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**Resisting the Imperial Peace:
Black Women and Self-Love**

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Resisting Imperial Peace

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It was not pre-arranged. It just happened that the driver made a demand and I just didn't feel like obeying his demand. I was quite tired after spending a full day working.

Rosa Parks

In the epigraph above, Rosa Parks, an African American woman, reflects on her December 1, 1955, decision not to leave her seat and move to the back of a city bus to accommodate a white male. Prior to that historic day, Mrs. Parks had complied with the Birmingham law which required Parks to sacrifice her comfort and convenience for white male and female passengers. Like other Jim Crow laws, this Birmingham statute reflected U.S. compliance with global subordination of black persons. Its requirement to reverse the era's gender conventions – that Parks, a black *woman*, give up her seat for a white *man* – meant Parks, or any black woman who accommodated a white male, experienced intersectional subjugation based at once on gender and race. In her decision to disobey the U.S. Jim Crow law requiring that she sacrifice herself, Rosa Parks broke social and religious conventions and asserted her human dignity as a value equal to that of the white male who challenged her. In doing so, Parks took up the task of resistance by expressing self-love.

As an element of long-established social conventions that asserted subordination of black persons as “natural” and welcomed, Jim Crow laws and practices had the sanction of Christianity. Religious historian Albert Raboteau writes that when evangelizing enslaved Africans in the United States, “the missionary’s ideal picture of the *Christianized* [enslaver-enslaved] relationship [was] the Southern myth of a benevolent planter-patriarch presiding benignly over his happy black folks.”¹ This imaginary ideal persisted well into the twentieth century as exemplified in assertions by some southerners that outside agitators disturbed the peaceful coexistence of black and white persons with civil rights demonstrations. The picture of

¹Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 165. Italics added.

felicity of all classes of people with their status during and after the colonial period in the United States coincided with the transnational mythology that undergirded colonization. The broad foundation of that mythology was the assertion that heathenism and barbarism necessitated subjugation of indigenous persons by Europeans. A variety of imaginary character types were laid upon this background to indicate more specific roles assigned to colonized persons. Once established, this basic colonial structure persisted for well over two centuries then transformed itself to maintain imperial European political and economic domination. Development of the character types was accompanied by “christianization” – colonizers’ practices and intentions in using Christianity as a mechanism to establish and promulgate a religious identity, moral codes, conceptions of citizenship, structures of education, social behaviors and roles, etc., that simultaneously developed and inscribed hetero-patriarchy, settler rule, white supremacy, and racial subjugation in policies, practices, and the imagination. Current political and economic structures combine with imaginary construction, Christianization, and Western military might to maintain this “imperial” peace established centuries ago. In the transnational colonial political order, Parks pushed against a character type she was assigned as a black woman. Moreover, since Christianity long has been and remains deeply embedded in both the imperial order and African American identity politics, Parks’ act of staying in her seat may be understood as a self-defining psychological feat.

This essay analyzes ways the legacy of colonialism and Christianity interact with black female identity to support the imperial peace. The analysis includes two parts. Part I begins with examination of stock of character types that define black womanhood within the colonial

imagination. The discussion then explores ways Christianization helped develop and sustain white supremacist and patriarchal views of Africans and African descended persons through missionary education. This was particularly true in regard to black women whom colonials defined as “acceptable” only when seen as labor and sexual surrogates, or when being scapegoated through unfair blame or negative treatment to serve and enhance white life. Part II presents examples of character types through which black women are expected to fit into the imperial peace. Colonial era stories from southern Africa and the midwestern United States demonstrate the intersection of white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy in the sexual exploitation of black women. Contemporary stories show how the legacy of colonially constructed definitions of black womanhood persist in influencing popular practices. Concluding reflections consider the meaning and significance of black women’s self-defining self-love to resisting the imperial peace.

Part I: Black Female Identity Under the Imperial Peace

Colonial Definitions of Black Womanhood

Black women do not figure prominently in current geo-political and transnational economic debates.² This reality reflects the long established view that within the transnational social order, black women primarily are defined by three images that structure the popular imaginary about black womanhood and limit conceptions of ways black women may “acceptably” participate in

²Persons such as Condoleeza Rice (former U.S. National Security Advisor then Secretary of State) and Susan Rice (not related, current U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations) support this assertion by virtue of their being such obvious exceptions.

civil society. The three images fit among a stock of characters developed within the colonial imagination to perpetuate constructions of white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy. Fitting among the most persisting mythological construction of colonization – that whiteness and maleness trump all other instances of human-being – these images serve to disallow constructions of black womanhood that threaten this element of the colonially defined social order.

Reviewing one and one-half century of historical characterizations of black women in the United States, Patricia Morton concluded that through mythical “images the black American woman has emerged in ... historiography as a natural and permanent slave woman.”³ Morton notes that “not only historical explorations of slavery, but also social-science interpretations of race came to present a virtually uniform, preencoded story of the black woman’s past, complete with a set of slave-women stock characters who merged into caricatures of black women after slavery.”⁴ Images of black women as “mammies/mules,” “whores/jezebels,” and “sapphires/matriarchs” serve the ideational function of limiting constructions of black womanhood to

³Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Greenwood, 1991) ix.

⁴Morton, xiv. Morton identifies four stock characterizations of black women. She writes of Jim Crow historiography: “Black women figured in this body of literature almost uniformly in terms of a set of pejorative slave-women stock characters. While these often overlapped, they may be identified singly as the brood mare, the Jezebel, the bad black mother, and the Mammy – the sole emblem of ‘good’ black womanhood. The slight variations from source to source were only in terms of how these images were used.” See page 31. I follow Morton’s identification of stock characterizations of black women that “often overlapped.” However, in this essay, I indicate three characters – “mammy/mule,” “whore/jezebel,” and “sapphire/matriarch” – instead of the four Morton identifies above. Also see, Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 7. Townes identifies five stereotypes of black women.

categories of existence that dehumanize or disempower black women and that affirm white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy.

The “mammy/mule” character is the most “acceptable” colonial construction of black womanhood. It “was only Mammy,” Morton writes, “who used her strength in the service of whites, who emerged as a positive image of the black woman in American history.”⁵ The mammy figure was idealized, Micki McElya observes, and “set the contours of the faithful slave narrative. The scene of black loyalty was almost always the white home, whether in terms of domestic work or, particularly in the case of [enslaved males], the protection of the white home in the wartime absence of male patriarchs. These black figures and their relationships to white people were usually expressed by the assertion that they were ‘like one of the family.’”⁶ In addition to faithfulness, the mammy/mule image was acceptable because it represented asexuality, compliance, and passivity. Acceptability of this character hinged on the lack of threat imagined since (a) the mammy/mule is seen as having no sexual desire for and as undesirable by white male patriarchs; (b) the mammy/mule always conforms her will to the desire of enslavers, including willingness to be overworked; and (c) the mammy/mule character never has the will to fulfill or even conceive of her own desires. Alongside other “faithful servants,” the mammy/mule character does not disturb, and, in fact, helps to preserve the status quo. This “caricature,”

⁵Morton, 37.

⁶Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

Emilie Townes writes, “was used to prove that black women (and by extension children and men) were happy with their enslavement.”⁷

The “whore/jezebel” character is a construction of black womanhood that is acceptable as an outcast in an abject space where she serves as a scapegoat for varied “disturbances” of the imperial peace and as a receptacle of defilement. In the U.S. colonial context which valued black women as “breeders” to increase profits and wherein white masculinity was constructed as unbridled, the black “whore/jezebel” character fulfilled the colonial need as a “brood mare” (which often included breeding the enslaver’s progeny), as the cause of black communal degeneracy, and an easily available female body that was both blamed for and used to relieve the unfettered white male libido. The black woman “whore/jezebel” is understood as sexually deviant and as “chronically promiscuous.”⁸ Consequently, she is the source of black depravity, is fit for reproducing human chattel, and is an appropriate receptacle for assuaging the white male sexual drive. Patricia Morton notes that white historiographers and pseudo-social scientists developed a “late nineteenth-century doctrine of Negro regressionism” which blamed “freedpersons’ degeneracy” on black women. Morton reports that in a 1889 book *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* Phillip Alexander Bruce, “popularizer of regressionism,” asserted because black women “molded the institution of marriage among plantation Negroes, to them its present degradation is chiefly ascribable.”⁹ Morton also reports that Frances Butler Simkins and other white historians argued the black woman “gave birth to so many offspring ... simply because of

⁷Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 31.

⁸Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 182.

⁹Morton, 27, 28.

her natural, though ‘offensive,’ promiscuity and ‘sexual familiarities’ ... [and] her ‘uninhibited passions’ and free offering of ‘bodily favors’ corrupted the white man, promoting his preference for ‘the fellowship of dusky women.’” While she corrupted black communities and white men, black women simultaneously were an offence to white women, Simkins argued, since “his [the white male’s] ladylike wife paid the price for practicing ‘the Victorian virtues to a greater degree than other women.’”¹⁰ The “whore/jezebel” characterization functioned as a support for white male hetero-patriarchy by constructing black women as so abjectly depraved that it would be an anathema for white “ladies” to develop allegiances with black women against white male rape and infidelity. In the final analysis, the image of the black “whore/jezebel” functions as an ultimate reason for and symbol of white rule.

The black “sapphire/matriarch” image populates the colonial imaginary as an “unacceptable” character. She functions for black women as a warning of what not to become and to white persons of what not to accept. Seen as loud, complaining, uncooperative, immasculating, and a troublemaker, the character supports colonial constructions of black womanhood by identifying as unacceptable black women who assert their own agency, desires, and sense of self in opposition to white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy. This stereotype suggests a woman who is uncontrollable and intolerable. The retaliation exacted on persons so characterized, reflected for example in the job loss and brutal beating of persons like Fannie Lou Hamer or the immediate arrest of Rosa Parks also suggests the sapphire/matriarch is uppity for

¹⁰Morton, 31.

not knowing her place and, therefore, gets what she deserves.¹¹ The 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan report, asserts that black women matriarchs, especially among impoverished African Americans, are the source of black family disorganization and pathology, and the major cause of “a crushing burden” on black women and men.¹² “In essence,” Moynihan writes, “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”¹³ Though Moynihan’s report was initiated to support black families, it functioned to support white supremacy by presenting negative perceptions of black womanhood and black community degeneracy. Quoting a 1960 study of Detroit families by Robert O. Blood, Jr. and David M. Wolfe, Moynihan asserts “‘Whereas the majority of white families are equalitarian, the largest percentage of Negro families are dominated by the wife.’ The matriarchal pattern of so many Negro families,” Moynihan continues, “reinforces itself over the generations.”¹⁴

¹¹Less than 12 hours after she attempted to register to vote, Hamer was ejected from her home and job. Later, on a return trip from a voter registration training, Hamer was brutally beaten while being held in jail for entering the “whites only” waiting room of a bus station. See Rosetta Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 100-101, 104-105.

¹²Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Office of Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March, 1965, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/moynihan-report-1965#chapter4>, accessed March 29, 2010.

¹³Moynihan, Chapter 4.

¹⁴Ibid.

The extent to which mythical colonial images structure the popular imagination is evident in the influence of such imagery on black persons as well as others' conceptions of black womanhood. Moynihan's view of the so-called black matriarch had roots in scholarship of black male sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. In 1930, 35 years before the Moynihan report, Frazier's text *The Negro Family* discussed the "Matriarchate" as a source of pathology in black families. According to Frazier, in rural southern black families the granny/matriarch served as the most influential person. She discouraged young women "from marrying, perpetuating the 'maternal family organization'" which, in the urban context, obliterated black families. In cities, Frazier says "the mother-led family became an institution which transmitted 'loose sex behavior' and 'moral degeneracy' from one generation to the next." Frazier's 1949 text *The Negro in the United States* did not portray black women in any better.¹⁵

Mythical constructions of black womanhood – as "mammy/mule," "whore/jezebel," and "sapphire/matriarch" – cast black women among other images and ideas that sustain white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy by identifying persons who do not conform to colonial requirements as outside normative humanity and civil society. These images, and other elements, of the currently structured imperial peace had their origins not only in European imperialism, but also in missionary activity which collaborated with colonizers by using christianization to subdue African peoples.

¹⁵See Morton, 74-83, especially 80-81.

Christianization and Colonization:

Missionary Education and Colonial Definitions of Black Womanhood

In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*,¹⁶ Delores Williams uses the term “surrogacy” to describe social-role exploitation as a major element of black women’s history. In the United States, Williams argues, black women have been labor and sexual surrogates for others. Black women’s surrogacy included serving as field hands, cooks, maids, wet nurses, nannies, and enslaved/pressured objects of sexual gratification. During enslavement these roles were fully coerced. After enslavement, during the Jim Crow era, Williams says, these roles were voluntary, though pressured by economic necessity and Jim Crow practices. In addition to being surrogates, black women also have been scapegoats, which included being unfairly blamed or unfairly receiving negative treatment. Similar to surrogacy, black women experienced scapegoating differently during and after enslavement. During enslavement, planters raped black women then frequently blamed the women for “enticing” men into sexual liaisons. While this blaming continued after enslavement as did “voluntary, though pressured,” surrogacy, scapegoating black women during the Jim Crow era primarily manifested as negative treatment (such as the law requiring Rosa Parks to move to the back of the bus) and as blame for black communal degeneracy. Black women’s experiences of fully coerced surrogacy, voluntary (though pressured surrogacy), and scapegoating all reflect the colonially constructed view that defined “acceptable” black women – mummies/mules, sometimes, whores/jezebels – as surrogates and subordinates to enhance white life. A substantial function of Christian missionary education – Christianization – was to

¹⁶Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1993).

develop, inscribe, and reinscribe the view that “acceptable” black womanhood functioned to enhance white life.

An enduring legacy of missionary Christianity is its establishment of “being Christian” as a prerequisite for citizenship. As nationalism evolved across Europe and as European colonization developed across the globe, Christianity emerged in civil society as a marker of humanity and a requirement for citizenship. For Europeans who gave up their native gods, Christianity held out the promise of being fully recognized, initially, as subjects of the empire, and later as citizens within modern European nation-states. For Africans, who were integrated into imperial Europe through colonization, Christianity offered limited recognition and secondary status among the stock of characters that sustained European colonial rule. Colonial governments collaborated with Christian missionaries to subdue and fit indigenous African populations into imperial structures. In this collaboration, Christianity was one of the primary mechanisms that structured colonial society as missionary education inscribed white supremacy and helped intensify hetero-patriarchy. For African descended women Christianity served both as an instrument to lower their status and, after the colonial era ended, as a warrant of limited black female acceptability and respectability.

In Africa, Christian missionaries collaborated with colonial dismantling of African women’s traditional power and status. Christian missions in Africa followed western views about womanhood that restricted female roles and activity to the home or private sphere. In doing so missionaries and colonial governors created structures that neglected entirely women’s public roles in African societies. Miriam Adeney observes that “European colonial governors,

educators, and missionaries of that era were not accustomed to women's political or economic leadership in their home countries. Therefore they overlooked women leaders in traditional institutions in Africa." This included ignoring roles of "female prophets, diviners, and curers; women's religious gatherings and ceremonies; and the rich application of religion to areas of life with which women particularly were concerned."¹⁷ As they lowered African women's status, colonialists imposed and intensified patriarchal structures in indigenous societies. Adeney says:

When the colonial governments administered modern land titles, for example, they tended to do it in men's names, and women's traditional rights to land were lost. ... When Europeans encouraged cash crops, women's traditional subsistence gardens or gathering grounds which continued to keep the family fed were shoved to the margins. When public and private powers – including missions – offered business connections and loans, women often were bypassed.

Christian missionary education in Africa joined colonizers in lowering black women's status, not only by instituting patriarchy, but intersectionally compounded black women's subordination by defining black women as servants and preparing girls for domestic service in colonial and mission homes. According to Adeney, "Although missions founded girls' schools – far fewer than boys' schools – the girls' curricula often emphasized domestic and consumer skills rather than preparation for higher education, business or leadership." This was the case even when "parents requested more academic training for girls."¹⁸ Preparation of African descended women for domestic service in colonial homes was replicated in the Americas.

¹⁷Miriam Adeney, "Do Missions Raise or Lower the Status of Women? Conflicting Reports from Africa," Dana L. Robert, editor, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Orbis, 2002), 212.

¹⁸Adeney, 212-214.

Missionary education in the United States developed an imaginary in which enslaved black persons submissively accepted subordination. Responding to the fear of Southern planters that Christian baptism signaled equality of black and white persons, most missionaries asserted that baptism did not change the status of enslaved persons. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians made arguments for conversion making enslaved persons “better” (which actually meant “better to be enslaved”). Not surprisingly sometimes the discipline of church authorities (including authorities of some black churches) upheld enslavement.¹⁹ As a consequence, the “plantation mission” emerged to complete the task of bringing enslaved new Christians into the institutional church, and, perhaps more importantly, to develop and create the “rule of gospel order” or “a Christian social order” reflecting the southern status quo.²⁰ Missionaries carried out this task through preaching, lecturing, and catchizing.

After “legal” sanction of enslavement ended in the United States, christianization undergirded conceptions of black people as intellectually dwarfed and morally degenerate. Post-bellum christianization was not limited to white missionary activity, Kevin Gaines notes, since black middle classes (hoping to improve white views of black people as acceptable and respectable) often incorporated practices and perspectives of christianization in their work for “racial uplift” in African American communities.²¹ The predominant necessity of acquiring white support to improve their status resulted in ambiguous expressions of black agency. Often

¹⁹Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 144-147.

²⁰Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 160.

²¹See Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

black and white institutions, usually churches, collaborated in “christianizing” racial uplift work. Black churches sometimes assisted “home” missionaries of white denominations in seeking to secure the status of formerly enslaved persons after the Civil War. Spelman College for women, for example, was founded in the basement of an African American congregation, Friendship Baptist Church, where white missionaries from the American Baptist Convention structured a curriculum that focused on domestic science and Christianity. Unlike practical and classical study prevalent in white women’s institutions of the era, an important element of Spelman’s early curriculum was to christianize the women these American Baptist home missionaries encountered. In an 1883 report to the American Baptist Home Mission Society, Spelman founders Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles wrote: “It is very essential that these colored people shall be *Christianized* as well as educated.” “Hence,” they continued, “the importance of schools where the Bible is taught daily, and constant attention is paid to morality, truthfulness, and honesty.”²² The emphasis on “morality, truthfulness, and honesty” in establishing curriculum of a black women’s college during the U.S. Jim Crow era carried the baggage of questioning black women’s “decency” within a larger discourse of “Negro regressionism” which labeled black women as the cause of black moral degeneracy and source of the necessity for European colonization and rule. As was true during the colonial era in Africa, in the United States, christianization was embedded in a deeply racialized discourse about the acceptability and respectability of black persons in white civil society. It is self-evident that missionaries who established girls schools felt they knew best what was an appropriate education for Africa’s

²²Yolanda L. Watson and Sheila T. Gregory, *Daring to Educate: The Legacy of the Early Spelman College Presidents* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2005). Italics added.

descendants. In addition to seeing themselves as educational authorities, European missionaries agreed with colonial authorities in understanding themselves as having control over black women's bodies.

Part II: Examining the Imperial Peace through Black Women's Stories

White Supremacy, Hetero-patriarchy,

and Sexual Exploitation of Black Women under Colonialism

While examination of mission school curricula reflects social subordination of black women through gender roles, literature on the colonial era is replete with stories of white violence against and white commodification of black female bodies. Perhaps most poignant are historical examples of two ways the mythical black "whore/jezebel" character functioned to sustain colonialism. First, black women's sexuality was represented as a primary reason for black subordination. An enduring argument for subordination of Africans and establishment of white supremacy is based in assertions about sexual degeneracy of black people. In this argument, conquest and rule of Africans is necessary to sustain white civilization and purity. Since black degeneracy was said to derive substantially from black women's promiscuity, promiscuous black womanhood most aptly demonstrated black degeneracy. Second, once white supremacy was established, sexual exploitation of black women's bodies became a symbol of white terror and white male hetero-patriarchy. Violent reminders of the "necessary" subordination of Africans served to diminish challenges to this so-called "natural" order. The complete sexual subjugation of black women functioned as a reminder of the "necessity" and

terror of white supremacy. These two elements of colonial logic are nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the lives of Ssehura Bartman and Margaret Garner.

Born among the first peoples of Southern Africa around 1789, Ssehura “Saartjie” Baartman’s saga of subordination begins and ends with colonial conquest.²³ After slaughter of her parents by Dutch settlers, when she was age nine “an aunt sold [Baartman] to a Wesleyan *missionary*, Rev. Cecil Freehoueland.” After living several years as a servant/daughter to Freehoueland, Baartman went back to her aunt when Freehoueland died suddenly of cholera. By age 16 she had married, lost her husband in the colonial wars, and lost her son who lived only a few months. At this point Baartman went to a mission in Cape Town where she “was trained for a new life as a slave-servant by the teachers at St. Luke’s Orphanage, and given to the Caesar family to become a nursemaid to the couple’s three children.” The father of the family, Colonel Caesar, “fondled her in private,” and his brother Hendrick Caesar “fascinated by her large buttocks and the myth of her ‘apron,’ raped” Baartman. The Caesars sold Baartman to a British trader who took her to entertain persons paying a few shillings in England to gaze at (and sometimes fondle) her naked body. Eventually passed on to a Frenchman to settle a gambling debt, Baartman became a living specimen of Baron Georges Cuvier “to increase his stature in the scientific world and bolster his argument that Negroes were only marginally human and closely aligned with apes. When [Baartman] died of tuberculosis at age 26, Cuvier dissected her body, placing her sexual organs in specimen jars and her skeleton on display for years.”²⁴ Baartman’s

²³Rena Singer, “In South Africa, Painful Past Reclaimed: Many See Their Story in Return of Remains of Woman Held Captive,” *Boston Globe*, May 4, 2002.

²⁴Karen Celestan, “Transit of Venus: The Sad Saga of ‘Hottentot Venus’ Saartjie “Sarah’ Baartman” in *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 9, 2003. Italics added.

preserved genitals, brain, skeleton, and a cast of her body remained on display in a Paris museum until 1974. After prolonged demonstrations by her Khoisan descendants, Baartman's remains were returned for a South African burial in 2002.²⁵

Used both to satisfy white male libidos and to justify black inferiority, Baartman was viewed and treated as the model black whore/jezebel character. The complete subordination of Baartman as a person and the unexamined presumption of authority over and full access to Baartman's body, perhaps especially including her sexuality, indicate the historic status of black women in western civil society. The use of her living body and then her remains as specimens reflects the way colonial logic permeated the science that helped justify and sustain African subordination. "Christians" and "Christian" agencies were collaborators throughout Baartman's subordination. A Wesleyan missionary, a Cape Town mission, and a "Christian" orphanage all participated in enslaving and inscribing her status as subordinate. Unfortunately, an aunt to whom Baartman turned twice was unwilling or unable to provide rescue.

During enslavement in the United States some black women, determining they would not comply with brutality to which they were subjected, sought relief for themselves and their children through escape. In one extreme example, twenty-two-year-old Margaret Garner slit the throat of her third child (two-year-old daughter Mary) and wounded the other three because, Garner said, she "would rather kill [her children] all than have them taken back over the river" into enslavement.²⁶ Garner (whose story was the historical source for Toni Morrison's novel

²⁵Rena Singer, "In South Africa, Painful Past Reclaimed: Many See Their Story in Return of Remains of Woman Held Captive," *Boston Globe*, May 4, 2002.

²⁶"The Slave Tragedy in Cincinnati," in *The New York Times*, February 2, 1856, np.

*Beloved*²⁷) escaped with her three other children, her husband, mother- and father-in-law in a group of seventeen persons who left Kentucky enslavement by walking across the frozen Ohio River. Garner probably was fathered by her enslaver, John Pollard Gaines. In all likelihood, three of Garner's four children were fathered by her biological uncle, Gaines' younger brother Archibald (who appeared particularly attached to the dead infant Mary). Garner, apparently, was viewed as both "whore/jezebel and "sapphire/matriarch." A local Kentucky Presbyterian communicant once identified her as "'common and cross-tempered,'" likely referring to Garner's children sired by Archibald Gaines as well as to Garner's protest against her enslavement and rape.

Archibald Gaines bought Maplewood Plantation on which Margaret was held when John Gaines left Kentucky to take a Federal post as governor of Oregon in 1849. The social assumption that white planters would "gander" around during pregnancy of their wives included the expectation that black women's bodies were accessible, including being raped, to protect pregnant white females and to satisfy white males. Garner, whose births followed shortly after those of Gaines' wife, was several months pregnant with a fifth child when events of her story unfolded in late January 1856.²⁸ Arrested by Federal Marshals as she was seeking to kill her children, Garner and her husband Robert (who defended the family with a gun before being captured) were tried in Cincinnati in a bizarre case that sought to determine both her status as enslaved or free and whether she should be tried for murder. After four weeks of trial the

²⁷Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, 1987).

²⁸Steven Weisenburger, "A Historical Margaret Garner" at http://www.motopera.org/mg_ed/educational/HS_HistoricalMGarner.html, 2-4, passim, accessed December 3, 2009.

Garners were returned to enslavement. Margaret Garner is said to ““have displayed frantic joy”” upon learning that her youngest daughter Priscilla drowned while they were being transported to enslavement in Arkansas. She died of typhoid at about age 24.

The Imperial Peace and Black Women in the 21st Century: HIV/AIDS and the Back of the Bus

Although imperial subjugation in the lives of black people sometimes is less personally immediate than it was during the colonial era, the foundation of colonization in contemporary social, economic, and ideational structures continues to exist. Conceptions of white supremacy and black subordination persist in the imaginary of most persons across the globe and help sustain colonial constructions of blackness and black womanhood through thought and action. This occurs when everyday interactions symbolically reconstruct historic conceptions that black women “acceptable” in the colonial structure must be ruled by white people and, ultimately, by white men, or that black women “acceptable” in the colonial structure must be worked and/or scapegoated to enhance white life. Two stories – an exchange between two professors of religion (a black female and a white male) and a scene on a bus – demonstrate contemporary examples of the continuing colonial legacy.

At a recent meeting of the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR) in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, African woman scholar Dr. Musa Dube, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Botswana, gave a plenary address entitled “Go

tla Siama, O tla Fola: Doing Biblical Studies in an HIV & AIDS Context.”²⁹ The title “Go tla Siama, O tla Fola,” Dube said, is an expression that means “It will be fine. You will be healed.” In southern Africa where many persons are dying from the AIDS virus, this expression is a way of living innovatively through “creation of a language of self-awareness and hope. ... It is an expression that resists hopelessness,” Dube said.³⁰ The focus of Dube’s lecture on HIV/AIDS is consistent with work of many African women scholars of religion,³¹ who determined to use their agency and status as academics to advocate for persons and to address suffering resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The extent to which HIV/AIDS is devastating African communities is a legacy of colonial economic structuring that continues to impact African politics and societies. This is supported by data indicating the spread of AIDS in Africa, particularly in children, relates especially to “malnutrition, parasitic infection, and poor sanitation – not ... heterosexual transmission.” Moreover, colonial subjugation of Africa continues to be imagined and enacted in the way funds are distributed in relation to AIDS in Africa. The huge sums of money invested in research and treatment of AIDS reinscribe African degeneracy and inadequacy by failing to address malnutrition, poverty, and sanitation, which are both legacies of colonialism and the major factors contributing to the spread of AIDS in Africa.³²

²⁹Musa W. Dube, “‘Go tla Siama. O tla Fola:’ Doing Biblical Studies in an HIV&AIDS Context,” unpublished paper, Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion Meeting, March 7-9, 2008, Atlanta, Georgia.

³⁰Dube, 1, 2.

³¹See the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians at www.thecirclecawt.org.

³²Marcus Cohen, “AIDS in Africa: Medical Colonialism?” at <http://notaids.com/en/african-aids>, accessed April 4, 2010.

In the body of her lecture, Dube argued against the “implication that those who are infected [with HIV and AIDS] suffer from sexual laxity” by failing to abstain, failing to be faithful to their partners, and failing to use condoms. Dube also noted the “psychological side of the epidemic including “violent masculinities.” “In the HIV & AIDS context,” she said, “[men] were out of control and the identity of manhood was seriously challenged. The methods of prevention (abstinence, faithfulness and condomising) largely debunked patriarchal rights of manhood over women’s bodies, by insisting that they have to stick to one partner and condomise – that is, they have no right to deposit their semen into women’s bodies.” Resistance to the loss of patriarchal control included rape, incest, and femicide. Dube observed that with HIV/AIDS “infecting more women, more young people, more poor people, displaced persons, immigrants, children and those who live in violent zones,... [t]he virus found its fertile soil in social injustice.” In the context of social injustice, Dube observed “knowledge does not always get translated into practice or behavioral change given the prevailing social inequalities.”³³

Dube continued her lecture by discussing “Liberative HIV & AIDS” biblical interpretation which seeks “to combat the oppressive conditions, structures and perspectives that aid the spread of HIV & AIDS and deny quality care to PLWHA [(people living with HIV/AIDS)].” Dube reviewed scholarship exploring “Biblical texts as constructive theoretical frameworks” which disavow “social discriminations of all forms and disempowerment, especially poverty and gender-based discrimination that fuel the HIV & AIDS epidemic.” Dube concluded that “HIV & AIDS history ... challenge[s biblical studies] to break the mold of self-

³³Dube, 3, 4, 5.

isolation and the exclusive text-centered approach to include the clumsy field of contemporary communities of faith readers of the Bible and their interpretations.”³⁴ In the course of her lecture, Dube noted the shift of HIV and AIDS to two-thirds world populations. The HIV/AIDS “epidemiological map,” she said, “*seemed* to confirm colonial stereotypes about the colonized thus resulting in much suspicions and *silence* among the infected and affected communities.”³⁵ Contrasting with the silence resulting from colonial stereotypes is Professor Dube’s identification of the expression “Go tla Siam, Ota Fola” whereby people use voice to assert “self-awareness” and to “resist hopelessness.” Alongside the people’s voice, Dube also resists silence through her assertion of social injustice as “fertile” soil for spread of HIV and AIDS.

During the question and answer period after Professor Dube’s lecture the first person to speak was a young white male professor who asked Dube if she thought there ever were times when it was important to talk about personal morality as an element of what is necessary in combating HIV/AIDS. In her diplomatic response to the question, Dube noted concerns religious groups have about personal responsibility and pointed out that focusing on personal morality may leave out the larger issue of how formal and informal social and economic structures account for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

As I observed the brief exchange between Professor Dube and her questioner, I was struck by the contrasts it presented: Musa Dube, invited to give the keynote at SECSOR based on her experience teaching on at least two continents and having served as a theological consultant for the World Council of Churches, was a senior African woman scholar. The question came

³⁴Dube, 9, 17, 19.

³⁵Dube, 5, italics added.

from a white male junior scholar who had not completed his first three years of teaching.³⁶ In her talk, Dube emphasized the importance of religious groups engaging the challenge of addressing institutional conditions that contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS. In his question the junior scholar accentuated personal responsibility in contributing to the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Beyond these contrasts, I considered Dube's purposefulness in identifying ways "social inequalities" contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS and the strikingly obvious premise *likely* embedded in the young professor's question. The question reflected a colonial presumption of white privilege and hetero-patriarchy, namely, that Black female agency, without regard for age or social status, always may be challenged by white male presuppositions and agendas, especially in regard to issues related to sexuality. The global geographic context of the two persons intensified the colonial nature of the exchange. Musa Dube is a scholar situated in Africa. The questioner is a scholar situated in the United States. Dube is an "indigenous" person from a geographic region where settler colonial rule continued beyond the mid-20th century.³⁷ The questioner is a descendant of settlers in the United States. A question by a white male scholar to a black female scholar about her interpretation of the Christian Bible heightens the symbolization of colonial conquest, subordination, and enslavement of Africans. Apart from the obvious racial dimension of the exchange, the question to Dube at some level challenged her use

³⁶In a workshop presentation on the day prior to the lecture, this scholar revealed his professional status.

³⁷Although Botswana gained independence in 1966, it is bordered by countries (Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa) that were dominated by settler colonialism well into the late 20th century. Zimbabwe and Namibia won independence in 1980 and 1990, respectively, while South Africa attained independence in 1994.

of Christian scripture and, perhaps subconsciously, also reflected the colonial notion buttressed by Christianity that white males have ultimate authority over black female bodies and over western education/biblical interpretation. In view of the history of negative representations of black women's bodies, is it ever possible that this kind of exchange between two such persons could not carry the burden of reinscribing historic colonial perspectives? The extent to which the legacy of colonial constructions of black womanhood persist, even with the black psyche, makes answering this question difficult.

Recently, I attended a Christian denominational conference where I was among persons who traveled by shuttle bus to and from the convention site because our hotels were located outside the city center. Since the conference hours sometimes ran from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., I often was quite exhausted when I returned to the hotel at night. The infrequent shuttle schedule and distance to my hotel made returning to my room for rest during breaks impractical. As a result, when I reached the convention center in the morning, I stayed until my work was completed around 11:00 or 11:30 at night. Once I boarded the shuttle in the evenings, I took solace in the fact that among the few passengers being dropped off so late, I would arrive at my hotel shortly because I was in the group whose hotel was the first stop on the shuttle's outbound circuit. On my last evening at the conference, when I boarded the bus, there was only one other passenger, a young white woman whose hotel would be the last stop on the circuit before the driver returned to the convention center. Curiously, that evening the African American male driver reversed the shuttle route and dropped the white woman rider first, announcing to her before he did, "That way you will not have to wait and ride all the way around to the other hotels

before you get to yours.” When I protested to the driver that I expected to be dropped off first since that was the regular route, the other passenger – apparently assuming a black woman should provide this privilege for a white woman – observed, “You’ll be second.” “Second is not first,” I replied to her. The bus driver was silent. After other passenger disembarked, I asked the driver if he had changed the bus circuit in order to drop the other passenger first. Without hesitation, he replied “Yes.” When I asked why, he said, again without hesitation, “that way she did not have to go all the way out before reaching her hotel,” and added that I had not been significantly inconvenienced. I muttered in reply, “This is typically what black women experience.” “Do you think I did that because you are black,” the driver asked? “I think you did it because she was white,” I responded. The driver was silent for a few seconds then said, “Why does everything have to be a race issue?” He continued, “I did not think it was such a big deal.” I understood this statement to mean that I should be willing to sacrifice, to experience inconvenience in order to provide relief and convenience for the other passenger. “It is a big deal to me,” I replied, and added, “if it was not such a big why did you take her first?” The driver was silent. Since we did not exchange any other words, I have no sense of the extent to which this man recognized that his action inscribed my status in that situation as a scapegoat subordinated to enhance the white female’s experience, or the extent to which he reinscribed his own, and, by extension, black people’s status as second class.

When I returned home, I shared this story with several persons. Some reacted with a “So-what?” silence. Some asked questions: “What did you do?” “Do you think the driver may have decided to take her first because he did not want to be alone late with a white female

passenger?” “Why didn’t you say something else?” My sister responded by telling of an attempt to bump her from an assigned airline seat to accommodate a white male and reminded me, “That sounds like something that happens all the time.”

Toward a Black Female Assertion of Self-Love: De-Christianization and Self-Definition

How do black women develop practices and perspectives of self-love amidst the colonial legacy of black female subjugation, mythical images, violence, and self-abnegation? Christianity has deeply influenced definitions of love in the West. Drawing on canonized scripture and socio-cultural legacies, theologians historically asserted that Christian love is self-sacrificial, disinterested, unconditional, and uncritical. Anders Nygren writes, for example, that Christian love (called *agape*) “is a love that gives itself away, that sacrifices itself, even to the uttermost.” Moreover, Nygren continues, “Christianity does not recognise self-love as a legitimate form of love.”³⁸ Constructed as a cure to an egocentric self-assertion which seeks to objectify and control others, sacrificial love excludes self-love because it functions to regulate human pride. Specifically, *agape* is viewed as an imitation of Jesus, the supreme deity’s “suffering servant” who sacrificed himself unconditionally for the world.

In spite of the extended legacy of Christian love as unconditional self-sacrifice, contemporary scholars challenge the value (and validity) of this reading of the tradition. Some argue that identification of human-beingness with pride and self-assertion relates more to socially-constructed masculinity than to social conceptions of femininity. It also neglects,

³⁸Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, translated by Philip S. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 118, 217.

denigrates, and subordinates all persons' experiences of disorganization, passivity, and distraction.³⁹ Other scholars criticize Christianity's focus on the crucifixion of Jesus, and reject the idea of a sacrificial suffering servant as central to and paradigmatic for Christian practice. Emphasizing sacrifice, they argue, dismisses constructive elements of Jesus' ministry and normalizes many forms of abuse and violence as legitimate Christian experience.⁴⁰ Jacquelyn Grant recommends not using "servant" language to identify Christian black women because it camouflages and reinscribes unequal relationships. Grant says although the term servant is said to apply to all Christians, in the material world, "Serving is reserved for victims, while being served is the special privilege of victimizers, or at least representatives of the status quo. These *privileged* servants are served by [*actual*] servants who are in fact often treated as slaves."⁴¹ In many cases, "suffering servant" language has been used as an element of Christianization. Servant language and "the notion of servanthood," Grant argues, often reflects "sociopolitical interests of proponents of the status quo and their attempts to undergird their intended goal through psychological conditioning that comes partially with the institutionalization of

³⁹See Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40/2 (April 1960): 100-112; and Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1979).

⁴⁰See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2008); Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1993); and JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in African American Experience* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

⁴¹Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis, 1993), 211. Italics added.

oppressive language, even theological language.”⁴² Grant’s assertion and other challenges to traditional Christian characterizations of love, indicates the historic view of Christian love, as self-sacrificial and exclusive of self-love, is detrimental for black women. This is especially evident when one considers that acceptable images of black women in the colonial imagination – as “mammies/mules” and “whores/jezebels” – function as mechanisms for subordinating black women to enhance others’ lives. Moreover, the acceptable image of black women in the colonial imagination – as “sapphires/matriarchs” – serves as a warning against black women’s self-valuation, self-confidence, and objection to their subordinate status.

A primary concern of black women worldwide should be to practice self-love. While recognition that human physical and emotional survival may *ultimately* depend on each individual’s purposeful action, the transnational rhetorical construction of hetero-patriarchy and racism, especially the peculiarly specious “anti-black racism,” means black women generally experience being de-privileged (deprived) in favor of other persons who are seen as more human (more worthy). By reinscribing and ritualizing these ideas through Christianization, male and female black persons, like the bus driver above, also internalize the mythology of white privilege and negate themselves, perhaps especially black women, as a result. Black women themselves, in situations of ambiguity like Ssehura Baartman’s aunt, sometimes face the *real* and *imagined* choice of deciding between themselves and other women of African descent. European and – due the reality of “anti-black racism” – many persons from other ethnic groups routinely structure themselves hierarchally in relationship to black women. Within this context the safety

⁴²Grant, 210.

nets – of partner, friend, family, colleague, neighbor – which *may* help sustain persons often have holes or are removed altogether when needed for black women. Seeking to survive and thrive amidst contingencies of being black and female in a hetero-patriarchal, racist geo-political context means black women often feel themselves living unprotected, without a net.

Confronting the legacies of enslavement, Christianization, surrogacy, and intersectional subordination requires black women's self-love – a radical, critically conscious valuation of one's own black woman-ness. Important to black women's self-love is the work of constructing communities of safety and resistance in which black women can stand for themselves with others, recognizing, in the process, the need for as well as the difference between safe and strategic alliances. This will require black women's willfulness and courageous honesty. It also expresses self-awareness and hope, and is the starting point for more substantially identifying the special meaning of self-love as a norm for black women's lives.