Ecowomanism, Memory, and the Sacred[1]

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Abstract*: The paper examines the interrelation of womanism, theology, and nature in an attempt to verify the ecowomanist liberation ethics that is both ecological and ecospiritual. Nature is conceptualized as a memory space, where the African American cultural trauma is remembered and reworked, and as a field of significance, where through creative action the restoration of the creation becomes possible.*

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

1. Introduction

When Toni Morrison observes that "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" (1995: 99), she forcefully brings African American awareness of nature to attention and that the environment in African American female memory has played a prominent role in constructing, reflecting on, and maintaining their identities. As *lieu de memoir*, it was in/through nature that the African American female subjectivity could be remembered and practiced, representing traumas inflicted upon them in nature while making up for the disrupted links in the female genealogy. Imbued with religious spirituality, "wisdom's practice" (Daniell 2007: 465) including the wisdom of sustenance, and possibilities of intergenerational encounters, the natural environment crystalized as a mnemonic space where and through which expressing the emerging African American self becomes possible.

As the ecowomanist perception of nature intersects with religious conceptualizations, the present paper examines major topoi in womanist theology as they embed the black female self in nature from a religio-cultural point of view.

2. Womanism, Theology, and Nature

While the African American conceptualization of the natural environment is informed by African cosmological as well as Christian concepts, demonstrating maneuvers to appropriate the surroundings, the term "womanist" is conventionally traced back to Alice Walker's book, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), denoting her "fluid spirituality" (Harris 2011: 228)—an African American female spirituality that has been subsumed into womanist theology. On the one hand, womanism entails a black female genealogy with a centuries-long tradition conventionally traced back to Sojourner Truth and even earlier; and, on the other, it refers to a black female community with nurturing memories and disruptive, yet identificatory traumas. Indeed, Sojourner Truth's essay "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) problematizes race, gender, class, and religiosity in an intertwining way, suggesting intersectionality at an early stage (see Smiet 2021: 122):

> And ain't I a woman? Look at me? Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could

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> work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? [. . .] Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do with Him. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again? And now they is asking to do it, they better let 'em. (2000: 39-40)

It must be noted that her speech delivered before an essentially white audience at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851 was transcribed and edited by white writers (Phillips-Anderson 2012: 25), thus it is difficult to decide to what extent authenticity can be attributed to the text. The complaint palpable in her text about female debasement and black displacement as well as her religion-informed identity formation was echoing an already existing black tradition and verifying "a long-standing African-American women's intellectual community" (Hayes 1995: 4) that reverberated with later feminist (see bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* [1981]) and womanist thinkers. In the wake of black theology, the latter, partially to address the absence of black women in it (Burrow 1999: 78), looked to ground themselves in theology much along the lines detectable in Truth's thinking, implementing most notably "interstructured analysis employing class, gender, and race," institutional criticism of the Black Church, as well as ecological investigations (Townes 2003: 159). While maintaining an activist vein, womanist theology formed a space of inquiry that is based on the context of black culture and the egalitarian interrelation of the black female self, the community, and non-human entities.

Bearing similarity to black liberation theology, womanist theology emphasizes the relevance of the social context, which for Jacquelyn Grant means that "The Bible must be read and interpreted in the light of Black women's own experience of oppression and God's revelation within that context" (1989: 212). The context is provided by black women's experiences and is mainly understood in the gender binary. As she further explains, "Theology and Christology have developed in this context. Characteristically then, in theology and Christology, the male-masculine is projected as the valued entity and the female-feminine is projected as a devalued entity. In effect, there is the institutionalization of dual existence" (1989: 69). Grant further problematizes the contextual framework of black liberation theologians which contextualizes African Americans primarily in a racist context. As Deotis J. Roberts, Sr. puts it:

> The context of the faith of black people is a situation of racist oppression. Religion, and especially the understanding of the biblical faith, has been the source of meaning and protest for blacks. Our religious heritage has nurtured and sustained, us through our dark night of suffering. Without this profound religious experience and the churches which have institutionalized it, blacks might not have survived the bitterness of American oppression. (1976)

With the emphasis on black women's experiences, Grant echoes their embeddedness in the oppressive American society, at the same time, she insists that the institutionalization of the black faith marginalized black women, entombing them in the shadow of black male domination—much as this is an oversimplification (see Carr-Hamilton 1996).

Importantly, what she also seems to suggest is that before the birth of the institutionalized black church (and besides it ever since) black women must have enjoyed a more egalitarian position within the religious community. As is testified by Raboteau, Levine, and others, before and outside the church is connected to the natural environment, which closely connects black female spirituality to nature. This is in close parallel with ecofeminist thinking, like Rosemary Radford Ruether's, who explains that "in ecofeminist culture and ethic, mutual interdependency replaces the hierarchies of domination as the model of relationship between men and women, between human groups, and between humans and other beings" (1993: 21).

The womanist connection to nature is verified on another level, too. The emphasis on the context of female experiences reveals the de-emphasis of biases that represent the black woman in a muted way. A view is employed that embeds the black woman in an egalitarian way in a relational black cultural context, which is away and elsewhere from oppressive white environments. De-emphasis is achieved by emplacing the female subject in nature and in relation to nature, i.e., it represents a move away, elsewhere much in Teresa De Lauretis's sense (1987: 26).

Nature represents the creation in womanist theological thinking—a primordial space identifying a pre-racial entity both in time and space. As such, it is cleansed from conceptualizations that for womanists reflect Western patriarchal values, or as Mary Shawn Copeland terms it: "the hegemony of the pseudo-universality of a deracinated male posited as the Western standard of normativity" (2006: 226). The principle *Creatio ex Nihilo* in Western theologies substantiates that order was made out of nothing, which sets and justifies hierarchies serving the human interests in Western understanding. By contrast, womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher explores the principle *Creatio ex Profundus* to offer a relational approach that illuminates the "the interconnectedness of spirit and matter and Spirit" (Baker-Fletcher 2006: 71). While she does not seek to debunk the tradition of creation from chaos, in her "Christian integrative relational womanist" interpretation, creation reveals that "God alone is not created but Creator who from eternity creates [and] creation has not been created without the presence and transcendence of Spirit" (idem: 71). Creation is an ongoing process in her evaluation, which also implies that what has been corrupted can be reinstated, whereby she rejects fixities of any "man"-made orders. The active presence of the Spirit signifies for her how creation comes into being through "creativity, freedom, and depth" (idem: 68). Divine creativity is seen as parallel with female agency as creation may represent the interconnection of male and female principles as the African American cultural historian Charles H. Long also points out about some creation myths (1963: 124) and as it reflects womanist engagement in/with nature: "To be creation is to participate in divine creating" (Baker-Fletcher 2006: 66). Creation is not conceptualized as chaos, something estranging and dark, but as birth "revealing divine handiwork" (idem: 67), and as she states elsewhere: Genesis is "a birth story, a story about the nativity of the earth and its creatures, including women and men" (1998: 25). Participation is no simple habitation but, in a Heideggerian sense, dwelling as in cultivating (see Heidegger 1971), i.e., building as in creating. Agency reclaimed in this way suggests empowering freedom for her: "Freedom is a form of power. In freedom, creatures have the power to choose whether to assent to God's unsurpassable love" (2006: 78). For the womanist, empowering freedom in nature enables counteracting violence and subjugation.

The conceptualization of nature as creation serves to counter social and ecological injustices, i.e., racial violence and the violation of nature. To return to

Grant: "The central problem is the domination-submission model of relationship [. . .]. Resolution of the problem involves not only the re-ordering of relationships between human beings but also the re-ordering of relationships with non-human realities" (1989: 137). The model Grant refers to emanates from fallenness in womanist theology. Karen-Fletcher's observation that "nature itself [is] fallen and awaiting human salvation so that it, too, may be redeemed" (2006: 94) appears to merge meanings of "redemption" and "nature's moment of violence" (idem: 94) in that nature may be read as damaged thus in need of healing and corrupted in a moral/ethical sense. Since she also maintains that "The environment was thrown off balance through a human disregard for the interrelated structures of the cosmos" (idem: 88), nature itself is not corrupted but tainted with defilement, bearing the marks of human activity.

It is refreshing to see that contextualization does not mean in the womanist thinking (much as there are other examples as well) that the corruption in nature—and the source of social injustice—originates in Western thinking, whatever that may be, but in human nature, which is why it can be said that evil "does not come from any one place but in every disregard of God's aim for creation" (Baker-Fletcher 2006: 89). Hence violence in societies and the violation of nature has been present in all cultures and at all times. It also suggests that "Western" cannot be considered a monolith but it is itself heterogeneous, and very much functional, even useful for the integrative relational womanist Christian theologian.

The hope invested in this framework comes to the foreground in the treatment of human fallenness in relation to nature:

> Earth creatures, male and female, became greedy, wanting more than their share of power. Taking the freedom they were created in by persuasive, loving, divine community, they greedily grasped at more than their share of power. This created an imbalance, leaving divine community, which was already eternally creating, creating anew what had been whole and now was broken. The creation that took millennia to become whole spiritually strives to find wholeness again. (Baker-Fletcher 2011: 170)

For Baker-Fletcher, the struggle can even be detected in Cain's violence. In analyzing human sin and expulsion, Baker-Fletcher identifies Cain's mark as one of protection and not of curse (2006: 89), showing that God has not turned away from him, and his remorse is as hopeful as it shows openness to return, i.e., change, remedy, and redemption are possible. Integrative restoration is inherent in womanist theology that becomes evident in the human relation to the creation and thus to the environment. The environment becomes, in this way, a reminder of the promise of redemption, the resurrection both in a Christological and a restorative sense, and thus healing in/through nature as the manifestation of the ongoing creation as God is believed to create "continuously, everlastingly, dynamically" (Baker-Fletcher 2011: 165).

It closely follows from the conceptualization of the creation and human connectedness to it that womanist theological thinking is inherently ecological: "To be spiritual is to be deeply, intimately connected with the earth" (Baker-Fletcher 1998: 19). As Edward P. Antonio contends, ecology is "interaction with the ecosystem," but, more concretely, it evinces "an *intentional* relationship to the world," designating "a field of significance" (2004: 149). It suggests that beyond the identity of substance as "Dustiness refers to human connectedness with the rest of creation" (Baker-Fletcher 1998: 18), it expresses the meaning attached to the

environment both as it becomes meaningful and as it becomes the means or terrain of performative signifying. Co-creating proves ethical, moral, and authenticating as in deracializing as agency is claimed outside/in opposition to the American social space. However, the signifying participation in perpetual creation also means a restorative activity to enable "seeing goodness as intended by the creator in all his creation" (Kebaneilwe 2015: 702). For Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe, it refers to the restoration of equality across creation so that "Nature, that is, animate and inanimate creatures will be appreciated as having goodness inherent in them and hence would be nurtured and not raped by the powerful for their selfish wants, and hence creation would become as God envisioned it, 'all good'" (idem: 702). The a priori goodness of nature sets the demand for its recognition as such and consequent care—an ecological compulsion that, as Harris reminds us echoing Walker, is a trait of the ecowomanist: "being accountable for and to the earth is a more imperative for one operating within an understanding that the earth, nature, divinity, and humanity are interrelated" (2011: 233).

The ecowomanist deployment of creation principles does not thus only represent a restorative move but also delineates an agenda for action. For Harris, ecowomanist ecology is situated in the intersection of race, gender, and class,

> Uncovering parallels between acts of violence against the earth and systemic patterns of violence (racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism) faced by women of color reveals the need for a fresh environmental justice paradigm; one that honors all earthlings and their approaches to earth justice in a community of life. (2016a: 13-14)

For Baker-Fletcher, too, applied ecowomanism crystalizes as liberation ethics: "To work in harmony with God's intention for the well-being of the planet means that we must work toward the salvation, redemption, and freedom of entire environments. We must look to free both people and the planet that sustains us from a diversity of health hazards" (Baker-Fletcher 1998: 18). The trope of the creation reveals that the intentionality triggering the interaction with nature is based on the interrelation with it expressing "links between justice, gender, ecology, and equality" (Harris 2016a: 10). With the many layers, participation in creation also means recreating ties with nature and oneself, which unveils the ecowomanist mnemonic strategy.

3. Defilement and trauma: the ambiguity of African American ecomemory

The ambiguity of African American ecomemory can be described by, what Kimberly N. Ruffin identifies as, the "ecological beauty to burden paradox" (2010: 2):

> People of African descent endure the burden and enjoy the beauty of being natural. They bear the burden of a historical and present era of environmental alienation while they also come from and transform cultural traditions that enable—in fact, encourage—human and nonhuman affinity. African Americans struggle against the burden of societal scripts that make them ecological pariahs, yet they enjoy the beauty of liberating themselves and acting outside of these scripts. (2010, 16)

The duality described by her can be seen as fragmentation or split along multiple lines as it has not just been the binary of race to cloud black female experience of the environment but also gender, rendering the paradox tetrapolar (see Johnson 1986) or even other notions including age, geography, etc., making fragmentation

multiple. Ruffin also extends the paradox to religiosity when she argues for "a religious burden-and-beauty paradox" (2010: 91) to address the same ambiguity of "the Bible [. . .] used as textual support for American enslavement" and "its message [. . .] transformed out of the hands of racist oppressors and into those fomenting social justice" (idem: 91), which she also connects to ecology.

Much as nature for African Americans has signified the possibility for a replenished community, it bears thus the marks of traumatization. Delores S. Williams forcefully attacks Western conduct in America by establishing a parallel between the violation of nature and the exploitation of the black female body: "Just as the land is vulnerable to all kind of uses by those who own the means of production in our society, the nineteenth-century slave woman's body was equally as vulnerable" (1993: 26). In a reverse manner, Alice Walker establishes the same identification of nature and black bodies*:* "Some of us have become used to thinking that woman is the nigger of the world, that a person of color is the nigger of the world, that a poor person is the nigger of the world. But, in truth, Earth itself has become the nigger of the world" (1988: 147). In either way, seen as an "extension of assault" (Williams 1993: 25), nature is regarded as a female symbolic, i.e., the black female body, and in that she projects black female trauma onto the natural environment:

> Different from the traditional theological understanding of sin as alienation or estrangement from God and humanity the sin of defilement manifests itself in human attacks upon creation so as to ravish, violate, and destroy creation: to exploit and control the production and reproduction capacities of nature, to destroy the unity in nature's placements, to obliterate the spirit of the created. (idem: 25)

In the quote nature and the black female body are exchangeable to signify ultimately black female cultural trauma. Strip-mining and breeder women are juxtaposed, whereby the exploitation of nature triggers for Williams memory work that is further substantiated by religious contextualization. When she claims that "breaking the spirit of nature today through rape and violence done to the earth, and breaking the spirit of nineteenth-century slave women through rape and violence, constitute crimes against nature and against the human spirit" (idem: 27), she insists that both are crime as they represent defilement as nature and black women were made in the likeness of God (idem: 29). In this way, much as she speaks of the suffering of nature as the extension of black female suffering, reminding her of black female experiences, her tactics are not mere anthropomorphization of nature by identifying nature as a black woman, but, much rather, it refers to being-there-together in close juxtaposition in the context of creation. As Melanie Harris puts it, "The comparable ways in which black women's bodies have been treated unfairly, and exploited throughout history, and the ways in which the body of the earth has suffered through pollution, overuse of resources and general exploitation reveals alarming intersections of oppression that black women and the earth have suffered" (2016a: 13). She, too, identifies parallel exploitations as "the sin of defilement" (2017: 10), which indicate that not only are the different realms of the female experience intersecting but also oppression is present in diverse and parallel forms in different realms of the planet so that oppressions can intersect in multilayered ways (idem: 11).

The cultural trauma surfaces for African Americans primarily in their oceanic memory revolving around the Middle Passage and so does it for ecowomanist theologians:

> We remember our ancestors who crossed the Atlantic in slave ships, whether we are wading in the Atlantic or the Pacific. We remember the millions who drowned during the Middle Passage, some because they threw themselves overboard in the name of freedom, others because crew members threw them overboard as excess or defective cargo. The ocean is a place where horizons of past, present, and future meet, providing wonder for those who look and remember. (Baker-Fletcher 1998: 23)

The vast waters of the ocean are identified as the source of African American cultural trauma. Originally conceptualized in spiritual terms by Africans, the ocean has become to signify a defiled environment for the horrors experienced by enslaved Africans and for obstructing memory of the homeland, much as "Shared Atlantic experience and memory served as a touchstone for new cultural practices that emerged in the New World diaspora" (Smallwood 2007: 190). While African cultural practices were transferred to and remembered in the New World, the Atlantic experience included the New World experiences of slavery and the memory of the Middle Passage. It is the latter "as a fluid, yet collective, foundation for Africans in America" (Wardi 2011: 24) that has, in many ways, become the carrier of the nativity of African American subjecthood as "fixed melancholy" (Mallipeddi 2014: 237)—here as the memory of the Middle Passage as place—served as "a protest against deracination" (idem: 238). Indeed, as Stephanie E. Smallwood contends, "[. . .] the connection Africans needed was a narrative continuity between past and present—an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience" (2007: 190-1). The trauma of the ocean is recycled to be built in cultural memory as "memory emerged as the principal site of contestation" (Mallipeddi 2014: 247).

As the terror and negligence suffered in America are transposed on the oceanic memory, it finds reassertion in traumas connected to other water bodies and the wilderness in general. It is in this way that Glave describes the cultural memory of the Middle Passage, confessing to its impact on her, too, through her emotional writing. In doing so, she palpably connects the oceanic memory to Hurricane Katrina: "The plight of African Americans exposed to disease by the putrid waters in New Orleans echoes the experience of Africans who died of disease and starvation after they were captured by whites in Africa and transported to the Americas in the dark holds of ships during the Middle Passage" (2010: 137). The oceanic ecomemory becomes the vehicle of traumas suffered by African Americans in the case of Katrina, too.

The cultural trauma represented by the oceanic memory also gives way to reframing the trauma as self-constructive. To remain with the example of Katrina, black victims traumatized before and after the hurricane (Casserly 2006: 197) suffered from "the disastrous intersecting realities of racism, classism, poverty, and environmental degradation in New Orleans" (Daniell 2007: 457). At the same time, the trauma experience is transformed into agency as the victims are seen as survivors instead of victims. While initially "the city's black residents, for example, were often described as victims of a storm rather than survivors of a terrible calamity [whereas] [t]o be a victim is to be helpless, but to be a survivor is to possess courage and creative skills." (Powell et al. 2006: 63), womanist thinkers—not neglecting the

environmental injustice inflicting black populations (see Harris 2016b: 31)—emphasize the vertical encounter with God enabling an epistemological process resulting in the transformation of consciousness instead of the horizontal encounter with racial injustice (constituents of the black experience in Williams's conceptualization [1993: 154]). As Williams explains, "the vertical encounter between God and humans constitutes the most salient feature of the black experience. This encounter occurs in history and empowers black people to transform negative, oppressive social forces into positive life-sustaining forms" (idem: 155). For Baker-Fletcher, the hurricane represents resilience, creativity, and inspiration:

> Survival was important. You did your best to live, do find higher ground, strong shelter. You prayed for and sought those things. Folk could feel a storm coming on their skin; smell the scent of it in everything, grumbled about the pain of it in their bones. They sought safe cover when first seeing and hearing of the shelter-seeking behavior of birds, dogs, squirrels, cows, all manner of two-leggeds, four leggeds, flying and creeping things—signs of a bad storm coming; divine revelations in creation to find safe, strong, hiding places, something hard to find today. People helped one another. God, even in fierce gales and roaring thunder, inspired community. (2010: 61)

She connects African American creative agency, the cleaning power of the hurricane from an ecological perspective, and resurrection hope to demonstrate that "Creation is called to participate in God's aim for the well-being of all creation in spite of the problem of evil" (idem: 63). Importantly, the concept of interrelation between creatures, animate and inanimate, undergirds a holistic approach to nature, community, and creation in general as it is in this way that the womanist integrative and relational approach can be verified. No part can be remedied without the consideration of the whole and the holistic approach requires attention to particular constituents belonging to the whole. Trauma is rechanneled to be embedded in this meaningful context, where, through the creative engagement of the ecowomanist, the constituents are reconnected to build a façade of significance. For the move, nature is the means and framework: "For me ocean and wilderness are God's natural temple, which no human hand can build" (Baker-Fletcher 1998: 23).

4. Conclusion

Ecowomanist theologians seek to embed their environmentalist discourse in a theological framework revolving around creation, creativity, and a liberation ethics triggering their ecological understanding. For ecowomanists, it is through a religio-cultural lens that they view the environment and remember it so that it can function as a context in/through which it becomes possible to make the self whole again and to find healing for the community in terms of remedying a ruptured memory. As Baker-Fletcher vividly describes, "I remembered my African American ancestors whose bones and blood helped build this new nation called the United States. Every piece of land that I walked—urban, rural, suburban, woods, parks—became sacred to me in a new and more self-conscious way" (1998: 51). Here as elsewhere in ecowomanist writing, environmental thinking centres on the recurring issues of trauma, spirituality, and subjectivization opposing white objectification. The recollection of own memories and those of others related to the environment enables the ecowomanist to reconstruct memory in a creative way as in participating in the

creation work in theological terms. Inversely, re-creating the self and reconnecting to the community through ecomemories is the healing potential spiritually. From an ecological point of view, the healing of nature contributes to the healing process. In this intertwining, interstructured relationship, ecowomanists envision an ecological activity that is just as environmentalist as it is liberating.

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