



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Hanging Out a Red Ribbon:
Listening to Musa Dube's Postcolonial Feminist Theology**

Melissa D. Browning
mb@melissabrowning.com

Liberation theologies have provided new lenses for both “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy” as they have articulated fresh paradigms for understanding faith from the perspectives of the poor and oppressed around the world. Black Theology began the formal tradition of liberation theology by telling us “Jesus is Black,”¹ while Latin American Liberation Theologians proclaimed Jesus had a “preferential option for the poor.”² Feminist theologian Rosemary

¹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973).

Radford Reuther challenged the gender of Jesus by asking whether or not a “male savior could save women,”³ and Black theologies of inculturation in Africa named Jesus as our brother, or our Great Ancestor.⁴ As we read with liberation theologians, past and present, we can still affirm that Jesus is poor, that Jesus is Black, but if you ask Musa Dube, you’ll also learn that Jesus has AIDS. This is what she told the World Council of Churches at a meeting on missions in 2002.⁵ Reflecting on the global AIDS pandemic, Dube reread Matthew 25 by saying,

I can hear Jesus saying to us: I was sick with AIDS and you did not visit me. You did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine to manage my opportunistic infections. I was stigmatized, isolated and rejected because of HIV/AIDS and you did not welcome me. I was hungry, thirsty and naked, completely dispossessed by HIV/AIDS and globalization in my house and family and you did not give me food, water or any clothing. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not come to my rescue. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan and you did not meet my needs.⁶

Dube used the Matthew 25 text to remind her hearers that the church is the body of Christ, and since so many people in the church have HIV/AIDS, then Jesus must be HIV positive as well.

As a liberation theologian, Dube and others doing theology in Africa are shifting the conversation to bring attention to the 28 million people living with HIV and AIDS on the African continent. Two-thirds of those who have HIV and AIDS in our world are in Africa, and African

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, ed. *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

⁵ This talk was later published as: Musa W. Dube, “Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 363 (10): 2002, 535-549.

⁶ *Ibid*, 537-538.

women are hardest hit by the disease.⁷ In Southern Africa, the region of Dube's birth, prevalence rates show one-fourth to one-third of the population is HIV positive.⁸ The questions that Dube poses as she speaks through Matthew's Jesus are questions for liberation, questions that must be asked.

In the summer of 2007 at the annual meeting of the *African Association for the Study of Religion* in Botswana, Dube challenged her colleagues by asking another question: Does HIV and AIDS necessitate a new liberation theology?⁹ This paper will take up this question by analyzing Dube's methodological approach with reference to its place within liberation theologies, and by examining Dube's writing on HIV and AIDS to argue that HIV and AIDS is not only a new space for liberation theology, but is a space where liberation theologies must intersect to create change for those who are oppressed on multiple levels. Dube's method of approaching cultural hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics through an African feminist postcolonial lens provides a model of a liberation theology that takes on global oppression without neglecting a specific social location. In her theology, she invites both the former colonized and the former colonizer to the table, asking that we all take seriously the way

⁷ Statistics taken from UNAIDS, AIDS Epidemic Update, 2006 (www.unaids.org) and UNICEF, HIV/AIDS and Children, (www.unicef.org).

⁸ Ibid. Botswana has lower rates (with 24% prevalence) but other countries in the region such as South Africa, Swaziland, and Lesotho all have prevalence rates above 30%. Southern Africa is the worst affected region in the world.

⁹ Question raised in response to a paper by Lovemore Togarasei at the *African Association for the Study of Religion Conference*, Gaborone, Botswana, July 2007. Dube asked if the work being done on HIV and AIDS is a liberationist reading, noting that AIDS most deeply affects women and those who are poor.

oppression functions within the contexts of poverty, inequality, racism, ethnocentrism, religiocentrism, globalism, neocolonialism, imperialism, and gender injustice.

Narrative and Scholarship: Naming Social Location

In developing her scholarship, Musa Dube begins by naming her own social location. The narrative of her life is woven throughout her work, creating a project of scripture interpretation that is African, feminist, and postcolonial. Because Dube starts with her own narrative, it may serve us well to understand her story because it directs her method.

Dube tells her readers that although she is Motswana,¹⁰ her family came to Botswana from Zimbabwe. But when the British colonized Zimbabwe, the land that had always belonged to her family was given to a white farmer. They had the choice to stay and serve on the land under harsh restrictions, or to move somewhere new. Her family chose Botswana, which, though also under British rule had a harsher climate and was less popular with the settlers.¹¹ Dube tells about growing up as a Christian, and remembers how she saw Jesus – with blonde hair and blue eyes. She remembers the “colonization of the mind” she experienced as she understood the most godly to be white missionaries, and the most deviant to be Black Africans.¹² She read the Bible

¹⁰ A citizen of Botswana.

¹¹ Dube, “Batswakwa: Which Traveller Are You (John 1:1-18)?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 108 (11): 2000, 79-89.

¹² Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” *Semeia*, no. 78: 1997, 11-26.

in English,¹³ excelled in school and was given a chance to study in both the UK and the US. But Dube found that her New Testament studies in both places made no connections with her life, her experience of being an African woman.¹⁴ She recalls the most relevant pieces of her education coming from her interactions with feminist and liberation theologies. But when it came time for her to write her own dissertation, her feminist postcolonial approach to the Bible was met with opposition at every turn.¹⁵

Through constant reflection on these experiences, Dube crafts a liberation approach to scripture that encounters the canon both as an imperialistic text, and a text for liberation.¹⁶ Through her feminist postcolonial framework, she reads scripture with the experience of women and the formerly colonized in mind. In this pursuit, Dube plays a subversive role as she uses the “colonizer’s language” to “decolonize” the text and “decolonize” minds.¹⁷ Yet in this process,

¹³ Dube, “Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures,” in *Study of Religion in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of G.C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Johannes A. Smit, P. Pratap Kumar, and G. C. Oosthuizen, 77-96, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 86-87 and Dube, “Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” 11.

¹⁴ Dube, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations” (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 224-246, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 240-241.

¹⁵ Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman’s Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship,” in *Feminist New Testament Studies: Global and Future Perspectives*, ed. Kathleen Wicker, 177-202, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 183-185.

¹⁶ This theme is articulated in different ways throughout her work, for a specific citation, see Dube, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations” (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy,” 229.

¹⁷ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 102-109; and Dube, “Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42),” *Semeia*, no. 75: 1996, 37-59.

she is conscious of the feminist question, first coined by Audre Lorde, of whether we can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.¹⁸

Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Today in African Theology, some of the most creative theology being done is by *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, of which Dube is a part. The Circle, which was created by Mercy Oduyoye in 1989, is pointing out where the church neglects women and where Christianity ignores African cultures or collaborates with patriarchy and neocolonialism. In order to understand Musa Dube's larger project, her work must be situated inside the *Circle*, for she sees her own work as a communal process, in conversation with others both inside and outside the academy; both inside the *Circle* and in cross-cultural dialogue.¹⁹

The best starting point for understanding the *Circle* is through the work of its founder, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. In Oduyoye's first full book, *Daughters of Anowa*, she sets the stage for African feminist theology in the context of a postcolonial discourse by arguing that colonialism and western Christianity have destroyed safeguards and worsened the condition for women in

¹⁸ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 103; and Dube, "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations" (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy," 241-242.

¹⁹ In Dube's work, the idea of communal theology in participation with the church can be seen in "Readings Of Semoya" where she points to the AIC churches method of communal interpretation as a model for praxis (See: Dube, "Readings Of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations Of Matt 15:21-28," *Semeia*, no. 73: 1996, 111-129). A second level can be seen through her work as part of the Circle. While many articles exemplify this connection, two key works would be Dube, "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalization Era," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), 71-93, (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003), which was written for Circle members, and Dube, "Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures."

African cultures. By looking at folk stories, myths, and proverbs, Oduyoye shows images of women in both positive and negative lights and examines traditional Akan systems of keeping patriarchy at bay. While she does not point to a pristine past, she does give evidence to colonialism's reliance on men, not women as decision makers. As a Methodist, she also points to her own tradition of Christianity as bringing in the notion of the "stay-at-home" woman, which did not fit the African notion where all people work to contribute to the community. Though Oduyoye does not often use the term "postcolonial" in her work, she sets the stage for its use by paying attention to the damage of colonialism and the ongoing harm from neocolonialism in African cultures.²⁰

Oduyoye and other *Circle* theologians critique the church by pointing out how women are pushed to the margins. Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya speak of women's participation in the church as relegated to "fund-raisers and rally organizers," undermining the traditional participation of women in religious life. As they talk of women moving between African traditional religions and Christianity, they speak of the African woman as "yet to be consulted by theologians,"²¹ a concern Oduyoye also raises when she points out that African women have yet to be studied in any detail.²² Dube's writing shows her connection to the *Circle*, to the African

²⁰ Mercy Oduyoye, *Daughters Of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

²¹ Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, "Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community," in *With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 4.

²² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Empowering Spirit of Religion," in *Lift Every Voice*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, 245-258 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 247.

church, to the global church, and to the oppressed. Her project echoes the concerns of the *Circle* by naming African women as subjects in their own liberation.

Methodology **“One African Woman’s Perspective”**

In her article on the future of feminist New Testament scholarship, Musa Dube prefaces the argument she is making by naming it “One African Woman’s Perspective.”²³ Yet as Dube forms her argument in this article, she does not do so as “one African woman” but as an African woman connected to women who have gone before her and to those who surround her now. In this article, she writes herself into Rahab’s story as she identifies with a woman who is in the midst of a colonial-type conquest. Dube makes Rahab’s story her own as she says of Rahab:

As she walks away from the window I realize that I am her. I am Rahab. I am also leaning on a small window, stuck in a world divided by great walls – walls that too easily pretend that we have not touched and made love to one another and felt the passion of our humanness. Like Rahab, I am also standing at the window by a great wall that divides the powerful and the less powerful. I am standing in the shadow of death, where the powerful threaten to wipe out cities and they do.²⁴

Dube goes on to say that with Rahab, in the face of death, she will tie out a red ribbon; but she will not wait for the conquerors to knock down the wall. The ribbon, for Dube, stands for life, fragile and fleeting in the face of HIV and AIDS. Dube says, “I tie out a red ribbon, inviting the world to stand in solidarity with Africa and all other people living with HIV/AIDS, to save life. I tie out the red ribbon to say, ‘Let’s own up. We have already made love.’”²⁵ Through her feminist

²³ Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman’s Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship.”

²⁴ Ibid, 177.

²⁵ Ibid, 178.

postcolonial methodology, Dube asks the same of her readers. *Let's own up. We have already made love* – colonialism and imperialism, neocolonialism and globalization have profoundly impacted our lives. We are all affected and infected. The gender injustice present in our world and worsened through our global interaction has shown us that liberation will not be an easy task. But there is the red ribbon, and the window, and so there is something we can do.

Reflecting on this small piece from Dube's work, several themes pertinent to liberation theology emerge. The first is solidarity. In her statement on Jesus and AIDS to the World Council of Churches, and in her reflection on Rahab, Dube calls all who will listen to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. Solidarity with the poor within liberation theology takes on a new meaning in Dube's work as solidarity with those who suffer from HIV and AIDS. This meaning fits well with Gutierrez' definition of the poor as those "who die before their time."²⁶ In an article on children and aids, Dube argues that taking an "option for children is taking an option for Christ."²⁷ Using the language of liberation theology, she points out that the poor are not just poor, but they are also sick.

Second, Dube writes from a place of praxis. She reads both texts and cultures while listening to the people who surround her. This is seen throughout her work as she always speaks from the location of her community. Nothing is written in the abstract, every word she has written has grown from the land of her birth. One illustration of this can be seen in Dube's work

²⁶ Jon Sobrino, "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria, 38-74, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 67.

²⁷ Dube, "Fighting with God: Children and HIV/AIDS in Botswana" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 114, Nov 2002, 31-42.

with African Independent Churches (AIC). In 1706, Beatrice Kimpa Vita broke away from the Catholic Church to form the first African Independent Church.²⁸ These churches resisted colonial Christianity by pulling from both Christianity and African Traditional Religions in the worship and praxis. Dube pulls from the interpretation and liturgical practices of AIC churches in her work and uses them as an example of combining indigenous African religions and Christianity.

Dube also utilizes praxis in her teaching. In a New Testament class she teaches at University of Botswana, she has required students to interview people with HIV and AIDS.²⁹ Dube has further modeled praxis by creating worship resources and sermon guidelines for addressing HIV and AIDS in congregational settings.³⁰

Third, through biblical interpretation, Dube evokes the space of the prophetic. In her 2007 article, “Jesus, Prophecy and AIDS” Dube emphasizes Jesus’ own acceptance of his prophetic role as she frames the AIDS pandemic within a liberation approach. She points out that from Jesus birth as king to his announcement of the kingdom of God, he subverted the colonial rule of the Roman empire. Dube argues that throughout the gospels Jesus took the side of the

²⁸ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 40-43.

²⁹ Dube, “Healing Where There is No Healing: Reading the Miracles of Healing in an AIDS Context, in *Reading Communities, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte*, ed. Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran, 121-133 (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2002).

³⁰ Dube, ed. *Africa Praying: A handbook on HIV/AIDS sensitive sermon guidelines and liturgy*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003).

lepers and the sex workers and empowered the powerless to stand against injustice. Dube sees this as a model of how the church must speak prophetically in the face of HIV and AIDS.³¹

Fourth, Dube's project is feminist at its core. Deeply influenced by both Western feminism and by the *Circle* of women she writes with, the priority of women's experience is seen throughout her work. While this can be seen throughout Dube's body of work, a good illustration of this can be seen in the introduction to "Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women." Here, she speaks of the Circle of African Women Theologians and says,

A "circle of women" describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnectedness of life. It signifies life as a continuous flowing force, which must continue to be nurtured at all times. A circle of women pursuing theology together in different African contexts is an approach that insists that African women are also a part of creation: they are in the circle of creation.³²

Yet, while Dube's project is woman-centered, Dube is critical of Western feminists who speak against patriarchy without speaking against imperialism. Dube says that African women experience "double colonization" by patriarchy and imperialism and cannot be asked to fight against one without the other.³³ Dube speaks of her experience by saying,

³¹ Dube, "Jesus, Prophecy and AIDS," in *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge*, ed. Robin Gill, 89-99 (London: SCM Press, 2007).

³² Dube, "Introduction: 'Little Girl, Get Up!'" in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Musa W. Dube, and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 40-65 (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001), 11.

³³ See Dube, "Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard, 60-76, (New York: Sheffield Academic Press), 2003; and Dube, "Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization & Postcolonial African Feminisms," *Studies in World Christianity* 5: 1999, 213-228.

As a black African woman of Botswana - a survivor of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization - I live in the deep shadow of death. To live with the intensification of poverty in African countries, to live with wars and coups, to live with corruption and exploitation, to watch helplessly as AIDS slowly eats away the life of beloved friends, neighbours and relatives is to live where death and life have become identical twins.³⁴

As Dube speaks for the vulnerable position of African women, she reminds her readers how oppression literally means death. With these words we realize the importance of her liberation stance that draws theology away from the theoretical and makes salvation literal and urgent.

Finally, other liberation theologies, Dube believes God is closest to the oppressed. Where Dube possibly diverges from theologians like Cone and Gutierrez is in her opening up a greater role for the oppressor to have a voice through her postcolonial approach. Dube asks former oppressors to “own up” to their role as oppressors, emphasizing that both the former colonized and the former colonizer have work to do.³⁵ While James Cone told white people they might play a part in his liberation project, he emphasized that they “will have to do what we say.”³⁶ Dube’s postcolonial theology takes a different approach as she asks the former colonizers to take a more active role. Postcolonial theology is not just for oppressed peoples, it is for the oppressor as well. In describing this method, Kwok Pui-Lan argues that although they begin at different entry points, postcolonial theology can be done by both the former colonized and the former

³⁴ Dube, “Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Global Economic Era.” *Ecumenical Review* 49 (10): 1997, 439-450, see pg. 443.

³⁵ Dube, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations” (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy,” 222.

³⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 199.

colonizers.³⁷ Dube names the oppressed person as having an epistemological priority, as being the “real postcolonial readers,” but reminds her readers that we are all postcolonial subjects because we have all played a role in imperialism.³⁸

Postcolonial Theology

Postcolonial theology can be understood as Dube’s *red ribbon*. It is the flag she flies from the window to speak for life and liberation as she points out systems and structures that have not been life-giving for those in the Two-Thirds World. Dube’s postcolonial theology finds its roots in postcolonial theory, a literary method that analyzes the ways in which a body of literature can create colonized minds. Dube draws from the text, *The Empire Writes Back* in her use of the term “postcolonial” and defines it as, “the modern history of imperialism, beginning with the process of colonialism, through the struggles for political independence, the attainment of independence, and to the contemporary process of neocolonialism.”³⁹ In another article, Dube defines postcolonial as the “cultural, economical and political contact of the colonizer and the colonized and the chain reactions that it ignited.”⁴⁰ In both of these definitions, Dube emphasizes the

³⁷ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 127.

³⁸ Dube, "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations" (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy," 239.

³⁹ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 14. See also, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ed., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

⁴⁰ Dube, “Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization & Postcolonial African Feminisms,” 215.

continuity of oppression by pointing out that independence did not end imperialism, but merely shifted it to the realms of neocolonialism and globalization.

Taking postcolonial theory a step farther, a postcolonial theology is needed precisely because the colonization of peoples went hand in hand with their conversion to Christianity. Dube reminds her readers that colonizers such as David Livingstone said, “civilization – Christianity and commerce – should never be inseparable”⁴¹ Africans were seen as backward or uncivilized, and therefore in need of conversion. In responding to this history, Dube sees postcolonialism as a servant of liberation and as a servant of justice.⁴² Dube understands postcolonialism to be essential to the goals of liberation theology as she says, “It is only fair to say liberation theology rose from a context of resisting both imperial oppression and deformation of people through exploitation, racism, and dispossession.”⁴³ Dube argues that the postcolonial framework can add a new dimension to liberation theology by 1) highlighting the connection between the colonizer and the colonized, and thus crossing lines in academia, 2) by sharpening the focus of theologians in the Two-Thirds world as it points out how they have also participated in oppressive ideologies, 3) by taking seriously the double oppression of imperialism and patriarchy, 4) by helping the Two-Thirds world understanding the oppression within textual forms and frameworks, and 5) by recognizing the continuation of international domination of some nations by others.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Dube, (quoting David Livingstone), *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 6.

⁴² Dube, “Postcolonialism & Liberation,” in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre, 288-294 (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 293-294.

⁴³ Ibid, 291.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 293-294.

Dube creates a space for praxis as she applies her postcolonial method to the issue of HIV and AIDS. Here, she points out that western conceptions of naming and confidentiality did not take African cosmology into account. She says that because HIV and AIDS have not been given African names, their nature has not been fully known and Africans have remained suspicious in light of the baggage of western colonialism. She also says that practices of confidentiality surrounding testing isolated individuals and did not allow sickness to be shouldered of the community. Confidentiality deepened stigma and left no room for a communal response. In response to this, Dube suggests that HIV and AIDS should be addressed through communal divination where a traditional healer gathers the community to explore where broken relationships exist and how they can be healed. Dube believes this would bring to light patriarchy, poverty, and other forms of marginalization that make people vulnerable.⁴⁵

Dube's use of the postcolonial framework is seen most clearly through her work with texts. Dube argues that a postcolonial interpretation of scripture as necessary in order to recognize the ways in which the imperialists wrote themselves into the texts.⁴⁶ She suggests that the biblical stories themselves invite this type of reading because the biblical story is an "unfinished story." Dube says the biblical text "invites its own continuation in history; it resists the covers of our Bibles and writes itself on the pages of the earth."⁴⁷ By seeing the story as a "drama of believers," various "biblical reader-actors" can shed light on texts through their

⁴⁵ Dube, "Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention," in *African Women, Religion, and Health*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 131-156 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

⁴⁶ Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible," 11-26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

locations in history. According to Dube, injustice is done when one historical location, such as the ancient setting, is privileged over others. Here, Dube argues that the Bible as a written book belongs not only to its authors, but also to its readers.⁴⁸

In navigating a postcolonial interpretation of scripture, Dube points out how the biblical narratives (like all postcolonial literature) authorize travel and proclaim imperialism as a “moral vocation.”⁴⁹ One example of this can be found in her interpretation of the Exodus story. While most liberation theologians turn to Exodus as a narrative of God’s liberation, Dube focuses on the way the narrative authorizes travel, sending the people to conquer an inhabited land. Dube notes stance against slavery in the text, but she also points out how the victimized become the victimizers, and how the characterization of the land as “flowing with milk and honey” betrays the economic interest and the characterization of the people as godless authorizes conquest.⁵⁰ Dube says, “The Exodus-Joshua story is an imperializing rhetoric because it is expressly focused on taking and maintaining power over foreign and inhabited lands.”⁵¹ Dube argues that the story of the Exodus can serve both the colonized and the colonizer.⁵²

Despite the imperialism present within the text and within its reading history, reading through a postcolonial framework opens space to read for resistance. The goal of conquest and colonization is challenged as new voices enter the conversation. For this reason, Dube argues

⁴⁸ Ibid, 12-14.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 16-18.

⁵⁰ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 57-83.

⁵¹ Ibid, 70.

⁵² Ibid, 106.

that the goal of a postcolonial interpretation is “decolonization,” and the goal of a decolonizing reading is liberation.⁵³ Dube says, “The concern and top priority of decolonization and liberation is therefore to affirm; to heal the wounded cultural identity.”⁵⁴ In this way, liberation can be served when distorted images are corrected and “essentialisms” are redefined.⁵⁵

Biblical Hermeneutics

There is a popular saying in Africa that says, when the white man came, they had the Bible and we had the land, but when we bowed our heads to pray, we looked up and we had the Bible and they had the land.⁵⁶ Dube retells this story as she speaks of the inseparable and ongoing link between colonialism and Christianity on the African continent. With this story in mind she takes scripture as an open canon⁵⁷ and argues for the inclusion of African *Scriptoratures*, a term Dube coins to refer to folktales, proverbs, and other stories that are held sacred by the community.⁵⁸ By proposing an opening of the canon, Dube finds freedom to read with a hermeneutic of suspicion, which characterizes liberation theologies.

⁵³ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁴ Dube, “Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization & Postcolonial African Feminisms,” 217.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 219.

⁵⁶ Dube, “Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42),” 37.

⁵⁷ For a discussion on an open canon, see Dube, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations” (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy,” 236-238 and Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 12-15. Dube also proposes an opening of the canon through her work on “scriptoratures,” See Dube, “Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures,” 77-96.

⁵⁸ Dube, “Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures,” 77-79.

Dube also proposes a way of reading that is attentive to what she calls the “oral-Spirit space,” a place where women’s oral and unspoken stories can be recovered in theological discourse.⁵⁹ In employing this method, Dube reads like a storyteller as biblical characters find themselves in new African locations, and African characters migrate into the biblical texts.⁶⁰ Dube points out that because Western ways of reading have been named as the “legitimate ways of reading the Bible,” new ways must be discovered because the “master’s tools cannot bring down his house.” Dube argues that African women must continue to develop new ways of reading and points out three ways she has done this, through telling and re-telling stories, through divination readings, and through spirit readings.⁶¹

Dube coins the term “scriptoratures” based on Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s term “orature” which refers to the oral literatures of Africa. Scriptoratures, for Dube, are then the oral bodies of literature within African cultures that speak authoritatively within both sacred and secular

⁵⁹ Dube, “Scripture, Feminism and Post-colonial Contexts,” in *Concilium: International Journal for Theology, Women’s Sacred Scriptures*, No. 3: 1998, 45-54, see pg. 52-53.

⁶⁰ Dube employs this literary motif in several of her articles. For example, in “Rahab is hanging out a Red Ribbon” she reads herself into Rahab’s story. in “Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24-43” the bleeding woman who touches Jesus becomes “Mama Africa,” whose doctors have not made her well. And in “John 4:1-42 – The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters: The Samaritan Woman and African Women,” the five husbands become the colonizers of the continent and the woman at the well is replaced by women from Africa’s people group in Dube’s five storytelling scenes. See: Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman’s Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship,” 177-202; Dube, “Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24-43,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship)*, ed. Musa W. Dube, 50-62 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); and Dube, “John 4:1-42 – The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters: The Samaritan Woman and African Women,” in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Musa W. Dube, and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 40-65 (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001).

⁶¹ Dube, “Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures,” 92.

realms. Dube identifies this method as one used by the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* by pointing out that their process involves exchange of these oral stories. Dube looks at the history of inculturation hermeneutics in Africa and says that theologians in this tradition “sought to read the Bible with their own African traditions.”⁶² She points to the founding of the AIC churches in 1706 as a means of combining African thought and Christianity.

As Dube examines the role of the popular readers, she says, “African readers... could not read the Bible without their scriptoratures, since this would amount to endorsing their own colonization of the mind and denying their own identity.”⁶³ Dube points to the process of cultural hermeneutics within Circle methodology and emphasizes with Oduyoye the importance of understanding the way the Bible is used in culture as an interpretive key. Dube articulates her own process by saying that as a “liberation reader” she sought out the AIC churches to see how they read the texts. Dube does not say that all popular readings will be liberation readings, but instead notes that an “ethical framework of liberation” is required to ground popular readings of scripture/scriptoratures.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid, 80.

⁶³ Ibid, 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 86-94.

A concept key to Dube's work is her method of "*reading with*" the community.⁶⁵ In reflecting on this method Dube says, "Reading with non-academically trained readers becomes a subversive act of decolonizing."⁶⁶ Her starting point for theology is always with experience and with the people. By *reading with*, Dube balances life inside and outside of the academy. She utilizes fieldwork in her own research and instructs her students to do the same. Her work in scripture is heavily influenced by African Independent Churches and the way they combine traditional and Christian beliefs in their faith expressions.⁶⁷

Through research within African Independent Churches, Dube has found that one popular reading of the Bible is in its use as a "divining text." Dube argues that the Bible is used in a similar manner to the set of objects the diviner would cast to discern the source of sickness or death. She says that for the AIC churches, reading the Bible as a divining sets "allows them to get in touch with their sacred figures – *Badimo* and Jesus."⁶⁸ *Badimo* is the Setswana word for the ancestors who are understood to be departed spirits who are now caretakers of the

⁶⁵ Dube uses this term throughout her work, for a specific citation where she defines the term, see Musa W. Dube and Gerald O. West. "Reading With": An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible: African Overtures," *Semeia*, no 73 1996, p 7-17. For an example of how this hermeneutic functions in her work, see Dube, "Healing Where There is No Healing: Reading the Miracles of Healing in an AIDS Context" in *Reading Communities, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte*, ed. Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran, 121-133. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2002), esp. page 124; and Dube, "Readings Of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations Of Matt 15:21-28," 111-129.

⁶⁶ Dube, "Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures," 82.

⁶⁷ Dube argues that the AICs offer a viable model of liberation and its example has not been given enough attention. See Dube, "Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization & Postcolonial African Feminisms," 111-129.

⁶⁸ Dube, "Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures," 87.

community. Dube points out that the colonial biblical translations (which are still in use) translated *Badimo* as “evil spirits,” misunderstanding the spiritual role of the ancestors. Yet despite this, when the text is used as a divining text, the connection between the people, Jesus and *Badimo* is still honored.⁶⁹ In her own work with the texts, Dube reads passages as a divining text. She uses a hermeneutic similar to that found in the African Independent Churches as she reads the texts with both a textual and cultural hermeneutic in mind. Through this process, Dube explores issues such as HIV and AIDS, globalization, the experience of women and international relations.⁷⁰

Another aspect of Dube’s focus on *reading with* can be found in her work with the church. As a former HIV and AIDS theological consultant for the World Council of Churches, Dube has written on how to integrate HIV and AIDS into theological curriculums and into church worship services. In the volume she edited called *AfricaPraying*, Dube authored songs, liturgies and sermon reflections to be incorporated into services to create AIDS awareness.⁷¹ In

⁶⁹ Dube, “Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into “Demons” in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 73 (03): 1999, 33-59.

⁷⁰ Dube, “Divining Ruth for International Relations,” in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A.K.M. Adam, 67-80 (St Louis: Chalice, 2001); and Dube, “Divining texts for international relations: Matt. 15:21-28,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Reviewed*, ed. Ingrid R. Kitzberger, 315-328, (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Dube, “Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42),” 37-59.

⁷¹ Dube, ed. *AfricaPraying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy* (Geneva: World Council of Churches / Consul Oecumenique), 2003.

this work, she embraces the multi-sectoral approach that helped Botswana lower their country's epidemic prevalence as she pulls the church and the academy into the realm of activism.⁷²

An African Postcolonial Feminist Theology of Liberation: Jesus Has AIDS

Musa Dube's feminist postcolonial liberation project has opened new ground for both liberation theologies and African theologies through utilizing postcolonial methodology. If the problems of Africa are going to be solved, the macro-lens of how these issues relate to the history of colonialism must not be neglected. Dube fills an important lacuna as she uses postcolonial theory to bridge the gap between Western feminist theologies and African feminist theologies, while bringing attention to what Two-Thirds World women theologians have to offer.

Dube's methodological approach exemplifies a place where liberation theologies intersect to create change for those who are oppressed on multiple levels. By inviting both the former colonized and the former colonizer to the table, Dube points out the interconnectedness of our globalized world and asks that we all find our place in the story and find our role in working for liberation. Dube's work is a prophetic voice in an era of AIDS, where prophetic voices are hard to find. In this way, Dube's project answers her own question – HIV and AIDS must be a liberation theology because those with HIV and AIDS may be among the most oppressed in our world today. When a person in the Two-Thirds world contracts HIV, multiple oppressions of

⁷² Dube, "Introduction: Towards a Multi-sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS," in *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, ed. Musa W. Dube, vii-xiii (Geneva: World Council of Churches / Consul Oecumenique, 2003).

poverty, unemployment, stigma, global inequalities in healthcare, and inequalities in life expectancy collide, redefining their very being. Dube realizes this as she puts Jesus in their shoes and says:

We, the church of this era, will ask, When Lord did we see you sick with AIDS, stigmatized, isolated and rejected, and did not visit or welcome you in our homes? When Lord did we see you hungry, naked and thirsty and did not feed you, clothe you and give you water? When were you a powerless woman, a widow and an orphan and we did not come to your rescue? The Lord will say to us, "Truly, I tell you, as long as you did not do it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did not do it to me."⁷³

This is the call of liberation theology – to identify with the most marginalized, to work to end oppression, even if it means admitting we have been oppressors. Through her work, Dube invites us all to find the freedom that can only be gained when our destinies as former colonizer and former colonized are bound together. She invites us to “*own up*” for we have already “*made love*.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Dube, “Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era,” 537-538.

⁷⁴ Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman’s Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship,” 178.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ed., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969.
- _____. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997.
- Dube, Musa W. "Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention." In *African Women, Religion, and Health*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 131-156. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.
- _____, ed. *AfricaPraying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy*. Geneva: World Council of Churches / Consul Oecumenique, 2003.
- _____. "Batswakwa: Which Traveller Are You (John 1:1-18)?" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 108 (11): 2000, 79-89.
- _____. "Circle readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures." In *Study of Religion in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of G.C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Johannes A. Smit, P. Pratap Kumar, and G. C. Oosthuizen, 77-96. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005.
- _____. "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo into "Demons" in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 73 (03): 1999, 33-59.
- _____. "Divining Ruth for International Relations." In *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A.K.M. Adam, 67-80. St Louis: Chalice, 2001.
- _____. "Divining Texts for International Relations: Matt. 15:21-28." In *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Reviewed*, 315-328, ed. Ingrid R. Kitzberger, Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- _____. "Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24-43." *Ecumenical Review* 51 (01): 1999, 11-17.

- _____. "Fighting with God: Children and HIV/AIDS in Botswana." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 114 (11): 2002, 31-42.
- _____. "Go Therefore and Make Disciples of All Nations" (Matthew 28:19a): A Postcolonial Perspective on Biblical Criticism and Pedagogy." In *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 224-246. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998.
- _____. "Healing Where There is No Healing: Reading the Miracles of Healing in an AIDS Context. In *Reading Communities, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte*, ed. Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran, 121-133. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2002.
- _____. "Introduction: Towards a Multi-sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS." In *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, ed. Musa W. Dube, vii-xiii. Geneva: World Council of Churches / Consilium Oecumenicum, 2003.
- _____. "Jesus, Prophecy and AIDS," 89-99, In *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge*, ed. Robin Gill. London: SCM Press, 2007.
- _____. "John 4:1-42 – The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters: The Samaritan Woman and African Women. In *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Musa W. Dube, and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 40-65. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2001.
- _____. "Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation." In *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard, 60-76. New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.
- _____. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.
- _____. "Postcolonialism & Liberation." In *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre, 288-294. St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.

- _____. "Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Global Economic Era." *Ecumenical Review* 49 (10): 1997, 439-450.
- _____. "Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman's Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship." In *Feminist New Testament Studies: Global and Future Perspectives*, ed. Kathleen Wicker, 177-202. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- _____. "Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)." *Semeia*, no. 75: 1996, 37-59.
- _____. "Readings Of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations Of Matt 15:21-28." *Semeia*, no. 73: 1996, 111-129.
- _____. "Scripture, Feminism and Post-colonial Contexts." In *Concilium: International Journal for Theology, Women's Sacred Scriptures*, No. 3: 1998, 45-54.
- _____. "Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization & Postcolonial African Feminisms." *Studies in World Christianity* 5: 1999, 213-228.
- _____. "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS and Globalization Era." In *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele), 71-93. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003.
- _____. "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era." *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 363 (10): 2002, 535-549.
- _____. "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible." *Semeia*, no. 78: 1997, 11-26.
- Dube, Musa W. and Gerald O. West. "Reading With": An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible: African Overtures." *Semeia*, no 73 1996, p 7-17.
- Edet, Rosemary and Bette Ekeya. "Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community." In *With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996.

- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Kwok Pui-Lan. *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.
- Oduyoye, Mercy. *Daughters Of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- _____. "The Empowering Spirit of Religion." In *Lift Every Voice*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, 245-258. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
- Schreier, Robert J. ed. *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.
- Sobrino, Jon. "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology." In *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, 38-74. Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2003.