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In Search of My Mother's Daughters:
Toward a Womanist Meta-Epistemology of Radical Friendship

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Reflecting on my experience as a participant in the 2012 African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology Conference, I am especially intrigued by the memory of its opening session at the Talitha Qumi Center, Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana. Here, African women and women of African descent from throughout the Diaspora converged upon a

sacred place, and were greeted with a celebratory dance of welcome that beckoned us beyond the boundaries of nationality and religious difference, and even beyond the limits of language. We were called to perceive and to hear; to move and be moved in the commonality of our black, woman flesh. While the welcome- women danced joy and love and peace and blessing into the space, the conference participants, weary from the long journey, slowly approached the circle of meeting where in the days to come we would probe the intimate contours of violence against African and diasporic women and girls.

Tired, but fortified by the spirit of the time, the drums and the dancing compelled my blood memories[1] to conjure Morrison's Baby Suggs, holy, who, with twisted hip, also danced, while calling a beloved community together to proclaim hard love in resistance to the normative violence that threatened black life:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh." … Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say.[2]

In "Maps of Meaning: Black Bodies and African Spirituality as African Diaspora Trope," Anthony Pinn taps into the provocative import of Baby Suggs', holy, exhortation by expounding

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[1] Judith Jamison, Artistic Director Emeritus of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, uses the phrase "blood memory" when she speaks about the memories of the black church of Ailey's youth in Rogers, Texas, that served as inspiration for Ailey classics like *Revelations* (1960). The memories of the church were so deep that they encoded his blood, and he was able to feel the pulse of those memories even though he found himself in New York City, thousands of miles away from home. I have included the phrase here to emphasize how my experience of the black church as beloved community was so deeply embedded that even while thousands of miles away from home, I was able to connect my own experience of community, represented in many ways by Morrison's Baby Suggs, holy, to the call to community that was instigated in Ghana through the drums and the dance. For a more complete treatment of Alvin Ailey's "blood memories," see Jennifer Dunning, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996).

[2] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 88-89.

upon the significance of embodiedness for African/African diasporic communities. He asserts black humanism as a counternarrative to the dominant script concerning African/African American religion, which identifies theistic African/African American spirituality as the primary common attribute of black religious experience.[3] Pinn argues in contrast to the normative claim that divinity-based black religion is organic to all people of African descent, and, therefore, naturally serves as the principle fiber of African and African diasporic life. Instead, Pinn contends the body, both metaphorically and materially, is the shared "cartography of existence" that binds African peoples together across transnational differences that superficially undergird claims of fragmented African diasporic identity.[4]

In tandem with a womanist incarnation ethics that affirms the body, materially and metaphorically, rather than embodied social difference as *a priori* to right intracommunal relationships, Pinn cautions against the reification of embodied differences pointing toward the viability of pluralistic understandings of African and African American spirituality. Religious difference, national difference, and philological difference are secondary to the human experience of embodiedness. Thus, it is the *body* that reveals an incarnate continuity as the "common notion of life," which stretches beyond the stratifying character of intracommunal embodied differences.[5] Accordingly, Pinn admits that while the African Diaspora does have

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[3] Anthony B. Pinn, "Maps of Meaning: Black Bodies and African Spirtuality as African Diaspora Trope," in *Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources*, eds. Marcia Y. Riggs et. al., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 11-21. See also Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

[4] Pinn, 15.

[5] Eboni K. Marshall, "Rent in Twain: Beyond the Veil, Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation," (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2010), 222-233. Also see Anthony B. Pinn, "Maps of Meaning" in *Ethics That Matters*, 18.

"something to do with physical and metaphorical separation," transnational black bodies simultaneously connote "continuity, connection, and a web of meaning(s)" that liberate them from static interpretations of black experience that often conceal the critical and life-affirming "links between African diasporic communities.[6]

The substance of this sort of incarnate continuity is commonly appreciated in African American communities that embrace fictive kinship systems in which the continuity of black embodied experience is articulated in terms of familial relationality that is bestowed upon those who are unrelated by birth.[7] To fictively identify an other as "sister," "mother," "brother," or "blood," as is routine in African American colloquialism, is to affirm the "emergence of a people" dispersed, and yet creatively connected, although independent of indicators previously regarded "as prerequisites for designating a population as a racial ethnic group," namely, homeland, language, and uninterrupted culture.[8] In black churches one will hear clergy and laity referred to and referring to themselves as "Sister" so-and-so and "Brother" so-and-so, not only as an embodiment of the parenthood of God and the kinship of God's people, but also because of an affirmed similitude in the orientation of the soul.[9] Signithia Fordham's anthropological inquiry contends that imagined communities among African Americans function as *flesh and blood* acts of resistance that rebel against the conventional liquidation, at best, and the more typical expurgation of the trauma and triumph of black histories. The present compulsion to imagine

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[6] Pinn, 18.

[7] Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 69-87.

[8] Ibid., 72.

[9] Pinn, 17-18.

“the brotherhood and sisterhood of all [black people] regardless of class, gender, color, sexual orientation” and religion lends itself to the construction of an acceptable and contiguous past that, although geographically disingenuous, adjoins people of African descent beyond assumed diasporic fragmentation. Thus, musings of collective cultural identity undergirded by a primary yearning for increased submersion in the experience of diasporic incarnate continuity, primarily compelled my sojourn to the Mother continent. In the truest cultural sense, I went to Ghana in search of my Mother’s daughters.

Soul Sisters: Traditional Communalism as Moral Knowledge

Claims of transnational bodily continuity and fictive kinship systems that transgress the distinctions of social location among people of African descent can be likened to womanist ethics’ assertion of *traditional communalism* as the ethical impulse to value entire communities beyond embodied differences, more specifically beyond the intracommunal differences of sexuality, gender, color, and even age. The second part of Alice Walker’s four-part definition defines a womanist as:

> Also: a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Traditionally universalist, as in “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” [10]

[10] Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

African American women's historical experience of exclusion based on their embodied intersections of race, gender, and class disenfranchisement has led to a particular understanding of the cruelty of oppression in its multiple forms. The multidimensionality of black women's oppression as epistemic center, that is, as the center of knowledge from which one's ontic articulation in relationship to community and God emerges, has led to the prioritization of a *traditional communalism* that accounts for the multiplicity of black life in order to be effectively responsive to the wellbeing of *every body* in the community and not just some of them.[11] Rather than seeking to silence, dehumanize, demonize, and/or ignore difference, black womanist thought requires the identification, inclusion, and normalization of embodied differences as a prerequisite for the integrity of the whole. Albeit in starkly different ways, the scholarship of womanist sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and womanist ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs is especially relevant for gleaning the ways in which traditional communalism is embodied in the lives and everyday work of black women.

In an effort to attend to the contours of embodied gender difference, Gilkes interrogates the lived experiences of black women through the respective lenses of community work and church work, in order to claim that black women are positive agents of culture and community.[12] This assertion is particularly poignant in light of the fact that black women have historically been charged as the singular instigators of a presumed pathological disintegration of black families and, by extension, black communities. In fact, in 1965 then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel

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[11] See Eboni K. Marshall, 247.

[12] See Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If it Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (New York: Orbis, 2001).

Patrick Moynihan published a study entitled, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” more widely known as “The Moynihan Report.”[13] With no analytic attention given to the effects of the legacy of legal chattel enslavement and Jim Crow in the lives of black people, especially as this legacy manifests in black poverty, black criminalization, mass incarceration, ghettoization, hypersexualization, and other forms of black disenfranchisement, Moynihan essentially develops a caricature of black women as “black matriarchs” who, because of their strength and independence, have emasculated black men and, thus, destroyed the life chances of black families and communities.[14] In opposition to this racist and Afro-misogynistic dominant narrative that decidedly insists on the immorality of black womanhood, Gilkes argues that not only are black women moral agents of black communities, but black women are, more importantly, indispensable moral agents within their communities.

Simultaneously navigating the multiple social jeopardies of race, gender, and class that largely restrict them to the margins of both church and society, Gilkes contends that black women have persevered, creating communities of their own, as in the black women’s club movement of the 20th century, and communities within communities, as in black church Deaconess boards and Mother boards, that mobilize and organize to the extent that, Gilkes claims, “if it wasn’t for the women” as the title of her well-known text suggests, much of the

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[13]Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” United States Department of Labor, http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm

[14] It is important to note that the sources of Moynihan’s conclusion included Robert O. Blood, Jr. and David M. Wolfe, *Husbands and Wives: The Dynamics of Married Living* (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 34, and *E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940). According to womanist ethicist Rosetta Ross, both studies pathologized black families and blamed “black matriarchy” for social problems in African American communities. See Rosetta E. Ross, “Resisting the Imperial Peace: Black Women and Self-Love,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 1, no. 13.9 (December 2012).

work of black churches and community organizations would not be possible. To be sure, Gilkes admits that the patriarchal values of black churchmen prevail toward the end of gender oppression within the context of the black church tradition. However, she argues further that although sexism is clearly active in African American sacred spaces, the "dual-sex" politics of the black church counteract its primary silencing and invisibilization of black women. In other words, the moral urgency of being black and female gives birth to moral agency that creates space for women's constructive resistance and leadership. While gender difference and the sexism that results from it compromise the integrity of black organizations by restricting black women's leadership mobility and self-actualization, for Gilkes, black women's traditionally communal impulse has empowered them to create alternative spaces that resist the racist social structures that effect the entirety of the black community. Consequently, black women hold out against (or hold on to one's, depending on perspective) sexism in the black church and in society by building communities within communities that function toward the end of dismantling racism such that according to Gilkes, the black church actually functions as a woman's institution despite its male dominance.[15]

Similarly, Marcia Y. Riggs addresses the intricacies of black community from the perspective of sexual-gender injustice.[16] In stark contrast to Gilkes' assertion of the black church as a women's community notwithstanding the reality of gender oppression, Riggs' *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* interrogates the relationships between

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[15] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* (New York: Orbis, 2000), especially chapter 10, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," 181-195.

[16] Marcia Y. Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

black women and men, guided by her ultimate concern for transforming the moral life of the African American church[17] in terms of its unjust sexual-gender relations. Riggs identifies African American churches as "morally corrupt," and she engages a practice-based theory of power and gender, and social construction of gender theory to expose the complicated nature of black communities, given the complex intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality oppressions on black bodies.

Riggs offers three primary ideas to undergird her thesis, beginning with the impression that the African American church has essentially been crucified by the social mythology promulgated by a white cultural attack that is invigorated by racist-capitalist, patriarchal oppression.[18] Moreover, sexual-gender oppression, which includes but is not limited to sexism and heterosexism, in African American churches is a direct result of the demonizing social mythology that emerges from racist, capitalist, and patriarchal oppression.

Riggs traces gender conflict in black communities to the experience of black powerlessness in the era of enslavement and emancipation. While, on the one hand, black women and men were formerly bound together by the evil interconnectedness of racism and capitalist acquisition; on the other hand, they were significantly differentiated by gender in relationship to white normativity, which through the social construction of the cult of true womanhood asserted [white] maleness and femaleness in hierarchical opposition to each other. While honorable white personhood was similarly cast in hierarchical opposition to dishonorable black bestiality, it is

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[17] Riggs distinguishes the African-American church from the Negro Church and the Black Church as historically designated. The African-American Church is morally corrupted by its normative patriarchal institutional ethos. For full treatment, see Riggs, *Plenty Good Room*, 86-89.

[18] Riggs, 38-39.

gender that disrupts the universalization of racialization and gives birth to a hierarchy of sex-role identities within the black community, situating black women's personhood – poor, gendered, and raced – at the absolute bottom of the social barrel, an authentic embodiment of the "oppressed of the oppressed."[19] The reproduction of inferior womanhood and superior manhood in blackface, which Riggs identifies as "social reproductive shadow work," serves only to further reveal the circuitous nature of white supremacy.[20] It simultaneously emphasizes the corrupt moral paradox of a church that was born in the context of legal chattel enslavement precisely because of its high valuation of justice, and yet is conspiratorially affixed to a white supremacist, patriarchal ethic of control that subordinates women and sexual minorities.[21]

While Gilkes posits the dual-sex politics of black churches as the arbiter of redemptive space for black women's experiences of intracommunal oppression, Riggs argues that to accept the status quo of "male gatekeepers" and women workers/resisters by appealing to black women's agency in their construction of resistance methods alone, without calling for moral transformation, merely adds to the duplicity of sexual-gender oppression. Accordingly, Riggs concedes that "the unwillingness of the church to face this moral problem is a failure of moral courage," and a clear indication of the impending expiration of African American churches.[22] However, Riggs' womanist moral episteme of traditional communalism that acknowledges the

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[19] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

[20] Riggs, 54.

[21] See Marvin Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

[22] Riggs, 65-91.

value of “all the flowers in the garden,” male and female, and is ultimately concerned with the integrity of the entire community beyond embodied differences, claims that although the moral failure of the church situates it, for all intents and purposes, as dead, the church does not have to stay dead. In fact, Riggs posits the possibility of a sort of *ecclesial parousia*,[23] which argues that the church can “come again” if it intentionally endeavors to replace its sexual-gender oppression with a “sexual gender morality” that counters death-dealing dominant narratives about black humanity, and interrupts the Afro-misogyny and heterosexism that perverts the communal integrity of African American churches that claim to love Jesus so much.[24]

As outlined above, *traditional communalism as moral knowledge* has functioned as black women’s way of knowing not only how to *survive* intracommunal gender oppression, per Gilkes’ assertion of the dual-sex politics at work in black churches which allow room for and sustain black women’s communities within communities; but also, as indicated in Riggs’ scholarship, *traditional communalism as moral knowledge* empowers black women to know how to *revive* black communities that are dying because of their failure to transform death-dealing sexist and heterosexist practices of injustice. This moral knowledge is especially significant as it pertains to both race and gender. The bodies of black women uniquely situate them to know and value the significance of holding differences together across apparent boundaries, especially in

[23] My use of ecclesial parousia designates the “second coming” of the black church as it works to dismantle sexual-gender oppression. For a full treatment of ecclesial parousia, see “On the Parousia: Proclaiming the Body Electric,” in Eboni K. Marshall, “Rent in Twain Beyond the Veil, Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation, Ph.D. diss., 234-247.

[24] Riggs, 124-126.

the context of racist patriarchy which normatively informs us that “all the women are white and all the blacks are men.”[25]

Traditional communalism as normatively conceived within womanist ethical discourse, directly allows for the negotiation and inclusion of “every color flower represented in the flower garden,” regardless of visible difference, “brown, pink, yellow,… white, beige, and black.”[26] Thus, womanist ethics contends that embodied distinctions do not interrupt communal continuity, but rather offer “plenty good room” for a constant wrestling with matters of gender and even racial difference. In fact, the full inclusion of every body is what makes the “garden,” that imagined community that transgresses bodily differences based on shared and essential economic, political, social, and spiritual relationships, all the more spectacular. While in Ghana, however, where all the conference women were black and the men were not invited, I began to seriously consider how the dynamics of community as theorized above functions when the nuances of difference are not ascertainable by visible distinctions of race and gender. More specifically, does traditional communalism as womanist moral knowledge attend to African and African diasporic women’s intracommunal relationships especially when every body is a black woman and inclusion is not threatened by apparent bodily discontinuity, but rather by the epistemological groundwork from which we emerge as embodied selves? In other words, is the kinship, rather the sisterhood, that I had come to the Mother continent in search of ethically

[25] See Gloria T. Hull et. al., *But Some of Us are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, Black Women’s Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982).

[26] See the definition of “womanist” in Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

feasible when the "flowers in the garden," although all shades of the same color, emerge, at least in part, from different soil?

Hey Sister! Go Sister! The Challenge of Epistemological Difference

Nowhere was this question more significant for me than in the conference journey to the slave dungeons at Elmina, Cape Coast.[27] While standing for the first time at the remnants of the last of the Continent that my forebears would see and having paid to be retold of the rape and torture of blacks like me by an unflinching guide, I knew more deeply than before the horror of white supremacy, its trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the depraved proto-spirit of capitalist acquisition. Gazing outward from the infamous "Door of No Return," over the sound of crashing waves, I could almost hear the cries of black women, men, and children who would henceforth live and die enslaved. Rage obscured my profound grief as I realized in that moment that the presumption of the inferiority of black life hemorrhaging from the walls of Cape Coast Castle is but underscored by the racist and patriarchal oppressions that continue to threaten the life chances of black bodies almost five hundred years later, and even an ocean away. My private reflection on the stronghold of white supremacy – that is so completely duplicitous that it even dares to infiltrate my bloodline under the cover of caramel skin – was interrupted by laughter and light banter that presented itself to me in the moment as a desecration of sacred ground. Indeed, through my tears it felt for me as if my African sisters, who just days before I had greeted with

[27] Located in Cape Coast, Ghana, Cape Coast Castle was erected in 1653 and was used as a holding dungeon for captured Africans who were to be shipped to the Americas via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. It was at Cape Coast that I stood at the "Door of No Return," gazing out upon the Atlantic Ocean. There I etched a memory of the last piece of Africa that tens of thousands of my African ancestors saw into my mind's eye. I remember thinking, "I returned."

shouts of acclamation, were dismissing my measure of the sacrality of home-coming. Signithia Fordham alludes to this experience of intracommunal discontinuity that is particular to communities of African descent by contending that:

> Even though a social group may share a human experience with another social group … no two social groups have experienced a particular historical event in the same way. Consequently, it is *both* the uniqueness of the historical heritage of a particular social group *and* the meaning the group attaches to common identity symbols that are influential in the emergence of a people.[28]

Accordingly, peoplehood, or for my purposes here, sisterhood is not solely dependent on the historical continuity of black enfleshed experience as African women and/or African diasporic women. It is, rather, equally determined or compromised by the meaning or *knowing* that is attached to the primary incarnate commonality. Thus, the reality of intracommunal epistemological dissonance – that is, black women's knowledges-in-conflict – which defies embodied similitude also disrupts fictive claims of kinship that are conditioned by holding both the quality of black women's being and the intensity of black women's knowing together. When the confluence of diverse epistemological frameworks threaten this delicate balance, even fictive family ties can be exposed in ways that imperil the rapport of so-called sisters through identity-suspicious declarations like, "They are not *really* African," that are sometimes true…, but not always.[29]

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[28] Fordham, 70. Emphasis is mine.

[29] For further treatment of the nuances between truths, see Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 79-110.

In his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois theorized, in part, the ontic and epistemological vicissitudes of black American identity in his assertion of double-consciousness as the precarious predicament of black American life:

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like mayhap, in heart, in life, in longing, but shut out from their world…. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness…[30]

DuBoisian double-consciousness essentially contends that the Negro – American by birth, citizenship, political ideas, and language, yet also belonging to a "vast historic race" that descends from an African motherland – embodies a *both/and* twoness that is neither fully one or the other; neither fully American nor fully Negro, but stranded in the incessant negotiation of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."[31] While double-consciousness has proven to be a valuable sociological paradigm for engaging the challenges of African American life, sociologist of religion C. Eric Lincoln contends that it is not an altogether viable resource for understanding the complexities of being black. Lincoln posits that unlike DuBois, who could assuredly assert that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line" precisely because of his access to the white world, the masses of black society could not tow the color line of embodied racial difference, but were marooned behind the veil of race.[32] DuBois' negotiation of his own body politics that estranged him from Negro-ness

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[30] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 10-11.

[31] Ibid.

[32] C. Eric Lincoln, "The Duboisian Dubiety and the American Dilemma: Two Levels of Lure & Loathing" in *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation,* ed, Gerald Early (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 196.

and American-ness, respectively, prevented him from fully renouncing his own *privilege of difference*[33] that blinded him to the various intensities of black American life.

Similarly, the internalization of DuBoisian double-consciousness as the "universal expression of African American identity," and thus, "the answer to the riddle of blackness," underscores normative African American reliance on embodied difference, namely race and gender, as the primary source of communal fragmentation and continuity. However, the prioritization of embodied distinctions makes invisibile the significance of intra-communal epistemological differences that emerge with glaring precision even when bodies are contiguous. Although quite helpful for beginning to approximate the nuances of embodied difference, DuBois' dialectic of double-consciousness and the Veil is a patriarchal paradigm that does not fully appreciate the full value of the intersection of oppressions that corrupt intra-communal well-being beyond the veil of race and gender. It leaves room for an uninterrogated emergence of epistemological harm *all up in the family*, even between bodily contiguous sisters who happen to *know* differently. To be sure, the intricacies of African American women's relationships with other women of African descent are as significant as African American women's relationships with African American men, on the one hand, and white women, on the other. Given the complexities of kinship that are as much epistemological as they are embodied, what would it mean for "sisters" to choose to be friends?

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[33] Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 94.

Toward a Womanist Meta-Epistemology of Radical Friendship

In *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*, Marcia Y. Riggs argues for the renunciation of the *privilege of difference* as the critical starting point for mediating between race, gender, and class stratification in black communities.[34] The *privilege of difference* is an exclusionary posture that denotes "favor, advantage, or benefit" for some based on "socially constructed meanings of worth," which reproduce social hierarchies that marginalize and destroy.[35] Riggs asserts that the black woman's club movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resisted normative practices of exclusion based on intra-communal class differences in order to approximate a sisterhood that sought to include all black women in the work of racial uplift, across the social distinction that typically stratified the African American community, namely, class.

While it appears that the black women's club movement's renunciation of the privilege of difference served as a critical first step for bringing black women together for the purpose of intra-communal transformation, the rejection of privilege based on external differentiating factors does not adequately explain or make sense of the systematic emergence of social rules and tests that determined inclusion within many black women's clubs. In other words, although renouncing certain kinds of social discontinuity like class, profession, and even religious affiliation, some black women's clubs simultaneously used "brown paper bag" rules that calculated the pigment of one's skin, "comb tests" that assessed the grade of one's hair, and "12-inch" rules that measured hair length as determinants for inclusion, in ways that served to re-

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[34] Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act*, 94-96.

[35] Ibid.

inscribe black women's differences, intra-communally, based on epistemological frameworks that legitimized the *isness* of black women with light skin and long hair and delegitimized the *isness* of black women with dark skin and short hair, or, periodically, vice versa. Thus, the renunciation of the *privilege of difference* that first emerged in the black women's club movement as resistance against racial injustice engendered by racially embodied discontinuity, eventually led to the intra-communal re-production of the logic of white supremacy that eagerly pronounces, "if your white you are alright; if your brown stick around; if you are black, get back!"[36] While the *privilege of difference* may be successfully rejected in the work of towing the color line or even the gender line, it appears to run afoul amidst the intricacies of differences that are neither raced nor gendered by recreating the very hierarchies that the black women's club movement attempted to transgress.

To be sure, for Riggs, moral relevance derives from the particularities of concrete embodiedness; thus, the renunciation of the privilege of difference does not mean renouncing difference itself. By extension, this assertion also suggests that the willingness to renounce the privilege of difference does not mean that difference and privilege are not still at work, most especially when difference is not concretely visible in the first place, and, thus, is not explicitly measurable in terms of its renunciation. Said differently, renouncing the privilege of difference demands visible embodied continuity without probing and/or correcting the more implicit epistemic centers from which privilege actually emerges.

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[36] See Emilie M. Townes' use of "isness" in In a *Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). The colloquial song, "if your white you're alright; if you're brown stick around; if you're black get back" is one that I remember from childhood. I remember young black girls reciting it to each other in school, on the playground at recess, and other places where young girls gather. It appears to be an unsophisticated consciousness of intra-communal difference and hierarchy.

The reality of intra-communal epistemological dissonance thus requires a more nuanced approach to black women's relationships with other women of African descent, one that highlights a meta-epistemology that over-shadows the diverse epistemes of black women's personhood, all the while holding them together. A womanist meta-epistemology does not demand the renunciation of epistemic differences as a prerequisite for epistemological similitude, precisely because womanist theory recognizes that black women have historically been coerced to renounce the fullness of their personhood in order to conform to normative race and/or gender discourses in both church and society. Much to their detriment black women have historically had to *un-know* themselves, their womanhood in the struggle for racial justice and their blackness in the struggle for women's liberation. A womanist meta-epistemology resists this imposed *unknowing*, and peremptorily demands the privileging of what black women know and *how* they know differently. Moreover, it patents the value of epistemological discontinuity as evidence of the rich diversity of black women's personhood, and recognizes that the urge to identify embodied continuity as sisterhood's sole/soul categorical imperative may not be altogether valuable, precisely because the embodied continuity of sisterhood does not automatically translate into authentic and right relationship.

Instead, a womanist meta-epistemology considers radical friendship as the life-affirming prerequisite to sisterhood. Radical friendship resists renouncing the privilege of difference that seemingly functions well when differences are embodied, but stalls amidst embodied continuity with epistemic diversity. Womanist radical friendship identifies and requires choice as the first step toward authenticating black women's relationships with other women of African descent.

This choice for black women's radical friendship is radical insofar as it opposes the instantaneous and generic "friending" that is characteristic of a Facebook age where new "friends" continuously appear *sola voltus*, that is, by *face* alone, without much attention given to substantial and often invisible human qualities. Radical friendship emerges as a meta-epistemology –that is, as a way of knowing that pushes beyond the fragmenting limits of self-knowing – from the equalization of embodiment *and* episteme that chooses to be in relationship with and among black women not only based on the continuity of embodiment, but based on the real possibility of discontinuities of knowing. Whereas sisterhood has heretofore been primarily dependent on embodied similitude that, as we have seen, when threatened epistemologically often engenders black women's violation of other black women, to be radical friends means to make a choice in tandem with embodied similitude that embraces with affirmation and without offense, African and African diasporic women who may very well know differently (and perhaps even *know better*) than oneself. While womanist radical friendship appreciates the aesthetic proportions of black women's embodied similitude, it neutralizes its potential dangers that could lead to self-exclusion and the exclusion of other black women who are *sometimes different*, by affirming the value and virtue of black women's epistemological diversity. In this posture of womanist radical friendship, the *privilege of difference* must not be renounced based on similitude, but rather it is merely eclipsed by a primary choice of women of African descent to "grow in the garden together," that is, to be with and for each other, even though the truth is that black women do not always come from the same place.

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