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*The African and African Diasporic Women  
in Religion and Theology Conference:  
A Reflection*

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Several years ago, when I was a junior Religious Studies major at Spelman College,  
under the tutelage of departmental faculty, chiefly Dr. Rosetta Ross, I was introduced to black

and womanist ethics and theologies. I was crafting a two-year research project, “Womanism Is as Its Daughters Know: Creating an Empowering Christology for Young, African American, Christian Women.” With the UNCF-Mellon Undergraduate Fellowship, I traveled to South Africa for the first time and sought to make tentative comparisons with the liberation traditions I learned at Spelman and those of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CCAWT). A CCAWT member in Cape Town indicated that, if I wanted to connect with an active, mostly African and African-descended chapter of the Circle, I needed to work with the members of the Pietermaritzburg chapter. This academic “lead,” coupled with a desire to spend more time in South Africa, led me back to the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg) in August for a semester abroad. Over the course of the semester, I sat at the feet of women in CCAWT. Their academic and ecclesial collegiality, in addition to their friendships, created a welcoming space for me in Pietermaritzburg. I was surprised, however, that there were no formal collaborative efforts between the African American womanist religionists from whom I had come and the African feminist religionists whom I was coming to know. Of course, that is not the whole story. But for me, this yearning for formal collaboration between African American and African women religionists made the 2012 meeting especially meaningful.

One of the most striking moments of the African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology Conference happened on the last day of our gathering. The day before our last day we visited two slave castles – Elmina and Cape Coast – and were haunted, in various ways, by the perpetual mourning that such trauma-filled space continues to produce, centuries later. Our responses were no doubt made bigger through the descriptive narrativizing at which

each tour guide seemed painfully adept. At the slave castles, I was aware, distinctly, of our group's multiplicity. Some had visited the slave castles before and seemed to brace their psyches long before arrival. Some came open and curious. Some were too jovial upon entry, and too sad upon exit. I noticed that, for many of the diasporic African women, mostly African American, there was an emotional and spiritual sobriety that took the form of anger, silence, and tears. From the continental African women – mostly Ghanaian, Liberian, and Nigerian – there seemed to be a solemnity, inquiry, and visible frustration. I felt the hyphenated tension. It was an overwhelming day that needed the saltwater of our oceanside lunch to provide a cleansing. It was almost too much.

Throughout the week, we had discussed various practices of violence perpetuated on black bodies worldwide under the theme “hope is as strong as a woman’s arm.” At the violent slave castles, we – the descendants of those who “left” and those “left behind” – were embodied hope testaments, testing our arms’ strength in the still-speaking castles.

That night, I sat around a dinner table to discuss all that had been left behind discursively throughout the week with Amey Adkins, a sister doctoral student and friend, and Drs. Melanie Harris and Carolyn McCrary. Something about charged space always demands attention to the marginal. In our urge to collaborate, what cross-cultural meeting grounds had we failed to establish? In talking about violence, were we participating in an activist conversation that did not work toward an end? It was clear to us that there were multiple agendas in our gathered group and, by the conference’s end, all of them would not be met. We needed another way to be in temporary conference community. A change in plans ensued the next day.

In response to the previous day's fullness, conference participants sat in a circle and talked about all we were thinking and feeling. A lot came up in that conversation. Part of the conference's animating impulse was to provide transatlantic scholarly solidarity and convergence. As a part of the conference planning committee, I intended to orchestrate a space of Africana reflection with African-descended women speaking to and *through* each other. What arose (and needed to be tended) in the circle, however, were the contrasting identity spaces that, through each other, we could see more clearly. The circle conversation signaled something more enduring.

For me, our circle of conversation was the great gift of the Ghana consultation. Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and host of the conference, prophetically named her organization. A circle can always open up, expand, and include all those willing to be a part of it. Indeed, that is what I experienced on the final day of the consultation: a collective willingness to grow. Our conversation was not linear. Rather, prompted by several questions, we theorized, cried, and exclaimed through our life stories. It was a beautiful, complicated quilt of voices that could not be easily sewn together and displayed. It was a rare opportunity, though, to map our patched pieces. I have never had the opportunity to sit in a room of black women *so very diverse* and talk about our journeys of meeting and departure. We talked out loud about how we saw ourselves – particularly our African identities – and how we did, and sometimes did not, see ourselves in the other.

These questions resonated deeply with me. The founding moment of our 2012 womanist consultation happened more than two decades ago. For example, at the Interdenominational

Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, African feminist theologian and CCAWT founder Dr. Mercy Oduyoye encountered womanist theologian Dr. Jacquelyn Grant and set forth an intention for collaboration. As Dr. Rosetta Ross indicates in “An Historic Meeting: African and African Diaspora Women Convene for the First-Ever Religion Conference,” even their meeting was situated in a broader atmosphere of women worldwide challenging the patriarchy of liberationist academic agendas.<sup>1</sup> Their lives had already met discursively, and their chance meeting only solidified the necessity of dialogue. I have borne witness to several of these conversations. A few womanists have conducted research and taught in various African countries with the help of women in the CCAWT. Other womanists remain active members of CCAWT. In 2006, Rev. Lisa Rhodes of Spelman College spearheaded the Sisters Chapel Global Conference, which also brought together African and African Diasporan religionists and religious practitioners for cross-cultural dialogue. Never before, however, had black women religionists and religious practitioners from the continent and diaspora gathered intentionally for the purposes of academic solidarity and ongoing collaboration.

While we at the conference lamented that such a gathering was “long overdue,” the last-day’s circle conversation indicated that our gathering was, perhaps, timed appropriately. Our regional projects had matured enough to hold them up to the light of each other and talk about the ways that we can move forward together and separately. Ross suggests that “[a]lthough the mid-century spirit of social solidarity seems nearly passé, hope exists in efforts that seek to take

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<sup>1</sup> Rosetta Ross, “An Historic Meeting: African and African Diaspora Women Convene for the First-Ever Religion Conference,” *Religion Dispatches*, July 31, 2012, accessed January 17, 2013, [http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6231/an\\_historic\\_meeting%3A\\_african\\_and\\_african\\_diaspora\\_women\\_convene\\_in\\_ghana\\_for\\_first-ever\\_religion\\_conference](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6231/an_historic_meeting%3A_african_and_african_diaspora_women_convene_in_ghana_for_first-ever_religion_conference).

up ideals of a better future for everyone.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the last-day circle signaled the ideals of third-wave womanism which “celebrates hybridity, tension, and complexity...is Christian and non-Christian, straight and queer, historical and yet postmodern, political and rich with philosophical and cultural criticism, and lastly, committed to an open-ended vision of possibility.”<sup>3</sup> As I look back on my undergraduate years, specifically examining the intent of my research – a generation consciousness in womanist thought – I realize that this circle-culminating conference opened the space wide for such meaningful, cross-cultural subjectivities. As one of the youngest women in the space, my takeaway remains the importance of such roundtable collaborations. What daughters need to *know* is how to talk across difference.

I am left thinking about the significance of place. The Talitha Qumi Center (our meeting space, situated in Legon’s Trinity Theological Seminary), entitled with an imperative to “rise,” stood in sharp contrast to the muted gasp of the slave castles. Experiencing these two places in conversation meant that conference participants necessarily had to deal with the meaningful dialogic between *here* and *there*, African and African American, young and old, you and me. As each encounter gives us new ways of seeing each other and ourselves, the consultation in Ghana provided a rich storehouse of continuums from which each participant has the privilege to continuously draw.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Ain’t I A Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought,” <http://www.thirdwavewomanism.com/>, accessed January 18, 2013.