

**A Call to Gender Justice:
A Commentary on Equality and Equity in the COOLJC**

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A Senior Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2021

Abstract

This paper explores how some interpretations of scripture and other sacred texts have been used to subjugate women particularly in the COOLJC (Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Inc.). We will examine the historical epistemologies that have produced the Black female body politic and how these incendiary tropes have been used to justify why women should not serve as preachers in the Black church. In Black Pentecostalism we often trace our lineage through the spiritual bloodline of the 'Fathers of the Faith'. The significance of this work is that it breaks ranks with Pentecostal tradition. While we honor the men who have led these organizations, we also know that the Black church certainly would not exist nor would it have the same impact without the contributions of Black women. Therefore, I trace my spiritual lineage through my grandmother and other Black women who spent countless hours indoctrinating me, as well as spiritually forming and molding me to become a devotee of a Christianity that comes with a high moral and ethical mandate for restorative social justice, equity, fairness, and equality (although in many cases, she had not reaped the benefits of the fairness and equality of which she preached). This work pays homage to the countless number of Black women who formed networks to advance spiritual, economic, social and racial uplift, I trace my spiritual lineage through them. In summary, we will offer a call to action for the Black Apostolic Pentecostal Church to reflect on its interpretation of scripture as it relates to gender justice and equity.

Key Words: gender justice, equity, equality, scriptural interpretation, polity, piety, COOLJC

A Call to Gender Justice: A Commentary on Equality and Equity in the COOLJC

If Black women were free, everyone would be free, because that would mean all systems of oppression had been destroyed

– The Combahee River Collective

My grandmother, who was originally from Brazil, joined The Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Inc. (referenced by its devotees as the COOLJC). Prior to her experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit and becoming a member of the COOLJC, she was a practitioner of Candomblé – an African-Brazilian religion practiced in Salvador, Brazil. In Candomblé, as in Yoruba tradition, gender does not preclude women from serving in spiritual leadership roles. Scholar Bolaji Idowu (1982) author of *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, states that “Olodumare”, the Supreme Being in Candomblé and in the Yoruba religion, is considered to be “a State of Being who is all encompassing [in which] no gender can be assigned” (p. 5). Idowu asserted that, “Olodumare empowered and gave *emi* (the breath of life) to all humankind [regardless of gender]” (p. 7).

For decades, my grandmother’s interpersonal conflict was that her African worldview, at times, appeared at odds with the interpretation of scripture embraced by the COOLJC. She was a diviner, a Yoruba priestess and practitioner of Candomblé. She said that she had a spiritual encounter with the Holy Spirit, or “Holy Ghost” (as she referenced the Holy Spirit) at the famed Azusa Street Mission when she was teenager and later when was in her early twenties. She said that the in-filling of the Holy Spirit empowered her in such a way that the Spirit gave her supernatural insight into the portals of the supernatural-realm. She attested to the fact that being filled with the Holy Spirit was unlike anything that she had ever experienced. In her community

in Brazil she was already considered a spiritual leader, so her conflict was exacerbated when she joined the COOLJC and was denied ordination because she was a woman. For years, having discerned that she was called to preach, she grappled with whether she had to obey the rules codified upon her by the COOLJC or would she have to leave the church to follow her calling. Now that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, was God requiring her to renounce Candomblé? Should she renounce the practice of her Yoruba heritage? Was there a way for her to syncretize Pentecostalism and Candomblé? The teachings of Yoruba would not allow her to accept that she was not co-equal with the men in her denomination. Her Yoruba heritage told her that she was whole and complete and a powerful expression of the Divine. Should she trust her spiritual instincts and defy the limiting ordinances of the COOLJC? Eventually she received the inner peace needed to fully embrace both her Yoruba heritage and her Christian beliefs. However, later in this essay, we will examine how my grandmother arrived at a sense of inner peace, eventually syncretized her beliefs and accepted her call to ministry.

Now is the time for faith communities to have a renewed commitment to gender justice and equity. Our silence in the face of injustice denotes acceptance. Just as our nation continues to face its own reckoning with racial injustice, so too, must our country, as well as the faith communities within this nation, grapple with what it means to foster gender justice. In *Gender Justice, Citizenship and Development* Scholar Ann Marie Goetz defines *gender justice* as “the ending of, and the provision of redress for, inequalities between women and men that result in women's subordination to men” (p.5). Faith communities must create sacred spaces where the gifts and talents of all devotees, despite gender identity, can be valued and celebrated. Central to that work is dismantling the uncritical ways in which sacred text is interpreted; along with, identifying the structural barriers that persists which prevent women from holding offices of

power within faith communities. If we truly believe that God created us all to be equal, then we would reject the notion that women can only be role models to other women; while conversely, it is expected that the leadership imprint of men, solely based on gender alone, is limitless, allowing the male leader to lead and be a role model to both men and women. The misguided notion that *when women lead, female leadership should be restricted to supervising other women; but only men are equipped to lead everyone* is both patriarchal and misogynistic. The timestamp of history would clearly unveil that the Black church in the United States was not the original arbiter – nor did it give birth to – patriarchy or misogyny; instead, both of these ideas pre-date the existence of the Black Church. We cannot solely place patriarchy and misogyny at the proverbial feet of the church. However, while the Black church is not the ‘birth mother’ of patriarchy and misogyny, we can hold the church accountable for its role in propagating, as well as, being surrogates and adoptive parents to patriarchy and misogyny and – in some cases – using both as tools to oppress and subjugate women.

While there are women who choose to freely submit to patriarchal-led denominations and faith traditions, their right to remain and serve within these organizations should be both honored, upheld and respected. The purpose of this scholarship is not to cast dispersions on the *free will* choices that women make in sacred spaces in which submission to religious polity is embraced as an act of spiritual piety. Instead, it is my intent to examine how some interpretations of scripture and other sacred texts have been used to subjugate women. It is also my intent to examine the difference between polity and piety; especially when church polity is designed to circumvent women from serving in leadership positions. In the case of my grandmother, the interpretation of scripture being used to justify why women should not be ordained to preach was only one among several challenges that she encountered within the COOLJC. The patriarchal

leadership of the COOLJC developed structures of governance which circumvented women from ascending to positions which granted them the formal authority to make decisions within the executive leadership of the church. Having been exposed to a more liberative theology that advances gender justice (Candomblé) prior to her association with the COOLJC, my grandmother revisited the African Diasporic Religious principle of *Vital Force* highlighted in scholar Laurenti Magesa's (2013) work *What Is Not Sacred?* Vital Force is the belief that the Divine is alive in everyone and everything without respect to the "construct of gender". Later in this essay, we will discuss gender as a construct in Oyeronke Oyěwùmí's (1997) work *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. The principle of Vital Force framed the worldview of my grandmother and was the impetus for her contesting the limiting patriarchal beliefs adopted by the COOLJC which prohibited women from being ordained to preach in the denomination. The teachings of the principle of Vital Force ultimately helped my grandmother value her own agency as a Black woman and empowered her to see herself as being a unique and divine expression of God.

In Black Pentecostalism we often trace our lineage through the spiritual bloodline of the 'Fathers of the Faith' – Bishop Charles Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ; Bishop Robert Lawson, founder of the COOLJC; or Bishop Theodore Brooks, Presiding Bishop of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. The significance of this work is that it breaks ranks with Pentecostal tradition. While we honor the men who have led these organizations, we also know that as scholar Cheryl Gilkes (2001) would say in her book entitled *If It Wasn't For the Women*, that the Black church certainly would not exist nor would it have the same impact without the contributions of Black women. Therefore, I trace my spiritual lineage through my grandmother and other Black women who spent countless hours indoctrinating me, as well as spiritually

forming and molding me to become a devotee of a Christianity that comes with a high moral and ethical mandate for restorative social justice, equity, fairness, and equality (although in many cases, she had not reaped the benefits of the fairness and equality of which she preached). To the countless number of Black women who formed networks to advance spiritual, economic, social and racial uplift, I trace my spiritual lineage through them.

In the same tradition as Pulitzer-Prize winning writer, Alice Walker's (1983) work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, I examine the spiritual essence, creativity and contributions of Black women even in the face of pain and subjugation, especially as I examine my grandmother's spiritual journey. Walker's premise is that she could see the beauty and creativity of Black women, even in the Jim Crow South, expressed in the planting of their gardens and by the way they maintained their spirituality despite the brutality they endured. America's dark night of the soul is reflected in its treatment of Black women who have ingested a toxic cocktail of injustice, violence and brutality. Yet, these women have engaged in what scholar Monica Coleman (2008) in her book *Making a Way Out of No Way* coined as "creative transformation". Black women have used soul-resuscitating joy as spiritual warfare; took rage and turned it into passion; transformed bitterness into forgiveness; fury into non-violence; indignation into forbearance and cravenness into courage. It is the inherent agency of these women who spiritually shaped and formed me. Therefore, I have chosen to use as my primary source materials the work of Black Womanist Scholars, Christian and Islamic Feminist Scholars, and African Diasporic Religious Scholars to serve as seminal thought leaders in advocating for the need for gender justice in creating equity, equality and justice in faith communities.

In *Discovering Biblical Equality*, in the chapter entitled "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate" theologian Gordon Fee (2005), reminds us of the following:

[God's] Word had specific intent in its historically particular moments. Our task is to discover and hear that Word in terms of God's original intent as expressed by the biblical writer, and then hear that same Word again in our own historical setting, even when our particulars are quite different from those of the original setting. But this does not mean we need to keep their historical particulars intact as well. For good or ill, history brings changes to culture, a fact that is especially so for Western culture. Instead of seeing this as a debility, we should recognize the greater glory of Scripture and praise God for it. That he would speak so directly to their contexts is what gives us hope that God will always through that same Word speak again and again to our own historical context as well as to all others (p.371-372).

Scriptural interpretation matters and to Fee's (2005) point, the "historical particulars" also matter. Every human being deserves unparalleled access to equality, equity, and freedom. Human vocabulary fails in its attempt to describe the "social death" that African and African Diasporic women have faced after being muted and marginalized. The most unfortunate reality is that while the church should be a place of liberation for all – it has not always been a place of liberation or justice for Black women.

As an institution, the church has reinforced many of the oppressive ideologies which have stymied the progress and stomped on the spiritual aspirations of women to fully pursue their call to ministry. Communities of faith must start by examining the practices that do not promote justice, equity, or equality. Church work, particularly for women within the Black Apostolic Pentecostal Church, is often labor intensive. One would be remiss if they did not understand that it is Black women who often drive the recruitment; institution building; and micro-economies that are the sustenance for the Black Church. According to scholar Judith Casselberry (2017),

“Black women compose 75-80 percent of the active adult membership in The Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Inc. (known among its ranks as the COOL JC)” (p. 10). The COOL JC which is one of the largest Black Apostolic Pentecostal sects, has churches in the U.S., Africa, and Brazil. Casselberry (2017) in her book *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* examines the emotional, intimate, and aesthetic labor that COOL JC women perform as they construct “religious and communal identities” (Casselberry, 2017, 10).

Although my grandmother eventually came to a resolve which allowed her to syncretize all of her beliefs, what about those who are still grappling with the intrapersonal conflict of how to utilize their gifts within faith communities? One of the frontiers of oppression which has been pervasive for Black Apostolic Pentecostal women has been the interpretation of scripture within the church. This paper will propose ways that sacred text can be de-colonized to foster gender justice. First, we will examine the difference between polity and piety. While polity is the governance and constitutional structure of the church, piety are the embodied practices of the devotee in reverence to God. Polity is a man-made construct and we will examine how many of these constructs have been mistaken for spiritual immutable laws. Second, we will examine how and why an African worldview can offer promise in helping us resolve the intrapersonal conflicts that women, including my grandmother, grapple with as they are forming their spiritual and religious identities. Third, we will examine why the “interpretation” of sacred text matters. It is important to interrogate how interpretation of sacred text can be used to advance social reform that forges a pathway which leads to “gender justice”. We will discuss the works of scholars of sacred text both in Christianity and in Islam whose work can help us re-imagine new hermeneutical approaches to interpretation of sacred text which can be a pathway to forming a

liberation theology which has “no respecter of persons”. Fourth, we will examine the concepts of agency, piety and submission which are often at the forefront of COOLJC and other faith communities that contribute to the *emotional, intimate and aesthetic labor* brilliantly highlighted in Casselberry’s (2017) ethnographic research. In this section, I will examine some of the reasons that women choose, as a free will act of piety, to remain in patriarchal-led denominations and faith communities. Fifth, we will examine the historical epistemologies that have produced the Black female body politic and how these incendiary tropes have been used to justify why women should not serve as preachers in the Black church. We will also highlight the work of trailblazing Black women preachers and the impact these ministers have had in opening the door for women to pursue their ministerial callings. In summary, we will reflect and offer a call to action for the Black Apostolic Pentecostal Church to reflect on its “theological absolutism” in its interpretation of scripture as it relates to gender justice and equity.

Pentecostal Polity vs. Piety

But all the same I said thank God, I got another chance. I wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sitting on high, but there wasn't no pulpit for me.

– Zora Neale Hurston
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Scholar Judith Casselberry (2017) shares an account in *Laboring in the Faith* in which Mother England, a prominent *Church Mother* within the church, opposes the decision of Minister Lee, a male associate minister, who suggested that a devotee should be moved to another Sunday school class before consulting with her. After Mother England speaks privately with Minister Lee, the case was closed, and Mother England’s decision not to move the devotee to another class remained unrefuted (p.111). Casselberry (2017) describes the COOLJC as churches that are

“woman-centered kin units in which women’s centrality is characterized less by the absence of husbands and fathers than by the *significance of women*” (p.104). Within COOLJC circles, Mother England was respected as having moral authority within the church. Her wisdom and insight were valued within the church. Yet, as a matter of church polity, Mother England lacked the formal authority to make a decision without the final approval coming from a minister (who were all male) within the hierarchical church governance structure.

Clearly, there is a difference between moral and formal authority. We know that people can be born or elected to positions in which they are granted formal authority. Or in the case of the COOLJC, individuals (who are all men) are appointed to executive positions within the church leadership which grant them formal authority. On the other hand, moral authority is *earned* through relational trust. In the case of the COOLJC, women *earn* moral authority, in some instances, based on how they *behave* within church circles (e.g. respecting church protocols; living a “sanctified life” which is codified in their aesthetic presentation; living a life which bears an example of the standards of holiness regulated by the COOLJC). Men in authority are often determining who among the women in the COOLJC are the standard-bearers of what they coin “the beauty of holiness”. Which means that women are often under the watchful eye of the patriarchal gaze. The fact that one *earns* moral authority, yet one is appointed to formal authority within the church, makes moral authority itself, in this case, another form of labor for women in the COOLJC. The relational trust throughout the organization that women must obtain elevates and sheds a spotlight on “the contours” and “registers” of *labor* codified upon women in COOLJC circles that Casselberry (2017) brilliantly highlights in her research. In essence, while men are appointed to positions of authority, women, on the other hand, must earn the right to have their voices heard. The question is how much more powerful and impactful would the

COOLJC be if those with moral authority, without respect to gender, could also have the formal authority to pastor, serve in executive church leadership or even serve as the National Bishop of the Church?

Preaching, in the Christian church, is sharing the “good news” that Christ is the risen Savior, and women have done so since the beginning of the evolution of the first Christian faith communities. Mary Magdalene was trusted by Jesus to go and proclaim the message of His resurrection. Jesus trusted Mary to preach to the other disciples and proclaim that He rose and conquered death, as He promised to His disciples that He would do. It was Mary Magdalene who Jesus first chose to tell the good news. Jesus, with intention, chose Mary – not another one of His male disciples – to share this good news. If Jesus has “no respecter of persons” then why would the church discriminate based on gender? Mary Magdalene was, in fact, the first to preach the gospel and share the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Women and Positions of Authority in the COOL JC

Casselberry (2017) approximated that more than 70% of the active adult membership in the COOLJC is comprised of Black women. However, what is intriguing is that despite having a female majority, there are no women in the executive leadership of the church. What might account for their absence? Equally compelling, Casselberry (2017) argues that the “emotional”, “intimate” and “aesthetic” labor contributed by these women are a sustaining force to the church. Casselberry’s (2017) scholarship remains “the first sustained ethnographic study of Black American Apostolic Pentecostal women” in the COOLJC. So do these women possess agency if they are in the majority and are undertaking a disproportionate amount of labor to build and sustain the church, but are not represented in church leadership?

Casselberry's (2017) work is mammoth in its significance, because it represents and "sheds light on the particularities of the religious labor carried out by these women" and ways in which COOL JC women submit to male patriarchal leadership within the church (p.10). As part of the theological and epistemological stance of The COOL JC, the church does not ordain women to preach or serve as pastors, nor are COOL JC women permitted to serve on the executive council of the church board. COOL JC women can assume national and international roles as missionaries or "Presiding National Church Mothers" who run the women's auxiliaries of the church. However, Casselberry (2017) is clear in pointing out that "it is the rank-and-file female majority that constitutes the workforce and economic foundation of the church" (p.14). In fact, Casselberry reported that she used the lens of *emotional, intimate and aesthetic labor* as an analytical framework and turned her "anthropological gaze (if you will)" to view these women "deliberately through their labor" for the purposes of her research because of the power they wielded through their sheer numbers to examine the ways that their labor impacts the micro-economies of the church (p.13). In Casselberry's work, *emotional labor* is defined as the "boundary-spanning emotional management and covert methods these women devised to circumvent patriarchal structures to get the job done". *Intimate labor* looks through the lens of the work "at the altar" in bringing in new souls to Christ or as they say in COOL JC – "harvesting souls", which is a process of crying out at the altar sometimes for hours in a process the COOL JC calls "tarrying for the Holy Ghost", where new converts wait to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Finally, *aesthetic labor* refers to the "regulation on dress, which the church codifies most rigorously on women's bodies" as an outward appearance in upholding a high standard of piety and holiness (Casselberry, 2017, p.15).

Given that Black women make up more than 70% of the active adult membership of the COOL JC, the church *could not operate* without Black women. So the question becomes if Black women are able to wield that much power, why have they not demanded a seat at the executive leadership table? In not demanding a change in the COOL JC leadership policies does that demonstrate a lack of agency or should we view their submission to the theological and epistemological stance of the church differently? Before we answer those questions, let us briefly examine the theology, ecclesiastical polity and history of the Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Inc.

The COOL JC Statement of Faith

The Church of Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, according the organization's website (www.cooljc.org), the organization adheres to the following tenants of faith:

We believe in one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism. (Ephesians 4:5)

We believe that the Holy Bible is the Word of God. It is true. It contains the keys to inheriting eternal life, and it reveals the mystery of our faith. (John. 5:39; Deuteronomy 29:29)

We believe in the oneness of God, who was the Father in creation, the Son in redemption, and today, He is the Holy Ghost in The Church. (I Timothy 3:16)

We believe that Jesus is God, for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. We proclaim LORD Jesus Christ is the name of God that was given to this generation as the only Name whereby the people of this Grace dispensation of time can be saved. (Colossians 2:9; Acts 4:12)

We accept God's plan of salvation of baptism by water and spirit. Jesus Christ, who was our perfect example, though sinless, was baptized to fulfill righteousness. (John 3:5; Matthew 3:15)

We believe that water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is essential for forgiveness of sins, and confirms our belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. (Acts 2:38; Acts 8:37)

We believe that rebirth by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential today as it was in the days of the Apostles. (Acts 2:4)

We believe that the Word of God must be proclaimed throughout all the world, according to God's commandment. (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Romans 10:18)

Our Blessed Hope lies in Christ Jesus our LORD who has given us the victory over death and hell. Therefore, standing firm on His promise, we anticipate the second coming of Jesus Christ—that great day of resurrection which shall surely come. On that day, the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then, we which are alive and remain will be changed, and caught up together with them in the air. And so shall we forever be with our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. (John 14:3; I Corinthians 15:51-58; I Thessalonians 4:15-17)

Theology, Liturgical Worship Style and Ecclesiastical Structure

The theology of The Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith aligns with the “Oneness Pentecostal” movement which believes that God and Christ are one and that Jesus is God, for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. COOLJC proclaims that “LORD Jesus Christ” is the name of God that was given to this generation as the only *Name* whereby the people of this Grace dispensation of time can be saved. To further explain, the church believes that “Jehovah of the Old Testament was Jesus of the New Testament” and “LORD Jesus Christ” is the proper redemptive name of God. COOLJC uses a literalist interpretation of Acts 2:38 which says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”.

Therefore, salvation ultimately occurs for the Believer in a three stage act of grace which includes: 1) asking for forgiveness of sins, 2) being baptized in the name of Jesus and 3)

receiving the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues. The Holy Ghost is needed and necessary not only as the ultimate keeping power for salvation; equally important, it is the Holy Ghost which empowers the Believer to do the works that Jesus does – winning souls into the Kingdom; operating in the gifts of the Spirit; and advancing the five-fold ministry. Unlike the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, one of the theological tenants of the COOLJC is that the organization does not ordain women to preach and disallows women to serve as pastors.

The **worship style** is characterized by a fully-embodied, participatory engagement with God. The common hallmarks of Pentecostalism, such as speaking in tongues, spiritual healing, and the operation of the gifts of the Spirit, manifest God's presence as an embodied, participatory, ecstatic encounter with the Holy Ghost. When Bishop Robert C. Lawson was alive, he served as the founder and the sole governing prelate of the Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Inc. After Bishop Lawson's death, Bishop Bonner (who was installed as the Chief Apostle after Bishop Lawson) instituted a Board of Apostles – these are Bishops who provide oversight for the entire organization and create the **ecclesiastical polity (structure and government) for the COOLJC**. Chosen from the Board of Apostles is the Presiding Apostle who is the central figure of authority for the church. There is also the Board of Bishops (who represent various geographic regions or jurisdictions), the Board of Presbyters (local ministers who report to regional Bishops), the Executive Secretary, and the General Council.

The History and the Founding of the Church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

Briefly, let us look at Bishop Robert C. Lawson (1883-1961), who was the founder of the COOL JC organization. In his own account, *The Anthropology of Jesus Christ Our Kinsman*, Lawson (1925) argues that through anthropological study, one can trace all races, including the Black race, through the genealogy of Jesus Christ; the Blood of Jesus makes everyone whole and

members of a royal priesthood; and that the “most insidious cancer in the Body of Christ is racism and white supremacy because it is born out of pure ignorance” (p.5). Lawson began his ministry under Bishop Garfield Thomas Haywood who (similar to my grandmother) was an early convert at the famed Azusa Street Mission in California in the early 1900’s and later joined the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (P.A.W.). Bishop Haywood, Lawson’s pastor, having emerged from the famed Azusa Street Mission which was under the leadership of Apostle William J. Seymour. Apostle Seymour emphatically taught that God’s giftings flowed through any human vessel who was willing to submit and be used by God without regard to gender. As a result, Apostle Seymour ordained both men and women to preach the gospel. Bishop Haywood, also, ordained both men and women to serve as preachers and pastors. In fact, one of the women that Haywood ordained included Bishop Lawson’s wife, Carrie.

However, according to theologian Estrela Alexander (2011), author of *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African-American Pentecostalism*, after 15 years of serving under Haywood, Lawson left the P.A.W. *because he disagreed with Haywood’s stance on ordaining women preachers and preferred a more conservative code of dress for women in the church.* Lawson, born in 1883, had parents and grandparents who were once slaves. Having had women in his family who had been subject to sexual violation in the South, he believed that women should be highly esteemed in the church and their dress should reflect the highest level of piety and purity to reflect “holiness”, through their outward appearance, hence the term, “the beauty of holiness” was coined to describe the piety of women’s outward appearance esteemed in the COOL JC. Lawson believed that certainly women should be filled with the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues, and that they would receive giftings from God such as the ability to teach or have spiritual discernment. Yet, he did not believe that women should be ordained.

Lawson's stance on ordaining women preachers is puzzling because his wife, Mother Carrie Lawson, who had been ordained in the P.A.W. under Bishop Haywood, and was reported to be the one of the strongest and most powerful influences in helping Bishop Lawson to build and grow The Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith from the time it was formed in 1919. Both Alexander (2011) and Casselberry (2017) give significant honor and respect to Mother Lawson, who was called by those tuning in to listen to the weekly radio program which eventually drew thousands to Bishop Lawson's church the "*Glorious Praying Mother of the Air*", this title was bestowed upon her, due in large part, to the powerful prayers and exhortations that she gave weekly on the church's radio broadcast. The church started with 20 people and had grown to 3,000 parishioners at the time of her death, which preceded Bishop Lawson's transition by 10 years.

Lawson (1925) asserts in his own work, that he was a strong "champion" for education; admired W.E.B DuBois and believed in the notion of "*racial uplift*"; and was a strong proponent of the idea of "*lifting as we climb*". He believed in service. In addition to building the church, he created a number of businesses. Lawson created daycare centers, so that Black women could go back to school and get a college education. He owned several funeral homes, because there were a number funeral homes that would not accept the remains of people of color. He opened a grocery store in Harlem so that there would be fresh produce in the Black community. Lawson also started a private school for poor and minority students because he felt the local public schools, which were segregated, lacked the rigor needed for students of color to succeed in society. History's account of Lawson shows a man who made a significant contribution; yet, it also shows that Lawson, who spent 15 years in a ministry (P.A.W.) which not only ordained him, but also ordained women preachers and pastors which something that is currently prohibited

within the COOL JC that Lawson founded. The ministry where Lawson was ordained also had less stringent standards on the regulations on how women dressed. So, in fact, a historical analysis of Lawson's spiritual formation shows that he and the COOL JC benefited greatly from the talents, inspiration, and the leadership of women in the early stages of his ministry.

After being ordained in a church that licensed women to preach the gospel, Lawson decided when he founded his own church that he would create a governance structure that prohibited women from serving as preachers or pastors. Women could in fact serve in local and national leadership roles, but those roles would be limited to overseeing women's auxiliaries within the church. Lawson created an organizational polity and structure that aligned with "his" beliefs. As devotees of Christ, which laws ultimately are we to obey – laws made by humans or those which are divinely inspired by God? If Jesus chose a woman to preach, why would we create rules within the church that defy such an ordinance? It is easy to hide behind scripture to do the bidding for codifying church polity that one wishes to enforce. Oftentimes a prohibition on women preaching or leadership is a matter of polity not piety.

If the work of faith institutions is to provide the tools and teaching for spiritual cultivation then we must also "empower", not subjugate, those seeking to be transformed. Spiritual cultivation, while an inward process, often takes place with the guidance of spiritual leaders within faith institutions. As spiritual leaders, it is important for us to critically analyze and critique historical epistemologies which can overshadow the exegesis of sacred text. Or said differently, we need to be able to separate polity and piety. Polity is the structure, constitution and governance of faith institutions, the rules are created and regulated by faith leaders (human-made). Piety, on the other hand, is often expressed as the embodied acts of devotion and reverence of devotees as they demonstrate their love for the Divine. While attending service in a

sacred space may be seen as an act of piety, the governance structure that regulates that sacred space would be considered polity. There are times in which the lines have been blurred between polity and piety. We must grapple with which rules are human-made within the church and which regulations are divinely inspired and should be adhered to as an embodied act of piety in our devotion to the Divine. My grandmother's worldview empowered her to denounce the regulations codified upon her by COOLJC polity, while allowing her to foster a robust spirituality that allowed her to see herself as worthy of being a chosen vessel of the Divine.

An African Worldview that Provides Peace to an Intrapersonal Conflict

"I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me."

- Kwame Nkrumah

Patriarchy was created by humans; it is not a divine edict. In the African-Yoruba worldview adopted by my grandmother, gender would not disqualify one from being a spiritual practitioner or priestess simply because one is anatomically different from a man. This African-Yoruba worldview put my grandmother in direct conflict with the doctrinal beliefs of the COOLJC and her acceptance of her power as a spiritual diviner. Scholar Tracey Hucks (2008) in her article "From Cuban Santeria to African Yoruba: Evolutions in African American Orixá History, 1959-1970" in *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* highlight the richness of Candomblé. Also in Hucks' collaboration with scholar Diane Diakité-Stewart, Stewart & Hucks (2013) in "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field" in the *Journal of Africana Religions* unveils the beauty inherent in African-Diasporic Religions (ADR). Stewart & Hucks (2013) both show how African-American Christians, like my grandmother, syncretized their African Diasporic Religious

practices with their Christian practices. Hucks et al. (2008) has shed light on the agency and power inherent in African Diasporic Religions. Many societies in the African lifeworld defy the constraints of the crippling Western social constructions and miscegenation's of gender. More than ever before, what is being unearthed as we look at Africa and African Diasporic Religions through a lens not filtered by bigotry, we see the beauty and majesty of the African worldview which elevates our understanding and honors the *vital force* that lives within all of us.

Let us examine the scholarship of three scholars whose seminal research provides a conceptual framework and understanding of the African worldview which guided by grandmother. Scholars Laurenti Magesa (2013); Jacob Olupona (2014); and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) ontologically re-constructed the beauty of African and African Diasporic religions and its people. The scholarship of Magesa, Olupona and Oyewumi deconstruct the colonial tropes, distortions and perjuries once accepted as "absolute truth", sweeping out the debris left by deception, and making room for a new appreciation for the pre-colonialized view of Africa and its gifts and offerings to the rest of the world. Both Magesa (2013) and Olupona (2014) show us that African spirituality permeates, shapes, guides and influences human existence in every sphere of life (both sacred and secular), and encompasses and connects with the embodied material world, as well as, the disembodied immaterial world. African religious epistemology asserts that the Divine is fully present and alive in all creation (without regard to gender). Oyewumi (1997) argues that Euro-centric definitions of gender have been *socially constructed* and should be viewed critically when applied to societies outside of "the West". In fact, the Oyewumi suggests that the Western Academy has often engaged in a somewhat unscrupulous overreach in privileging the notion, in a demigod-like fashion, that the rest of the world must be formed, molded and socially constructed in its own image and likeness.

Magesa's scholarship highlights the beauty and sacredness of African religions and he contends in Chapter I of *What is Not Sacred?*, that, unequivocally, "*Ubuntu*", the idea that as spiritual beings, we should aspire to be guided by our "full humanity" or operate with "ultimate or accomplished humanness" is both a value and a supreme guiding principle inherent in many African religions. Magesa quotes Augustine Shutte in the same chapter by building upon his earlier definition of *Ubuntu* by explaining that "in interpersonal relationships" *Ubuntu* is "manifested as tolerance, patience, generosity, hospitality and readiness to cooperate". *Ubuntu* is a lived spirituality evidenced by integrity, a solidity or wholeness of character that is present in one's judgements, one's decisions and one's feelings" (Magesa, 2013; Shutte 2009, 98). Magesa's (and Shutte's) explanation of *Ubuntu* show that African spirituality is a lived experience that is both "existential" and "universal". Magesa also shows us that there is a symbiotic relationship between "actions" and "intentions"; noting, good actions are a result of good intentions. Idiomatically, turning that same principle upside down, Magesa notes that evil intentions produce evil actions. *Vital Force*, on the other hand, according to Magesa, is the energy of the Divine which lives in all creation.

Building upon Magesa's point that African spirituality is not just a belief system, it is a "human existential" lived experience, Olupona (2014) begins the chapter entitled "Worldviews" in *African Religions : A Very Short Introduction* declaring that "the integration of religion into all aspects of daily life poses a sharp contrast to the church-state dichotomy upheld in Euro-American societies; African religious worldviews permeate economics and politics on the continent, where the sacred and secular realms influence one another" (p.2). Olupona goes on to say that "nearly all Western democracies [are] predicated upon a particular vision of religion as something that can be extracted from public life and quarantined in its own sphere" (p.5).

Olupona shows us that African spirituality does not embrace the Western concept of “the separation of church and state”; conversely, there is no line of demarcation between the sacred and the secular, for African spirituality informs and guides every sphere of life. Olupona’s explanation of the African worldview makes legible, Magesa’s value for *Ubuntu*, given that every action is informed by intention and we are called upon to operate with the highest level of “integrity” possible in guiding our actions in relationship with the Divine, with nature, and others with whom we share community both in sacred and in public life, a principle which upholds the “moral and social order” in many African societies. Olupona also identifies a fluid, “three-tiered cosmology”, which serves as a conceptual framework for a “fluid”, “active” spiritual paradigm where there is on-going interaction between the visible material world and the invisible immaterial world (Olupona, 2014, 5). The richness of African spirituality is that it is a “lived spirituality”.

Given the rich legacy of the African people, Oyewumi’s (1997) assertion in Chapter 1 of *The Invention of Women*, that “biological determinism” or the preferred way that Western scholars have sought to explain differences in race, class and gender have advanced a distorted view of the way that gender, and even more specifically, “the body”, is always “*in view*” and “*on view*”, and thus the “*gaze of differentiation*” of certain types of bodies (e.g. black bodies, female bodies, etc.) “*are seen as genetically inferior* [to those of White male bodies], *and this, in turn, accounts for their disadvantaged social positions*” (p.2). For example, Oyewumi states that in the Yoruba society (which pre-dates Western colonialism), “social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology” (p.12). Therefore, Oyewumi argues that gender is neither a “universal” nor “timeless” social category; instead, it is a category of “difference”, and often “degradation” which has been projected onto societies outside of the Western world. While

some may argue that neither Magesa's nor Olupona's work dive in as explicitly to address gender as Oyewumi does in her work; however, it is important to note, and to reinforce Oyewumi's point, that the social construction of gender does not appropriately reflect the lens by which many African societies interpret their experiences and interactions. So it stands to reason that scholars, such as Magesa (2013) or Olupona (2014), who are critically examining African spirituality may not necessarily discuss "gender" in the same manner as those interrogating the social aspects of the Western religious experience. Moreover, one could then deduce that gender (not as a *social construction*) but as a way to denote "the inclusion of all" who possess agency (whether anatomically male or female) are indeed represented and are implicit in both Magesa's and Olupona's work. We make this claim because *Ubuntu* and *Vital Force* (referenced by Magesa) and the three-tiered cosmology (referenced by Olupona) includes *all of creation* without the *demarcation* and *differentiation* of "male" and "female" (especially when one understands how those terms are used in Western scholarship).

Magesa (2013), Olupona (2014) and Oyewumi (1997) provide a contextually-rich understanding of the African worldview. In this section, we will examine the syncretizing of Candomblé, (an African-Brazilian religion which started in Brazil) and Pentecostalism. However, as a point of departure from other scholarship on Africa and African Diasporic religions, we will critically analyze how Candomblé and Pentecostalism have been syncretized through the lived spirituality of my grandmother. My grandmother was a diviner, a teacher of metaphysics, a practitioner of Candomblé and she called herself a "sanctified, fire-baptized Holy Ghost" preacher. She had an experience that transformed her life, the lives of her parents and continues to reverberate through time and changes the lives of everyone in her bloodline.

Scholar Tracey Hucks (2008) helps to broaden our understanding of Candomblé, an African-Brazilian religion which emerged between the 16th and 19th century in Brazil.. Candomblé was birthed out of the syncretism between the Yoruba religion of West Africa and Roman Catholicism. Candomblé, unlike a number of other Western religions, does not have holy scriptures; instead, it is an oral tradition which is monotheistic. The Supreme Being in Candomblé is called Oludumare and is served by lesser deities known as Orixás (spirit guides). Devotees of Candomblé believe that every practitioner has been assigned their own Orixá (in Christianity, they would be considered angels) who guides their destiny and offers protection on their journey while on earth. Candomblé is a blending of the religions brought to Brazil by the enslaved Africans from Yoruba, Dahomey and Bantu coupled with elements of Roman Catholicism introduced by Portuguese colonialists who controlled Brazil at the time and abducted slaves from Western and Central Africa.

Scholar Maha Marouan (2007) in the article "Candomblé, Christianity, and Gnosticism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" described Candomblé as “one of the major religious expressions of the Africa Diaspora” (p. 121). Scholar Paul Christopher Johnson (2002) author of *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*, described Candomblé as a “Brazilian redaction of West African religions recreated in the radically new context of a nineteenth century Catholic slave colony” (p.41). In Candomblé the devotee focuses on the worship of the Orixás who carry different energies and are often conceived of as ancestral spirits who influence the individual personalities of the devotee. The devotee can reach the Orixá assigned to them through divination. Ignoring or honoring one’s Orixá is posited as being the cause for specific maladies or challenges that the devotee may encounter in their lives. Different Orixá favor different colors, foods and specific activities, so it is important for human flourishing

that each devotee knows the Orixá who has been sent to guide their lives (Johnson, 2002, p. 117-119).

My Grandmother's Story

Scholar Dominique Zahan (2000) in “Some Reflections on African Spirituality” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meaning and Expressions*, says that “One is not born a mystic in Africa; one becomes it” (p.20). Which brings us to the story of my grandmother. The story of my African-Brazilian grandmother intrigues me. Her story is fascinating because my grandmother did not fit into the categorizations that are often superimposed upon practitioners of African Diasporic Religions. The Academy is often misguided, and limited by its categorizations, definitions, and its need to grant legitimization to an idea before it can be considered worthy of adoption. People of color are often forced to fit neatly into a box pasted together by preconceived notions, definitions and labels created by The Academy. Those who do not accept the label created for them by the Academy is the equivalent to engaging in treason. When I say to religious scholars that inculcated within my African-Brazilian grandmother's “lived spirituality” were African indigenous religious practices, all too often, she is then categorized and summed up as a Voodoo priestess. When I tell them my African-Brazilian grandmother was Pentecostal, she is then summed up and classified as an evangelical, replete with all of the other misconceptions that come with that in liberal spaces. Immediately she is thought of as embracing the prosperity gospel; she is labeled as a stoker of the flames of hostility against the LGBTQ community; and of course, she is deemed intolerant of all religious practices that do not align with the Western Christian paradigm. All of these preconceived notions are projected upon her, although none of them are true.

I have yet to have anyone lean-in and, just for the sake of curiosity, ask me to tell them more about her story. The Academy, one of the most powerful intellectual brain-trusts in the world, is quick to tell me that she either fits *here* or *there*. Certainly, there could be no nuance in the story of an African-Brazilian woman. Instead, she must fit into the categorization that best makes her “legible” to the Western audience whether that category fits her or not. Whether there was truth in any of the conceptions about her as a result of the category she was placed in was inconsequential. “Ill-legibility” is a greater crime oftentimes in academic scholarship than accuracy when the lives of people of color are explored. Here, we will veer from the practice of immediate categorization and hold space for a woman of color who described herself as an African-Brazilian Apostolic Pentecostal Diviner.

In my coastal community in Brazil, my grandmother, who was not only a pastor, but a mid-wife, was considered one of the “go-to” diviners in the community. Every morning at 3 AM you could hear her praying and speaking in tongues and making declarations about what she needed God to do. You could smell the sage and other incense depending on the problem or situation that she was addressing in prayer. She called it “case work” – often people came to her to connect and get guidance from the Orixá, while others in the Pentecostal circles would come to “get a Word of Knowledge” or “Prophetic Utterance” – because she was considered a seer. She masterfully connected with people from both worlds – whether they knew God through Candomblé; had an experience similar to hers of the “in-filling of the Spirit” in the Pentecostal Church; or syncretized the two as she had done. Her contextually-rich spiritual journey began when she and her parents, while visiting relatives in California, attended the famed Azusa Street Mission Rival Services.

My grandmother was 12 years old when her parents took her to the Azusa Street Mission for the first time. Every time she talked about the experience, she described it as “my soul being engulfed by bliss”. She recounted that an hour after she and her parents arrived at the service that both her mother and father began shaking and speaking in tongues. She said that soon after that, she felt a heat consume her entire body that was like an inferno and then, she began speaking tongues. She said the strangest thing happened to her. She said that while she was speaking in tongues, she could also hear the English translation of tongues that she and others were speaking, although everyone was speaking in different languages. She said she heard the voice of God tell her to lay hands on her mother who had suffered with cysts on her back and stomach. When she touched her mother, she recounted, that immediately the cysts evaporated and her mother never suffered with cysts or any form of skin disease for the rest of her life. My grandmother declared that from that day forward she could not deny the supernatural power of God.

She said that when she and her parents returned to Bahia, that her parents often held prayer meetings in their home and would invite members of the community to “tarry”, the process of laying out at the altar waiting to be filled with the Holy Spirit like the disciples did on the day of Pentecost. My grandmother said that often her parents would lay hands on people and they were instantly healed or they would prophesy to those in attendance at their home until the wee hours of the morning. My grandmother said that she nor her parents ever thought that their practice of Candomblé rituals were in conflict with the new impartation of the Holy Spirit they received when they were at the Azusa Street Mission. In fact, my grandmother felt strongly that receiving the gift of the “Holy Ghost” as she called it, took her into a higher dimension of understanding and access into the spiritual realm. She felt that she had a deeper understanding of

the Orixá because she was provided with supernatural insight by the Holy Spirit. In essence, my grandmother's African worldview fostered a new understanding of Christianity. She did not adopt a view of Christianity which subjugated and oppressed her. Nor did her newfound spiritual revelation of receiving the "fresh fire of the Holy Ghost" (which she often referenced it as) stand in conflict with her practice of Candomblé. Instead, as a teenager, she evolved and re-casted Christianity as a lived spirituality which promoted an ontology that could uphold the weight and complexity of her operating fluidly in the realm of the Spirit and communicating both with the Holy Spirit and with the Orixás without the latter being considered heresy. My grandmother's understanding of Christianity was not just informed by the emotional catharsis she felt from being "Holy Ghost filled" or practicing Candomblé, she used scripture to substantiate syncretizing the two belief systems. Let us briefly walk through scripture and analyze how she constructed this new ontology.

The Creation

First, Magesa (2013) states *In What Is Sacred?: African Spirituality* that "in the African worldview, spirituality is more of an activity than a passive quality. Rather than a state of being, it is a way of behaving, or rather relating. It involves dynamic relationships, between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchange of energies among all beings" (p.26). Important to the worldview of the African, according to Magesa (2013), also was the notion of "vital force" which is the energy that is present in all living things – humans, animals, plants, trees, nature, etc. Johnson (2002) referred to *vital force* as "ashe", and defined it as "a creative spiritual force with real material effects" (p.14).

My grandmother believed in "vital force". Since *vital force* existed in all things, including nature, it was not a stretch for her believe in Genesis 2:7 which said:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul (KJV, Genesis 2:7).

She believed that all creation involved the elements. Dust and clay were critical in forming, sculpting and making man. She often used dust and clay from the earth in her rituals to heal the infirm and call life back into those who were suffering from illnesses. She would sprinkle both water and dust on them and command the infirm to return to their God-ordained state of wholeness. She believed that not only did she possess the energy of God (which is vital force), she believed the elements also contained the same energy. Therefore, she could not accept that if the Divine imparted its energy into the elements and used those elements to form creation, it was unconscionable to her that she could not be used by God because she was a woman.

Magesa (2013) further asserts that in the African worldview “all reality is spiritual because it is linked together by spiritual power and is connected to mystery” (p.25). One of my grandmother’s favorite scriptures was John 4:24:

God is a Spirit. They that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in truth (KJV John 4:24).

My grandmother embraced her own divinity because she believed that the same Spirit that created the universe and everything that was in it, also lived fervently in her; meaning, she was inextricably connected to the *vital force* of the universe. She believed that worshiping God in “spirit and in truth” also included communicating with the Orixá, whom she believed God also created. She did not believe that she could fully execute her purpose as a diviner if she did not tap into the “full truth” of God, which meant embracing the Orixá and the Holy Spirit. She believed that God was the author and creator of the collective wisdom that resides in the

ancestral realm going back to primordial mankind. My grandmother believed that there would not be a portal to access that wisdom without diviners submitting themselves as vessels to connect the embodied material world with the disembodied immaterial world.

A Three-Tiered Cosmology

Olupona (2014) states in *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* that the African worldview includes the belief in the “three-tiered cosmology” in which “the human world exists between the sky and the earth (including the underworld)”. Olupona goes on to say that “African cosmologies portray the earth as fluid, active and impressionable with agents from each realm constantly interacting with each other” (p.4). My grandmother often shared the story in Daniel 10 to substantiate her claim that we communicate with the Spirit world and that the Spirit world has been assigned to bless us, just as the Orixá have been assigned to bless and guide us if we communicate with them. In the Old Testament, Daniel who had been placed in a Lion’s Den and prayed three times a day. It was not until the twenty-first day that Daniel saw the angel of the Lord. The angel shared with him that he heard his prayer the first day that he made his request known, but the angel said that he had to fight an opposing force in the spirit realm that was attempting to block him from getting to Daniel. The angel finally appeared before Daniel and comforted him and Daniel said:

Then there came again one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me And said, oh man greatly beloved fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea be strong. And when he spoke unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my Lord speak; for thou hath strengthened me. (KJV 10:18-19)

My grandmother saw herself often in the story of Daniel. She said that there were times that she, like the angel who was sent to restore Daniel, was opposed by intercepting forces in the Spirit realm, but ultimately she was just like the angel who fought the forces of darkness and victoriously came to Daniel's rescue. She believed that every answer and every tool that we needed for human flourishing was in the Spirit realm. Her view of Christianity did not put her in tension with the work that she did as a diviner to help those who may have felt trapped like Daniel and did not see a way out. She considered herself a portal into the realm of the Spirit to get the divine answers that people in her community needed to thrive.

God Has Charged Nature To Assist Us

Water and fire are important elements in Candomblé. One of my grandmother's favorite Biblical accounts can be found in I Kings 18:24-39. Elijah, God's Prophet, faced great opposition. However, he had the favor of God on his side. To show that he served the true and living God, Elijah took wood covered it with water and then called fire down from heaven. I Kings 18: 38-39 says:

Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. Then all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God. (KJV, I Kings 18:38-39)

My grandmother could relate to water and fire being used in a spiritual ritual or "demonstration" as she would call it. She would often say, "When both water and fire are used by God, and the Orixá, you can expect the universe to assist in a supernatural way". She asserted that the goal

was to achieve equilibrium with the entire universe. She believed that we have to commune with nature because it is a tool given to us by God to assure our victories and broaden our understanding of the Divine.

Spirit Possession

In the article “The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation”, scholar J. Lorand Matory (1999) starts by engaging the commentary of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits’s argument that “African-Americans in virtually every American nation retained some greater or lesser memory of [their] African past” (Matory, 72; Herskovits, 1966,1941). Matory goes on to conclude that spirit possession in the Brazilian Candomblé could be taken to demonstrate the African derivation of shouting or the behavior of those filled with the Holy Spirit in Black Northern American Churches” (Matory, 72; Herskovits, 1958 [1941]: 220-1). Matory concludes that Candomblé and other African religions “are religions of spirit-possession, divination, that also define peoplehoods” (75).

Scholar Margaret Thompson Drewel (1997) in the article “Dancing for Ogun in Yorubaland in Brazil” points out that “to utter the name of something may draw that something into actual existence...not only within the mind and the body of he who utters and he who hears the word, but also in the physical world as well” (p. 200). Drewel goes on to say that” The Yoruba believe strongly in the power of the word, or rather in a mysterious force called *ashe*...that quality in a man’s personality that makes his words – once uttered – come true” (202). My grandmother believed herself to be a metaphysical teacher in the Yorubian sense and believed Jesus was the greatest metaphysical teacher who ever walked the face of the earth. My grandmother saw herself as a vessel, having been filled with the Holy Spirit, who had the ability

to speak, proclaim and affirm as Jesus did. She used Jesus as her ultimate example. My grandmother often surmised that when Jesus said to the man who was infirm to “pick up your bed and walk” (John 5: 8-16 KJV)), she believed that God had called all of us to pick up our beds and walk. *Our beds*, according to her, were those challenges which weighed us down and incapacitated us as we are striving to fulfill our purpose. Her ministry, as she defined it, was to speak into the lives of people so that they would be empowered to *pick up their beds and walk*. She realized that the COOLJC did not have the authority to tell her who she was in God. God, and God alone, gave her both the mandate and the tools to minister to others. She decided that she would follow God’s path for her life and pursue her call to preach.

My grandmother was clear, without the experience that she had at the Azusa Mission, she felt that she would not be as impactful as a diviner, she often said the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit “felt like fire shut up in my bones”. She said nothing had ever come close to the experience she had when she was filled with the Holy Ghost at Azusa Street. She said she had a true Upper Room experience as it was described in Acts 2:1-4:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw tongues like flames of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (KJV Acts 2:1-4)

My grandmother was clear that after she received “the Holy Ghost” that it was not an either/or proposition of whether she should she embrace Pentecostalism or she should embrace Candomblé. The in-filling of the Spirit, according to her, allowed her to walk in the metaphysical

dimensions with greater awe and wonder. She said she tapped into “ashe” (the West African and Yoruba philosophical concept of the power to produce change) with more depth and became a seer who had greater precision and insight. She felt that the mystical experience she had at Azusa took her into a dimension that made her highly sensitive to the Spirit world. The wonderful thing about her experience, was that she always felt that the in-filling of the Holy Spirit and practicing African and African-Diasporic religions was for everyone. She never felt that she had been chosen to have an experience that would not be afforded to whomever was willing to yield themselves to the Divine.

Reconciliation

My grandmother’s healing started with her forgiving “herself” for thinking that she had to adhere to anyone else’s conception of who God ordained her to be – for she believed that she was an expression of the Divine. She engaged in a ritual of surrender and self-forgiveness. She built a small altar in her house. She burned sage to clear the atmosphere. She wrote on note cards all of her fears derived from not being accepted – whether it was by members of the COOL JC or her Yoruba family. She wrote down all of the words and insults that she thought she would receive from either group. Then she surrendered those words and her fears up to the Divine, the Holy Spirit and to the Orixá (the lower deity in Candomblé). She asked God to forgive her for caring more about what others thought of her than she did about fulfilling what she was divinely charged and purposed to do on earth. She submitted to God and asked the Divine to give her the courage to fulfill her unique purpose. She then burned the cards, as a sign that she made peace with her decision to accept both her calling and her spiritual identity. She then reconciled her intrapersonal conflict.

Summary

My grandmother evolved spiritually. When she viewed her spirituality through a Western lens her intrapersonal conflict was exacerbated. However, it was her African worldview that allowed her to visualize and accept herself as whole and complete. She was not a woman who needed to be subjugated to a man. Although, she had been told it was her duty to accept this subjugation by those who adopted a “Biblical Fundamentalist” approach to scriptural interpretation in her Christian denomination. She was not a Christian who was engaged in witchcraft (as many of her Western contemporaries described her Yoruba practices). She made peace with the fact that she was a Holy Ghost-filled diviner and practitioner of Candomblé, as she later called herself. Despite the colonial representation of Western Christianity, my grandmother found a way to de-colonize the Christian experience. She found a way to walk in her authority as a practitioner of Candomblé and as a Spirit-filled, “fire-baptized Christian”. She boldly engaged in both “creative” and “spiritual” transformation in her community. Whether she was talking with the Orixá; to nature; to the ancestors; or receiving impartations from the Holy Spirit, she considered herself a channel for the Omnipotent. She felt spiritually adept and fluid enough to pick up a celestial signal on any plane in the *three-tiered cosmology*. She understood the difference between the limitations that were placed on devotees due to dogma, ignorance and misinterpretation of sacred text and held those limitations in contempt. She never accepted that she was “less than”, nor did she embrace “deficit” or “reductionist” thinking about her worth as a Black woman nor as a practitioner of indigenous African religions, she found both to be a plus. This new understanding, which allowed her to resolve the intrapersonal conflict that she grappled with came from an adoption of an African-Yoruba worldview and an understanding of scripture which promoted gender justice.

The Interpretation of Sacred Text Matters – Christian and Islamic Feminist Scholars Make a Case for Gender Justice.

If God created male and female in God's own image, then both the man and the woman are equal within God's eyes because both are patterned after God. Women cease to be a copy of a man, an appendix to a story centered on the man's need for companionship (p. 1542).

---- Miguel A. De La Torre
Reading the Bible from the Margins

Christian Feminist Scholars Make a Case for Gender Justice

In this section, we will examine the work of Black Womanists, as well as Christian and Islamic Feminist scholars who have advocated for gender justice. Gender Justice is cannot be conceived as a topic only germane to Christian faith communities. Gender justice is a tie that binds communities of faith both Christian and Islamic Feminist scholars. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that “none of us are free until all of us are free”. Given that, I would assert that gender justice is needed and necessary in humanity’s quest, as King said, of “bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice”. As people of faith, we have often failed to apply a *hermeneutics of suspicion* to the *interpretation* of sacred text which propagates “otherness” and difference as a lens for legibility. Oftentimes, the faith community has justified exclusion, and the denial of rights, especially when it comes to issues of equity, equality, and freedom – particularly when we discuss the rights and agency of Black women in all faith traditions. From a political, social, economic, and cultural standpoint, we must take into consideration how interpretations of scared text impact the well-being of Black women situated within a society which has propagated inequalities whether upheld by colonial powers, imperial regimes, authoritarian dictatorships, or modern democracies.

One of the areas of intrapersonal conflict for many women in the Black Apostolic Pentecostal Church, including my grandmother, was wrestling with their inability to be ordained within the COOL JC. The stance that women should not be ordained to preach is derived from what scholar Elisabeth Schussler – Fiorenza (2014) calls “literalist fundamentalism” which she defines as adopting a theological stance which views the Bible as “the direct, inerrant Word of God to be accepted by Christians without question” (p. 40). The Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Inc. (COOL JC), takes the stance that women should not be ordained to pastor (or preach) because of the literal interpretation of the following scriptures:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be in silence. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 (KJV)

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man; and the head of Christ is God. 1 Corinthians 11:3 (KJV)

Schussler-Fiorenza, asserts that often “the Bible is used to inculcate mindsets and attitudes of submission and dependency as “obedience” to the will of God that dispose us to accept and internalize violence and prejudice” (p. 40). Schussler-Fiorenza’s words could be a “call to action” to reimagine what we, as the church, have taught and propagated as conventional wisdom and absolute truth. Western Christianity has adopted a number of approaches to biblical interpretation and hermeneutics, which has dehumanized, devalued, and diminished the self-worth of women not only in the church, but in society at large.

Schussler-Fiorenza (1992) coined the phrase “kyriarchy”, which highlights a set of connecting social systems built around domination, oppression and submission (Schussler-Fiorenza, 2006, 18). The concept of *kyriarchy* further asserts that potentially an individual might be oppressed in some relationships yet privileged in another. In the case of the Black Apostolic Pentecostal church, oftentimes the very men who are oppressed by the dominant white male

patriarchal society are privileged within the Black church, yet victimized by the larger society. In some cases, due to the powerlessness of Black men in the larger society, Black men exert dominance over the women in the church; because in the church – unlike the larger society – there, they do have power.

Schussler-Fiorenza asserts that wisdom is “...a perception of wholeness that does not lose sight of particularity, relativity, and the intricacies of relationships. Wisdom understands complexity and seeks integrity in relationships. It is usually seen as using the left and right brain in a union of logic and poetry, as bringing together self-awareness and self-esteem with awareness and appreciation of the world and the other” (Schussler, 2014, 23). We could conclude that without divine wisdom (*Sophia* in the Greek) restorative social justice would die unborn, ignorance would run rampant, and creativity would dissipate into the abyss. Perhaps, our new wisdom paradigm within the Black Apostolic Pentecostal Church should be to accept, embrace, appreciate and celebrate that the unique and powerful gifts that women are given by God are quintessential to humanity reaching its spiritual, social, and intellectual apex.

We stand at the dawn of a new day; the time has come for the church to recognize that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not bound by gender identity or expression. Galatians 3:28 tells us that in God there is “neither...male nor female, for you are all one in Christ” (KJV). How could we then interpret that there should be a justification for gender bias if we critically adopt the notion that “we are all one in Christ”. Biblical Scholar Karen King (2013) argued that “the true spiritual nature of human beings is *non-gendered*, such that people are truly neither male nor female, but simply “Human” in accordance with the divine image of the transcendent God” (p.83). King further makes the point that sex has been ascribed “ahistorically to the physical makeup of bodies, while gender is ascribed to a social construct”. Or said differently, “gender is

not innate; instead, it is a psychologically ingrained social construct” (King, 2013, 84). Keeping that in mind as we “wed ideology and rhetoric”, according to scholars Caroline Van Stichele and Todd Penner (2009), we must consider “the ways in which texts operate in and through structures of power even as they appear not to be doing so” (p.185). Stichele and Penner (2009) use Galatians 3:28 as an example, by saying that while the text “seems to argue for the obliteration of differences between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, [the text] may well reinforce those very differences rather than promote equality as is often presumed” (p.185). While some see the scripture as a call for us to obliterate all of the barriers and to focus on our “oneness” in Christ, others see the naming of the differences in that scripture as a way to promote a type of “separate” but “equal” status in Christ. However, history has proven that *separate but equal* is an oxymoron. An inherent separateness or “otherness” in the way in which these categories have derived through a colonial, patriarchal, and misogynistic lens has always been synonymous with inequality. Given that, we call upon faith institutions to use a gender-critical approach in examining sacred-text. Using a gender-critical approach means that spiritual leaders would critically examine sacred text with a willingness to unpack, deconstruct and account for the ways in patriarchal ideas, conceptions, idiosyncrasies and assumptions are pervasive in the text and be willing to grapple with what that means for devotees who are not male who serve within the church.

Now more than ever, as our country continues its reckoning with the inequities and inequalities that are at the intersectionality of race, gender and socioeconomic status, spiritual leaders are being asked to meet this moment with the moral courage needed to “speak truth to power”. Exercising the ability to exhibit moral courage is not just to hold external stakeholders accountable for perpetuating systemic injustice; equity and equality must start within the walls of

faith institutions. Scholars Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (2013) assert that “religious reform is necessary for social reform” to take place (p.164). The idea that religious reform precedes social reform holds true. The Bible, and other sacred texts, have been used to justify oppression not only in this country but throughout the world.

The subjugation of women (and other minorities) is not unique to this nation; we can rightfully conclude that the oppression of women has left a universal stain upon humanity. As communities of faith we must acknowledge that many of these oppressive ideologies have emerged from an interpretation of sacred text that concretizes patriarchy and misogyny. Both of which (patriarchy and misogyny) advance the creation of structures within church governance that render women powerless by denying them formal authority to make decisions and hold positions in executive leadership. Brenner and Fontaine (2013) suggests that we must re-evaluate our exegesis by examining “three sometimes overlapping forms of Biblical revisionism: *a hermeneutics of suspicion* (a skeptical critique of biblical text), *a hermeneutics of desire* (the bending of a text to our will) and *a hermeneutics of indeterminacy* (the acknowledgement that ‘there is always another interpretation’)” (p.165). Brenner and Fontaine (2013) also point out that “the Bible – whether inspired from above or not – was written here below by human beings over a period of millennia in acts of composition not very different from our own, we may want to recognize how filled it is with gaps and fractures, and take advantage of its contradictions” (p.165). Religious reform is the antecedent to social reform. With that in mind, we should adopt a hermeneutics that dismantles injustice and oppression. Ultimately, we should charge ourselves, as spiritual leaders, with seeking a hermeneutics that values liberation for all people without discrimination to race, gender or socioeconomic status. What if my grandmother, and other women like her, who discerned that they were called to preach, remained in the COOLJC?

Imagine the richness of the talent that would be inherent in the organization if everyone, without respect to gender, could fully bring their gifts to advance the mission of the ministry. Instead, there are a number of women, like my grandmother, who leave the COOLJC church so that their gifts and leadership skills do not die on the vine in the hope of being ordained elsewhere.

Summary

Interpretation of sacred text matters – not in insignificant ways – but in ways which are profoundly significant, and often existential. Less we forget, there were passages from the Bible that were not critically examined or interpreted contextually that were used to justify and propagate chattel slavery in the United States (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-24, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9-10). Contrary to slaveholders, abolitionists read the same passages of scripture and interpreted chattel slavery as being one of America’s dark nights of the soul. Stichele and Penner (2009) point out that the church cannot ignore how “interpretations attentive to gender, sex, and sexuality shape and determine the kind of meaning that is derived from texts” (220). Schussler-Fiorenza (2006), King (2013) and Stichele and Penner (2009) make sound arguments for why the interpretation of scripture matters. We see that the church, which has traditionally been governed by men for centuries, have interpreted scriptures that has proliferated sexism, classism, and patriarchy. The tactic of using scripture to make men legible as privileged figures of power ordained by God to exercise authority over women permeates not only through the “structures of power” in the church but also infiltrates the society more broadly.

Islamic Feminist Scholars Make the Case for Gender Justice

While the Christian church continues its fight for gender justice, it is important to note that gender justice is not just an issue which has been undertaken by the Christian church. Islamic

Feminist Scholars have also been strong proponents of how the interpretation of sacred text impacts the advancement of gender justice. Scholar Zayn Kassam (2014) asserts in the chapter “Re-Reading the Quran From a Gender Justice Perspective” in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Studies in the Twentieth Century* that “like their monotheistic Jewish and Christian sisters, Muslim women must also consider the patriarchal context of centuries of interpretation of their primary sacred text, which for Muslims is the Quran” (p.179). Comparatively, Jaqueline Hidalgo (2014) asks the question, “How in the 20th century did feminists interpret and engage the Bible?” Hidalgo (2014) asks that question in light of the “logics of anti-black racism and racialization; white supremacy and privilege, imperialist and settler colonialist imperatives and deployments, as well as European and Euro-North-American centered norms [which] all informed early twentieth-century academic scholarship” (p.199). Not the least of all of the “isms” which informed the thinking of early interpreters of sacred text (which is not limited to racism), we must be careful not to omit sexism and the implications of what misogyny and patriarchy has on interpretations of sacred text.

The patriarchal male gaze does not suggest that difference is good; instead, using itself as the standard by which all others must be juxtaposed, would proport that any variation of the standard, especially when you add gender, race or religious difference, as “the other”. Scholar Asma Barlas (2006) in her keynote address “*Does the Quran Support Gender Equality? Or, Do I Have Autonomy to Answer This Question?*” which was delivered at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, notes that the burqa (body veil) has been used to justify the “othering” of Muslim women through the Western gaze. In her address, Barlas argued that this sense of “otherness” is problematic because the Muslim woman is “made lacking what the subject has... [and is also made to be] threatening to the stable world of the subject by her radical difference.”

Scholar Meyda Yegenogku (1998) author of *Colonial Fantasies: Toward a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* concluded that due to the perceived “otherness” and “radical difference” perceived by the West that the “other” is, in fact, “born accused” (p.39). No one should be “born accused”; yet, we see the cultural and societal stigmas that are projected upon certain actors because of their race, gender or religion. What Western society has falsely accused people of, in large part, due to factors that they have no control over has caused us to have a society where difference has served as an albatross around the necks of those who can never fit into a narrow frame of those characteristics which are deemed acceptable – acceptable being defined as male, white, and Christian.

Equality is God’s idea. While human polity subjugates, embracing a God-consciousness view of life liberates. Scholar Amina Wadud (1999) in *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* wrote that “man and woman are two categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential” (p.15). Wadud goes on to assert that “the Qur’an does not support a specific and stereotyped role for its characters, male or female” (p.29). It is *taqwa* (piety) or as Wadud calls it the “consciousness of Allah”, which leads to how God judges the heart. Kassam (2014) declares that “there is no gender distinction in the emulation of piety and God-consciousness” (p.186). Wadud concludes that women, as well as, men have “the same rights and obligations on the ethical-religious level, and have equally significant responsibilities on the social-functional level” (p.102). If we embrace the notion that equality is a God-idea, then it must become a moral imperative to ensure that no human being, regardless of gender, is subject to being oppressed by another within a community of faith.

Since equality is God's idea, then we must honor the full humanity of women, which often starts with how women are perceived within communities and families. For women of faith, how they are perceived within communities and families is directly linked to how sacred text within their faith communities is interpreted. Scholar Asma Barlas (2002) also showed in her article "*Believing Women*" which appeared in *Islam: Understanding Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* that "the family in Islam is not patriarchal inasmuch as the Qur'an's treatment of women and men in their capacity as parents and spouses is not based in assumptions of male rule/privilege or sexual inequality" (p.167). Furthermore, Barlas (2002) makes clear that "nothing in the Qur'an suggests that males are the intermediaries between God and women" (p.198). Nor, as Barlas (2002) argues, can the Quran be held "responsible for how a particular social or sexual division of labor has evolved over time" (p.199). Scholar Zayn Kassam (2014) points out that we should view each of the tenants and principles in the Quran as "gender-egalitarian teachings" (p.188). Scholar Nimat Barazangi (2004) in her work, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* upholds that "most male scholars and religious leaders perceive and propagate the female's role as complementary to that of her male guardian" (p.14). Viewing women as only "complimentary" to men, Barazangi suggests that such a stance "contradicts the basic Qur'anic principle of human autonomous trusteeship in the natural order of justice and in mutual domestic consultation" (p.14). Kassam (2014) points out that "any male or female Islam-identified person understands themselves as "a trustee of God on earth (khalifah)" and stands firmly on the "ontological equality between both men and women" since each will be responsible for standing before Allah independently for their works, character and purity of heart individually (p.190). In order for spiritual leaders to align their practice with a God's-conscious

and centered approach to equality, injustice of any kind must become anathema to the household of faith.

Until it is our firm belief that injustice is repugnant, we will not honor the full humanity of women. Why would God create a people and decide that some, solely based on gender could not rise to fully fulfill the purpose of the Divine? Legal Scholar in Islamic jurisprudence, Khaled M. Abou El Fadl (2005) argued in *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* that “women are equal to men because they are rewarded and punished in exactly equal measure , and they have equal access to God’s grace and beneficence” (p.261). Scholar Abu El Fadl further concludes that a “gender-egalitarian” interpretation of Islamic sacred text would show that the Quran “protects women from exploitative situations and from situations in which they are treated inequitably... [while educating] Muslims on how to make incremental but lasting improvements in the condition of women that only be described as progressive for their time and place” (p.262). In this new dispensation, we can no longer abdicate our responsibility. We must take clear and calculated steps to “bend the moral arc towards justice”, which means we must exercise the moral courage to denounce inequality. Whether justifying inequality, or fostering and promoting justice and equality, both are decisions, and both are constructs made by man. We must choose which of these man-made ideas that we will support, uphold, justify or dismantle.

Summary

Islamic Scholars in their quest for “gender-justice” (Kassam 2014; Hidalgo 2014; Barlas 2002 & 2006; Yegenogku 1998; Wadud 1999; Barazangi 2004; Abou El Fadl 2005), point us towards a loving, fair and just God who promotes “ontological equality” and “taqwa”, which is piety or moral righteousness. Kassam (2014) also points out that “the Quran consistently directs

its edits and observations towards ameliorating the status of and benefitting women, concomitant with the Quranic notion of “*reverencing the womb*” (Qur’an 4:1); and finally, the need to read, study and understand the Qur’an from multiple points of view, embracing differences, and not just from the viewpoint of vested hegemonic male privilege...which is why a verse of the Qur’an [as well as the Bible] must be read within the context of those surrounding it, as well within the historical contexts in which the verses were revealed” (p.195).

To reiterate, not only in Christianity, scholars who critically examined Islamic sacred text, like Kassam (2014) argued that there were portions of the Quran which were “essentialist and unjust”, which must lead us to examine the “gender justice potential” as we identify a new lens for interpretation, using a lens which promotes gender equality, to “reclaim the agency of women”. Kassam also challenged us to “read [the Quran] holistically, not selectively, and verses should be read as part of the social and historical context in which they were revealed” (p.183). In Kassam’s work (2014), she referenced the commentary of scholar Amina Wadud (1999) who invited readers to embrace an interpretation of text which promoted an “*egalitarian system*” in which “women would have full access to economic, intellectual and political participation and men would have value and participate fully in home and child care for a more fair and balanced society” (p.186).

Collectively, as both feminist scholars (Byron and Lovelace 2016; Casselberry 2017; Hill-Collins and Bilge 2016; Kassam 2014; Plaskow 2015; Scholz 2014; Eugene 2014; Wadud 2014) and practitioners in the faith community we should employ a hermeneutics of suspicion to any sacred text that subjugates, oppresses, dehumanizes and tyrannizes others who are a part of the shared journey of the human experience – and that includes Black women. We must not only have the courage, but the tools, to denounce such practices. Muslim Feminists scholars like

Adujar (2014) reinforced the idea of “universalism – the idea that all human beings are equal”. Indeed, we must bring an interpretative lens to sacred text which allows all women to fully live out their journey of spiritual cultivation in faith communities that promote liberty, justice and freedom.

If the work of faith institutions is to provide the tools and teaching for spiritual cultivation then we must also “empower”, not subjugate, those seeking to be transformed. Spiritual cultivation, while an inward process, often takes place with the guidance of spiritual leaders within faith institutions. As spiritual leaders, it is important for us to critically analyze and critique historical epistemologies have infiltrated the exegesis of sacred text. Or said differently, we need to be able to separate polity and piety. Polity is the structure, constitution and governance of faith institutions, the rules are created and regulated by faith leaders (man-made). Piety, on the other hand, is often expressed as the embodied acts of devotion and reverence that devotees have for God. While attending service in a sacred space may be seen as an act of piety, the governance structure that regulates that sacred space would be considered the polity of the church. There are times in which the lines have been blurred between polity and piety. We must ask ourselves which rules are man-made within the church and which regulations are divinely inspired and should be adhered to as an embodied act of piety or devotion to God?

Agency, Piety, and Submission

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

– I Thessalonians 5:23 (NASB)

Not only have Black women been oppressed by racism, they have also suffered at the hands of patriarchal systems – racism and patriarchy have created a two-edged sword. First, the question is often asked if whether we should question the agency of women who are in patriarchal-led denominations or faith traditions? Given their ability to choose to submit to patriarchal-led denominations or faith traditions, it is clear that their freewill choice of submission demonstrates that they agency. Certainly through a spiritual lens in Christianity, one could define agency as the ability to discern and execute spiritual piety and the giftings of Divine to bring edification to the Body of Christ. As noted earlier, women comprise 70% of the church membership in the COOLJC and run the microeconomies of the church (Casselberry, 2017). So certainly, they are spiritually agentive. A leading scholar on human agency and social cognitive theory Albert Badura (2018) defines agency as the “human capability to influence one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions” (p.164). However, Badura is also quick to point out that “most human pursuits involve other participating agents, so in that sense there is no absolute agency” (p.164). Agency and power take on various forms depending on where Black women find their roles located in the larger social script within organizations or communities. However, we do know that some Black women within the Black Pentecostal Church are situated within a misogynistic and androcentric society which “culturally marginalizes their femininity” and they found ways to go around, under and above the power structures which have stymied their progress and chosen to succeed despite the obstacles.

Before we unpack this further, it is important to briefly examine the role that colonialism has played in shaping the “selfhood” of Black people more generally, and then Black women more specifically, in this country. Scholars Edward Blum and Paul Harvey (2012) authors of *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* make clear that there is no

discussion of the ‘construct’ of religion itself without a close examination of the role that colonialism has played in “informing, defining, categorizing, legitimizing and shaping the world’s views about Christianity in the United States”. There is a “hand in glove” inseparability – a symbiotic relationship – which existed between Christianity as it was defined, dating back hundreds of years, which highlighted Western (European) superiority and exceptionalism.

As a result, coded within the double helix of the genes – the very DNA – of the Western European colonial scholars’ interpretation of the Bible is the promotion of white supremacy. Scholar Sylvester Johnson (2004) in his article “Ham, History and Illegitimacy” best asserts this by saying “when Negro Christians self-inscribed the race as Hamites in the biblical record they become “circumscribed” by the “soul” of this heathen...To be heathen was to be spiritually backward, unmitigated embodiment of evil, the incarnation of decadence. The heathen was, indeed the enemy of God” (Johnson, p.68).). It was inescapable to not recognize that for centuries, as a way to justify slavery, Christian churches have erroneously taught that Black people were the descendants of Ham and that Ham was cursed, so then too would be his descendants. This is especially important because Johnson (2004) goes on to assert that Ariel’s Thesis is that “the bible is not only a book of symbols and stories to be drawn upon for living. The Bible [in fact] is the story of the world, so if the Negro did not come from Adam and Eve, then where else had they emerged. So the only way to prevent themselves from being invisible [or A-Historical] was to locate themselves in the Bible” (p.67). So why is this important in this context? The historical myth of situating the very existence of Black people in history as an “enemy of God”, coupled with the indoctrination of justifying the privileged position of “Whiteness”, while leaving no room for debate as to whether the same attribution or distinction

should be ascribed to Black people, has led to religion being used to question the legitimacy or simply outright denigrating the existence of people of color – Black people in particular.

Patriarchy and sexism, which have been mainstays for far too long in Western culture, have not only germinated, but metastasized – in certain cases – within the Black church. The oxymoron, of course, is that the Black church would not exist without Black women. It is within this milieu, understanding this history and all of the insidious and precipitous effects which continue to ravage the souls of Black people, that Monica Coleman (2008) declares in *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* that Black women through “creative transformation”, taking that which is “evil, unjust, and gratuitous” and creating a space of liberation, freedom and beauty continues to be the work of the Black woman in our society. I would add that it takes agency to produce creative transformation and Black women have a long legacy of building a castle out of broken pieces, the very pieces which were meant to debilitate them, they have used those pieces to transform not only their lives, but to also revolutionize the world.

A Different Lens for Examining Agency

While it is clear that women in the COOL JC make up the majority of the membership; it is also true that women are not ordained to preach or serve as pastors. However, it is also resoundingly clear that Lawson’s ministry was advanced in large part due to the contribution of women. It is easy to cross-examine the inner workings of the church and declare that the women within patriarchal-led denominations or faith traditions are oppressed. However, upon close examination of the COOL JC church, many of the women in Casselberry’s (2017) ethnographic study were highly educated and held very powerful positions in industry (e.g. Bank Presidents, Corporate Attorneys, School Superintendents and entrepreneurs), yet they chose to be members

of a church that did not ordain women as preachers or pastors. Does that seem incongruent? If you judge their decision through a neoliberal lens, which gives one the freedom and liberty to self-regulate and do what is best for themselves, then their decision would appear to be an anomaly or be a difficult conundrum to dissect. However, what if the goal is not freedom as defined through the lens of neoliberalism? What if the ultimate goal is anchored in something far more substantive and has eternal implications? While the world may be guided (or “*misguided*” depending upon your stance) by an ethos of “doing what feels right for you”, there is a force more powerful than self-indulgence or acceptance based on the consensus of men. What if one is ultimately guided not by the acceptance of humans, but by what they feel pleases God?

For many people of faith, it is their submission to live a life that they feel aligns with God’s standards for character and righteousness which guides their life and their decision-making. For some, living their lives guided by the principles of sacred text fosters their spiritual cultivation – making the very act of human submission to the will of God an agentive act. Jesus, Himself, said, “*I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but to do the will of Him who sent me*” (KJV John 6:38). Jesus submitted to the will of God. His submission to the will of God provided a prototype and a roadmap for the Believer. Perhaps, in this case, agency can be viewed in a different way. Conceivably, the act of submitting your *free will* to God is an act of agency – which gives us a different lens by which to examine the women in the COOL JC church. Submitting their character and lifestyle to align with what is codified in the COOL JC church, referred to by the church as “the beauty of holiness”, is an agentive act. For in fact, the women in Castleberry’s (2017) study are using their agency to “submit their bodies as a living sacrifice which is holy and acceptable unto God” (KJV Romans 12:1). Viewing the agency of women who choose to remain in patriarchal-led denominations or faith traditions through a lens

of their deep spiritual commitment to live a life that they consider to be pleasing to God provides a nuanced look at both Christian and Muslim women, who are discussed here, as empowered beings; instead, of viewing them as disempowered or subjugated. To further examine spiritual piety as agency, let us look at the piety of devotees in Black Pentecostalism and Muslim women as interlocutors through the lens of Christian and Islamic scholars.

Submission as Agency and Theology as Relational Trust

Throughout the ages, there has been a wedge of division in the political and spiritual relationships between Christians and Muslims. However, if one were to visit a COOL JC service and see the women dressed in white, with head coverings, dresses below the knee, and elbows covered, the COOL JC women share some similarities in their outer appearance with Muslim women in the United States. The integral part is that for both the COOL JC and Muslim women, their outer appear is an expression of their piety and their relationship with the Divine. What we see in both instances, the COOL JC and Muslim women submit and make free will choices to dress modestly as part of their spiritual transformation. Scholar of Islamic Studies, Martin Nguyen (2018) asserts, in his work *Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination*, that “theology is a relational act” (p.23). Nguyen (2018) further asserts that “theology entails the resolve to transform our lives in accordance with our convictions” (p.23). Nguyen’s theological framework best encapsulates the commitment, dedication and humility of the COOL JC women. *Emotional labor* is interpreted in the COOL JC theology as putting on the “breastplate of righteousness” (Ephesians 6:14), which more concretely translated entails a willingness to seek God’s way above all other options presented; a submission to the will of God above and beyond our own will; and having an ability to walk in peace even when tumultuousness and confusion abound.

Casselberry (2017) adds that for COOL JC women “the struggle, effort, exertion, achievement, training, negotiation and contestation [within a male patriarchy] also require significant emotional labor and emotional management” (p.106). *Intimate labor* through a COOL JC theological lens involves *witnessing* and *bringing souls to Christ*. The COOL JC coins this work as “*harvesting souls*”, which often translates into countless hours spent at the altar by COOL JC women helping individuals pray and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, according to Acts 2:38. Casselberry (2017) describes this register of labor as “work that involves embodied and affective interactions” (p.127). *Aesthetic labor*, seen through the COOL JC theological lens, is what the COOL JC women embrace as one of the imprimaturs of the “beauty of holiness”, signified by their external presentation of piety symbolically being “without spot or blemish” in accordance with Ephesians 5:27; given that, women dress modestly, keeping their heads covered in the church, wearing below the knee dresses, and refraining from all forms external adornments like jewelry (except for wedding rings). Casselberry (2017) asserts that “a woman, by her appearance, exemplifies not only herself as one of the ‘Ambassadors for Christ’ but also the institution and sets a standard for the body of Christ to model *the beauty of holiness*” (p.153). In keeping with the “relational” aspect of Nguyen’s theological framing, these acts embody the willingness of both COOL JC and Muslim women to both submit and fulfill their commitment to the Divine.

Nguyen (2018) declares that serving God and worshiping God are “coterminous”. Nguyen (2018) further asserts that “to worship [or submit to] God is to serve God”, and ultimately one finds fulfillment when “these two dimensions of life, service and worship are made to intersect and align as closely as possible” (p.18). The alignment of service, duty, personal responsibility, and the willingness to both change and align one’s practice with God’s

expectations for righteous living is what drives and motivates COOL JC women to embrace the regulations which are codified by the church in both their outward appearance and undertaking the labor-intensive activities associated with church building. If one is freely submitting their will in obedience to the Divine, would we define that as agency? Engaging scholars Judith Butler (1999) and Saba Mahmood (2005) should provide us with deeper insights in uncovering the answer to this question. However, first, let us re-visit the question asked earlier, do COOL JC possess agency if they are in the majority and are undertaking a disproportionate amount of labor to build and sustain the church, but are not represented in church leadership? Well, that would depend on which theoretical lens one looks through and it would also depend on how agency is defined. In Judith Butler's (1999), now seminal expose, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, agency would be defined as having the capacity to act freely, or "being free" (xxiv, emphasis added). Seen in this light, agency empowers one with the freedom to choose, even in the face of an external force or agent.

One of the most compelling arguments examining submission in religious piety as agency was put forth by Scholar Saba Mahmood (2005) in her groundbreaking book *Politics of Piety*. Mahmood's (2005) research focused on the intersection of Islam and feminist theory. Mahmood (2005) defines agency as "the capacity to realize one's own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (p.8). It is through this lens that Mahmood (2005) examines the question of "how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?" (p.6). Mahmood's research takes a critical look within the Women's Mosque Movement, which emerged more than 20 years ago, as part of the Islamic Revival, when women began meeting (first in their homes and then within mosques) to study the Quran. Through the meetings the

women teach the principles of Islam, and share with women “how to organize their daily conduct in accord with the principals of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior” (p.4). Mahmood discovers that many of the women she interviewed “described the condition of piety as the quality of “being close to God”: a manner of being and acting that suffuses all of one’s acts, both religious and worldly in character” (p.122). In that sense, *submission* is not a correlate to *oppression*. The wearing of the veil is not an *act of oppression*; instead, it is an act of *submission* and “ritual observance”. If one is freely subjecting their will to do something for the greater purpose of pleasing God, is that considered oppression?

It is Mahmood (2005), who asked the question in her grounding breaking research, *what if freedom and liberty are not the ultimate end game? What if obedience to God is the ultimate goal?* Towards that end to examine Judith Butler through the eyes of Mahmood would offer an intriguing theoretical lens to study the women in the COOL JC. Mahmood (2005) says that “freedom, in this formulation, consists in the ability to autonomously “choose” ones desires no matter how *illiberal* they may be” (p.12). The COOL JC strongly promotes education and a number of women in the COOL JC, are doctors, lawyers, teachers, and corporate C-Suite executives – one recently appointed to serve as Senior Vice-President of Chase Manhattan Bank and another recently retired as a Senior Vice President at Goldman Sachs on Wall Street. So the COOL JC has an interesting religious heritage, which includes very accomplished women who choose to submit to the standards of dress, male patriarchy (women are not licensed to preach in the COOL JC church) and the standards of piety set in place by the church, similar to a vast number of the women who Mahmood (2005) studied in *Politics and Piety*. After examining Mahmood (2005), could we say that in even in settings where it appears to be counterintuitive to liberal thinking, that agency, liberation and freedom, as constructs, exist in ways which cannot be

understood by researchers and academics if only viewed through a Western, liberal, or postmodern feminist lens?

Summary

For women within the COOL JC or the Islamic Revivalist Mosques who choose to remain in patriarchal led faith traditions or denominations, as an expression of exercising their spiritual piety, their choices should be upheld, respected and honored. However, the concept of *choice* here must be qualified. In some cases, for example in the case of my grandmother, if the choice is I stay and forfeit ordination, or leave to fulfill my calling, is that a choice or am I just managing my options? While we all have choice in a democracy; however, there also women within faith communities who submit to God out of piety, but are submitting to church polity out of necessity. Perhaps, there are women who remain in patriarchal-led faith communities because that is their church or faith community of origin (where they were born). Perhaps there are women who given the choice would create a pathway for ordination within the COOLJC, but choose to stay because they feel the COOLJC or other faith communities are an essential part of their individual and communal spiritual identities and they don't want to forfeit those relationships. Certainly, there are also very accomplished women by society's standards (e.g. doctors, lawyers, presidents of financial institutions, and college professors) who do not have angst over being in a patriarchal led denomination. Devotees have a right to express and live out their faith in a manner that enriches them spiritually. This scholarship does not impose upon a devotee to choose a path that is more or less patriarchal in its governance structure. However, one of the goals of this scholarship is to vet out the difference between polity (which is human made) and piety (which is a divinely inspired inward process of spiritual cultivation). Certainly, it is one thing to uphold an idea because you feel you are upholding the immutable law of God;

conversely, it is quite another proposition to uphold an idea or belief thinking it is the immutable law of God only to find out that the idea they held onto, although vastly agreed upon among many, is just an opinion of a human being. We all have a right to choose. As we make an informed choice, we not only understand the origin of how gender injustice was woven into some of our faith institutions, but we should also examine the historical epistemologies which drive the Black female body politic.

Examining Historical Epistemologies and the Black Female Body Politic

I believe the black church is the heart of hope in the black community's experience of oppression, survival struggle and its historic efforts toward complete liberation.... It cannot be made elite because it is already classless. In America it came first to the community of slaves. It cannot be made racial because it is too real for false distinctions. It cannot be made more male than female because it is already both, equally....(pp. 181-182).

– Delores S. Williams

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk

From colonial times, even in the wake of slavery, to the turn of the 20th century during the Great Migration, Black women have had to overcome great odds to be accepted as leaders of faith institutions within the Black church. In his article, “The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit” which appeared in *Women and Religions in the African Diaspora*, Scholar Wallace Best (2006) posits that “cultural beliefs about the Black female body shaped perceptions of women who led churches and created complex conditions within which they had to maneuver in order to legitimate their ministerial authority” (p. 102). Best (2006) goes on to say that the “culture of resistance to Black women preaching” is not merely rooted in the “objectifying [patriarchal] gaze” (p.102). Instead, Best asserts that “historically, when the subject of Black women in positions of ministerial leadership comes up, the discussion leads directly to a dialogue about

women's bodies, sex and sexuality – they are inextricably linked together” (p. 104). However, women such as Pastor Mary Evans of The Cosmopolitan Community Church and Elder Lucy Smith persevered and found a way to maneuver past these stigmas and idiosyncrasies and lead churches in Chicago. Not unlike the *aesthetic labor* that Casselberry (2017) points out that is codified upon women in the COOLJC, even women who have been ordained like Pastor Evans and Elder Smith, have had to appear “androgynous” in appearance, or only wearing church robes which covered their bodies to “desexualize” themselves, or “appropriating” the title of “Mother” to re-cast themselves not as sensual beings, but as “caretakers of the souls of humanity”. These were Black women, according to Best (2006) who despite having to confront racism, sexism and patriarchy head on still made an indelible mark in their communities as church leaders.

We should never forget that it has taken trailblazers, iconoclasts and pioneers to break up the fallow ground of discrimination, oppression, sexism and inequality, which is exactly what pioneering Black women preachers such as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Judith Foote did in the face of incredible obstacles and yet they prevailed. William Andrews (1986) who edited the book *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, asserted that early Black women preachers in the mid-to-late 1800's paved the way for what we now know as the Black church through their demonstration of courage and bravery. Jarena Lee, denied ordination as a licensed minister, still traveled more than 700 miles throughout the country preaching, although the church would only recognize her as “an exhorter” (not a preacher). Lee, not having the support of the African Methodist Church's Publication Committee to publish her autobiography, refused to acquiesce and self-published a thousand copies of her work. It was Lee, who proclaimed, similar to my grandmother, that the yearning within her to preach felt “like fire shut up in her bones”. Then there was Zilpha Elaw, knowing that she could

be captured, kidnapped or sold into slavery, remained undeterred from her mission to go to the slave states with her anti-slavery message and preach liberation. Finally, Judith Foote, overcoming an early life of indentured servitude, and being lambasted by her husband for her desire to preach the gospel, went on to become the first woman ordained as a deacon in the A.M.E. Zion Church and later an Elder, Foote being only the second woman in the church's history to hold that title (Andrews, 1986). These powerful women found a way to "*make a way out of no way*".

Andrews (1986) and Best (2006) show that one way Black women have displayed their agency was through preaching the gospel. By comparison, Casselberry's (2008) ethnographic account of the women in the COOL JC, when juxtaposed with Andrews (1986) and Best (2006) accounts, show a different form of agency. Although women are not allowed to serve as preachers or pastors in the COOL JC, despite disproportionately outnumbering men, Casselberry (2017) cautions that it would be a misnomer to suggest that these women are not agentic without taking into account "the extent of their spiritual, material, and organizational efforts as they construct individual and communal religious identifies and spaces" (Casselberry, 2017, p.7).

Casselberry's (2017) expertise as an anthropologist and ethnographer does not lend itself to her opining or making crude judgments about the women who choose to submit to male authority or the dogma of the COOL JC; instead, she goes "*behind the veil*", as W.E.B. DuBois says, and shows us the underbelly of the micro-networks of power and influence often wielded by the women of the COOL JC. The COOL JC women were the teachers at Sunday School, the laborers at the altar, ran the businesses and micro-economies supported by the church. It was these women who passionately shared the gospel and upheld the doctrine of the church which caused the church to thrive and grow (Casselberry, 2017). Even when you study the history of

the COOL JC, it is clear the significant role women have played starting from its inception in building and growing and sustaining the church. While it is clear that women within the COOLJC and other patriarchal-led faith communities have agency, it does negate the fact that women in those spaces could have even more agency if there was a pathway for them for ordination and to serve in the executive leadership of the church.

Conclusion

*There is **neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female**, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. – Galatians 3:28*

Christ decreed that “I have come that you might have life and that they may have it more abundantly” (KJV, John 10:10). An abundant life offers pathways and choices to use our gifts to fulfill all that we have been called to do to transform the world. If we are to ensure that we have gender justice in faith communities then we must examine ways that “every” devotee can fully use “all” of their gifts in the household of faith. We can adopt an exegesis which compels us to exorcise the “psychological diseases” of bigotry, we must be sure to both confront and conquer our own bias, discrimination, prejudice, and practices of inequality. As spiritual leaders we can no longer claim to have “pure hearts” while we perpetuate inequality and sexism, indiscriminately allowing both to rule our thinking and our hermeneutics. As Brenner and Fontaine (2013) asserted, “*religious reform is necessary for social reform*” to take place (p.164). If we are to radically improve the treatment of Black women in the larger society, then we must model how Black women should be treated starting within the household of faith.

The courage of Black women is undeniable, irrefutable and unassailable. Their greatness is not measured only in “*what*” they have done, but in “*who*” they are, in essence. Black women answer the call of the ancestors who cry out for liberation and freedom. The late groundbreaking

African-American iconoclastic actress Ruby Dee once said, “*Racism stomps on daring.*” Yet she, and countless other women, undeniably *stomped on racism* and dared to dream big – this is who Black women are – iconoclasts, warriors, intellectuals, savants, and “champions worthy to be wrestled with”. What makes the “agency” of Black women so powerful is that they are victors, despite having to drink the “toxic cocktail” of White hegemony, patriarchal oppression, colorism, and sexism. There is no force or albatross which has stopped the inexhaustible vein of supply of intelligence of Black women. That indomitability of the human spirit to follow the example in the COOLJC creed which is to “persist, run on and be victorious” encapsulates the agency inherent in Black women – it is the Black woman. The greatest days for faith communities are ahead only if, as an institution, spiritual leaders can embrace equality, equity and inclusion for all of its congregants, which means respecting the contributions, gifting and divinity inherent within Black women.

When women lead, it is not just a value-add for other women; it is a value-add for all human beings. We know that Africa is the birthplace of all creation. It would perhaps stand to reason that if we adopted the worldview given to us by our ancestors, and not the worldview of colonists, that all of us would have the tools needed to see ourselves as whole and complete. My grandmother’s intrapersonal conflict was resolved through the lens of her African worldview. In fact, it was her grappling with Western patriarchal ideology through scriptural interpretation that originally caused her conflict. Scriptural interpretation led her to believe that she was unqualified to preach based on gender. So too, scripture was used to convince her that her Yoruba practices compromised her Christian beliefs. Scholars Gay Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (2016) authors of *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* asserted that our “black bodies and our black lives cannot be left outside of the interpretative process. Likewise, the

bodies and lives of all interpreters are integral in the interpretive process (p. 15)". It is true that Black women have not been legible very often in Christian text and that includes Black women on the continent of Africa and those who reside in countries impacted by the slave trade, which make up the African Diaspora. The lives of African and African Diasporic women and their unique struggles must be addressed if the church can become a place of peace and reconciliation (both internal and external).

Black women have never had the luxury of fighting sexism in isolation. When you combine sexism, racism, and socioeconomic injustice, you have a three-corded rope. As Ecclesiastes 4:12 says that "...a cord of three strands is not easily broken" (KJV). Despite the arduous nature and challenge of breaking down and leveling the playing field for Black women, the work must be done. While *a cord of three strands is not easily broken*, no one said it could not be broken. Ethicist and womanist Scholar Toinette Eugene, who was featured in Susan Scholz article (2014) "Stirring Up Vital Energies: Feminist Biblical Studies in North America", was an early adopter of declaring that "sexism must be understood as part of other oppressive ideologies such as racism, militarism and imperialism because the structures of oppression are intrinsically linked". Eugene further suggested that a feminist biblical hermeneutics must include "an alternative liberating vision, and praxis for all oppressed people by using the paradigm of women's experiences of survival and salvation in the struggle against patriarchal struggle and degradation" (p. 55). While both of Eugene's points resonate, the second, which calls for the womanist and Black feminist agenda to be a vision of liberation and "praxis for ALL oppressed people", especially rings true.

Due in large part to our White patriarchal past, combined with a theology that favors and privileges White men, we have failed to use the suffering (and consequent liberation) of Black

women as a litmus test to measure (and eradicate) human suffering. Maya Angelou eloquently asserted that “if you are a human, then no human suffering can be foreign to you”. In our “politics [and hermeneutics] of omission” (p.58), we have failed to see, as Schussler-Fiorenza (2014) points out, that our agenda as womanist theologians should be to advance “holistic biblical well-being for all”. Schussler-Fiorenza (2014) proclaimed that our agenda should be one which has a “hunger and thirst for justice” (p.69), and only then can we “dismantle the rhetoric [and praxis] of empire” (p.63). If we “dismantled the rhetoric and praxis of empire”, as Schussler-Fiorenza suggested, then the intrapersonal conflicts, like the ones my grandmother grappled with would die unborn.

Having critically examined the anthropological and ethnographic accounts from a number of African and African Diasporic religious scholars such as Hucks (2008) and the collaboration of Stewart & Hucks (2013) made the syncretism of my grandmother’s Yoruba and Pentecostal experience legible through their scholarship. Magesa’s (2013) words resonate now, more than ever before, when he declared that an “African understanding of life might contribute generally to a more humane world order” (23). Ultimately, Hucks (2008); Stewart & Hucks (2013); Magesa (2013), Oyewumi (1997), Olupona (2014) and other scholars of African and African Diasporic Religions have shown us is that the African worldview builds capacity, agency and has the ontological and epistemological heft and power to enlighten, lift and elevate our consciousness to embrace a new understanding of the lived spirituality of devotees in African and African-Diasporic communities. Even as we take on the fight to end sexism, we must continue to respect, honor and appreciate the women who have, as a matter of their free will, chosen to remain in patriarchal-led faith denominations and faith traditions. The African-worldview for my grandmother elevated her understanding of her inherent leadership skills,

while other women in her denomination chose to submit to the rules codified upon them by the polity of the COOL JC. In the end, the goal is to eradicate any oppressive ideology that is anathema to human flourishing. The path that one takes to flourish or reach fulfillment is left up to the individual. However, we know, that we can create sacred spaces where the choices of women are honored and appreciated.

The scholars who write with an appreciation of an African worldview make the experience of my grandmother legible to the world, her story is no longer thrown into the heap stack of the disregarded. As the grandchild of a Black woman from Bahia who self-identified as a “Christian Spiritual Apostolic Pentecostal” pastor, she made no distinction between her beliefs as a Pentecostal and her embrace of African spirituality – through the lens of the atrocity of history of people of color and due to the fragmented lines of demarcation and categorization created by the Academy – I appreciate how much courage it took for her to be a spiritual iconoclast. Her lived spirituality and embodied practices included: 1) communicating with, and receiving messages from, the ancestors; 2) using herbs to perform rituals for healing; 3) operating in the gifts of prophesy as “a seer”; 4) speaking and interpreting tongues; 5) laying hands on the sick and infirm so that they could recover and be restored to wholeness; 6) preaching and teaching the Gospel; feeding the homeless; and 7) advocating for the disenfranchised – all of these practices, for her, represented a robust spiritual and social identity. She never embraced the Christianity of the West which deemed her Hamitic lineage or ancestry a curse; instead, she traced her spiritual identity through the *Order of Melchizedek*, the High Priest, who was the forerunner of Christ. So, she believed that the same blood which ran through the veins of Jesus Christ, was the same blood which ran through her veins, and thus her spiritual heritage gave her the right to stand in communion, dominion, relationship and power with the source of all life who is the Creator of

the Universe. I have embraced that teaching which has been passed down to me. My social identity is comprised of the principles of spirituality, civic engagement and advocacy for the disenfranchised that were instilled in me by my grandmother.

My grandmother saw herself as both fully human and fully divine. She knew that she was endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit, and as a result she did not shrink back, seek the acceptance of humanity or consider being her a form of herself that would have been inauthentic to her being. When my grandmother walked down the street, it was like the parting of the Red Sea – both men and women stopped, smiled, often kissed her hand. Men who were involved in mischief quickly apologized and often re-routed themselves as they were walking towards her. They did not re-route themselves out of fear, but out of respect for her because they did not want her to see them engaged in behaviors that were incongruent with what she embodied. While she had great social capital in the community, she was also a wife and mother, who had a husband who worshipped the ground she walked on and treated her with dignity and respect. Her power was not based on gender; her power came from the value that she added to that community as a spiritual practitioner.

Given that, I find that my lived experience, which is informed by my spiritual formation in that community has allowed me to see the value and the divinity inherent in all people, without the tags and categories that often have been placed on humans to determine their worth and worthiness (e.g. male, female, Black, white, gay, straight, etc.). Because of my expanded worldview, which was fostered, shaped and formed by the worldview of my grandmother, I can celebrate all people as a divine expression of the Most High God. My grandmother's story is like the inner-weaving of fine silk – spooling together the interlacement of courage, strength,

spirituality, hope and self-discovery – which made it a prolific journey in storytelling that was worth the excursion. She epitomized what it means to have access to gender justice.

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