the values of reciprocity, relationality, and self-(re)covery comprise a vision of a heightened sense of the dynamic between self-formation and self-identity and community that black theologies may consider. As noted before, black men may or not see value in this level of discourse, but that fact does not deny the role or opportunity that other scholars like myself have to at least offer the invitation; it also does not detract from the reality that there are harmful expressions of black masculinity and identity that need to be addressed and critiqued by other committed men. The process of conversation and critique endemic here in self-(re)covery, cannot involve force, coercion, or manipulation. To resort to those

---

mechanisms to address dissent and difference of perspective, ultimately collapses back into the very practices we are trying to escape, and becomes a totalitarian venture that again contributes to the rupturing of relationship and community.

For the black man, my reflections here are meant to simply offer an invitation: to participate in the possibility of preserving the integrity of our relationships through an acceptance of the responsibility of ongoing self-(re)covery. Further, this invitation also remains grounded in the recognition of the value and integrity and wholeness of relation to others. We find our(selves) within relation, and we begin the process of healing by reuniting and reconciling ourselves to others. While my framing of (re)covery obviously places primary responsibility on the shoulders of black men and black male theologians, it still indicates a concern for others, as self-(re)covery has the potential to impact women and our larger community. Self-(re)covery, in the final analysis, serves a relational function in that it is a means by which the healing of self and self-in-relationship within community becomes a possibility.

**Conclusion**

The reclamation of reciprocal selfhood—regenerating a new reality from an old reality, is about, as the start of this chapter noted, a renewal. In discussing black male self-(re)covery or black male (re)covering (re)covery, I speak a vision of renewal. It is not only a renewal of black male reciprocal selfhood, but a renewal of how we approach relationships within the context of community. A critical part of living and thriving within a community of others is recognizing the humanity of the other. For men, it is crucial that we see the unmistakable, unalterable humanity of women. The humanity of women stands on its own and is not subject to our gaze or control. Reciprocal
relationality, as I’ve suggested, is a means of embracing a new understanding of black masculinity and identity that mitigates and helps to correct the damage done by our acceptance of patriarchal modes of relating and being. Reciprocal relationality also, however, provides a means of relating to others in a way that preserves black male integrity and self. A reciprocal view of black male selfhood may compel us to realize that “the other one—the ‘thou’, is like a wall which cannot be removed or penetrated or used,” and to misuse others in this way, is ultimately an exercise in self-destruction, because we refuse to see in others the very same essential humanity within ourselves.\textsuperscript{67}

This dissertation represents the foundation that will initiate a larger set of questions and concerns about the turn to relationality within black theological discourse. Reciprocal relationality is but one means of realizing a new sense of human identity within the context of community. In my efforts to contour this ideal of relationality, I have made use of a variety of disciplines and perspectives, particularly womanist religious thought and literature. It is my hope that my meager contribution highlights the values of reciprocity and interrelated notions of selfhood, and possibly, that it may speak a word of affirmation to black men who struggle to live in ways that promote wholeness and healing. I would hope that my construction of reciprocal relationality not only inspires and uplifts black men and creates avenues of dialogue within black religious studies, but that communities beyond my own see the value of rethinking notions self and identity in light of the profound insights of womanist thought. Obviously, my framing of relationality, community, and self-formation as critical categories of black theological discourse is by no means exhaustive. However, I look forward to future conversations

\textsuperscript{67} Tillich, \textit{Love, Power, and Justice}, 78.
and collaborations that grow out of scholarly responses to this work and are centered on its major themes. If any of these possibilities come to fruition, I consider my reflections in this dissertation to have hit their mark.
CONCLUSION

When I began my doctoral studies, I wanted to write a dissertation that addressed sexism as a theological problem from my specific location as a black male. While not exhaustive, and while there are sure to be blind spots and shortcomings, I believe this dissertation can be read as a corrective to the patriarchal underpinnings that too frequently contour personal relationships, identity formation, and social practices in religious communities and beyond. In this dissertation, I sought to comment upon what it would mean to think of a new configuration of relationships generally, and the relational identities of black men from the vantage point of black religious thought and theological discourses, particularly womanist religious thought.

The first chapter charts the course of womanism, from Alice Walker to the present pioneers and leading representatives within the fields of womanist religious scholarship—gradually highlighting what I believe to be the most critical component of womanist relationality: the communitarian impulse as framed by Alice Walker. In short, there is an interrelated mutualism in womanist relational orientations—a symbiotic and organic conception of self in relation to others. I then placed this theoretical framing, as illustrated in M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom*, in conversation with Martin Buber’s conception of ethics as an exercise in reciprocal exchange and engagement. One possible shortcoming of this particular interpretive venture, one that I remain aware of and will continue to struggle with, is the degree to which Buber’s relationality informs my overall conception. While I believe I was clear early on in featuring Buber as more of a supplementary addition to my framing of reciprocal relationality, I remain anxious about how to ensure that the womanist dimension of my framing is most pronounced. In
other words, I do not want this element of the overall project to be read as a centerpiece of Buberian thought with womanist writings only offering “decoration”. Future work on this matter might seek the resolution of unresolved questions about how womanist notions of embodiment and specifically, as we see in Copeland, embodied presence, offer a useful alternative in response to the disembodied quality of Buber’s thought.

Just as important to this dissertation, was, as Katie Cannon illustrates, the centrality of black female literary sources, or what I cited as womanist literature—that is, literature deemed by womanist scholars to be particularly prescient in presenting the interior worlds and lives of “everyday” black women and their experiences within society and communal structures. I selected Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston because their work allowed me an opportunity to examine the relational proclivities of black men in communal spaces among black women—obviously in the form of my extensive analysis of Mr./Albert and Tea Cake, respectively, in the second and third chapters. This proved to be the most difficult element of the dissertation process—as the literary analyses available for both figures did not align with the perspective on both that I sought to defend. I argued that both figures provide a useful way to think through, and meditate on the formation of a relational identity in black men.

The particular difficulty of analyzing both figures was maintaining a creative tension regarding the instructive capacities of Albert and Tea Cake’s pathology and promise. By this, I wanted to make sure that a full account was given of the ways in which both men, in both the negative and the positive dimensions of their personalities, could demonstrate what is to be valued and embodied relationally, and likewise, what is to be eschewed and dismantled. Further, a realistic appraisal of both—taking into
account the full range of their affectations and contradictions, in some ways reflects the ebbs and flows—the good and bad—the failures and triumphs of all men who struggle to live more wholesome existences in the context of communal spaces.

An area for improvement involves the consideration of contemporary figures. That is, Albert and Tea Cake, as literary figurations from older texts that were written in vastly different contexts, are dated. An ongoing question for my consideration is where might, should I continue this work of constructing tropes for the revisioning of relational black masculinities, I seek more contemporary resources? Mark Anthony Neal’s *Searching for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013), which looks at television and film explorations of black masculinity, offers promising insights into the possibilities for looking at black popular culture. However, I never want to lose sight of the centrality of womanist resources and source materials in my theological work, so it is critical to be as keen on seeking more collaboration with writers that womanists have identified as paramount. In this regard, two newer novels from Toni Morrison, *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2014), features a host of black male characters that are interesting interpretive possibilities. While the prospect of finding additional sources for insight in black masculinity is varied and ongoing, within this dissertation, I believe my work with Albert and Tea Cake provides a good foundation.

The second and final half of this dissertation is perhaps the more explicitly theological—serving as an initial apparatus for what may resemble “black male relational theology”. This portion of the dissertation necessitated the identification and interrogation of the scholarship of black male theologians who are potential conversation partners, which I accomplished in chapter four. They were selected on the basis of their
engagement of womanist scholarship, and further, for their clarity on the various ways in which womanism impacts their theological perspectives on relationality. Along the line of their varied responses to the issues of male identity, relationality, and womanist religious thought, this dissertation sought to break down the most essential components of their thoughts—offering an addendum when appropriate while also clarifying my own position as a theologian. This was, and remains, important because as much as this dissertation emphasizes open, free collaboration and dialogue with womanism and womanists, it is just as important to create spaces for discursive reflection and conversation with other male scholars devoted to examining the ramifications of theological reflection directed toward addressing sexism, misogyny, patriarchal relationality, and identity formation in black male communities. My engagement with the progressive scholarship of the black theologians reviewed is a small representation of the kinds of soul-searching, critique, reflection, and dialogue that needs to happen among other men.

Dialogue, to be sure, is a critical piece of the reciprocal thematic driving the methodological standard of black male relational theology. As chapter five illustrates, conversation takes on theological significance within the trajectory of this dissertation because of the emphasis placed upon the integrity of the other as central within the exchange. It is not the act in itself of approaching the other that is important. It is, rather, that the other is acknowledged and embraced in her own specific alterity and integrity. In conversation and dialogue, which David Tracy helps us realize, we come to terms with place, integrity, and value of the other “above our own chatter”. And it is through such
an exchange that the world of the other is made available to us, and possibly, it is the
world of the other that may serve to change and transform our perspectives.

A reflective experiment on the ongoing process of embracing reciprocal
relationality, the final chapter examines the possibility of black male self-(re)covery.
Notable about this chapter is the extensive use of Paul Tillich’s concept of New Being,
which helps elucidate the process of overcoming the varied sources of personal and
communal estrangement that result in “self-loss” or what I referred to as the rupturing of
a relational disposition within one’s identity and sense of self in relation to others.
Drawing upon literature, history, and social science, I articulated some of the sources of
black men’s feelings of alienation and discussed the importance of acceptance and
embrace of a renewed sense of identity that values self and others, which I framed as self-
(re)covery. Most important of this concept, and which ends the chapter, is the notion of
non-finality. That is, there is no end result in which black men, or any man, ever reaches
a point in which he cannot learn, restructure, and renew himself and his capacity to
embody more wholesome and healthy ways of living and being and loving. Non-finality
is an indispensable outlook—because if there is no room for growth—no room for
evolution—no space for the prospect of what Victor Anderson refers to as “human
enlargement”, we may very well collapse into lethargies that inhibit our capacity to be
freer, to be more open, and to be more connected with others.

In the prologue to *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*,
Rudolph P. Byrd provides a twist on Alice Walker’s four-part definition of womanism, in
which he cites certain values and descriptions of a new mode of black masculinity in the
“tradition of John”.¹ Among these, Byrd cites, are the values of redemptive masculinity that empowers black men to reject any and all acts of dehumanization of their communities, self-reliance and strength, self/communal love. Of Byrd’s definition, I particularly hone in on the idea that black men in the tradition of John “value dialogue, listening, and harmony”, and are “committed to the abolition of emasculating forms of masculinity…the abolition of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ideological traps.”²

There is, as Byrd indicates within his framing of black masculinity, both a dialogical impetus that involves the other and a concern with addressing all features of human activity and experience that are dehumanizing. This expressed mode of being—this mode of human personality and relationality as key to one’s own identity, which places emphasis on the well-being of the other, is the foundation reciprocal relationality. Admittedly, such a calling to a renewed identity is not an easy one to accept, but we must try. Moving beyond our comfortable and solidified self-conceptions that we have grown accustomed to, is painful, disorienting, and uncomfortable, but no worthwhile venture is achieved without time, toil, and sacrifice. Writing this dissertation is evidence of this observation. Still, we are compelled to maintain an earnest hope in the possible possibilities of this relational sense of self.

In his homily on the greatness of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard noted that Abraham’s faith was magisterial because he “believed the preposterous.”³ Perhaps my insistence on the merits and strengths of reciprocal

---

¹ Specifically, the mythic High John the Conquerer.
relationality may strike some as preposterous. Perhaps it is idealistic. It is never an easy feat to convince people to restructure and reframe how they have come to know themselves; we are nothing if not creatures of habit. Nevertheless, I press on believing in the strengths of the renewed sense of self as a way of healing and strengthening the ties of human community. For black men and theological scholars, to whom I address most of my thoughts, I can only offer this preposterous invitation to self and communal renewal and (re)covery. In so doing, I offer no definite answers or promises of final outcomes. But in this calling—in this invitation to participate in a vision of renewal, perhaps we may recover something of value within ourselves that can help reestablish the communal and personal ties that pathological masculinity and anti-relational ways of living have worked to break.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ferguson, SallyAnn. “Folkloric Men and Female Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.”


Griffin, Horace L. *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in...*


Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.