

REMEMBERING INTO BEING: ECOWOMANISM, WOMANIST THEOLOGY, AND MEMORYⁱ

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Abstract: *The paper investigates the ecowomanist memory work based on context, integration, and relationality evoking a strategy of bonding through remembering. Reconstructing knowledge establishes an interstructure, which enables ecowomanists to remember themselves into being while deploying the mnemonic text as countermemory. The overriding of the fragmentation of the memory text is aided by the restorative activity in/through nature that contributes to a sense of completeness.*

Key words: *African American ecomemory, cultural memory and trauma, ecowomanism, womanist theology*

1. Introduction

For ecowomanists, nature as a place of memory is intertwined with religious significance that substantiates both individual and communal identities through relationality to other members and nature. Embeddedness in nature offers the means to reconstruct memory through econarratives. To remember is imperative, as Alice Walker contends, “we help the ancestors in ourselves and others continue to exist. If we kill off the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, that is history, that is human being is lost, and we become historically and spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who we were, on the earth” (1988:61); and to remember in/through nature provides a context, where the integration of (eco)memories into a cohesive collective stream secures the anchorage of memory.

The paper examines how (eco)womanist thinkers and womanist theologians construct a method to weave memory traces into a plait and how it is deployed as countermemory.

2. Ecowomanism, spirituality, and the mnemonic text

The ecowomanist method to remember starts “with investigating one’s family story and connection with the earth” (Harris 2017:7). Answers to Townes, Cannon, and Culp’s womanist questionnaire undergird Harris’s view:

The origins of my womanist voice are from my great-grandmother, grandmothers, mother and aunts and the kitchen-table conversations I heard and participated in from the time I was four or five years old. That is as far back as I can remember really *understanding* the stories and values they passed on to me. I inherited my voice from them and the richness of their conversations.

The origins of my womanist voice are from my reflections on my life as a black woman, a daughter, a sister and a spiritual sojourner. The origins seem to arise from the flowing waters “life river” within me. When I retreat with myself I find myself sitting at the banks of my life river, listening to the constant, continuous, flow of river water, calling me to flow with it, to stir it up, or simply lie in it. The voices of women, black women, that I have known and have read about, call to me from the river. (1993:133-4)

The mnemonic stories express a connection through female genealogy and establish a stream of continuity through “the codification of our ancestors’ lore” (Cannon 1995:134) that both subsumes individual female variants and enables the (eco)womanist to become through them. For Harris, establishing the stream of continuity evolves through “honoring experience” or “mining

ecomemory” (2017:27), which is based on collecting stories and narratives of women as they connect to the environment. Womanists, therefore, regard remembering as an inherently anthropological endeavour. As Linda E. Thomas argues:

The method of womanist theology validates the past lives of enslaved African women by remembering, affirming, and glorifying their contributions. [. . .] Moreover, we gather data from a reservoir of bold ideas and actions from past centuries to reconstruct knowledge for an enhanced and liberating quality of life for black women today. The weaving of the past into present knowledge construction produces a polyvalent self-constituting folk-culture of African American women. In other words, the past, present, and future fuse to create a dynamic multi-vocal tapestry of black women’s experience inter-generationally. (2004:40)

Reconstructing knowledge is primarily pursued through the analysis of texts, mainly fiction and (auto)biographies (idem:45). Limited as reconstruction may appear due to the absence/erasure of artefacts due to slavery to recreate historical knowledge, with the aid of anthropological methodologies, it is very much possible to recreate memories to remember the self and community. These acts of rememory described by Melville Dixon as “re-remembering” as “repopulating” (1994:21) and by Toni Morrison as “recollecting” and “reassembling” (2019:324) enable the remembering subject to regain subjectivity by finding past vistas, which also enables future vistas. In this way, the womanist theological endeavour serves identificatory pursuits in the present and the investigations describe the needs of the remembering subject and not historicity.

Layli Maparyan identifies the womanist method as spiritual archaeology:

Spiritual archaeology is the method of backward-looking spiritual story recovery, the act of digging up the spiritual roots of womanism by looking at the spiritual lives of self proclaimed womanists and their kindred spirits. Through stories (spiritual life stories) the dynamism that is womanism becomes cognizable (womanist methodology, womanism as spirit, spiritualized politics, womanism as vision, the womanist idea in toto). (2012:87)

Maparyan’s approach is based on the excavation of bits and pieces of mnemonic entities that constitute artefacts in search of a mnemonic texture. Artefacts here primarily refer to elements or fragments in the mnemonic narrative that can serve as the basis for reimagining memory as a whole. In the ultimately metonymic procedure, the fragments serve as threads to reconstruct and fill in gaps as in overcoming silence or erasure, as well as to interstructure, causing inner layeredness and connection between the elements, and, significantly, provide links of interrelation, i.e., intertextuality between other stories.

Spiritual, then, highlights, on the one hand, the immaterial nature of the inquiry as the spiritual archaeologist digs into narratives in search of evidence representing the cultural whole in a metonymic way; on the other, it refers to a shared reality that the mnemonic narratives blend into. It evinces a fountain of communality that the spiritual archaeologist can draw memory artefacts from to weave their own narrative. As Toni Morrison proclaims:

Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. [. . .] These “memories within” are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. (1995:91-92)

Interdependence underlies the notion of “spiritual,” presupposing a community of remembering subjects. What Morrison and Maparyan suggest, nevertheless, is that despite the mnemonic fragments in the shared spiritual space there is a void obstructing the recovery of an integrated memory narrative. Whether unwritten as in unexplored or as in forgotten or buried, the narratives need the linking power of imagination to overwrite the gaps in the narratives.

Imagination accounts for the individual dynamics of the memory narrative, filling in and overwriting gaps. This capacity does not only render the story integrated, but it also helps to

establish a platform of truth that then serves as a starting point of self-validation and as an interpretative horizon for fragments in further stories and even to oppose and debunk challenging discourses. Morrison's technique to reconstruct stories from remains supports memory work similarly:

On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. (1995:92)

Due to the contingency of the remains, the depth of memory and its reliability depend on the act of imagination. To turn it around, without the imaginative act, the recollection will lack grounding in memory and fail to function as a mnemonic narrative. The fragments dynamicized by imagination provide for surface tension for the narrative that through the fragments tightening against each other through the imaginative act provides for a self-supporting interstructure overarching the void of erasure/forgetfulness. The interstructure itself replaces the void and serves as the referential mnemonic work. Morrison appears to speak about fiction but for the womanist, any act of spiritual archaeology of this sort is indeed reconstructing a grand mnemonic narrative of being; in a way, the excavation of fragments and the reconstruction of narratives signify remembering oneself into being.

For the ecowomanist, the bonding of ecowomanist narratives evolves in/through nature:

Perhaps the greatest songs I've ever heard sung in the garden were African American spirituals, which made me feel a divine ancestral presence all around. Floating freely in the divine tones of music coming from within my own soul, I danced from flowerbed to flowerbed, admiring and singing the spirituals and sacred slave songs I learned in church. Gazing at bees already humming at my mother's roses, I noticed that we all seem to be singing the same song. Even the color of the roses added a melodic tune. Listening is a core part of singing. I learned this early, and the more I listened the louder the music of the earth grew. (Harris 2017:2)

As Melanie Harris defines, "Eco-memory refers to the collective and individual memory of the earth and speaks to our continuing relationship with the planet" (2019), i.e., nature serves as a link in connecting to others as it carries the memory fragments in a metonymic vortex. Remembering, thus, ecospirituality and ecoterror simultaneously among other memory threads, the ecowomanist talks themselves into being as listening, singing, and dancing for Harris signify a performative activity of mnemonic contextualization. As Thomas claims, "Womanist theologians, in a word, retrieve sources from the past, sort and evaluate materials, and thereby construct new epistemologies that effect change in the space and time occupied by black women" (2004:45). As in the times of slavery, religion can have a seminal role in rehistoricizing. Recreation of knowledge can evolve through the examination of the African American religious paradigm, especially through religious practices and beliefs as anthropological artefacts, which when read as text can be deciphered to map the different terrains of African American cultural memory. Religious memory contains imagery that has borne relevance for centuries and is capable of recreating a space in which absences and disrupted links can be filled and restored, respectively.

Combined with a view of nature that serves as both imagery, i.e., a vehicle of memory, and container, i.e., memory space, religious memory substantiates both individual and communal identities through relationality, which is based on sharing and bonding due to its inclusive character—a reason why it is capable of making up for muted and absent links in memory narratives. Concomitantly, nature expresses African American connection: "In the context of nonbourgeois black folk culture [. . .] [t]he black folk stressed togetherness and a closer connection with nature" (Williams 2006:118-119). The physical and spiritual return to nature expresses the "desire to reconnect with nature and return to black nature" (Harris 2017:5). At the same time, nature through its oppositionality to white social space is deployed as a liberating mnemonic

framework—an important tenet also in Delores S. Williams’s account—as it renders it possible to authenticate the traumatized black self and community and thus to unmute the black voice by simultaneously deconstructing white hegemonic narratives.

3. Ecowomanist spirituality as countermemory

Through ecowomanist spirituality, an ethics is implied, which is devoid of racialized constraints, i.e., it refuses to reproduce standards coded in white culture, as it is due to the latter that “fragmentation as a sense of separation within the self characterizes the effect of racism” (Harris 2010:61). Instead, womanists endeavour to reclaim a “sense of wholeness” (idem:67) and “a sense of belonging and place” (idem:121). This is also to say that ecowomanism is deployed as criticism of the white uniformisation of nature and the production of the black body in it. In Emily M. Townes’s evaluation, ecomemory embodies a countermemory in that it deconstructs white texts that mute and exclude black women. As she insists,

Counteremory has the potential to challenge the false generalizations and gross stereotypes often found in what passes for “history” in the United States. Counteremories can disrupt our status quo because they do not rest solely or wholly on objectivity or facts. They materialize from emotions and sight and sounds and touch and smell. They come from the deepest part of who we are. Counteremories are dynamic and spark new configurations of meaning. Also present is the recognition of decades-long patterns of meaning-making that remain alive in fallow discourses that can shape the enterprise of history into a dynamic process rather than into a static hegemony [. . .]. (2006:47-48)

The multimodality of memory refers to embodied memories that gain a foundation in black female experiences, which, in a Foucauldian way, can be deployed in opposition to muting discourses by “engrav[ing] memories on things and even within bodies” (Foucault 1977:150). In this sense, they come to represent a “rigorous pursuit of identity as a form of resistance to hegemony” (Townes 2007:106). Counteremories as embodied memories enable the reconfigurations of meaning especially as communicative memory can often be seen as empirical since they directly stem from lived experiences. Reconfiguration is not restoration, but reconstruction employing, what Cannon calls, liberation ethics, which is “debunking, unmasking, and disentangling the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society” (Cannon 1995:138); but, further, beyond mere deconstruction, it refers to the reconstitution of history with the help of “images linked to memory and history as well—those that spring from an imagination seeking to distinguish fact from truth” (Townes 2006:27). Since truth depends on a subjective rendering or reading, Townes’s insistence that “memory *can* be used to create a space or site in historical discourse” (idem:24) can prove useful in challenging historical discourses (idem:26) but it does not obliterate history. Through the emphasis on truth rather than fact, the directionality of the memory work is revealed. As the Baker-Fletchers explain: “The creative power to make meaning out of the past is necessary to give a sense of direction for present and future generations” (1997:155). The mnemonic activity to find and establish anchors in the past serves thus to validate the present identity construction in the present. The manoeuvre seeks to counteract the multiple oppressions womanists identify in white society, free the black female consciousness, and embed it in a discourse that unmutes it altogether. Karen Baker-Fletcher explains the present state of black women through their disembodiment: “We must literally re-member ourselves. We have become disembodied. We are disembodied from community. We are disembodied from self. We are disembodied from God. We are disembodied from earth. To become whole is to re-member” (1998:57). Importantly, the coin has two sides: counteremory and the reconstruction of history based on lived experiences withstand the objectification and consequent muting of black women; however, they similarly seek to resist forces in the African American community that deny diversity. It is thus also the goal to “avoid new forms of essentialism in subjugated cultures so that they can remain true to the struggles of exploited and oppressed groups in their attempts to critique

the dominant structures from positions that give meaning and purpose to this struggle” (Townes 2006:53).

The emphasis on context, relationality, and integration suggests a strong communal aspect and presupposes the (counter)memory of a (womanist) community. Indeed, the “womanist sense of community and [. . .] commitment to practicing mutual relationality” (Harris 2010:59) highlights that womanist spirituality seeks tethering in the “black sacred cosmos” (see Lincoln and Mamyia 1990:2) in close juxtaposition with other constituting elements, animate and inanimate. Contextual thinking does not refer to mere juxtaposition, however. Much as the cosmos, sacred and secular, includes the black female, it is by the reconstructive activity through the reflections of the black female filtered through her experiences that the world around becomes known to her, i.e., it is centred on the black female subject. As Mary Shawn Copeland claims, “Womanists are their own foundations” (2006:229)—embedded foundations tethered to other constituents, in whose function they can reach the full potential of their dehistoricised subjectivities.

Building upon Morrison’s idea of “the dance of an open mind” referring to a peace “warrant[ing] vigilance” (1996), “the womanist dancing mind” (Townes 2007:116) has become a metaphor to describe womanist theologians’ engagement with themselves and the memory work of others. Baker-Fletcher identifies dancing in her book *Dancing with God* (2006) as an epistemological endeavour in participating in the divine activity of creation. For Emily Townes, it represents “uncompromising and meticulous introspection, but this introspection takes place within the context of a community within a larger cultural landscape and its society” (Townes 2006:109). Relying on herself and the memory of others—just as Morrison suggests in connection with writing and remembering—Townes refuses fixity and the fixation by racialized, gendered, and class standards and confesses that “It is through the particularity of the womanist dancing mind that I can meet and greet those parts of myself that have been lost through neglect, ignorance, well-practiced amnesia, or malicious separation” (idem:116). She refuses, in this way, essentialist and ideological uniformisation that does not tolerate diversity (idem:109) even within the African American community and welcomes the creative restorative work that can deal with traumas and disruptions through erasure.

It is the womanist creative dancing mind that weaves one’s own narrative and weaves it with the narratives of others together into a collective memory narrative, which also functions as countermemory. The foundations of womanist spirituality rest on gathering memories and relying on the memories of others. This explains why it is characteristic of ecowomanist writing to reminisce about personal connection to nature through the practices of female forebears. Beyond making the writing personal and intimate, the autobiographical orientation expresses “the community’s consciousness of values” (Cannon 1995:63), as do black female writers for Katie Cannon. Further, it embeds the womanist theologian in the ecological discourse as an insider, while insisting on a female genealogy that comes to expression through the connection to nature, where due to ruptures in the family fabric (for example, the mother is absent), the continuation of the chain is maintained. It is nature as memory space and space elsewhere that contextualizes relations.

Resisting Euro-American overdetermination, womanist theological ethics entails Africanist traditions, including autobiographical ecostories as derivatives of “orature” (qtd. in Hayes 1995:16). As pointed out before, from the point of view of female genealogy, it is primarily the reliance on and connection to female forebears—overwriting the possible ruptures in the family texture—most often the grandmothers that are reminiscent of Africanist ancestor worship. Searching for an Africanist-informed matrilineal continuity Diana L. Hayes asserts that “A return is required of us. We must return to our roots, reforge the links in our chain of continuity from Africa to the present, which have become rusty, worn and, in too many places, broken” (1995:59)—a demand reflecting an “African understanding and spirituality” (idem:22). Hayes, nevertheless, insists that black women have formed a community, collectively calling them

Hagar's daughters, that extends to horizontal and extended relationships as well (idem:27). Hagar carries, on the one hand, the race-gender-class triple consciousness (Townes 2006:109)—representing “a story we have read in our mothers' eyes [. . .] And if not our mothers' story, then it is certainly most of our grandmothers' story” (Weems 1988:1)—but, on the other, liberation ethics through her experiences in the wilderness as Cannon addresses it in length (1988). It is this feature that connects powerfully to the image of the female forebear, the grandmother, and her ecological embeddedness combining Africanist and biblical overtones. As Melanie L. Harris reminisces about her grandmother: “She was given what I now call an agricultural epistemology that was spiritual in orientation. She was not only taught to feed, raise, and grow, but to nurture, love, and respect every aspect of earth” (2017:1). Just as the wilderness proved empowering for Hagar, so is observing nature for Harris a source of self-empowerment (idem:2). In womanist reasoning, empowerment in/through nature evolves through remembering the self, i.e., the dancing self in relation to female ancestral relations and the divine. Baker-Fletcher makes a similar observation: “I return to myself in my inmost parts. I remember who I am in a way that feels like home. It feels like being at home with God and family, those who are near, far, present, and ancestral. There is a connection between the land, self, and God, even with one's ancestral roots” (1998:37). Remembering is sanctification: the sanctification of the self and that of the land: “When the earth is sacred to us, our bodies can also be sacred to us” (idem:54).

The inclusive, relational scenario as opposed to Western taxonomies is supported by a comprehensive view of African peoples, i.e., it “centers the perspectives, voices, and experience of African peoples” (Harris 2017:32). Given that ecowomanists prefer ecostories in their communicative memory, it appears forced to call on African peoples as alone the plural of the terms suggest immense diversity (see Mbiti 1975:3) rendering it difficult to reconstruct as one spiritual tradition, especially since, as Townes suggests echoing Cannon: “the person or community cannot remember what it never knew” (2007:108)—however, it is not the goal either. Much rather, “black women's cognitive praxis” as Copeland terms it (2006: 229), reflects retroactive hybridization, which through the weaving together of individual ecostories in the present, subsumes individual elements, experiential and anthropological, to shape a collective narrative. The move does not embody confabulation as the confluence of experiences in the communicative memory into the collective enables the extension of mnemonic work into the realm of cultural memory.

4. Conclusion

Bonding through recollecting artefacts in one's own and others' lifestory shapes the basis for ecowomanist memory work as it forms an interrelated and intertextual whole. The hiatus that could prevent such a narrative from being cohesive is overwritten by the imaginative leap deriving from the conviction of womanist theologians in creative participation in creation. Morrison's concept of creative dance is turned into a mnemotechnique: closure in the fractured memory due to forgetting and erasure is effected through the imaginative leap that can create an interstructure capable of turning communicative memory into collective and cultural memory. To refer to Walker again: “we understand we are who we are largely because of who we have been. And who we have been has come down to us as the vibration of souls we can know only through the sound and structure, the idiosyncrasies of speech” (1988:61). For the womanist, while the peculiarity of speech/text depends on stories of the past for continuation, the stories also solidify a familiarity that enables both the recognition of stories as such and their re-collection through spiritual archaeology and introspection. For the ecowomanist, the process is aided by the embeddedness in nature. Signifying a place of creative activity, nature becomes a strand in the tripartite plait of self, community, and nature in/through which remembering is enhanced. As a place elsewhere, it helps

counteract the sense of separation and facilitates integration with the self and the African American community—thus countering history.

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