



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Introduction

Evelyn L. Parker
Southern Methodist University

Rosetta E. Ross
Spelman College

Part of **JRER Special Issue:**
*Proceedings and Reflections – The 2012 Consultation
of African and African Diasporan Women in Religion and Theology,*
edited by Rosetta E. Ross and Evelyn L. Parker

In an essay entitled “Perspectives for the Study of African-American Religion in the United States,” Charles H. Long says “the image of Africa play[s] an enormous part in the religion of the black [persons].” During enslavement, Long observes, social recognition of black

persons focused only on “physiological characteristics.” As a consequence, the historic experience of black persons in the United States includes a legacy of Africa being emphasized through focus on the black body, “one’s physical being and one’s origins,” even when black persons have “no conscious memory of Africa.”¹ How and to what extent black persons whose heritage dates to the U.S. colonial (and even reconstruction) era are socio-culturally connected to Africa has been debated for more than a century. On the one hand, in the recent past and contemporary era, this debate has arisen as support for diasporan Africans distancing themselves from an African heritage, sometimes reflecting “internalized oppression” that emerges as anti-blackness and anti-Africanness² among diasporan Africans themselves. This perspective seems aimed at countering the assertion that society’s racialized focus on the black body relates diasporan Africans to the image of Africa, without regard for personal dispositions toward the continent. On the other hand, there is in perspectives of some black persons in the United States longing to visit the African continent. As a religious concern, diasporan Africans may seek connection with Africa and Africans for authentication and to validate their humanity. This longing affirms the idea that the image of Africa “constitutes the religious valorization of the land, a place where the natural and ordinary gestures of the black [person] were and could be authenticated.”³ For many diasporan Africans, being born and living day to day in a context

¹ Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for the Study of African-American Religion in the United States” in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, Ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert E. Raboteau, 22-35, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 26.

² Dianne Stewart presents a helpful discussion of the distinction between anti-blackness and anti-Africanness in African American thought in her text *Three Eyes for the Journey*. See the discussion starting on page xi in Dianne Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

³ Long, 26.

where anti-blackness and anti-Africanness⁴ is a socio-cultural reality means there often is a nagging psychological experience of longing, in spite of rootedness and accomplishments within U.S. and other borders. This sense of longing – resulting from any of number of experiences: the absence of full social recognition, potential to be criminally profiled at any time, experiences of arbitrary exclusions, ongoing need to prove one belongs to one’s country, etc. – was discerned and described by a Ghanaian Muslim activist as African Americans looking for home. “You are searching for home,” she said. “I realize that I am privileged because I am at home.”

This description of diasporan Africans may have precisely named the ultimate impetus for the 2012 Consultation of African and African-Diasporan Women in Religion and Theology. One conference organizer from the United States observed that “many African descended people from North America, I included, have desired to visit the Motherland – the continent of Africa – with expectations of being received by the people of Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and other countries in Africa. Years ago I fantasized the rituals and receptions of coming ‘home’ to Tanzania, East Africa. The euphoria of my first experience, however, was tempered by the reality of the African people I encountered who were far more complex than the fantasies I had created and the stereotypes I had harbored.” Still, she continued, as “Charles Long indicates, I longed for Africa and her peoples to validate my existence as an African descended woman.”

In stark contrast to the experience of longing by diasporan Africans, continental Africans feel “at home.” And being “at home” means more than living on the continent. It includes the psychological security of ongoing interaction with primordial legacies of elders and ancestors

⁴ See note two above. Interestingly, the distinction between anti-blackness and anti-Africanness and the reality of internalized oppression makes the longing of diasporan Africans even more complex since there exists not only the absence of not being at home or in one’s own land, but also the potential absence of being alienated from one’s self.

and a variety of other cultural traditions (even if sometimes contested), and the apparently comfortable complexity of hybrid understandings and negotiations of indigenous sources, traditions, and “religious”⁵ practices. Notwithstanding differing realities of development and differing experiences of colonization, continental African women’s “being at home” is observed by some diasporan Africans as a strength that contributes to, among other things, an ability to easily negotiate the deep complexities of African identities. Another U.S. conference organizer said what she noted most among the many dynamics at play during the 2012 Consultation was the comfortable intricacies of continental African women’s identities. “Continental African women constantly were showing me what it means to negotiate one’s power, as they easily embodied this practice at every level in almost all of what they did and said.” The distinct realities of looking for home and being at home became flashpoints that emerged at different times during the Consultation as continental and diasporan women negotiated together and with each other around the meeting’s theme “Hope Is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora.”

The first Consultation of African and African Diasporan⁶ Women in Religion and Theology emerged from seeds planted more than 25 years earlier when continental and diasporan African women first encountered each other in international Christian denominational meetings,

⁵ We include the term “religious” here fully recognizing the contested nature of the term as an appropriate way to name the varieties of ways peoples use ritual, language, artifacts, and other behavior to structure their lives and identities.

⁶ Though the meeting technically did include representatives from Africa and the African diaspora, conference organizers noted and began and ended the meeting lamenting constraints that prevented wider representation and anticipating broader participation of women on the continent and in the diaspora at future meetings.

in programs of the World Council of Churches, and in helping to shape the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). More specifically, organizing the 2012 meeting began with a response to Evelyn L. Parker's 2008 request for ideas to plan future programs and emphases for the American Academy of Religion's Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Group. Recalling earlier work and recognizing the ever-present timeliness of continental and diasporan women being in conversation, Rosetta Ross suggested that the Womanist Consultation engage African women scholars. Plans for the 2012 Consultation began in earnest when Mercy Amba Oduyoye – host of the meeting and elder sister in collaborations of continental and diasporan African women in religion – enthusiastically responded to the idea, “At last, it is going to happen!” Notwithstanding her enthusiasm, Oduyoye gave Rose Mary Amenga-Etego the opportunity – and the task – of leading organizing work on the continent.

The meeting took place over four days in July, 2012, at the Talitha Qumi Centre of Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra, Ghana. Forty women registered for the meeting and made up the daily average, nearing that number, though on the opening day a delegation from Ghana's Muslim women's associations as well as other Ghanaian women joined the meeting for the inaugural keynote and pushed numbers to over seventy. Throughout the week the group consisted of participants from Liberia, Nigeria, and the United States, including one Jamaican-American scholar. Persons traveling from the United States included some who had visited Africa several times with experiences in different countries, as well as persons who had never visited the continent and were traveling internationally for the first time. Notwithstanding this relative diversity, the largest percentage conferees came from various locations in Ghana.

Women at the meeting were African traditionalists, Muslims, and Christians; laity and clergy; university professors, students, and administrators; community activists and denominational executives; business women; and traditional leader Nana Amba Eyiaba, Queen Mother of the Oguaa Traditional Area in Ghana. Departing from the usual academic conference format, the Consultation included keynote addresses, small group work, strategy sessions, presentations of case studies, a “Hope” march, a trip to castles of enslavement, and reflection time. In consideration of tensions that emerged during the meeting, there also was a schedule adjustment to accommodate a time of debriefing. This adjustment resulted from tensions and challenges that emerged during the meeting and contributed to what was, perhaps, the greatest achievement of the Consultation; however, anticipation of this “achievement” was not on the meeting agenda as is accounted for in the need to adjust the schedule.

Goals of the 2012 Consultation of African and African Diasporan Women in Religion and Theology were ambitious, although in planning the meeting organizers did not consider them so. The meeting’s aim was to build community through conversation, and to determine means of collaborating to address the common concern of violence against continental and diasporan African women and girls. However, the purpose of the conference that we designed was eclipsed by the collision of fantasies, stereotypes, unmet desires, and insensitivity that flowed from our complex identities as continental and diasporan African women. Clearly, the expectation that African-descended women would easily collaborate with each other was naively based on diasporan African women’s longing for and idealization of the image of Africa.

Class differences within and among conferees also played a major role in tensions and struggles that surfaced. These differences were expressed as varied expectations related to accommodation, transportation, food, and conference activities. Among women from the United States, socioeconomic stratification was evidenced in subtle “intragroup conflict.”⁷ In *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, Keri Day examines intragroup class tensions among black women in North America.⁸ The glaring absence of poor African American women points out one way this intragroup tension emerges, and marks a loss of possibilities of discourse that could occur had poor black women from the United States been present. Beyond intragroup conflict, stereotypes of continental and diasporan African women about each other crept in, as did challenges arising from our emotional baggage related to different experiences of colonial legacies. Tensions climaxed while visiting the Elmina Castle when the term “half cast” – used to identify African women’s children fathered by European men who had enslaved them – coupled with the phrase “not real Africans” was used to describe diasporan participants. The term “half cast” evoked for diasporan Africans the “stereotype of the Tragic Mulatta”⁹ and the white imaginary assertion that nothing good can come from the woman with one drop of black blood in her veins.¹⁰ This occurrence at the site that separated diasporan Africans from the continent made fully present the psychic pain of longing for home as well as

⁷ Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 16.

⁸ Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

⁹ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 84-89.

¹⁰ Ibid, 84-85.

the difficult postcolonial reality that the search for home is unending. The emotion that sprang from the collision of stereotypes and identities during the tour of the castles of enslavement resulted in a session change the next morning to address the issues that we could feel viscerally but could not, at that point, name. Our attempt to name the issues showed in passionate statements, anger, tears, remorse, and even laughter. We did not have a problem being human together. What we held in common was our femaleness and our commitment to address violence against women and girls in our contexts. Sometimes we were challenged when our common identities were juxtaposed with our class and ethnic differences. We needed to and we did stop and reflect. The lesson that emerged from stopping was recognition that while the conference was historic and noteworthy, the most significant achievement of the meeting was the realization, which slowly dawned on some participants, that one legacy of the Middle Passage is our need to acknowledge the complex and the multi-layered identities of African-descended women, and that this complexity cannot easily be overcome. Perhaps more than anything else, we learned how important it is to talk together about our different identities through the sharing of our stories.

The materials in this special issue capture the tensions and struggles of the meeting as well as common threads of our identities as African-descended women and our mutual goal of diminishing all violence against continental and diasporan African women and girls. The issue begins with a document from the meeting, an invocation entitled “An African Prayer from the Heart of a Woman” offered by Elizabeth Amoah during the Consultation’s opening ceremony. Resources from three religious traditions – African indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity – were interwoven into the opening ceremony. Amoah developed a prayer for the Consultation

and crafted her prayer so that it is both deeply rooted in African indigenous traditions and captures organizers' hope that the meeting would provide space for conversation to begin and be extended, and for relationships and collaborations, ultimately, to emerge. The prayer helped set the tone of the meeting, and, perhaps presciently, identified "a forbidden event" that occurred in the past as the source of challenges that would unfold among the meeting's deliberations. The prayer recites the traumas, but moves to expression of hope, and to a call for life and prosperity.

The two essays that follow the prayer are the keynote addresses that – delivered the first and second days of the conference by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Dianne Stewart – helped set the tone for reflection and discussion of the conference theme. Both essays examine practices of mothering as important to the hope and well-being of continental and diasporan African communities. However, whereas Stewart offers a figurative exploration of the mother symbol that draws from scholarship of African and African diasporan feminist/womanist scholars, Oduyoye cites practices of mothering as sources of hope to introduce to her discussion of five areas – general wellbeing of women and girls, marriage, formal education, wealth, and power – where hope and work are needed move women and girls beyond violence. In "There Is Something in the Heavens': Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls" Oduyoye discusses each area as she specifically notes realities faced by women in Africa. She begins with the observation that claims of preserving African culture often stand in the way of reasonably attending to the wellbeing of women and girls. Oduyoye examines, in turn, ways culture, tradition, and religion impede and prevent women's development and exercise of agency. She

concludes by noting the need for women to collaborate with each other and with men to bring hope and change to women and girls across Africa.

Dianne Stewart's "Rethinking Indigenous Africana Sources of Womanist-Feminist Activisms in the 21st Century" examines discussions of "mothering" in continental and diasporan African scholarship to highlight an ethic based in "virtues of relational life." By analyzing conceptions of mothering as "originary symbols and axiological orientations that are embedded within cosmic and creative [African] realities," the essay overcomes western dualisms that separate theories about human well-being from activism seeking to enact it. "African feminist theoretical treatments of mothering and other female-inclusive concepts," she argues, "make the case for locating solutions to African female dilemmas first and foremost in indigenous African spirituality and cultural values." Stewart overcomes re-biologizing mothering in her assertion that "all members of the human family can become *socio-ontological* mothers."

Keynote addresses helped set a tone for the meeting. However, as indicated above, issues of our identities became a focus of our deliberations and are revealed in some of the remaining articles. In her reflective essay "Hope Is as Strong as a Woman's Arm: Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora," Rose Mary Amenga-Etego identifies some history, challenges, and presuppositions that were palpable in preparations for and during the meeting. She analyzes elements of the meeting as reflecting conferee's diversity, noting that complex realities of historical separation, class and educational differences, regionalisms, as well as differing individual and group expectations combined to challenge conferees in speaking and listening to each other. Still, Amenga-Etego says, a compelling

element of the meeting was the capacity to recognize “that our common humanity as women in the face of diverse forms of violence united us as women and girls, and far outweighed what divided us.” Amenga-Etego lifts up hope that was present in conceiving, organizing, and even participating in the meeting by calling continental and diasporan women to remember their heritage as daughters of the mythical Ghanaian ancestress, Anowa.

Essays by Eboni Marshall Turman, and Carolyn Akua L. McCrary and Beverly Wallace, dovetail in addressing strains in the meeting by discussing, respectively, tensions diasporan women face in seeking to sustain intracommunal solidarity, and the need to practice balance and self-care in negotiating these tensions. Turman’s “In Search of My Mother’s Daughters: Toward a Womanist Meta-Epistemology of Radical Friendship” explores her yearning for an experience of “diasporic incarnate continuity” and examines epistemological difference as the cause of stresses in conferee interactions. Turman says fictive kinship in diasporan practices are expressions of “*traditional communalism as moral knowledge*” that allows black women “to know and value the significance of holding differences together across apparent boundaries, especially in the context of racist patriarchy.” However, she continues, fictive kinship is less useful in ethically negotiating intra-race, intra-gender contexts when epistemological differences challenge continental and diasporan African women’s intracommunal relationships. Instead of “traditional communalism,” Turman calls for a womanist meta-epistemology of radical friendship that honors black women’s full life experiences and privileges difference by affirming women’s choice to be friends. In “The Women Gathered – Stringing Beads of Resistance: Identity, Lament, and Hope,” pastoral theologians McCrary and Wallace reflect on their

experiences of the Consultation and note the need for African women to lament, to process prior personal experiences as well as new knowledge of violence, and to practice balance and self-care. They advocate acts of “re-membering” whereby persons consciously seek to connect and reconnect with the self and the community. McCrary and Wallace also affirm interdependence, but caution against potential exploitation of women seeking to maintain interdependence and communal flourishing (aka “traditional communalism”) at the expense of their own wellbeing. They conclude by encouraging persons to ask “What are some of the liabilities involved in communal relationships for women?” In reply, McCrary and Wallace lift up the need for women to prioritize self-care.

Rabiatu Ammah and Fulera Issaka-Toure explore the role and significance of Muslim women’s agency in combatting physical and emotional violence they confront. Ammah’s “Hope Is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora: Reflections of a Ghanaian Muslim Woman” assesses significance of the Consultation for Muslim women. She concludes that the universal experience of violence by women links the conference to Muslim women’s concerns and describes activism to diminish gendered violence in Ghanaian Muslim communities, especially work of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Ghana (FOMWAG). Ammah highlights the roles of scholarship and education in diminishing violence against women, noting especially contributions by Muslim women scholars. Emphasizing the connection of education to women’s development and women’s economic security, Ammah calls for continued production of women intellectuals and of scholarship, and involving both men and women in the work of eradicating

violence against women. In “Agency in Praxis,” Issaka-Toure uses a Muslim feminist lens to consider women’s agency in marriage (in Accra, Ghana) as expressions of their humanity and as directly related to the ability to overcome emotional and physical violence. Issaka-Toure uses Amina Wadud’s conception “engaged surrender” to discuss ways Muslims enact the Qur’anic expectation that humans respond to the deity as agents. *Engaged* surrender is necessary, Issaka-Toure says, so that all “Muslims, or humans, carry full responsibility for their actions, otherwise the notion of judgment in the hereafter is meaningless.” She draws on qualitative data to assert that some Muslim women’s perspectives about divorce and practices in choosing marriage partners reflect use of agency, and to argue for contexts of religious meaning that respond to the existential needs of women to act as agents.

The final essay “The African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology Conference: A Reflection” by Meredith Coleman-Tobias assesses the Consultation optimistically, in spite of some challenges of communicating across differences. Describing the visit to castles of enslavement as the tipping point that signaled a need to stop and confront impediments to conversation, Coleman-Tobias celebrates implications of the circle of conversation that emerged to address strains of the meeting. “A circle can always open up, expand, and include all those willing to be a part of it,” she writes. That conferees persisted in conversation with each other, even when it was difficult to do so means, Coleman-Tobias continues, that “what I experienced on the final day of the Consultation [was] a collective willingness to grow.”

The experience of the Consultation leaves us with new questions to explore. We wonder about the necessary work of acknowledging and lamenting the wounds of trade of enslaved

Africans and the Middle Passage, and our colonialized meaning making during postcolonial times. As African descended women, how do we engage in the important work of eliminating violence against women and girls while healing ourselves of the atrocities of our histories? How do we receive each other's strangeness? How do we learn to acknowledge each other as complex gendered, classed, sexual, and religious creations of the Divine? What practices of reception of each other do we need to imagine so that we work, undistracted, toward our common goal? The willingness and *need* to grow in developing knowledge of and sensitivity toward one another became a resounding theme as the meeting closed. Recognition of this may be the place to begin future consultations, as continental and diasporan African women and girls continue to engage each other in the work of overcoming violence in our lives and, perhaps more importantly, as we fine-tune with and for each other the meaning of being at home.