# Making Space for Black Girlhood: A Womanish/st Pastoral Theology

By

Kishundra D. King

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

May 14, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Phillis I. Sheppard, Ph.D.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Ph.D.

Jaco Hamman, Ph.D.

Emilie M. Townes, Ph.D., D.Min.

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredibly supportive parents,
Rory and Betty King,
two exceptional humans who always created space for this Black girl.

## AKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although I take full responsibility for the content in this dissertation, no project of this magnitude could be achieved without the support and guidance of many. First, I extend my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee: Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Jaco Hamman, Emilie Townes, and, my dissertation chair and advisor, Phillis Sheppard. Dr. Sheppard, I am most grateful for your esteemed guidance, wisdom, dedication, and incomparable mentorship.

To my family of prayer warriors and intercessors, with special recognition to Rory and Betty King, Susan Granville, Elijah and Genirde Glenn, Titus and Shanterry Glenn– your prayers carried me. Eternal thanks to my community who motivated me, held me accountable, laughed with me, and encouraged me along the way. Special thanks to Kianna Granville-Williams, Kashana Granville, Chelsea Yarborough, Shatavia Wynn, and Michael and Laine Walters Young– your support nourished me.

Much gratitude to Black girls represented in this work and all who participated in the study, "Black Girlhood Experiences in Church and Society." Your narratives and wisdom were invaluable to this project. Finally, to the divine creator of the universe– words are insufficient to express my gratitude and appreciation.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Making Space for Black Girlhood: A Womanish/st Pastoral Theology* seeks to grapple with the many layers of Black girlhood by situating Black girlhood experiences in theological reflection. Doing so disrupts Black girlhood erasure in religion and society. In this dissertation, I make the case that the Black girlhood erasure condoned by society is expressed in academic scholarship, as evidenced by the scarce positive mention of Black girlhood in education or childhood studies, areas of study where we expect analysis of childhood experiences. This dissertation argues that Womanist theology, and more specifically, Womanist pastoral theology, is capable of grappling with issues impacting Black girlhood, and is morally responsible to do so.

This dissertation project is situated within a Womanist pastoral theology for three distinct reasons. First, Womanist pastoral theology, as a discipline, engages in conversations integrating theology and social sciences, which is crucial for parsing through the complexities of Black girlhood experiences theologically. Second, Womanist pastoral theology invites critical methodological interpretations of lived experiences as it explores various relational aspects and intrapsychic responses in Black womanhood, which can be critically appropriated and extended to Black girlhood. Finally, Womanist pastoral theology activates contextually relevant practices of care because it considers Black women's lived experiences of race, class, gender, and theology as integral to formulating models of pastoral theology, care, and counseling. Toward that end, I, as a Womanist pastoral theologian interested in Black girls and Black girlhood experiences, have connected this dissertation to standard methodological elements within Womanist pastoral theology and ask *What does it mean to care for Black girls?*

In response to this question, this project argues for a critical revision of prevailing

methods in Womanist pastoral theology specifically, and of Womanist theology generally, by embracing "Womanish" narratives. This turn to the Womanish is intentional in that it acknowledges Womanish as a complex, culturally-derived term often used to describe maturing Black girls.[1] Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to include the actual experiences of Womanish Black girls as sources of knowledge and sites for theological reflection. To that end, this dissertation project is necessarily dialogical and engages Black girl narratives, religious studies, childhood studies, Womanist thought, developmental psychology, and sociology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the developmental trends and cultural strengths of Black girls. It begins with an overview of Black girlhood in research and society to demonstrate the necessity of a Black girl-centered, Womanist, and Womanish, pastoral theology.

## Black Girl Representation in Research and Society

In 2015, a viral video of a Black fourteen-year-old girl, Dajerria Becton in McKinney, Texas, sparked intentional discourse about Black girls and their experiences. In this video, Becton was thrown to the ground by a White police officer, Corporal Eric Casebolt, for allegedly trespassing. Becton, barefoot and bikini-clad, presented no physical threat or danger. Instead, she was attending a pool party with her friends when Casebolt grabbed her, threw her to the ground and placed his full body on her with his gun drawn. Becton was heard to cry and scream "Call my mama!"[2]

Although this video was not the first instance of a Black girl being treated unjustly, it did

[1] Dorothy Randall Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism: A Culturally-Derived and African-Centered Ideal (Concept)," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 3.
[2]Wall Street Journal, "Texas Cop Draws Gun on Pool-Party Teens," June 18, 2015, YouTube Video, 7:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6tTfoifB7Q. Accessed April 15, 2017.

generate much debate as it was publicly broadcast on social media and through news outlets. Until this event, most interest in Black Girl Studies was limited to educational research and policy reform rather than Black girls' experiences of race, class, and gender. And even discussions of punitive school practices and education did not recognize the particularity of Black girls or include a robust account of Black girl experiences. In 2012, the Law Review of UCLA Law School, in conjunction with the Critical Race Studies Program, sought to disrupt the pattern of excluding Black girls from research objectives. Together, they hosted a symposium, "Overpoliced and Underprotected: Women, Race and Criminalization," that brought together researchers, lawyers, advocates, and formerly incarcerated women to address the alarming numbers of Black girls in the prison system as well as criminal supervision of women and girls of color.[3][4] This symposium resulted in the publication of "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected," a report exposing the unjust treatment of Black girls in disciplinary processes in the education system. The report notes:

> [e]merging from the 2012 symposium, it was clear that serious interventions were necessary to alleviate the knowledge desert that exists around the lives and experiences of Black women and girls.[5]

In this eye-opening report, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, along with Priscilla Ocen and Jyoti Nanda, describe the school-to-prison pipeline crisis and its effect on Black girls.[6] The school-to-prison pipeline, known as the phenomenon that funnels youth from school to prison using punitive school policies, gained recognition in the early 2000s. At the time, efforts to challenge

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[3] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Priscilla Ocen, and Jyoti Nanda, "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected" (African American Policy Forum, 2015).
[4] This symposium brought together researchers, lawyers, advocates, and formerly incarcerated women to address the alarming patterns and criminal supervision of women and girls of color.
[5] Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, "Black Girls Matter," 6.
[6] "This framework highlights the ways that punitive school policies lead to low achievement, system involvement, and other negative outcomes." (Crenshaw et al, "Black Girls Matter," 5).

and deconstruct this pipeline typically centered on Black boys as they are suspended or expelled more than any other group.[7] Unfortunately, Black girls were excluded from the school-to-prison pipeline conversation and subsequent policy reforms that resulted from such efforts to dismantle the pipeline.

According to "Black Girls Matter," punitive disciplinary policies negatively impact Black girls and other girls of color much more so than White girls and Black boys. In fact, "Black girls receive more severe sentences when they enter the juvenile justice system than do members of any other group of girls, and they are also the fastest growing population in the system."[8] Yet, girls are typically excluded from analysis, research, and educational policies. The "Black Girls Matter" report serves as a corrective to the longstanding exclusion of Black girl research by emphasizing the ways that Black girls in particular are corralled into underachievement and criminalization. In *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, Monique Morris also argues that "[the] criminalization of Black girls…has extended into our schools, disrupting one of the most important protective factors in a girl's life: her education."[9] Morris argues that media and advocacy efforts have focused primarily on the criminalization of Black boys. However, "Black girls are also directly impacted by criminalizing policies and practices that render them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, dehumanization, and under worst circumstances, death."[10] Morris contends that Black girls have been overlooked, both by the general public and by school officials, and yet are disproportionately represented in the criminal and juvenile justice systems

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[7] Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, "Black Girls Matter," 5.
[8] Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, "Black Girls Matter", 6.
[9] Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 3.
[10] Morris, *Pushout*, 46.

in relation to their male and white female counterparts.[11]

Additionally, "Black Girls Matter" suggests that Black girls are perceived by the general public to be more socially mature and self-reliant than White girls and Black boys their age.[12] The report reveals that Black girls often resort to "acting out" or "misbehaving" when their counseling needs are overlooked and disregarded by school officials. Unfortunately, Black girls only become visible to school officials when their behaviors lead to punishable offenses. Therein lies a major problem: Black girls are routinely ignored unless they are being reprimanded for their behavior and, when reprimanded, often receive worse punishment than other youth presenting the same behaviors.[13]

Unfortunately, Black girls and their experiences have always been understudied—even in child-specific research areas such as education and childhood studies. In the early 1990s, a group of influential scholars in feminist psychology and education at Harvard University began researching American girlhood.[14] This first wave of Girl Studies emphasized the intergenerational connection between womanhood and girlhood. Feminist ethicist and psychologist, Carol Gilligan, drew connections between the experiences of girls' psychosocial development and subsequent issues in adult womanhood. In Gilligan's foundational text, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982),[15] Gilligan criticizes psychological theories that track human development—specifically those of Kohlberg, Erikson,

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[11] Morris, *Pushout*, 47.
[12] Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, "Black Girls Matter," 10.
[13] Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, "Black Girls Matter," 6.
[14] Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 16.
[15] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

and Piaget—by positioning males as the standard for proper human development, thereby depicting women as misfits. Gilligan contends that since psychological theories of "moral" have conceptualized male as the standard developmental schema, women are typically seen as less moral, childlike, and immature. Recognizing that women's outcomes and perspectives often did not fit existing human development theories, Gilligan began tracing the origin of women's psychology backward toward girlhood.[16] In her later works, she focused exclusively on human development from a feminist perspective, noting that there is a distinct connection between girls' psychosocial development and womanhood and concluding that the key transition in female personality development is adolescence.

In *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (1992), Carol Gilligan and her student, Lyn Mikel Brown, conducted studies involving girls and adult women. Their findings suggested that the "central paradox" of women's human development occurred during adolescence. Gilligan and Brown argued that girls tend to edit their feelings and desires out of their existing relationships during adolescence.[17] According to their research, girls fear that their honesty or assertiveness within these relationships would breed conflict that will ultimately lead to abandonment. For them, this phenomenon "marked the mass movement of adolescent girls' authentic voices 'underground' into protected spaces (such as a private journal), a compromise state that over time made it harder for girls even to identify, much less express, their true feelings and opinions."[18] During this same time period, the American Association of University Women (AAUW), in collaboration with scholars at the Wesley College Center for Research on Women, published *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, the first national survey

[16] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection," 22.
[17] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connections," 16.
[18] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connections," 16

focused on girlhood and the loss of self-esteem that occurs during adolescence. Although these reports and studies were helpful in considering girlhood as a viable research area, they only represented certain girls.

Girlhood research developed a narrative of girls' psychosocial development based on data collected from predominately White, middle-class samples. The problem with this research trend was that it privileged White girls as the ideal of for normative girlhood experiences. Anything outside those normative experiences were, by definition, abnormal, and by extension, in need of correction. In other words, White girls defined the standard by which girls of color were measured. In "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies," Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin explains the following:

> Several of the earliest American girls' studies established their narratives of girls' psychosocial and academic development on predominately White, middle-class samples (e.g., Brown and Gilligan 1992). These studies met with harsh critique for over-generalizing the experience of girlhood in a multicultural America.[19]

In the years following these initial reports, researchers began acknowledging race, ethnicity, and social class as key components of girls' developmental experiences. The common premise of this research shift was an acknowledgement that these and other contexts contribute qualitatively to girlhood experiences that do not conform to White girl norms. Whereas Brown's and Gilligan's research suggested that adolescent girls' lessening drive to make their voices heard was a nearly universal experience, later research revealed that this developmental trajectory was not true for all girls. For example, in Janie Victoria Ward's essay, "Raising Resisters: The Role of Truth

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[19] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connections," 21.

Telling in the Psychological Development of African American Girls,"[20] Ward describes Black girls as appearing more willing and able to assert their voices and advocate for their own needs.[21] Such assertions about Black girl development challenged pre-existing notions of White girl development as being representative of healthy and normal girl development.

Although Ward's groundbreaking research on Black girls was monumental for girlhood studies, the majority of literature in childhood and girlhood studies in the 1990s and early 2000s continued to situate White middle-class girls as the universal figure for girlhood**.** This is a reflection of the "White equals normal" ideal that is strongly tethered to whiteness and US cultural imagination**.**[22][23] According to critical race theorist Cheryl Harris, US culture often valorizes whiteness in such a way that whiteness functions as treasured property that grants access to privileges.[24] One such privilege is idealization, where non-whiteness is seen as malformed or inferior. Moreover, since US culture also idealizes maleness, non-maleness suggests lack or inferiority, making Black girls members of both "non-standard" groups. Annamma et al. assert that deviations from the "ideal" leaves Black girls with two options in research: 1. Be excluded or 2. Be depicted as the deviant, abnormal girl. [25]

## Forging Another Option

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[20] Janie Victoria Ward, "Raising Resisters: The Role of Truth Telling in the Psychological Development of African American Girls," in *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities*, eds. Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 85–99.
[21] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connections," 20.
[22]See: Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
[23] See chapter four of this dissertation.
[24] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1711.
[25] Annamma et. al, "Black Girls and School Discipline," 5.

In the last decade, critical social theories, such as critical race feminism and critical race theories, have forged new pathways to disrupt the standardization of whiteness and maleness toward reclaiming Black girl voices as valuable. As guiding conceptual frameworks, critical race theory and critical race feminism intentionally refute dominant norms by theorizing the relationship between race, gender, and power to draw out inequalities. Although critical race theory began in law studies, scholars interested in social inequities frequently adapt critical race principles to investigate hierarchies in the social situation in order to transform or "right" the wrong.[26]

More recently, the Executive Director of the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Rebecca Epstein, nudged the field of Black girlhood studies in that direction. In June 2017, Epstein et al.'s "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood"[27] became the first major report to explore the erasure of Black girlhood. The groundbreaking report showed that adults typically view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than White girls of the same age, especially between the ages of five and fourteen.[28] The implicit bias positioning Black girls as less innocent than their peers makes them more susceptible to being treated as adults rather than as children who characteristically lack maturity and are more susceptible to peer feedback at a crucial moment of character development.[29] Black girls are frequently viewed as older than their age because of their outspokenness (associated with the aggressive Black woman stereotype), their physical development (which, on average, occurs

[26] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 2–3.
[27] Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia Gonzalez, "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood" (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017).
[28] Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez, "Girlhood Interrupted," 1.
[29] Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez, "Girlhood Interrupted," 5.

earlier than White girls), and the culturally rooted fantasies of Black girl hypersexuality. According to the report, adult-like characteristics charted onto Black girls is a form of "age compression" or, as other describe it, "adultification."[30] These phenomena capture the denial of Black girls' childhood freedom, thereby collapsing their experiences with Black women.

Although recent interest in Black girlhood has emphasized the adverse treatment of Black girls in school and society, Black girls have yet to be asked how they experience adultification and (mis)representation. This is an important issue, considering what childhood scholars and researchers know about self-development and what the "self"—the core of one's personality—needs for healthy development. Generally, childhood specialists understand that primary components of the "self," such as behaviors, feelings, having a body, self-esteem, and psychological needs are influenced by the environment through the processes of internalization. Internalization refers to the process of absorbing external attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, either consciously or unconsciously, to the point that they become a part of the self. [31]

## Attending to Black Girls' Experiences

A primary task of this dissertation is to identify the fullness of Black girls' experiences in academia and beyond and unearth their actual narratives. As previously noted, much of childhood studies and educational psychology are primed to focus on girls' experiences but often fail to consider the entanglement of race, class, gender, and culture in their theorizing and intervention methods. According to LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis, Black Feminist Thought and Womanist research paradigms can remedy this since both paradigms "allow for examination of

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[30] Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez, "Girlhood Interrupted," 5.
[31] *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology,* s.v. "Internalization," accessed July 2, 2019, https://dictionary.apa.org/internalization.

the Black female psyche and social experiences, providing a means to contextualize Black girlhood."[32] In order to attend to Black girl experiences in a substantial way, their experiences must be personal and culturally situated, based on the reassertion of subject knowledge that takes childhood seriously.

To clarify, attending to Black girls' experiences in research and society will be both delicate and challenging. Not only will attending to Black girls' experiences require a methodological shift that centers on Black girls, it will also require a re-envisioning of the theoretical relationship between children and adults. In the history of childhood studies, there has always been a muddy, hierarchical relationship between the researcher, the adult, and the research subject (the child), where the child becomes objectified as a point of study rather than a contributor. Philosopher David Kennedy calls this the unavoidable trap of childhood studies. In *Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education*, Kennedy explains that "the object of the discipline is born with the discipline."[33] "The 'child'… is a culturally and historically mediated, philosophical construct disguised as the hard object of experimental science."[34] In other words, to study children is to objectify children by maintaining a power dynamic between adults and children predicated on the philosophical construction of childhood. Although the philosophical construction of childhood is beyond the scope of this dissertation project, our relationship with children requires ongoing reflection to avoid objectifying Black girl experiences in research. Therefore, this dissertation minimizes the risk of objectifying Black girls by giving them a voice

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[32] LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm: Toward a Culturally Relevant Research Model Focused on African American Girls," *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 5 (2015): 509–11.
[33] David Kennedy, *Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 1.
[34] Kennedy, *Well of Being,* 1.

in research and writing.

The relationship between adults and children in terms of subjectivity and agency is complicated when adult researchers set the bar for interpreting childhood behaviors and the criteria for "being." The focus on children as "being" is almost always subsidiary to who they are anticipated to become. In a sense, childhood studies are based on adults' interpretations of childhood and what it *should* lead to. It is the inevitable flaw in childhood studies and psychological accounts of childhood development—to take a child perspective versus a child's perspective. Childhood studies began as an inquiry about children in their state of "becoming" and, even now, reflects a "so that" methodology, such that studies promote healthy childhood development, *so that* they become functioning adults in the way that adults think best. Children are rarely understood on their own terms, which inadvertently renders them voiceless. This relationship suggests that what children will become is more important that the actual child.

David Kennedy describes the privileging of adults in comparison to children as "adultism," an ideology that depicts adults as superior in cognitive abilities, morality, and knowledge production. Kennedy's formulation of "adultism" describes the presumption of children as underdeveloped or incomplete beings, incapable of possessing authority. This notion of adultism is important for our consideration as it relates to epistemology as authority, especially when it comes to taking children seriously in research. Kennedy rightly notes that the relationship between adults and children in research and writing is a White hegemonic and patriarchal construction. However, he fails to address how these relationships vary across cultures. For instance, adultism is further complicated in Black girlhood when it meets the historical oppressions of Blackness, femaleness, and the "adultification" of Black girls. Thus, research in Black girlhood requires a dynamic methodology that disrupts oppression and sees/

hears Black girls in a culture that diminishes children and their experiences, degrades Blacks, considers females as subordinates, and denies Black girls a childhood that only whites get to enjoy.[35] There is no easy or quick fix.

In "Reading Sideways, Upside Down, and Backwards to Find Black Girls,"[36] Tammy Cherelle Owens suggests that the narrowly conceived concept of girl and the denial of Black children's childhood during slavery and beyond explain why Black girl studies have been marginalized as "absolutely unresearchable." Owen suggests that one way of approaching Black girl studies is to re-define knowledge and think creatively about methodologies. Her work demonstrates methods of Black girl research in which she creatively locates Black girls. Owens explains:

> in the making this history [history of Black girlhood] of the bringing together of an array of accounts of black girlhood—including literary texts, cultural work, and primary source materials—I unearthed an innovative and accessible archive of black girlhood, one in which black girls' stories function as sites of historical knowledge of black female personhood. Although there are few sources authored by black girls while still young, again, the array of accounts from the perspective of black women, white women, and black men provided me with a means to locate black girlhood. [37]

Owens's work examines the configuration of Black girlhood and alludes to the many layers required to capture and recapture Black girl voices, but is limited due to the scarcity of documents authored by Black girls. Researching Black girls and their childhoods requires a shift in how we value knowledge, fresh approaches to understanding tangled webs of oppression, a rigorous commitment to Black girls and their voices, and interpretive frameworks committed to

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[35] To be discussed in later chapters.
[36] Tammy Cherelle Owens, "Reading Sideways, Upside Down, and Backwards to Find Black Girls: Recovering Black Girlhood in Creative Historical Re-Readings of Nineteenth-Century Popular Texts" in Corinne Field ed., "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *Journal of History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (2016): 387.
[37] Owens, "Reading Sideways, Upside Down, and Backwards," 386.

Black girl authority and advancement. This work requires emphasis on subjugated knowledge—a task all too familiar to Black feminists and Womanist scholars.

## The Way Forward

As critical social theories, Black feminist thought and Womanist thought reasserts the subjugated knowledge of Black women. Blacks feminist and Womanist scholars intentionally reflect the voices of Black women and affirm these voices as credible sources of knowledge in research and practice. Womanists, for example, rightly question universal claims as it stems from biased ideologies, whether it be racially based, gendered, or classist. Womanist ethics repudiates these biased ideologies and exposes their social and cultural origins.[38] For example, in Womanist theologian Delores Williams' seminal essay, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices,"[39] she posits that Womanist thought prioritizes Black female-centered "words, beliefs, and behavioral patterns"[40] as a valuable and essential source for theological and ethical reflection. For instance, Williams begins and weaves throughout her essay the actual words of Black women when they responded to her presentation on Black feminism. These women challenged Williams with questions related to class and whether "feminist" could be recovered or separated from white feminists' privilege and their active complicity in advancing white supremacy and racism. Black community women argued that a revised feminism—one that would "fit" their lives, was no longer feminism. In echoing their perspectives, and their hermeneutic of suspicion, Williams insist that race, gender, class, and colorism are lived simultaneously.

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[38] Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Theological Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36-37.
[39] Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis*, March 2, 1987.
[40] Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices."

Similarly, Black feminist studies attend to the critical relationship between race, class, and gender and draw attention to Black women's experiences rather than treating them as an afterthought.[41] In an essay describing Black feminist epistemology, Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins explains:

> Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, U.S. Black women's experiences as well as those of women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or exclude from what counts as knowledge. U.S. Black feminist thought…rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination.[42]

Collins notes that American society has historically established the criteria for what is considered legitimate knowledge. These criteria often reflect racist and sexist biases such that Black women, as a source of knowledge, are often deemed inferior.[43][44] Deviations from this criteria presents "alternative" epistemology. In Black feminist and Womanist thought, this alternative epistemology is often referred to as "particularity," a perspective grounded in the experiences of Black women. Black feminists and Womanist scholars understand that there are multiple discourses inspired by Black women and their various perspectives.[45] Black feminist and Womanist studies' ability to embrace "alternative" epistemologies, while holding a critical view of race, class, and gender, undoubtedly situates them to lead the charge on the effective study of

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[41] Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name?," *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (1996): 9.
[42] Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2000, 251.
[43] Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 253–54.
[44] There is a unique tension in Black feminist and Womanist studies such that scholars obtain education degrees to raise their status so that they can "legitimately" contribute to knowledge, thereby participating in the process, while also relying on Black women's voices and experiences as primary sources of knowledge to fight against the system of knowledge validation. See *Black Feminist Though*t page 254-255.
[45] Phillis Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

Black girls and their experiences—arguably much more so than the fields of childhood studies, educational psychology, and other fields that often base their considerations on the "universal" girl, almost always meaning *"White girl."*

Studying Black girls and their childhoods requires much more than "alternative" epistemologies. Considering that Black girls are beings who are becoming, studying them requires dedication and continuous effort towards acknowledging their wholeness. These studies also require a recognition of who Black girls are at their core and an understanding that they are socially, culturally, and intergenerationally located. It requires attention to the "Womanish." In her four-part definition of "Womanist," Alice Walker includes the roots and values inherent in the term. Walker explains that the term is steeped in, rooted in, and comes out of the Black traditional phrase "Womanish." In Black folk tradition, "Womanish" often refers to a Black girl who is "outrageous, audacious, courageous, or [enacting] *willful* behavior."[46] As noted in Walker's definition, "Womanish" can be perceived negatively, as it is synonymous with "you trying to be grown," which is not always perceived favorably. However, colloquially, it is a mother's expression of pride about her daughter.

To date, robust attention to the Womanish girl is often overlooked or is collapsed into Womanist women, further rendering Black girls vulnerable to adultification. And, when Womanish girls or Black girls are mentioned, they are referred to in past tense because they are a part of an adult woman's past or embedded in their memory. Although memory is a unique tool in Womanist scholarship because it creates and sustains particularity and tradition, it presents a challenge to Womanist thought about present-day Black girls. When it comes to focusing on

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[46] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Reprint Edition (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2003).

children in the present, adult memories of childhood contribute to theoretical thought and practices toward present-day children such that what we offer children is in response to our own childhoods rather than to actual children.[47] This over-reliance on memory shortchanges interventions meant for actual children, and it is especially problematic for Womanist scholarship that touts a responsibility ethic meant to eradicate oppressive forces for the sake of Black women and girls.

## A Womanish/st Project

I identify this project Womanish/st because it bridges Womanish and Womanist perspectives. The bridge forged by this project honors the development of Womanist thought and theology aims by honing in on Black girls' lived experiences, which includes their "words, beliefs, and behavioral patterns,"[48] According to Williams,

> In [Alice Walker's] definition [of Womanist], Walker provides significant clues for the development of womanist theology... A paramount example is mother-daughter advice: Black mothers have passed on wisdom for survival -- in the white world, in the black community, and with men -- for as long as anyone can remember. Female slave narratives, folk tales, and some contemporary black poetry and prose reflect this tradition.[49]

Thus, the legacy of Womanist scholarship comes from the Black folk tradition of transmitting moral wisdom from one generation to the next.

Further, the development of Womanist theology emerged, in part, through intergenerational engagement.[50] Historically, at kitchen tables where adults sat separately from children, at a certain age Black girls earned a privileged seat at the adult table and learned what

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[47] Sandra Chang-Kredl, "What Is It like to Be a Child? Childhood Subjectivity and Teacher Memories as Heterotopia," *Curriculum Inquiry* 46, no. 3 (2016): 314–15.
[48] Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices."
[49] Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices."
[50] Linda E. Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," *CrossCurrents* 48, no. 4 (Winter /1999 1998): 491.

is to be Black and female, that is, how to navigate life. Conversations at the kitchen table include a highly coveted intergenerational transmission of knowledge. According to Womanist anthropologist and ethnographer Linda Thomas, "the tasks of womanist theology are to claim history, to declare authority for ourselves, our men, and our children, to learn from the experience of our forebears, to admit shortcomings and errors, and to improve our quality of life."[51] This is evident in the general methods of Womanist theology such as the invocation of memory, documentation of narratives, and ethnography. The purpose of these methods is to affirm and re-affirm the value of Black women's voices and validate their experiences as knowledge-forming—all toward obtaining/maintaining wholeness in the Black community. However, attention to the quality of life for Black girls, in particular, has primarily been overlooked.[52][53]

While Chapter One of this dissertation explores Womanist theology's deficiency in treating Black girlhood in greater depth, it is important to consider that the absence of Black girlhood in Womanist theology is a conundrum. The exceptions to this oversight are Womanist practical theologians who specialize in religious education. Womanist practical theologian Evelyn Parker, for example, describes her methodology as an unequivocal analysis of the lives Black women and girls wherein "race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ecological justice are the intersecting analytical tools."[54] In *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*,[55] Parker explored Black adolescent spirituality in relation

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[51] Thomas, "Womanist Theology," 89–90.
[52] Thomas, "Womanist Theology," 491.
[53] Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).
[54] Evelyn L. Parker, "Womanist Theory," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), 204.
[55] Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

to racial injustice by conducting interviews with Black youth to better understand how Black youth view their spirituality. However, while Parker took the voices of youth seriously, she oriented her study to her own childhood experiences and what she thought these youths were missing in terms of congregational conversations about social justice issues. As such, robust accounts of children's childhood experiences have yet to be discovered. In order to account for Black girls and their childhood and make use of their experiences as reconstructed knowledge, Womanist theology must critically revise its methodology. With that said, this is decidedly a Womanist project. More specifically, this a Womanist pastoral project.

According to Williams, a Womanist project is informed by "(1) a multidialogical intent, (2) a liturgical intent, (3) a didactic intent, and (4) a commitment both to reason and to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements."[56] Such a project expects researchers to advocate and participate in dialogue and action concerning the Black female experience toward a more robust theological reflection. [57]When met with a Womanist pastoral theology approach, the project becomes dialogical, critical, contextual, theological, and constructive. Womanist practical and pastoral theologian Phillis Sheppard asserts:

> First, womanist pastoral theology is dialogical because it engages in conversations with theology and social sciences, and has multiple sites for practices. Second, womanist pastoral theology is critical because the approach opens a critical reading of the various perspectives in light of the implications these perspectives have for black women's and black people's lives. Third, womanist practical theology is contextual in that the features of social location, including race, gender, class, economics, and so forth are engaged. Fourth, womanist pastoral theology is theological because the approach considers the theological questions that emerged from an epistemology that begins with attending to black women's lives. Finally, womanist pastoral theology is constructive because womanist

[56] Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices.".
[57] Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices."

theologizing ultimately constructs a specific theology with its own theological categories.[58] Sheppard's description of Womanist pastoral theology illustrates the commitments of Womanist pastoral theology as well as the unique strategies Womanist pastoral theologians employ to conduct thoughtful and meaningful research for and with Black women. These strategies orient this dissertation.

As a project in Womanist pastoral theology, this dissertation maintains an orientation to pastoral theology and care that (1) is Womanish and Black female-centered, (2) emerges from Black female experiences and activities, (3) opposes systems of oppression, and (4) commits to particularity as a source of epistemology. This dissertation also contributes to "the scholarship on African American girls [which] requires scholars to integrate existing theories and/or develop theories that provide an appropriate lens to accurately identify, name, interpret, and write about [Black girls'] experience[s]."[59] In doing so, this dissertation first overviews the field of Womanist theology, with an emphasis on Womanist pastoral theology in its treatment of Black girls. It proposes a methodological shift that captures and utilizes Black girl narratives, which I call a *Kaleidoscopic Analytical Approach* (*KAP*).[60] This mixed methods approach is a corollary of dialogue between Black girl narratives (also achieved by a mixed-method ethnography designed for this dissertation),[61] theological reflection,[62] and the findings from the socio-cultural critical analysis. Second, this dissertation explores what it means to care for Black girls and their experiences in theory and practice.

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[58] Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "Culture, Ethnicity, and Race: A Womanist Self Psychological Perspective," in *Transforming Wisdom : Pastoral Psychotherapy in Theological Perspective*, ed. Felicity Kelcourse and K.Brynolf Lyon (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 48–49.
[59] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm"
[60] See chapter Three of this dissertation.
[61] See chapter Two of this dissertation.
[62] See chapter Four of this dissertation.

To truly care for Black girls is to know who they are and what they *actually* need, versus what we *assume* they need. If Black girls truly matter, it is not enough to describe what is happening surrounding Black girls; those who advocate for Black girls must also seek to understand how events impact Black girls and their needs in order to respond effectively.

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE ERASURE OF BLACK GIRLHOOD IN WOMANIST THEOLOGY

In the *Encyclopedia for Women and Religion in America*, Womanist theologian and ethicist Emilie M. Townes describes Womanist theology as a form of theological reflection that employs an inter-structured analysis of race, class, and gender to disrupt oppression in the lives of African Americans.[63] These theological reflections are both descriptive and prescriptive: they describe and analyze sociohistorical perspectives and systems of oppressions, and prescribe ways to eradicate oppression. The key to Womanist theology is its view of theology as a liberative effort; theological reflection, in other words, is recognized as an opportunity to free humanity from oppressive systems like racism and sexism.

Since its inception, Womanist theology has engaged macro- and micro-structural issues for the sake of liberating all Black people and with the intent to declare authority for Black women, men, and children. Katie Geneva Cannon's 1985 essay, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," introduces Womanist traditions in theology as an interpretive principle birthed out of the lived experiences of Black religious heritage and predicated on Black women's experiences of white supremacy and male dominance since slavery. In general, the goals of Womanist theology are to "interrogate the social construction of [B]lack womanhood in relation to the African American community," critically engage Black (male) theology so that a full theology for the African American community emerges, and promote the reconstruction of knowledge in such a way that all voices are valued.

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[63] Emilie M. Townes, "Womanist Theology," in *Encyclopedia for Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1165.

Womanist theologians also understand that a full theology is multi-dimensional. As such, Womanist theologians approach theological reflection from various angles. For instance, Womanist theologians are represented in disciplines such as biblical interpretation, anthropology, liturgy, pastoral theology, and ethics. What unites these approaches as Womanist theology is the intentional engagement with lived experiences and a full inclusion of Black female experiences. With Alice Walker's definition of Womanism as a theoretical guide, Womanist theologians typically begin their reflection with Black women's lived realities and incorporate elements of "tradition, community, spirituality and the self… and practical application"[64] within their theological reflection.

In this chapter, I explore Womanist theology's aim at an inclusive theology, with a particular focus on Black girlhood. In doing so, I focus on "particularity," which is generally understood as the "totality" of one's lived experience that develops from and informs our knowledge of self in relation to others.[65] In this case, "totality" refers to the interwoven social dynamics of race, class, gender, sex, and ability in tandem with psychological dimensions. In the Womanist tradition, particularity refers to the "depths of African American experiences"[66]—historically, socially, psychologically, economically, and culturally. In other words, particularity is who we are at our core, a concept that has served to orient the field of Womanist theology. Womanist theology is particular about particularity. Yet, the particularity of Black girlhood is excluded.

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[64] Townes, "Womanist Theology," 161.
[65] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 6.
[66] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

For this reason, this chapter grapples with the absence of Black girls in Womanist theology. I contend that despite Womanist theology's commitment to interrogating social constructions of Black womanhood, its failure to fully investigate the time period in which these social constructions emerged contradicts (1) the goals of Womanist theology, (2) its insistence that particularity is an epistemological stance, and (3) its liberatory perspectives. To make matters worse, some Womanist theological reflections encompass Black women and girls with little or no reflection on actual girls.

To contend with the absence of Black girls in Womanist theology more deeply, I critically engage the field of Womanist pastoral theology as a microcosm. I situate my critique in Womanist pastoral theology because Womanist pastoral theology is particularly attuned to intersectional analyses of lived experiences[67] in accordance with robust accounts of particularity that include intrapsychic and internal experiences. Similarly, because Womanist pastoral theology's appropriation of psychology and psychoanalysis, Womanist pastoral theologians are suited to navigate the complexities of particularity as it relates to issues of age and development.

## Womanist Theology and Particularity

Understanding particularity and its complexity is the first step in Womanist theological reflections in that it orients Womanist theologians to Black women's realities. In Patricia Hill Collin's essay, "Black Feminist Epistemology," Collins asserts that Black women have a particularized source of knowledge that grows out of their standpoint or experience of being Black and female. This focus on "being" denotes the idea that Black women come to "know"

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[67] Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "Womanist Pastoral Theology and Black Women's Experiences of Gender, Religion, and Sexuality," in *Pastoral Theology and Care: Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practices*, ed. Nancy Ramsay (Newark, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018), 126.

through their embodiment, interpersonal relationships, emotional lives, social roles, and social treatment, thereby linking Black women's particularity to their epistemology. In fact, the totality of their lived experience is a criteria for meaning.[68] The totality of the experience is where Womanist theology begins.

Womanist theologians explore the implications of theological themes, symbols, images, and rituals in light of Black women's particularity as a source of epistemology.[69] More specifically, particularity manifests in the critical engagements of biblical texts, traditions, lived experiences, and rituals.[70] In "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," Cannon notes that "[b]y tracking down the central and formative facts in the Black woman's social world, one can identify the determinant and determining structures of oppression that have shaped the context in which Black women discriminately and critically interpret scripture, in order to apprehend the divine Word from the perspective of their own situation."[71] Particularity, then, represents an epistemological stance for Womanist theological reflection as evidenced by Womanist methodologies.

Overall, Womanist theologians have engaged particularity well through ethnographic research, historical analyses, and childhood memories. Consider, for instance, Katie Cannon's recollection of childhood in "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition," in which she shares that she "first began pondering the relationship between faith and ethics as a

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[68] Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," 276.
[69] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*.
[70] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
[71] Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1985).

schoolgirl,"[72] or in Townes's presidential address to the American Academy of Religion in 2008 wherein she discusses her childhood memories of being raised by older Black men and women.[73] In both cases, these Womanist theologians described their situatedness and its relationship to scholarly orientation. In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes explains:

> … particularity challenges me to explore gender—sexuality, sexual orientation, sexism—to get at not only my hope for wholeness, but also to understand the ways in which age and body image, and a history that contains the ultimate mammy, the emasculating bitch, the tragic mulatta, the castrating matriarch, and the pickaninny continue to ooze from the pores of videos and magazines and television and radio and music and the pulpit. These images of Black women and girls rest solidly in the imagination of U.S. culture and must be deconstructed and understood for the awful impact they have on how a stereotype is shaped into "truth" in memory and in history.[74]

Particularity exposes racism, sexism and other oppressive systems that devalue individuals as theological problems that infringe upon the human capacity to experience God's love.[75][76] Thus, unearthing the particulars is fundamental for a critical theological reflection that inspires rigorous analyses and impactful theological responses.

Further, from an ethnographic perspective, Womanist ethnographer Linda Thomas emphasizes ethnography as a means for unearthing Black women's life stories and personal narratives as vital sources of knowledge.[77] Interestingly, engaging particularity in Womanist reflections often involve recalling childhood memories and re-telling narratives from childhood that are pivotal for establishing their standpoint and orientation to the work. There is also an

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[72] Katie G. Cannon, "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 4 (1984): 171.
[73] Emilie M. Townes, "Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness: Scholarship and Activism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 1 (March 2009): 4–9.
[74] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 3.
[75] Townes, "Womanist Theology."
[76] Emilie M. Townes, "To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in PostModern Refraction," *Society of Christian Ethics* 13 (1993): 94.
[77] Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," 490.

ethos of responsibility to gendered and racialized experiences embedded in Womanist theoretical orientations and methodologies. This responsibility calls upon Womanist theologians to ensure accurate representations of the Black community that extends far beyond data collection and singular analyses.[78] This begs the question: if particularity is so important in Womanist theology, why are Black girl voices alluded to but not fully examined as a source of knowledge?

A similar critique can be found in Theresa Fry Brown's essay, "Avoiding Asphyxiation: A Womanist Perspective on Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Transformation."[79] In this essay, Brown emphasizes the need for Womanist theologians to critically reflect on the epistemological orientations inherent in their methodologies. In her introduction, Brown tells the story of trying to teach Womanist theology to non-academic Black women. Brown observed that there was a disconnect between Womanist frameworks and "actual" Black women. In response, Brown proposed an epistemological shift which resulted in small dialogue groups—the Sisters Working Encouraging Empowering Together (SWEET) program. In a review of Brown's essay, Phillis Sheppard wrote: "[The small group dialogue] approach created a space for theological reflection that addressed the personal, familial, and communal, and one that emphasized mutuality, rather than a hierarchical model, to pastoral care."[80] It is worth considering that a disconnect between Womanist frameworks and actual Black girls exists when Womanist theologians make claims about Black girlhood without consulting Black girls.

Black girls have their own unique particularity related to their contexts and lived

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[78] Vanessa Marr, "Ditchin' the Master's Gardening Tools for Our Own: Growing a Womanist Methodology from the Grassroots," *Feminist Teacher* 24, no. 1–2 (2015): 99.
[79] Theresa Fry Brown, "Avoiding Asphyxiation: A Womanist Perspective on Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Transformation," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1997).
[80] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 48.

experiences that is entangled with the hormonal changes and heightened identity formation operative in childhood. This particularity manifests unique psychological needs relative to age and development. For instance, during adolescence in particular, Black girls internalize external stimuli, a process that inherently influences their self-development and psychological needs.[81] Yet, in Womanist theology, it seems that Black girlhood is viewed as a *transitional* state within particularity rather than having particularity in itself. This oversight assumes that Black women and girls require the same kinds of theological reflection, thereby collapsing Black girls with Black women to the point that Black girls and their childhood are overlooked in Womanist theology. Although collapsing Black girls with Black women is common in society, the collapse is especially troubling in Womanist theology, considering the importance of particularity in Womanist thought as well as the current state of Black girlhood erasure, age-compression, and adultification—all of which are theological problems.

**Growing Up Black and Female: Why Particularity Matters**

The oversight of Black girls and their childhood omits the fact that particularity, as a reflection of "being," is tied to identity. Particularity is not stagnant. It changes with age and development. For this reason, particularity is more complex and dynamic than it might appear. Aside from adulthood, particularity also encompasses Black girls' coming-of-age stories and shapes Black girl epistemology.

Notably, coming-of-age stories for Black girls[82] involve nearly impossible demands.

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[81] Aerika S. Brittian, "Understanding African American Adolescents' Identity Development: A Relational Developmental Systems Perspective," *Journal of Black Psychology* 38, no. 2 (2012): 172–200.

[82] This includes racial and gendered development ascribed to adolescence, self-image, and self-understanding.

From an early age, Black girls develop an internal script and inner self-image that are at risk of cultural humiliation. Black girls must navigate embodiment that is intertwined with often negative sociopolitical contexts throughout the process of their self-creation. This process involves racialized identity development and self-image construction in the context of negative representations. Further, the adultification and representation of Black girls as non-innocent categorizes Black girls as a "problem" that needs to be resolved or managed. While children in general are not completely innocent because they have agency,[83] adultification in Black girlhood positions Black girls as inherently guilty without cuase. This translates into the policing of Black girl bodies and dismissal childlike behaviors (i.e., being assertive, questioning authority, and expressing curiosity) as delinquent.

Black girls must learn to navigate their ways of being at any given moment depending on the social situation. They are expected to be poised, neat, well-groomed, and silent without making mistakes or throwing tantrums—despite the fact that such behavior is characteristic of adolescence. The unique tension of living in a Black female adolescent body requires Black girls to be proficient in code-switching, "civilized" and compliant to avoid danger, and fluent in Black girl vernacular while learning what it means to be both Black and female. In this case, code-switching is characterized by alternating between two or more self-expressions dependent on the social situation. It is a practice of "fitting in." If and when a Black girl makes a mistake or challenges authority, she is placed in a taxonomy of deviance that imagines her as bad, loud, and defiant rather than such behaviors being characterized as typical adolescent behaviors. This multiple jeopardy robs Black girls of their childhood and positions them as the antithesis of the

[83] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 144.

racially specific construct of "girl."[84] In other words, in the dominant society, Black girls are prohibited from expressing childlike behaviors without penalty and thereby forced into adulthood prematurely.

To that degree, the reality of intersectionality complicates the degree to which Black girls can measure up to gender expectations and racial expectations. Black girls are not only evaluated by not only their degree of gender conformity, but also of Black respectability as well. Thus, the dominant narratives of what it means to be a girl renders Black girls vulnerable to being pathologized and criminalized.[85] As critical ethnic studies educators Horace Hall and Eleshia Smith note, "regrettably, the 'inherited' attributes of Black girls are often interpreted (against the framework of conventional femininity) as obstinate, aggressive, and disobedient behaviors."[86] If the Black girl does not develop in accordance to White girl norms, she is deemed a misfit. Unsurprisingly, the implications of being deemed a misfit can impact how a Black girl sees herself and, consequently, her particularized way of knowing.

Womanist theology has not looked closely enough at Black girl needs and experiences. This is a glaring oversight. Not only has Womanist theology overlooked Black girls' lived experiences as sources of epistemology, it has also not dealt with the theological problems associated with Black girls' coming-of-age stories. This is baffling because, like Black women, Black girls also experience the trifecta of racism, sexism, and classism and are misrepresented by

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[84] Eboni Marshall Turman, "Facing Pecola: Toward a Womanist Soteriologic of Black Girl Disrespectability," (lecture, Antoinette Brown Lecture Series, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN, March 23, 2017).
[85] Annamma, "Black Girls and School Discipline: The Complexities of Being Overrepresented and Understudied," 5.
[86] Horace R. Hall and Eleshia L Smith, "'This Is Not Reality … It's Only TV': African American Girls Respond to Media (Mis)Representations," *The New Educator* 8, no. 3 (2012): 225.

negative tropes.

I argue that Womanist pastoral theology is primed to address the concerns and erasure of Black girlhood, in Womanist theology and society at-large, through its unique methodology and process of *psychodynamic theologizing*—a process of theological reflection stimulated through psychological analyses of experiences in tandem with theological perspectives concerning the human condition. What makes psychodynamic theologizing Womanist is its commitment to Black women's (and girls') lived experiences. Womanist psychodynamic theologizing situates Womanist pastoral theology to make space for Black girlhood in Womanist theological reflection because it employs theology and the social sciences to parse out the dynamics of particularity, including the psychosocial and intrapsychic elements, which are important for considering Black girls who are in the crux of identity development.

## Womanist Pastoral Theology: An Overview

Since its earliest development, Womanist pastoral theology has understood the necessity of accounting for Black women's social situations and interior experiences to reflect on adequate caregiving and care-receiving. As previously mentioned,[87] Womanist pastoral theology and care has maintained an orientation to pastoral theology and care that is (1) Black female-centered, (2) emergent from Black female experiences and activities, (3) oppositional to systems of oppression, and (4) committed to particularity as a source of epistemology. The necessity of these four commitments became abundantly clear in the early 1990s when Womanist pastoral theologians and practitioners gathered in Lansing, Michigan to form the founding principles of

[87] See introduction of this dissertation.

"Womanistcare," a process of caregiving and care-receiving among Black women.[88] Although Womanist caregiving practices have been operative for centuries, this gathering situated Womanist pastoral theology as a discipline that challenged traditional, White European paradigms of pastoral theology. To align with Black women's particularity, Womanistcare served as a response to traditional views of pastoral theology that were "predominantly White, male, linear, and fraternal, and that traditionally lifts up such images of shepherd and servant as the primary means by which care is given and received."[89]

In what follows, I trace major developments in Womanist pastoral theology and the ways that Womanist pastoral theologians have navigated the complexities of particularity as a catalyst for adequate contextualized pastoral care. Although Womanist pastoral theology has yet to wrestle with the ways that age and development impact particularity, Womanist pastoral theologians such as Carolyn McCrary, Carroll Watkins Ali, and Phillis Isabella Sheppard frequently allude to the importance of contextualized experiences. In this constructive read of Womanist pastoral theology, I assert that context is age-specific, and gesture towards opportunities for creating space for Black girlhood.

### Carolyn McCrary

In 1990, Womanist pastoral theologian Carolyn McCrary's groundbreaking article, "Interdependence as a Normative Value in Pastoral Counseling with African Americans,"

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[88] Marsha Foster Boyd, "Womanistcare: Some Reflections on the Pastoral Care and the Transformation of African American Women," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation & Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 198.
[89] Stephanie Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 126.

introduced the necessity of a Womanist orientation into pastoral theology, care, and counseling. In her essay, McCrary relies on a "Womanist kind of interdependence"[90] based on particular values of the African American community. McCrary's primary concern was to critique the Western ideal of independence that guided many pastoral care practices. It further advocated for interdependence as a normative value in pastoral counseling, especially with African Americans because they value community.

McCrary began her critical analysis of independence as a norm in pastoral care and counseling with a counterclaim from the West African proverb, "Omo omode ko to pepe, t'abalagba ko wo keregbe," which translates to "The small hand of the child cannot reach the high shelf. The large hand of the adult cannot enter the narrow neck of the gourd."[91] Although this proverb suggests that adults and children need one another to survive and flourish, McCrary took this proverb to mean that everyone needs everyone—theologically and psychologically. From this, McCrary defined and described a Womanist kind of interdependence:

> a state of communal existence wherein each person is appropriately recognized for her/his uniqueness and ultimate worth, encouraged in her\his need to be significantly related to others, enabled in the fulfillment of her/his potential of work and purpose, and supported in her\his responsibility for the survival, the physical well-being, and positive mental, psychological, economic, and spiritual development of the group as a whole.[92]

In later essays,[93] McCrary extends her definition of interdependence to engage Black women's experiences of historical and generational oppression, as well as to advocate for strategic care practices that address Black women's concerns. However, most notable about McCrary's

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[90] Carolyn L. McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value in Pastoral Counseling with African Americans," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 18, no. 1 (1990): 119.
[91] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 119.
[92] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value,"132.
[93] See "The Wholeness of Women: An African Woman's Story" and "Intimate Violence against Black Women and Internalized Shame: A Womanist Pastoral Counseling Perspective."

definition are her core influences and resulting praxis based on her interpretation of Black cultural values.

McCrary was influenced by Howard Thurman's theology of community, the Four Categories of Being and their Qualifications in Bantu-Rwandaise Philosophy, and W.R.D. Fairbairn's interpretation of Object Relations Theory.[94] Beginning with Howard Thurman's theology of community, McCrary explains the theological necessity of interdependence through Thurman's concept of a "corroborating unity" that allows individuals, through God's grace, to develop uniquely and to pursue community.[95] She first describes the complexities of community and its tendency toward whole-making such that community participants are theologically responsible for supporting each other's wholeness.[96] Second, McCrary describes Thurman's understanding of "proper" identity development to which each individual has a unique and personal religious experience that gives them their ultimate meaning and purpose.[97] For McCrary, this sense of unity and identity develops parallels in the Bantu-Rwandan philosophy of "being," particularly the unifying forces of maintaining the connecting essence of creation and the insistence that there is interconnectedness and interdependence of being of everyone and everything.[98]

McCrary also employs W.R.D. Fairbairn and object relations theory of personality to describe the necessity of relationships for individual development. McCrary goes on to identify Fairbairn's three stages of development: (1) infantile dependency, (2) the transitional stage of quasi-independence, and (3) mature dependency, in addition to what happens in each of these

[94] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Values," 120–21.
[95] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Values," 120–29.
[96] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 120.
[97] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 121.
[98] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 123.

stages. In sum, psychoanalytic formulation for Fairbairn is based on the quality of the dependence among persons from birth, and those relationships help determine who we are.[99] Individuals are inherently relational beings who seek relationships; personality development depends on the quality of those relationships. Fairbairn theorizes that each relationship has a dependence quality that changes based on the stage of development. These relationships function as a tool for healthy development towards interdependence, such that we all remain dependent on one another throughout our lifetime even though the nature of that dependency changes.[100] With this, McCrary concluded that the goal of pastoral care and counseling should not be independence. Instead, the goal should be interdependence as it aligns with African and African American values and a theology of community. For McCrary, this normative shift changes the tasks of pastoral care and counseling and influences care practices with African Americans, and by extension, everyone.

Overall, McCrary's pastoral interests revolve around interdependence and interconnectedness from a psychological and theological perspective. In her view, the self is formed relationally, such that past generations and culture influence one's self-understanding, attitudes, and behaviors. She contends that "[oppressive] values lead to unhealthy attitudes and behavior both cross-culturally and cross-generationally."[101] Thus, her pastoral response and suggestions for strategic care practices contend with oppressive values, such as independence, in favor of Black cultural values of interdependence. Her assertion is that when people internalize values that are not consistent with their own values, the result is a fragmented or disconnected

[99] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 131.
[100] McCrary, "Interdependence as a Normative Value," 130.
[101] Carolyn McCrary, "The Wholeness of Women: An African Woman's Story," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 25 (1998): 261.

self that is disruptive to God's desire for us to be in community. To address these issues, McCrary draws on the narratives of African and African American women to demonstrate how these women have been able to "move beyond internalization to an understanding of interdependence toward health and wholeness,"[102] despite generational and cultural oppression.

McCrary's approach and utilization of a Womanist kind of interdependence demonstrates the integrative and dynamic methodology in Womanist pastoral theology and care, an interdependence that addresses intergenerational concerns. It proffers a process for appropriating theology, culture, and psychology as tri-dimensional lenses for analyses and care practices with Black women and girls while challenging independence as a universal ideal and goal for pastoral care and counseling. However, McCrary only addresses these issues from the perspective of Black women. Given McCrary's use of object relations theory, which focuses on early childhood development, and her concern with intergenerational relationships, McCrary's approach can only be enhanced by the inclusion of Black girlhood narratives.

Since the process of internalization is most operative in Black girlhood, McCrary's tri-dimensional approach could easily be applied to Black girl experiences of identity development. For instance, inclusion of Black girl voices could have expanded McCrary's pastoral approach from a reactive pastoral response offered after cultural traumas takes place to a proactive response and possible prevention of cultural trauma in the moment.

### Carroll Watkins Ali

In 1999, Womanist pastoral theologian and practitioner Carroll Watkins Ali developed the first monograph in Womanist pastoral theology critiquing White dominant perspectives of

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[102] McCrary, 261.

pastoral care. Like McCrary, particularity also informed Watkins Ali's critical perspective of pastoral theology. In her book, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context,* Watkins Ali described methods of pastoral theology and care as being situated in a dominant White European male perspective and as too individualistic to universally address human concerns. Watkins Ali also notes that the individualistic perspective of pastoral theology is/was counter to the communal philosophy of African Americans, making them ineffective and inadequate for addressing African American concerns.[103] According to her, both a methodological and a paradigmatic shift was necessary to address concerns that were important to African Americans and their/our contexts. In her introduction, she recalled being in her doctoral program searching for pastoral theology and care sources that addressed the needs and concerns of the Black community. She came up empty-handed. Therefore, her book proposed a paradigmatic and methodological shift in pastoral theology.

Watkins Ali proposed a revised definition of pastoral theology and care that centered around context. Watkins Ali clarified that the experience of culture is necessary and relevant for "strategic pastoral caregiving."[104] Watkins Ali described her revisionist approach as a Womanist project that aligned with Alice Walker's definition of Womanism, encompassed the worldview of Black women, and was intentionally inclusive. She called this an "umbrella approach" because it sought to focus on Black women's subjective experiences, yet extended and responded to issues of pastoral care more broadly. Watkins Ali explained that the "purpose of an umbrella perspective is to ensure that an awareness of the subjective experience of those living in the

[103] One contention that Watkins Ali has for the current paradigm of pastoral care is its individualistic and traditional pastoral theological method, which contrasts to the communal philosophy of African Americans.
[104] Carroll Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999).

cultural context of ministry guides the events of ministry."[105] She clarified that pastoral care practices should respond directly to the variability of human experiences which include, but are not limited to, experiences of race, class, and gender.

Further aligning with Womanist commitments, Watkins Ali's version of pastoral care demanded a shift in pastoral theology and care methods with a particular emphasis on how theology and care functioned for communities rather than individuals. Her proposed revisions to pastoral theology required new sources, new methods, and new ministerial events and practices that addressed the concerns of African Americans, which she navigated in three steps. According to Watkins Ali, her first task was to locate her theological reflection in cultural experiences, which she took on by exploring the African American context from a historical perspective and noting acts of resistance, economic despair, poverty, and nihilism in the Black community. Her historical overview emphasized the lingering effects of slavery, acknowledged the unique pastoral care needs in the Black community, and recognized the need for a strategic pastoral theology and care model to address those needs.

Watkins Ali's second task was to identify intellectual resources within the Black community to assist her in developing a strategic pastoral theology and care model. Watkins Ali clarified that a paradigmatic shift required cognate resources that were to African Americans because African Americans tended to better identify with African American experiences than with White sources. Arguably, her use of African American resources also validated Black experiences as a particular way of knowing. She explained:

> [t]his book acknowledges an urgent need to search for and explore new sources to aid in conceptualizing a framework for pastoral theology that is specific to the needs of black people in America. As a means to extrapolate the black experience in America (short of ethnographic or qualitative study), sources from the discipline of systematic black

[105] Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation,* 12.

> liberation theology, womanist theology, black psychology, and African American literature will be examined in order to provide interpretations of African American experience "[106]

In other words, Watkins Ali was clear that centering on Black intellectual sources was fundamental for developing a pastoral theology that speaks directly to the needs of the Black community.

Watkins Ali's third and final task was to reconstruct and redefine pastoral theology and care to accommodate human issues on a broader scale, reinstating the inclusive goals of Womanist theology. She also insisted that effective care practices can be created based on context. Her reconstruction of pastoral theology "defined as theological reflection on the experience of the cultural context as relevant for strategic pastoral caregiving in the context of ministry. Pastoral theology defined this way elevates the importance of contextuality, asserting that the experience of the cultural context is central to theological reflection."[107]

Watkins Ali's three-fold approach demonstrates a methodological flow of Womanist pastoral theology from experience, to intellectual source for analysis, to strategic responses that directly relate to the interconnected experiences of being Black and female. Based on her analysis, she concluded that pastoral care should nurture, empower, liberate, and reconcile the self with God[108] to contend with the concerns of the Black community. It is important to note that these four attributes are extensions of the Euro-centric functions of pastoral ministry often thought of as classic or universal functions of pastoral care: healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling estranged parties. Thus, Watkins Ali ensured that cultural contexts and experiences determine the events of pastoral theology and care, and those events are strategic.

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[106] Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation,* 13–14.
[107] Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation,*10–11.
[108] Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation*.

Although Watkins Ali's analyses of the Black experience were generative, they did not wrestle with the variability of the Black experience in relation to age and development. A potential expansion of her work lies in the notion that cultural, contextualized experiences are age specific. This understanding of contextualized experiences relative to age creates space for developing pastoral care that address both childhood and adulthood concerns. It is possible that attention to age-specific contexts might have expanded Watkins Ali's functions of pastoral care from "nurturing, empowering, liberating, reconciling" to include "advocating," which is relevant for both adults and children.

### Phillis Isabella Sheppard

In 2011, Womanist practical and pastoral theologian Phillis I. Sheppard proposed a turn to the intrapsychic, and toward a robust Womanist pastoral reflection. In her book, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology*, Sheppard demonstrated how psychoanalysis can be appropriated and utilized in Womanist practical theology and why it is necessary for understanding the depths of particularity. Although Sheppard's work is known for its critical appropriation of Heinz Kohut's self-psychology and understanding of cultural self-object needs, her understanding of particularity is especially noteworthy for understanding the vast dimensions of personhood in Womanist theology. She explains that Womanist theologians cannot fully analyze the complex experiences of Black women without attending to their psyches. She notes:

> Since its inauguration…womanist theology and thought has maintained an epistemological standpoint grounded in the experiences and perspectives of Black women… This epistemological grounding is essential … Central to this epistemology is the recognition that black women's lives cannot be engaged independently of the converging realities of color, gender, and racial categorization.[109]

[109] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 6–7.

Sheppard also points out that "[there] can be no womanist…theology in which embodiment is not integral to the epistemological positions we take."[110] Given that Sheppard understands embodiment as the convergence of the psychological and social that guides how we understand ourselves, she argued that particularity includes the intrapsychic domain.

According to Sheppard's analysis of Womanist theology, Womanist theologians commonly engage the intrapsychic domain of particularity without naming it as such. Instead, they reference the intrapsychic implicitly in terms of suffering, joy, or other internal experiences.[111] Womanist theologians also tend to assume that these internal experiences are connected to external realities of racism, classism, and sexism without sufficiently investigating the interior. Sheppard concluded that Womanists "must listen to the interior of a person"[112] to grasp the impact of lived experiences as it relates to the self and particular ways of knowing and then, to strategically address internal experiences. Sheppard's insistence on investigating the interior implies a Womanist practical theology of ethics such that internal assessment of particularity is necessary.

Sheppard offered a means for excavating the interior as a nexus where the psychological and social converge. Noting the connection between the psyche and culture, Sheppard identified the many Womanists and Black feminists who have reflected on their own childhoods and psychological developments, which are always steeped in the individual's socio-cultural contexts and early relationships with caregivers. She explained:

> [theories] abound regarding the importance of relationships with early caregivers for the formation of the self or identity and, in the cases of black self-development, the messages they convey about black femaleness. Even so, the complexity of black embodiment is not just a psychological result of mother-daughter or other familial dynamics. A critical

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[110] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others,* 14.
[111] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others,* 7.
[112] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Other,* 9.

> womanist perspective understands these formative relationships more broadly, frequently drawing on black cultural productions.[113]

Sheppard described the intricacies of Black female embodiment and its long-lasting psychological impact, insisting that Womanists "must wrestle with the reality that for some the [psychological] wounds of silence and hurt not only mark them but also come to define who they believe themselves to be and who they believe others to be."[114]

Although Sheppard did not engage Black girl personal narratives, implicit in her understanding of particularity is a formative element. She referenced Black girlhood experiences, specifically formative relationships in early childhood, as foundational to the behaviors and attitudes of Black women. Sheppard's insistence on the importance of early relationships leaves space for grappling with Black girlhood.

## More Recent Developments in Womanist Pastoral Theology

While earlier developments of Womanist pastoral theology have been more implicit in their creation of space for Black girlhood, as evidenced by their referencing to contextualized and formative experiences, more recent developments gesture towards Black girlhood more explicitly. For example, in Stephanie Crumpton's *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, Crumpton offers a sociohistorical, intrapsychic view of Black womanhood and intimate and cultural violence. In her introduction, she writes that "[black] girls and women experience overwhelming violence, and for many this violence begins while they are still young girls." She adds:

> [the] annual survey on intimate partner violence and sexual assault conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) paints a clear portrait of two ugly truths in American

[113] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 15.
[114] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 17.

> society. The first is that for many, sexual violence has become a rite of passage of sorts into womanhood… The second ugly truth is that girls who experience sexual and physical abuse tend to experience more of the same kinds of violence in adulthood.[115]

In Crumpton's grounding of the problem of intimate violence, she cites facts about intimate violence and notes that many abuses occur in childhood. This suggests that Black girls are particularly vulnerable to violence and that this violence is sustained through Black womanhood. It is also worth noting that five out of six women in the case studies reflected on violence that occurred during childhood and manifested as various symptoms, mostly associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. However, Crumpton does not reflect on childhood in her Womanist pastoral response. Crumpton's description of the "root" of the problem, in tandem with her Womanist pastoral response, invites me to consider how Black girl voices get lost in pastoral responses that are meant to address both women and girls.

In her final pages, however, Crumpton does insist that more work is ahead in the study of intimate and cultural violence. She says, "[further] study not limited by the initial parameters I set needs to be done to build on the insights offered in this book…pastoral theology needs to hear from young women, under the age of eighteen, to hear their narratives of survival, interrogation, and overcoming."[116] Crumpton's invitation is clear: Build on her insights with narratives of young women under eighteen.

In sum, throughout the history of Womanist pastoral theology, Womanist pastoral theologians have explored contextualized experiences, socially and psychologically, without attending to the dynamics of age and development. Further, after twenty years of significant contributions to pastoral theologies of care focusing on Black women's experiences, Womanist

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[115] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, 1.
[116] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, 1.

pastoral theology has yet to address the problem of Black girlhood erasure or take Black girl lived experiences seriously. The omission of Black girl voices in Womanist pastoral theology is particularly jarring considering that Womanist pastoral theologians often consult Black women's narratives in case studies that often include memories from childhood to situate Black women's contextualized experiences. Not only does the rehearsal of childhood memory in Womanist pastoral theology render Black girls tertiary conversation partners, it renders the strategic care practices that emerge from these types of reflections insufficient and possibly ineffective for contemporary Black girls.

Failing to address cultural and psychological factors influencing childhood is a problematic gap. A "one size fits all" Womanist pastoral theology is inadequate. I propose that Womanish Black girl narratives can be turned toward both an intergenerational perspective and a Womanish/st pastoral theology that addresses Black girlhood.

### Making Space for Womanish/st Pastoral Theology

A Womanish perspective draws on the relationship between Black women and Black girls. In Alice Walker's four-part definition of Womanist, Walker outlines "Womanish" as characteristic of Black girls who are "outrageous, audacious, courageous"[117] and who want to know more than what was considered "good." Walker explains that the term "Womanish" comes from Black folk tradition and is/was usually expressed by a Black woman to a Black girl.[118] With both scold and grin, "Womanish" serves as both a compliment and complaint regarding a Black

[117] Reference definition…
[118] Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

girl's behavior or being. Thus, a Womanish perspective socially locates and captures the gray area between Black girlhood and Black womanhood.

An overview of Womanish literature reveals that Black women frequently reflect on their childhood, or Womanish journeys, through narratives and autoethnographies. These Womanish reflections chronicle childhood landmarks and lessons learned in the process of becoming a Black woman and often reveal significant incidents or patterns of epistemology. In a poem titled "She Scrape She Knee," Opal Palmer Adisa recalls that when she was a girl, she often scraped her knee, not because of improper balance, but because she dared to be brave. Yet, as an adult, she has been taught to brace for the fall.[119] Similar to other Womanish reflections, Palmer does not romanticize childhood. Instead, she recognizes the intrinsic gumption of the Womanish girl and the difference of perspective in adulthood causing her to "brace for the fall." In Womanish captures Black girls and their complex development through adolescence.

In *Womanish Black Girls: Women Resisting the Contradictions of Silence and Voice*,[120] the editors describe the complicated, and often contradictory, expectations of Black girls who grow up Womanish. As a collection of autobiographical essays written by Black women, *Womanish Black Girls* illustrates the complicated and varied tasks of Black girlhood. Each essay recalls the joys and challenges of growing up as Black girls navigating what it meant to be Black and female in families that at times celebrated their curiosity and bravery and, at other times, punished and silenced their courageous and inquisitive natures. To be Womanish was to be a Black girl trapped in the complicated task of becoming a woman.

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[119] Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism," 4.
[120] Dianne Smith, Loyce Caruthers, and Shaunda Fowler, eds., *Womanish Black Girls: Women Resisting the Contradiction of Silence and Voice* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, 2019).

If the Womanish is carefully considered in Womanist pastoral theology and care, pastoral care can function to shield Black girls from the theological problems of oppression and glean new wisdom.[121] Further, Womanist pastoral theologians are particularly skilled at analyzing particularities and lived experiences with social scientific and psychological tools, such as developmental psychology, and can better understand nuances related to age.

One way of doing this work is through the direct inclusion of Black girl narratives. In one of the earliest monographs centering on Black girlhood experiences, ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt examines games that Black girls play as an inspirational source for the development of African American musical stylings. Gaunt's work represents a pivotal shift in Black feminist studies by situating Black girls as co-creators of knowledge and culture in a field that usually centers on Black women.[122] It also includes Black girls in research and reflection.

## Making Space for Black Girlhood is Our Responsibility

In this overview of Womanist theology, and more specifically Womanist pastoral theology, I point out how an understanding of particularity is complex and can be enhanced by age-specific theorizing, particularly by including Black girlhood experience. In earlier stages of the discipline, the particularity of Black women stimulated reconsideration of traditional pastoral models and methods of care. More specifically, Womanist pastoral theologians and caregivers have questioned normative practices of pastoral care that largely excluded African Americans. Similarly, I question normative practices of Womanist pastoral care that excludes Black girlhood.

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[121] Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism," 3.
[122] Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New: New York University Press, 2006).

Fortunately, Womanist pastoral theology grows and develops based on research and the work of the African American female community to create a stronger discipline and care praxis. It is a process. Marsha Foster Boyd describes this process in terms of Womanistcare, which she says is the "intentional process of care giving and receiving by African American women… In this process, the focus is the holistic care of body, mind, and spirit in order that healing and transformation occur for African American women and their circles of influence."[123]

Womanist theologians in particular consider themselves to be moral agents that strive to eliminate oppression in theory and practice.[124] In Katie Geneva Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*, she explains that there is a unique ethical and moral code embedded in the Black female community garnered by historical accounts of racism, sexism, and classism.[125] However, while Womanist theologians base their reflections on religious and moral responsibilities to disrupt injustices—especially those that oppress Black women and girls—they have yet to confront issues such as adultification and (mis)representation of Black girls with a vigorous analysis. In most cases, Black girls and their experiences are not a part of the descriptive analysis nor the prescription to eradicate oppression. And when Black girls are included in such analyses and prescriptions, their representations are typically minimal and inadequate. Instead, Black girlhood is referenced as a memory or constituent of adult narratives such that the prescriptive reflection either inadequately addresses present-day Black girls or only addresses Black women recovering from childhood injuries. This goes against the very premise of Womanist theology and its

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[123] Boyd, "Womanistcare: Some Reflections on the Pastoral Care and the Transformation of African American Women," 198.
[124] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 6.
[125] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics, 6*.

commitment to recognizing the nuances of particularity, its work with particularities to discover its rootedness in social location, and its strategies for eradicating oppression at its source.[126] Womanist theology is a theology of advocacy and liberation that takes seriously the actual rather than the abstract. Reflection of the actual gives Womanist theology its authority as a theology that has a meaningful impact. Without actually including Black girl narratives, Womanist theological reflections and practices fall short.

[126] Townes, "To Be Called Beloved," 95.

# CHAPTER TWO

## BLACK GIRLHOOD EXPERIENCES AS TOLD BY BLACK GIRLS

*Dear [Ms. King],*

*I thank you for always being there for me when I needed you. You help control my anger, and not holding my feelings in anymore, and most importantly loving myself again. When I first met you I was scared to open up to you. I didn't know what to say or how was I going to say it. That I was depressed about my life I'm still is but not that much you have changed my life for the better now I tell my mother things I thought I would [not] tell her. I am so greatfully (sic) for you to be in my life. I just wish you did have to leave this school. You help me so much in my life. Like I still need you I don't think I can do this by myself. After school is over I still want to talk to you somehow but I won't make this long and sad ending but I just wanted to say thank you for everything you have done and wish to have you back next year.*

*P.S. Sorry for my handwriting it's ugly.*

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END

Receiving this note reminded me why I research *and* practice practical theology, which is to ensure the integrity of children and preserve their agency in Womanist theology. In my view, this process begins with listening carefully and attending to Black girl narratives as primary sources of knowledge. I affirm their Womanish narratives.

It is important to keep in mind that narratives are temporal and complex, and embedded within them are multiplicitous ways of knowing, whereas multiplicity represents the internal relationship between mind, body, spirit—the conscious and the unconscious.[127] Thus, the work of listening to narratives involves listening for subjective experiences. In Womanist pastoral theology, this is where theologizing begins.

This chapter introduces Womanish Black girl narratives as a site for theologizing. I situate the Womanish because these Black girls are courageous enough to share their narratives. As noted in chapter one of this dissertation, the first stanza in Alice Walker's definition of Womanism validates the bold, audacious Black girl as displaying Womanish behavior.[128] As such, affirming the Womanish is a "re-imagining"[129] of doing pastoral theology with Black girls in such a way that respects their agency and ensures their integrity. In an essay, "Children and Religion in the Public Square: 'Too Dangerous and Too Safe, Too Difficult and Too Silly'," practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore describes Christian theology's tenuous relationship with children. Referencing Marcia Bunge, she articulates that in pre-modernity the topic of children was "beneath" the rigorous standards of systematic theologians. Miller-

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[127] Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), vii.
[128] Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.
[129] See Bonnie Miller-McLemore's *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*: "children must be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents." (xxiii-xxix)

McLemore adds that theological work that includes children, such as that of James Fowler, does so with children at a distance—discussing children as symbols or metaphors rather than as embodied persons. In other words, many theologians have yet to take children seriously as theological subjects. Miller-McLemore's response to this lack of engagement is a new way of doing theology with children, such that children are taken seriously.[130] She proposes a feminist maternal theology drawing on knowledge and wisdom gleaned from the practice of mothering as a means of getting closer to children in research and writing.

Miller-McLemore's invitation is clear: Take children seriously as theological subjects, as agents, and as embodied persons. She is also clear that her approach is just *one* way of doing theology with children.[131] In this chapter, I offer another way of doing theology with children, particularly Black girls, by journeying to the source: Black girl narratives as told by Black girls. This orientation to Black girl narratives invites us into Black girls' world in such a way that we can engage their voices as knowledge.

In Womanist process theologian Monica Coleman's essay, *"*Metaphysics, Metaphor and Multiplicity: A Postmodern Womanist Theology for Today's Thorniest Religious Issues*,"* Coleman explains that in Womanist theology, Black women's narratives have served as the literal source of womanist theological reflections, "offering the entry points of understanding God, the relationship between God and creation, and our modes of salvation."[132] In other words, Womanist theologians have utilized the narrative approach to elucidate their ways of knowing

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[130] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Children and Religion in the Public Square: 'Too Dangerous and Too Safe, Too Difficult and Too Silly,'" *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 3 (July 2006): 392.
[131] Miller-McLemore, "Children and Religion in the Public Square," 398.
[132] Monica A. Coleman, "Metaphysics, Metaphor and Multiplicity: A Postmodern Womanist Theology for Today's Thorniest Religious Issues," *Political Theology* 18, no. 4 (2017): 342–43.

toward contextual theological reflections. Similarly, Black girl narratives function as a source of epistemology and have the potential to expand theological reflections.

To mine Black girl narratives, an ethnographic approach as a means of practical theological knowledge is essential. Practical theologian Almeda Wright demonstrates an ethnographic approach in *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans.* She argues that addressing childhood experiences in theological studies requires practical that theologians attend to and take seriously the "daily experiences" of actual youth. For Wright, this approach includes three movements:

1. Attending closely to the lived realities of African American adolescents and their spirituality.
2. Engaging in constructive critical reflection on this reality by the placing the experiences of African American youth in relation to theories of adolescent spirituality and religious education, identity development, sociology of religion and African American history, and Womanist and Black theology.
3. Returning to the concrete realities of youth by offering proposals for improved practice with African American adolescents.[133]

In her book, Wright interviews eight African American Christian youth and conducts online surveys with fourteen youth.[134] Although Wright's practical theological method is meant to address the chasm between Black youth and the Black church, her articulation of doing theology with children is important for our consideration because it "attempts to carefully interconnect the experiences and wisdom of youth with the wisdom and traditions of scholars and theologians,

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[133] Almeda A. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.
[134] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 11.

often far removed from the experiences of these youth, such that both are enhanced."[135] In essence, ethnography creates mutuality and agency in research.

In Linda Thomas's seminal essay, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," Thomas makes clear that ethnography necessitates our entering into a marginalized community such that the ethnographer turns to the lived experiences of that community as the primary source of reflection. Thomas explains that by "[employing] the context and knowledge base derived from the focus and pilot groups, [the Womanist theologian] launches a larger and more comprehensive ethnographic research study by living among the people, thereby encountering their symbolic cosmology."[136] Ethnography connects the researcher to the "researched" in such a way that the "researched" become "co-researchers." Thomas adds that researcher's job is to present the narratives, with integrity, while emphasizing the polyvalent voices of that community.[137] An ethnographic approach presumes that the community in question is a knowledge base and has much to teach us.[138] As such, this chapter positions Black girls as fully respected persons and elucidates the fullness and richness of Black girlhood.

Due to the diversity of Black girlhood experiences, narratives shared in this chapter span 1) verbatim interview material collected for this dissertation project, 2) a critical appropriation of the interview data documented in Almeda Wright's book, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* and 3) and clinical encounters. Each lens offers a unique portal into the daily lived experiences of Black girls, which, together, creates an ethnographic picture. The purpose of this ethnographic picture is to generate a vision of Black girls and their childhood experiences rather

[135] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 8.
[136] Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology and a New Anthropological Paradigm. " 491.
[137] Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology and a New Anthropological Paradigm. "489.
[138] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 48.

than an exhaustive, essentializing view of Black girlhood. As Black girlhood scholar Aimee Meredith Cox stated in an interview about her work, "[t]here's is something so deeply insightful about seeing the world from the perspective of youth, femaleness and blackness."[139]

**The Focus Group Turned Interview: Embracing the Unexpected**

Best practices for research involving children and adolescents suggest that group research settings are ideal for encouraging candor and a diversity of opinions and experiences.[140] As such, I began my study with the intent to facilitate a focus group.

Subsequent to a clear description of my research methodology, including the special attention necessary to safeguard children and their information, my project was granted approval by the Institutional Review Board in June, 2018. Following IRB approval, I distributed five recruitment letters to local pastors in Nashville, Tennessee. The recruitment letters requested individual meetings with the pastors. The purpose of these meetings was to explain the reason for my focus group and what I hoped to accomplish. Unsurprisingly, only three of the pastors responded.

When it came to the day of the focus group, only one person, Jordan, attended. Immediately, I was disappointed by the lack of attendance. Appropriately facilitated focus groups usually result in conversation among adolescent research participants; I was prepared for

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[139] Aimee Meredith Cox and Ruth Nicole Brown, "On Black/Brown Girlhood, Black Feminism, and the Arts: A Conversation with Aimee Cox and Ruth Nicole Brown: Part I," interview by Darnell L. Moore, *The Feminist Wire*, December 29, 2011, https://thefeministwire.com/2011/12/on-blackbrown-girlhood-black-feminism-and-the-arts-a-conversation-with-aimee-cox-and-ruth-nicole-brown-part-i/.

[140] Kristin Adler, Sanna Salanterä, and Maya Zumstein-Shaha, "Focus Group Interviews in Child, Youth, and Parent Research: An Integrative Literature Review," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18 (2019).

more participants. However, after exchanging pleasantries with Jordan, I quickly realized the value of a one-on-one interview. I got to know Jordan more personally. She was no longer a "focus group participant." She was Jordan, a fourteen-year-old Black girl from Nashville, Tennessee. And, she did not have to posture "Black girl magic," a phrase and movement recognized by popular culture to signify the greatness of Black females.

This encounter might read as a single case study. Although single case studies are often thought of as inconclusive and having the potential to lead to oversimplified analyses,[141] it is important to consider that a single-case case study method has particular strengths as well as disadvantages for engaging Black girls and the richness of their experiences. In practical theological research and writing, single case studies have been "extraordinarily powerful for showing the richness of a complex situation or a person's life or an entire social or spiritual phenomenon."[142] According to practical theologian Eileen Campbell-Reed's essay, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research," "a single case study can provide an instance of practical wisdom, and it can contribute to complex human learning or assist with urgent needs for discernment and multifaceted and demanding situations."[143] Single case-studies also contribute to a unique constellation of knowledge that is integral to the human experience.[144] Further, analyzing case studies can be a lens to discovering narratives.

This approach melds particularly well with the engagement of particularity in Womanist pastoral theological reflection to which "case studies are useful for articulating complex, context-

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[141] Eileen Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research," in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Joyce Ann Mercer, 1st ed., Theology in Practice (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 33.
[142] Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study," 33.
[143] Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study," 33.
[144] Campbell-Reed, Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study," 37.

dependent knowledge, revising belief and practice, offering practical wisdom or helpful discernment about situations."[145] This approach also complements Womanish Black girl research paradigms as evidenced in Black girlhood studies. For example, in Aimee Meredith Cox's keynote address at the Black Girlhood Studies workshop, she suggested that narratives create doorways into the fullness of Black girls' lives.[146] Narratives are a space where Black girls can imagine "a place worthy of their mothers and strong enough to not only hold and grow them but tightly grasp their hand and guide them to alternative roots, alternative places."[147] The key components of advancing such a perspective is to be open to imagination and Black girl theorizing with shifting lenses to grasp what is underneath and analyze these stories according to their socio-cultural contexts. I hold onto their narratives as sacred knowledge and engage those narratives as sources of epistemology.

## Jordan's Narrative

Jordan began the interview as shy and soft-spoken. She was initially concerned about being the only participant, which had left her in a more vulnerable position than she had imagined. Jordan was quickly able to identify the necessity of my research agenda. When we talked about why I was interested in Black girlhood in church and society, she commented that some research about Black girls only responded to their *image* or *stereotype* without getting to know Black girls. Jordan agreed that Black girls are a source of knowledge.

Over the course of interview with Jordan, I posed five questions:

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[145] Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study," 38.
[146] Aimee Meredith Cox, "Place: 'We Live in Possibility'" (Keynote Address, Princeton University African American Studies Graduate Conference, Princeton, NJ, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDWm3EW9_DM.
[147] Aimee Meredith Cox, "Place: 'We Live in Possibility,'"7:43.

1. (a) How would you describe Black girls? (b) Describe what childhood is like for a Black girl.

2. How do you feel about being a Black girl?

3. (a) What do you like about being a Black girl? (b) What do you dislike about being a Black girl?

4. (a) How do you think people view Black girls? (b) What are some examples?

5. What would you want people to know about Black girls?

Jordan's responses to the first question came with a list of descriptors for Black girls. She said, "Black girls are beautiful, smart, intelligent, strong, capable, intelligent, awesome." When I told her that I was curious why she said "intelligent" twice, she giggled and responded that was a mistake. She said that she really believes that Black girls are intelligent. Emphasizing the word "really," Jordan explained that Black girl intelligence comes from their mindset. According to Jordan, the Black girl mindset requires Black girls to "tell themselves" that they are intelligent and powerful. Jordan clarified that a good mindset is about "telling yourself about yourself." I was really curious about her emphasis on the need to tell yourself that you are good. She responded by saying that a lot of people put you down and you have to tell yourself that you are "beautiful, smart, and intelligent."

Jordan noted that as a part of her daily mantra, she reminds herself that "she is beautiful, smart, intelligent, and can do this today." I asked who tells her that she is not smart, she said "most of the kids at school says that Black girls aren't smart." Jordan went on to say that it is hard growing up as Black girl and that it is very different from a White girl. She said that, for her, "Black girls have to go to church. Black girls have to live up to higher expectations than that of White girls." She also mentioned that some of those expectations are for yourself as in "Black

girls create their own high expectations." Unable to truly explain what she was saying, Jordan said "White girls don't have to [sic], I don't know where I'm going with this. I just know that it's tougher." When I asked what made Black girlhood "more tougher," Jordan replied, "The hair." After a long pause, she continued, "A lot of people want to touch my hair or they ask how I get my hair like this. And it's just weave. They try to touch it. I don't like when people touch my hair."

Jordan also reflected that Black girl parents are "more stricter" [sic] because society expects Black girls to fail. As a result, Black girl parents have higher expectations than White girl parents. Surprisingly, Jordan thought stricter parenting was a good thing. She noted that stricter parenting makes Black girls show that they can flourish and live productively lives. In other words, stricter parenting makes Black girls rise to the challenge of flourishing when the world imagines them as bad. When I asked Jordan about other aspects of her childhood, she said she grew up in the "hood," more specifically the projects, but no longer lives there thanks to God. She was clear that God is active in untenable situations.

Jordan reported that the only aspect she does not enjoy about being a Black girl is that folks "want to be [her], until it's time to be [her]." Jordan explained that people want to copy Black girls without experiencing the "real" parts of their existence, such as violence or gangs. She went on to say that people would be scared to be Black girls because of potential threats. She said she loves being a Black girl overall. She said she loved that White people come up to her and tell her they like her hair. She loves that Black girls are intelligent, curvy, and have kinky-curly hair.

She hates the negativity. I asked Jordan how she makes sense of the negativity surrounding Black girlhood and her simultaneous love for being a Black girl.

As the interview progressed, Jordan recalled that although she could not envision a world where she was not a Black girl, being asked about her girlhood gets annoying. She explained that many adults ask her what it is like being a Black girl, and she does not always know how to respond, yet she would be curious to know how other girls are experiencing their childhoods. She would ask Black girls about their challenges as she herself experiences lots of negativity. According to Jordan, other challenges in Black girlhood include racial profiling. She told me that she had been racially profiled twice, once at the mall and once at restaurant. She said the world thinks Black people are poor. She said she asked her mom why everyone thinks Black people are poor. She said her mom was unable to answer the question.

Jordan was unable to see class difference in all-Black spaces. When I asked her to specify which people think Black people are poor, she said she did not know what people thought at church because everyone was Black. I asked her about other messages she has heard at church. After a long pause, she looked at me, squinting her eyes with confusion, and said "I haven't heard anything about being a Black girl at church. No one has ever sat me down to talk about it." I probed more about Jordan's idea about God, to which she responded:

> I know God made us all. I mean. He did make us equal. I think He's trying to tell us to love ourselves and don't let the negativity get to you. Um. Be yourselves. Love yourselves. Because there's a lot of hate in the world. Like, a lot of hate. Don't let anything change you because of what people say or do. [God wants us] to do your best and love everybody even if they show you hate. God wants us to love one another.

When I asked her what love means, she explained that "love means showing kindness, respect one another, and love thy neighbor. Basically, show kindness." She said it sometimes hard to do because people can be rude and disrespectful and the other words. But, "I still love them," she said. "Well, I try to."

Jordan said that she hates that society in general thinks Black girls are dumb. In fact, she hated that there are so many stereotypes and perceptions about Black girls that are not true. Jordan was clear that changing the stereotype is only going to happen one step at a time, and the first step to changing stereotypes is to love one another.

At the end of the interview, I asked what she would want people to know about Black girls, and she replied:

> Not all Black girls or Black people are criminals. We're not the stereotype that you think we are. We all don't live in the hood. Because we don't. We're not all on crack or do drugs. We're not all in gangs or anything. When I said "criminals," there was one time that a teacher called my friend a criminal when my friend grabbed her phone off of the teacher's desk. The teacher said, "You're a criminal." That really shocked me. [My friend's] mom came up there. My mom would've come up there too. I mean. Why would you call someone that? A student. A criminal?

Jordan also remarked that stereotypes make her angry but also sometimes sad or frustrated. She explained that she is particularly saddened when some Black people make negative stereotypes, such as gangs or drug use look true. Even though there are good stereotypes, there are mostly bad stereotypes. Jordan expressed that she feels like she is constantly having to disprove stereotypes, although this is not the case at school or at church. She said, "You can't just be great."

The remaining time was spent talking through things she did not get to say during the interview. A particularly poignant reflection was when Jordan said that she does not always feel worth it. And she has to know that she is worth it, intelligent, and can do this. Her wish is that we all become one with each other. She wants positive news. When people are negative, she tends to think less of herself. And then she realizes that she is not what people says she is. What helps her get through tough times is her inner cheerleader. Jordan perked up and explained that each of us have two voices inside of us: the inner critic and the inner cheerleader. I asked Jordan, how  she

listens to one over the other. And she said that one speaks out more. One is louder than the other. Jordan named that "sometimes the inner critic is louder, but for [her], the inner cheerleader is louder. The inner critic will sometimes say that you are not worth it." She then clarified that ger inner cheerleader tells her to smile today and that she is worth living for.

I then asked Jordan how she got so intelligent. She looked at me completely amazed and asked "You think I'm intelligent?" She found that surprising because what people say makes her doubt it. After a brief pause, Jordan exclaimed, "I speak the truth. Even when I don't know what to say, I tell what is. I'm not gonna sugar coat anything. I think that makes me intelligent." She explained that she is intelligent by what she does. She acknowledged that you can lead in both positive or negative ways.

Jordan then asked how I feel about Black girls. I stumbled through an answer. I wondered what the difference is between being a Black girl and Black woman. Her response was clear. Jordan said the difference is that Black women know what they want, whereas Black girls are developing what they want and learning how to be Black women. She said she does not know what she wants and she has to pray about it. Jordan was also very clear that her wants changed as she got older. She explained that she wanted a lot of things when she was eight, she wanted to have a million dollars, and she wanted to be an astronaut. It seems as Jordan matured, the possibilities of what she could do and what she could have dwindled. Now, she wants to be a child and family psychologist. When I asked her why, she said because she likes to listen. She said that she's not that good at talking. She also feels like she wants to help people.

Jordan's question turned back to me. She asked what struggles I faced "as a Black girl…well Black woman." Understanding that Jordan was not going to let me off the hook with

this question, I shared some of my experiences with her. We talked more about the pressure for Black women and girls to care for others.

> Jordan: Who else would step up to the plate?
>
> Kishundra: If a Black woman did not take care of everything, would other people learn to manage, or would things just fall apart?
>
> Jordan: It might be both.

Again, for the third time, Jordan asked how I felt about being Black girl, forcing me to reflect on my girlhood. She asked about my church experiences, greatest influences, and school. She resonated with my reflections about family values and how those values impacted my experiences.

Jordan concluded the interview by referencing her inherited values on sexuality. She explained that her grandmother reminds her not to "open her legs for everyone." When I asked Jordan what she thought of her grandmother's words, Jordan shook her head and exclaimed, "Oh, no! I'm not like that." "Like that?" I asked. Jordan replied, "Well, I'm waiting until I'm more mature."

My interview with Jordan was revealing on many levels, the first being Jordan's insistence that I am a Black girl, the second being that despite Jordan's depiction of Black girls as "beautiful, smart, intelligent, etc.," she did not readily identify those traits in herself. Finally, Jordan's reflections on her selfhood and thoughts on Black girls as "beautiful, smart, intelligent, strong, capable, intelligent, [and] awesome," in tandem with her less-than-subtle refusal of dichotomous language reflected the multiple, yet simultaneous, embodiments of Black girlhood—a point emphasized in this project's cross-referencing phase in which I turned to the work of practical theologian Almeda Wright.

## Embodied Black Girl *Selves* and the Fallacy of Fragmentation

Almeda Wright's *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* engages the multiplicitous nature of Black youth as a distinct adolescent feature. In her book, she argues that there is a disconnect between African American youth and their spirituality. Identifying this feature as fragmentation, Wright explains that "[fragmentation]… can be considered a characteristic feature of adolescent psychological and social development by striving for integration and wholeness, related to one's identity, purpose and relationships."[148] She notes:

> Adolescents recognize and incorporate into their being and identity the perspectives of others (be they true or imagined perspectives); in turn adolescents become susceptible to the 'tyranny of they.' In this tyranny of 'they,' adolescents can become so caught up in the expectations of their significant others that they feel trapped, or struggle to filter out the unreasonable expectations of others.[149]

The point that Wright makes is that the major task of adolescence is to integrate various social forces such as relationships, church, school, social media, communities, and so on into one *whole* being—a concept that orients Wright's interpretation and vision of Black adolescent spirituality. Wright concludes that the "tyranny of they" in adolescence lends itself to fragmented spirituality, which she says is evident in her interviews with Black youth. She clarifies that fragmented spiritualties are not necessarily bad, yet she also notes that Christian spirituality works to heal fragmentation, implying that fragmentation is necessarily negative.[150] To reconcile or fix spriritual fragmentation, Wright proposes an integrating sprituality. She explains:

> *Integrating spirituality is spirituality that empowers youth to hold together the seemingly disparate areas of their lives; to tap into the resources of their faith communities and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, in order to see themselves as capable of living abundant life by effecting change on individual, communal, and systemic levels.*[151]

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[148] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 72.
[149] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 73.
[150] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 7.
[151] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* , 6.

While I appreciate Wright's depiction of integrating sprituality, I ask: Why is fragmentation an aspect of Black youth's lives that need to be healed? And, who determines that fragmentation needs to be healed?

Although Wright's interviews concerning fragmentation are not exclusive to Black girls, here I reference her interviews with Black girls emphasizing the paradoxical selves of Black girlhood. The first participant Wright writes about is Marissa, a young African American girl from New Jersey who offered Wright a candid reflection about the ineffective practices of her church. In a response to Wright's interview question about how Marissa's faith or faith community helped her navigate struggles at school, Marissa responded, "I don't think my church does very much because my church is constantly begging for youth and when they have time in the church, they like run them off. They are constantly, 'you can't do this.' And it violates our youth. So I don't think the church does much to open our eyes to see the struggle or anything."[152]

Marissa also said that she feels more comfortable talking to her therapist than a church leader about school issues. In fact, Marissa also noted that she could not remember any powerful experiences from church. A particular emphasis that Wright draws our attention to is that Marissa simultaneously questions her Christian identity and believes that God blesses her. When Wright asks about questions or ponderings that Marissa was working through at the time of the interview, Marissa reported, "I think, whether I'm a Christian. I don't know if I would consider myself that. I guess my church can easily say that I'm a Christian only because I show up every Sunday, but don't know if I would..." (21) Wright recalled being struck by Marissa's ambiguity about her identity as a Christian.

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[152] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 17.

And Kira, a Black girl from Florida, talked about her theological commitments. Kira explained that though she has strong theological commitments and convictions, there are not many tangible resources in her community to respond to youth violence.

Jackie, from California, said this about going to church: "I like people to see how open my church is and my faith, how we don't push stuff off on each other. Like it's not read the Bible every Sunday. I think we barely pull out the Bible. We'll read one verse. Then we'll like relate it to our everyday lives and how we can incorporate it and stuff like that."[153] An important emphasis in Jackie's narrative is that although she thoroughly enjoys her youth group, she found church worship services boring and uninviting.[154]

> [The church] wanted us to get involved. They always come in every year and talk to us about tithes and offerings and stuff. But everything else is kind of like whatever. It always seemed like they didn't really care about us. But we always had our youth pastor. So that was like our church in that church. And so it kind of seemed separated.[155]

Danielle, from Georgia, talks about perceptions... "I guess I wouldn't say it was like a Black school because the administration runs it like a really good school so I live in suburbia and so it doesn't really have too much of like the problems that they associate with like Black, predominantly Black schools, so it's doing pretty good."[156] In a summary of the data, Wright noted that almost a fifth of her research participants worried about the negative perceptions of their schools because their schools were predominantly Black and low-income. Many of her participants also worried that their classmates had internalized the negative stereotypes about Black youth.[157]

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[153] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 27.
[154] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 28.
[155] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 28.
[156] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 34–35.
[157] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 37.

Following the interviews and Wright's acknowledgement of the multiplicitous nature of Black youth, Wright looks to early psychology of religion texts as a basis for understanding dualities. She first references William James's lectures on the *Varieties of Religious Experience,* pointing out James's iteration of the "sick soul," which he diagnosis as a "divided self." According to James, the self is born split between "the natural self" and "the spiritual self," and the division between the two halves results in a "sick soul" temperament. The "cure," for James, was to unify those halves.[158] Although Wright does not explain what a "sick soul" would look like for Black adolescents, Wright's understanding of spirituality aligns with James's belief that spirituality can be unifying. In other words, the goal of spirituality is integration.

Wright continues her investigation of Black adolescent fragmentation utilizing W.E.B. Du Bois's social psychological theory of "double consciousness."[159] In a description of double consciousness, Du Bois writes:

> a peculiar sensation… [a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[160]

Although Wright is clear that her interactions with Black youth did not reveal the negative extremes of being "torn asunder" as described in Du Bois's concept, she finds this concept useful as Du Bois's concept of double consciousness illustrates how duality, in terms of identity and loyalties, are created and sustained.[161]

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[158] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 69.
[159] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 69–71.
[160] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Dover Thrift Edition (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Incorporated, 1903, 2016), 8.
[161] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 70.

Careful not to pathologize Black adolescents, Wright clarifies that her use of James and Du Bois are only possible explanations for the fragmentation that Black youth experience. Wright then explains that not all episodes of fragmentation are bad; instead, fragmentation puts Black youth at risk. I, on the otherhand, understand fragmentation differently. I characterize fragmentation as disconnects and separations within the self that causes distress for the individual. In this case, it is up to the youth to identify if they are experiencing distress caused by fragmentation. The difference between my view of fragmentation and Wright's view lies in who gets to label the navigation of multiple selves as distressing or in need of healing: the researcher of the youth. Wright says this about her interviews, "[the] youth interview and survey data pointed toward the ways the fragmented spirituality, though functional, limits the prophetic potential and power of young African Americans today."[162] With my understaning of fragmentation in mind, I am curious to know how the survey pointed to fragmentation and who made that decision.

Nonetheless, Wright proposes a Critical Pedagogy of Integrating Spirituality to resolve fragmentation. Such a sprituality "empowers youth to hold together the seemingly disparate areas of their lives."[163] While I largely agree with Wright's proposal for a Critical Pedagogy of Integrating Spirituality, as it honors the multiplicitous nature of adolescence, I am challenged by the term "integrate." I am challenged because Wright's rationale for an integrating spirituality is meant to heal and support the ongoing process of integration. In some cases, integration is a veiled term meaning two or more objects becoming one. It is not clear what Wright means by integration. However, if integration means, two parts becoming one, the question is: Who made

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[162] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 238.
[163] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 208.

that a goal? What is it about the narratives that said Black adolescents wanted/needed integration? Why are the embodied selves and expressions of Black adolescents seen as potentially problematic? Another interesting part is Wright's note that Du Bois's concept has been expanded by Womanist scholars to include class and gender variations—expanding it to a multi-layered self.[164]

The idea of the self as a singular entity is reflects early psychology's norms and considerations that healthy persons are autonomous and self-reliant.[165] The negative connotation of multiplicity dates back to Freud's observations of "double consciousness" and the separation of the consciousness and unconsciousness. Although Freud quickly abandoned his belief in "double consciousness" in exchange for the "unitary unconscious,"[166] early psychologists have emphasized the dividedness of the self and its drive towards unity.

In *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God, and Persons*, Pamela Cooper-White traces the belief in a singular self and its foregrounding in American history and religious history. In the introduction of this text, Cooper-White makes clear that the idea of singularity was a constituent of previous patterns of thinking about the self and God in Christian history. Beginning with the Enlightenment, [167] she explains that the dominant theme was integration and unity—a theme that has percolated throughout most of Christian history and almost always linked to universality. Given the entanglement of religion and culture, this theme has seeped into

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[164] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,*72.
[165] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans,* 78.
[166] Elizabeth Howell, *The Dissociative Mind* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2005), 38.
[167] The Enlightenment era is most often characterized by the abandonment of religious dogma as truth in favor of positivist, scientific thinking (belief that *only* science produces credible ideas). See Elizabeth Howell's *The Dissociative Min*d (41) the inseparability of context from what we know.

American culture, pushing the language and rhetoric of integration as the ideal. The rhetoric of unity, though helpful at times, also has oppressive implications for minority groups. She writes:

> The rhetoric and ideal of unity has served many admirable purposes…Yet I am also mindful of the ways in which the symbols of union, equality, and the "melting pot," fused with the Enlightenment image of the rational, free (white, male, and preferably Christian and landowning) citizen have actually served to exclude and disenfranchise women, persons of color, non-Christians, immigrants, non-English speakers, the landless, and the poor.[168]

In a sense, Cooper-White is describing unity as an ideology. Cooper-White continues on to describe unity and "oneness" as a code for conformity embedded in early psychological theories and theology. As such, in adolescent developmental psychology, multiplicity has been characterized as a task or crisis that must be "resolved" for adolescents to advance to adulthood and become a "healthy" person.

Consider, for instance, ego psychologist and developmental theorist Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and identity theory. According to Erikson, identity development evolves over the course of a lifetime through a series of pre-determined steps. Based on a succession model, Erikson maintains that the ego, or the internal consciousness within each person, achieves developmental stages in accordance with age-based experiences *toward* generativity.[169] Erikson is describing a "maturation timetable" for human development primarily based on integration. In his depiction of adolescence, Erikson asserts that the adolescent ego's task is to *synthesize* and *integrate* accrued experiences from the successive stages. If the adolescent's ego fails to synthesize one's accrued experiences, it is at risk of identity diffusion,

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[168] Pamela Cooper-White, *Braided Selves : Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God and Persons* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2011), 2–3.
[169] Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982).

which Erikson believes signals psychological disturbances and fragmentation.[170] Although Erikson's developmental model has merit as it reflects his clinical experiences, it is important to note that his developmental model is limited as it only reflects perspectives from White male development and presumes that the self is singular.[171]

While Wright's presuppositions about selfhood are unclear, she appropriates Erikson's identity theory, implying that the multiplicitous nature of Black youth needs to be remedied, She writes about fragmentation as impeding on adolescents' abilities to envision their selves, God, and others working together to address their concerns. Wrights states that "[examples] from the interviews point to the fact that youth are experiencing an incongruity between these competing visions," referencing roles, identities, and opinions.[172] I, however, interpret Wright's narratives differently as I see multiple subjectivities—adolescent "fragmentation"—as fluid, multiplicitous, and flexible.

Although Wright is clear that she intentionally "listened to see if or how faith entered [youth] narratives,"[173] it is possible that her perspective to unify her subjects' multiple subjectivities overshadowed what the youth were trying to communicate. For instance, in Wright's description of her data, she writes: "The youth interviews and survey responses do not demonstrate a clear connection….The young people's concerns about their communities and

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[170] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), 95.
[171] See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*: Gilligan reviews common psychological theories that track human development (with an emphasis on Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget) To show that women's voices have been excluded from theories of the lifecycle, which there for places a masculine bias of human development theories. Gilligan concludes that boys have been the primary model of human development and positions males as the standard.
[172] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 80.
[173] Wright , *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 1.

their personal experiences of God do not translate into reflective and focused action in the world."[174] For Wright, this points to fragmented spiritualties. She asks: "Why is their understanding of a personal experience with God not fully connected to or integrated with their concerns about the community, their understanding of how God is working or should work in the world, and with the types of actions they are taking in the world?"[175]

Given that the youth Wright interviewed did not have this concern, I am curious to know why this is the question. A re-reading of Wright's interviews suggests that Black youth are more interested in learning how to hold together multiples harmoniously. More simply, Wright's work is about Black youth, in general, but for Black girls in particular, the multiple selves needing to be held together are gendered.

### Black Girl *Epistemologies* and Womanist Pastoral Theology

In recent scholarship on Black girls' ways of knowing, Gholnecsar E. Haddix and Marcelle Muhammad have described Black girl epistemologies as plural, multidimensional, nuanced, and complex, as evidenced by Black girl code-switching and Black girls' abilities to theorize and critique various modes of media.[176] In "Centering Black Girl Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls," Haddix and Muhammad outline Black girl epistemology with the presuppositions that "Black girls can know; simply stated, they have a voice. Black girls are generators and producers of knowledge... Black girls exhibit

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[174] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 47.
[175] Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 47.
[176] Gholnecsar E. Muhammad and Marcelle Haddix, "Centering Black Girls' Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls," *English Education* 48, no. 4 (July 2016): 299–336.

philosophies and practices that are distinguished from those of other groups."[177] Black girls have a self-defined standpoint situated within their "both/and" orientation because Black girls are both female and Black, and have allegiances to both groups.

Although Haddix and Muhammad do not describe their process for accessing or attending to the multiple layers of self that contribute the construction of that epistemology, they appropriate Patricia Hill Collin's articulation of "standpoint epistemology" as a conduit for understanding Black girl epistemology.[178] In "Black Feminist Epistemology," Collins describes epistemology as an overarching theory of knowledge, usually emphasizing the production or validation of knowledge. She explains that Black women have a particular standpoint, or position of both being Black and female that substantiates how they produce and validate knowledge from a woman's standpoint. Womanist theologians have engaged Black women's subjective knowledge as a source of epstiemology for theological analyses and reflection. I ask: What about Black girls? What process or method is capable of investigating the layered reality of Black girlhood?

As noted in the introduction, Womanist theology is poised for this undertaking due to its long history of crafting and implementing critical frameworks and methodologies that tap into the knowledge embedded in the core of Black women's experiences. Theological anthropologist Linda Thomas describes the process of "tapping in" as "understanding the 'language' of black women"[179] which Womanist theologians engage. They remember their foremother's rituals and oral histories. From this, Womanists weave together present and past knowledge to "create a

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[177] Muhammad and Haddix, "Centering Black Girls' Literacies," 304.
[178] Muhammad and Haddix, "Centering Black Girls' Literacies," 303.
[179] Thomas, "Womanist Theology," 490.

dynamic multi-vocal tapestry of black women's experience inter-generationally."[180] This tapestry reflects the braided threads of race, class, gender, and psychological development that contribute to particularity and epistemological grounding.

Womanist pastoral theologians, are well situated to examine the tapestry of Black girlhood. Although I reference Cooper-White to describe the complexity of integration in early psychology and pastoral theology, Womanist pastoral theologians have paid homage to multiplicity in their theoretical orientations to relational psychologies as the impetus for thinking about Black women. Implicit in every pastoral theology is a theological anthropology orienting the researcher's approach. In "Culture, Ethnicity, and Race: A Womanist Self Psychological Perspective," Phillis Sheppard explains that a "pastoral psychological theological anthropology requires us to take the context, where we embody our createdness, seriously. Otherwise, when we are forced into invisibility, a distorted and damaging psychological theological anthropology is operative and, as a result, we are often unwittingly complicit in reproducing the distortion."[181] This is the case when practical and pastoral theologians uncritically orient their pastoral approaches toward integration. Pastoral theologians, in particular, work at the intersection of religion and psychology. Implicit in their approach are a theological anthropology and moral values concerning the human situation. These commitments influence and shape their use of theory (i.e. Fairbairn and other uses of relational psychologists). The next step for Womanist pastoral theology is to embrace the paradox more fully through a revised methodology capable of bending and shifting with the ebbs and flows of Black girlhood.

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[180] Thomas, "Womanist Theology," 491.
[181] Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "Culture, Ethnicity and Race," 48.

As observed in the Black girlhood narratives presented in this chapter, Black girlhood is fluid, dynamic, precarious, perceptive, evaluative, and holds competing subjectivities together without trying to force them together. The reality of the embodied Black girl as shared in Jordan's interview, as well as the interviews in Wright's book, is unique to them. Yet, it connects with, and elucidates, features of Black girlhood that I frequently witness in clinical practice.

At the beginning of this chapter, I shared a thank-you note I received in my clinical practice where I see children between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Similar to Jordan, Raven (pseudonym) described a deep sense of reflexivity associated with girlhood. I first met Raven when she was a sixteen-year old sophomore at a Nashville metro public high school. She was referred to me from her school counselor due to Raven's low mood, low self-esteem, and tearful disposition. I met with her each week to discuss the important topics of her day; we seemed to always circle back to her relationship with her mom, her self-image (which she described as "fat and ugly,") sex, and her idea of being "grown." She would say to me that she felt like she was "already grown" because she was working nearly full-time at a fast food restaurant, paying some of the family bills, and being a "bad bitch." I was curious about Raven's "both/and" interpretation of herself as being "fat and ugly," "grown," and a "bad bitch." Although I met Jordan and Raven under very different circumstances, one element remains constant—the inner cheerleader and critic exist on the same plane, connected.

In Jordan's and Raven's narratives, "either/or" language did not exist. Raven's and Jordan's stories exude the multiplicity of selves, suggesting that the self has multiple

subjectivities that shift and adapt to changing social contexts.[182] These mutual selves co-exist in one being.

In "'I Am a Puzzle': Adolescence as Reflected in Self-Metaphors," Denise Larsen and Janine Larsen confirm that many adolescents understand themselves as multiplicitous and complex.[183] In their study, they asked a group of tenth-graders to describe their eperiences of the self.[184] Larsen and Larsen found that the notion of multiple-selves was consistent throughout the youths' descriptions. In their analysis of the study, they argue that "[this] multiplicity of selves is a result of changing social contexts. The context of language, personal and cultural history, and setting are integral to an understanding of self."[185] Accordingly, shifting social contexts as multiple selves seems to be the process of Black girlhood. Therefore, a monolithic treatment of Black girl epistemology is inadequate and insufficient.

## Conclusion

Although Womanist pastoral theologians have yet to embrace the "both/and" mindset of Black girlhood, its adoption is not far removed or unthinkable. In *Self, Culture, and Others*, Sheppard rightly points out the necessity of Womanists engaging the psyche and social dimensions of Black women's experiences. Although Sheppard's description of Black female embodiment only alludes to the complexity of Black adult women's epistemological grounds, I contend that the same type of exploration is necessary for deciphering the "just knowing"

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[182] Denise J. Larsen and Janine E. Larsen, "'I Am a Puzzle': Adolescence as Reflected in Self-Metaphors," *Canadian Journal of Counselling* 38, no. 4 (2004): 248.
[183] Larsen and Larsen, "'I Am a Puzzle,'" 246.
[184] Larsen and Larsen, "'I Am a Puzzle,'" 249.
[185] Larsen and Larsen, "'I Am a Puzzle,'" 248.

embedded Black *girl* embodiment, specifically as a means for gaining access to their knowledge and utilizing it in theological reflection.

The ethnographic method employed in this chapter is a step in that direction as it takes Black girls' agency and epistemology seriously. The shared narratives contextualize and demonstrate the complexities of Black girlhood as well as provide a Geertzian "thick description"[186] of what it means to be a Black girl in today's society. I propose that if we take Black girl narratives seriously as an illustration of divine activity, their narratives affirm and illustrate the reality of the divine as being fluid and oftentimes intangible and inconceivable.

[186] Anthropologist Clifford Geertz identifies "thick descriptions" as a detailed account that is comprehensive enough for outside observers and readers to understand and make meaning of the observed in such a way that it is culturally relevant.

# CHAPTER THREE

# THE KALEIDOSCOPE ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE:

# A NEW APPROACH FOR EXAMINING BLACK GIRLHOOD

How do you know?

"I *just* know."

As a practicing psychotherapist, the question "How do you know?" comes up frequently as a tactic for challenging distorted thoughts. I first learned this method in an introductory class to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) where I was taught the cognitive model of the self as having multiple components: core beliefs, automatic thoughts, affective responses, and behaviors (which operates as a system of cause and effect), in addition to methods in cognitive therapy. In my work with Black girls, in particular, I am constantly met with "I *just* know." Over the years, I have come to understand the emphasis on "just knowing," as reflective of Black girls' particular ways of knowing, as it relates to their gendered, cultural, and racialized experiences within their various stages of development. Simply put, "just knowing" represents a theory of embodied knowing that is beyond rational thought.

"Just knowing" also reflects a postmodern understanding of knowing that emerges contextually and from experience. Although postmodernity largely represents a time period signifying the disillusionment of infinite, error-free knowledge, it also positions knowledge as

subjective, multiple, interconnected, and shaped by everyday experiences.[187] For Black girls, knowledge is produced in their everyday lives.

In "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/ist': Black Girlhood and African Diasporan Feminist Consciousness,"[188] Carol Duncan explains that the kind of "just knowing" particular to Black girlhood emerges from the experience of being a Black girl-child. She asserts that Black girlhood is a pivotal and formational period in Black women's lives as it is the impetus of radical subjectivity.[189] In this regard, Black girlhood is the experience of developing social relationships, challenging gendered norms,[190] acquiring knowledge that extends beyond passive knowledge consumption, and involves doing, feeling, and thinking.[191] According to Duncan, the culmination of these experiences births radical subjectivity rendering Black girlhood experiences a source of epistemology, or more simply, their way of knowing. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins explains that Black women's epistemology, or ways of knowing, is often expressed by everyday interactions and behaviors. This is also true for Black girlhood.[192] As an example, Duncan references the autobiographies of Octavia Butler and Audre Lorde, among other acclaimed Black women artists and scholars who name Black girlhood as "an important origin of

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[187] Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 7.
[188] Carol B. Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/Ist': Black Girlhood and African Diasporan Feminist Consciousness," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 29–37.
[189] A tenant of womanist epistemology, according to Stacey Floyd-Thomas's book *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
[190] Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/Ist'," 31.
[191] Consider psychologist David Kolb's experiential learning theory four types of learning styles. Rather than watching and thinking (Assimilating), Black girls tend to acquire knowledge by feeling and watching (diverging), doing and thinking (converging), and doing and feeling (accommodating).
[192] Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology."

their creativity and subjectivity as artists and critical thinkers."[193] In other words, Black girlhood is the site where these women dared to challenge boundaries and transgress normative racialized and gendered codes of being.[194]

Although Duncan's depiction of Black girlhood limits girlhood to a passage of time to adulthood, her assertion that Black girlhood as a definitive and viable source of knowledge or "just knowing" is important for our consideration. Also important is Duncan's assertion that Womanism has the capacity to include a variety of Black girls' experiences for "a viable theoretical and methodological framework for critical research and intellectual and creative projects."[195] Yet, as mentioned in previous chapters of this dissertation, there are no frameworks for exploring the epistemological experiences of Black girlhood from a Womanist perspective. This chapter fills this void and introduces a "viable theoretical and methodological framework" for attending to Black girlhood experiences.

As such, this chapter introduces a *Kaleidoscopic Analyses Perspective* (KAP), a psychodynamic and relational approach that first acknowledges Black girls as sources of knowledge and, second, attends to the multi-systemic, multiplicitous, and integrated dimensions of Black girlhood in concert with their embedded epistemology, toward a Womanish pastoral theological reflection. This chapter assumes a psychodynamic *and* phenomenologically oriented[196] view of humans which recognizes personality as informed, both by interactive,

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[193] Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/Ist,'" 34–35.
[194] Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/Ist,'" 34.
[195] Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/Ist,'" 35.
[196] According to the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology (2020), phenomenological theory constitutes "an approach to personality theory that places questions of individuals' current experiences of themselves and their world at the center of analyses of personality functioning and change."

intrapsychic structures and external situational forces. This presupposition bridges the frameworks and guidelines from Black girlhood studies[197] and Womanist pastoral theology.[198]

Although kaleidoscopic analyses have been referenced by adolescent development theorists[199] and Black girlhood scholar Ruth Nicole Brown, the *kaleidoscopic analysis* referenced in this chapter emerged in my clinical practice with Black girl adolescents and further honed by my engagement with Black girl narratives. In true kaleidoscopic fashion, the kaleidoscope image within KAP is multiplicitous and has multiple uses and functions. I appropriate the kaleidoscope image as a complex analogy for the multiplicitous self, as a theoretical concept that acknowledges the multiple systems operative in Black girlhood, and as a method for mining Black girlhood experiences as wellsprings of knowledge. As such, this chapter will make three moves elucidating the many uses of the kaleidoscope toward a Womanish/st pastoral reflection.

### The Kaleidoscope Image as a Complex Analogy

As first witnessed in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*,[200] Womanist scholars have employed figurative language to describe and convey nuanced concepts and abstract ideas. Consider, for instance, Delores S. Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Katie Cannon's *Katie's Canon*, and Emilie M. Townes's "The Womanist Dancing

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[197] See present chapter and chapter two of this dissertation.
[198] See chapter one of this dissertation.
[199] B. Bradford Brown and Reed W. Larson, "The Kaleidoscope of Adolescence: Experiences of the World's Youth at the Beginning of the 21st Century," in *The World's Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe*, ed. B. Bradford Brown, Reed W. Larson, and T. S. Saraswathi (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–20.
[200] Collins, "What's in a Name?," 11.

Mind,"[201] along with a litany of others. In all instances, figurative language does the work of communicating deeper meanings beyond words—in the same way that the "kaleidoscope" of the *kaleidoscopic analysis perspective* conveys a dynamic perspective about identity formation and self-development.[202]

To be clear, the kaleidoscope metaphor has long been utilized by relational psychologists and psychoanalysts to talk about the dynamic multiplicity of the self. For example, relational psychoanalyst Jody Messler Davies uses the kaleidoscope image to discuss the complexity and infinite variability of the self, relative to configurations of consciousness and unconsciousness. In *Dissociation, Repression and Reality Testing in the Countertransference,* Davies explains the following in regards to the unconscious:

> It has come to be regarded as a given within relational psychoanalysis that the internal integrity of experience evolves out of our ever present yet constantly changing, system of affective, cognitive, and physiologically based self-experiences an ongoing interactive and dialogic discourse with a host of significant internally and externally derived objects… the nature of unconscious process, rather than being embedded in fossilized stone, emerges more fluidly out of the particular constellation of self – and object-related experiences… Not one unconscious… but multiple levels of consciousness and unconsciousness…Not as an onion which must be carefully peeled… but a child's kaleidoscope in which each glance through the pinhole of a moment in time provides a unique view; a complex organization in which a fixed set of colored, shaped, and textured components rearrange themselves in unique crystalline structures determined by way of infinite pathways of interconnectedness.[203]

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[201] A chapter in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.
[202] See Cozy. Baker's *Kaleidoscopes: Wonders of Wonder.* Concord, CA: C & T Publishing, 1999.
[203] Jody Messler Davies, "Dissociation, Repression and Reality Testing in the Countertransference: The Controversy Over Memory and False Memory in the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, Symposium on the "False Memory" Controversy, 6, no. 2 (1996): 197.

This relational understanding of consciousness and unconsciousness denotes the self as complex with many folds.[204] These folds are interconnected and ever shifting with the slightest tilt of the kaleidoscope.

A more elaborate use of the kaleidoscope metaphor, more specific to identity development, is that presented by Kay Deaux and Tiffany Perkins in "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"[205] an essay in which they make use of the kaleidoscope's technical parts: the multi-colored bits of glass stored at the bottom of the kaleidoscope and the resulting image it creates. In their essay, they argue that envisioning the self as autonomous and disconnected from social contexts undermines the variability of "self-representation" over time.[206] In this case, self-representation is how people self-define and understand themselves throughout their lifetime. As a result, Deaux and Perkins emphasize that, like the kaleidoscopic glass, self-representations are multiplicitous and ever-changing. In this instance, self-representation includes: (1) the individual-self (who you are as an individual—i.e., your personal traits, such as "shy" or "talkative"), (2) the relational-self (who you are in relation to others, such as "daughter"), and (3) the collective self (the groups or collectives to which one belongs—i.e., social and cultural groups, such as "student" or "African American").[207] Each of these self-representations signify variations of the self that all work together, yet, depending on the environment and circumstances, one of these variations is most recognizable. Deaux and Perkins claim that by

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[204] Note: Pamela Cooper-White frequently references Davies' work to explore elements of multiplicity and its implications in pastoral theology in *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God, and Persons*.
[205] Kay Deaux and Tiffany S. Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self," in *Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self*, ed. Constantine Sedikides and Marilynn B. Brewer (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), 299–313.
[206] Deaux and Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"299.
[207] Deaux and Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"300.

"continuing to use the kaleidoscope metaphor, we suggest that distinctions between the three forms of representations are dependent on the angle of view or, to shift to the language of experimentation, on the particular manipulations or approach to assessment that the investigator uses."[208] They insist that differing self-representations coexist and are inextricably linked to one another as shown in a resulting kaleidoscopic image or pattern.[209] Yet, depending on the time and position of viewing,[210] how we see or experience that self-representation will vary. In other words, context always matters.

In another appropriation of the kaleidoscope as a guiding metaphor, psychoanalysts Neil Altman and Jillian M. Stile capitalize on the kaleidoscope's finite number of colored-glass pieces and infinite number of designs. They recognize that each piece of colored glass shifts in relation to the neighboring pieces, creating ever-changing patterns similar to structures of the self. In "The Self: Cohesive and Fragmented, Elusive and Kaleidoscopic," Altman and Stile propose that the process of identity formation is one in which individuals make and remake themselves continuously—a necessity for adapting to an ever-changing world.[211] They explain that there are "socially pervasive aspects of life that [do] not fit smoothly into a cohesive model of the self."[212] Altman and Stile point to sociologists Charles H. Cooley[213] and object-relations theorists D.W. Winnicott to describe a kaleidoscopic experience of the self.

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[208] Deaux and Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"301.
[209] Deaux and Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"302.
[210] Deaux and Perkins, "The Kaleidoscopic Self,"299.
[211] Neil Altman and Jillian M. Stile, "The Self: Cohesive and Fragmented, Elusive and Kaleidoscopic," *Psychological Study* 64, no. 3 (2019): 258, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-019-00518-x.
[212] Altman and Stile, "The Self: Cohesive and Fragmented." 260.
[213] Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902).

According to Cooley's "looking-glass" theory, each person develops their sense of self based on how they believe others view them. This self-development process involves the continuous evaluation of interactions with others such that interactions resemble a type of "mirror." And, since each person has multiple interactions, their sense of self develops as a collective of "mirrors"—a process further complicated by social structures and systems. More simply, our self-perception is a kaleidoscopic experience "built out of the reflected appraisals of others, as perceived by the person."[214] Leigh Shaffer explains that this process involves three parts:

1. We imagine how we must appear to others in a social situation.
2. We imagine and react to what we feel their judgment of that appearance must be.
3. We develop our sense of self and respond through this perceived judgments of others.[215]

This process is best explained psychoanalytically in Winnicott's concept of the "true self." In *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, Winnicott describes the criteria of a "false self" and, by extension, a "true self." He defines the "true self" as the central part of the self that is powered by internal instincts, and the "false self" as the part of the self that is more outward presenting and related to the world.[216] The development of two selves begins during infancy when the internal instincts "are not yet clearly defined as internal to the infant."[217] In psychoanalytic terms, internal instincts, or id-demands, must be adequately satisfied in order

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[214] Altman and Stile, "The Self: Cohesive and Fragmented," 262.
[215] Leigh Shaffer, "From Mirror Self-Recognition to the Looking-Glass Self: Exploring the Justification Hypothesis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61 (January 2005): 47–65.
[216] Donald Woods (D.W) Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International Universities Pres, Inc., 1965), 140.
[217] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment,* 141.

for the infant's ego to distinguish their internal instincts from the outside world. Contemporary Winnicottian theorists understand this as the "me" and the "not me." To that end, as the infant develops, a separation between the "me" and the "not-me" is forged based on the infant's evaluation of the parent-child relationship. During this process, frustrations or traumas can occur when internal instincts are not satisfied, resulting in the infant's inability to adequately distinguish the "me" from the "not me."

In general, internal instincts are satisfied in early caregiving relationships, specifically the infant-mother relationship. According to Winnicott, if the "mothering" is "good-enough," i.e. the mother provides sufficient, continuous support for the child's healthy development, the infant is able to properly determine external objects as "not me" and form genuine relationships, establishing a "true self." If the "mothering" is "not good-enough," the infant may be unable to determine a proper relationship with external objects and responds by either resisting or complying with the environment rather than distinguishing the "me" from "not me."[218] This establishes a "false self" that can be overly compliant or resistant. It should be noted that the notion of a "true self" and a "false self" extends to adolescence where there is an internal navigation and distinction between the "true self," as a private personal self, and the "false self," as a polite or socialized self.[219] The compliant "false self" develops as an accommodation or defense that hides, and protects, the "true self."[220] Ultimately, Winnicott's understanding of the "self" is based on ever-changing relationship dynamics. It is kaleidoscopic.

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[218] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment,* 145.
[219] D.W. Winnicott, "The Concept of the False Self," in *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 65–70.
[220] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment,* 143.

Although Winnicott's perspective lends itself to a robust understanding of adolescence,[221] other theorists interested in kaleidoscopic experiences of the "self" write more specifically about the heightened dimensions of adolescence. More recent adolescent theorists mark adolescence as the culmination of biological, physiological, cognitive, and social changes. Aerika Brittian explains that "the myriad biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur during adolescence lead the person to engage in self-evaluation and social redefinition."[222] This comes at a time when the individual is better able to understand and negotiate social norms and understand social biases. In *Identity and the Life Cycle*, Erik Erikson asserts that the primary psychological task of youth is to recognize their individual identity apart from others. This stage is referred to as "identity versus social diffusion"[1] in which the youth's ego integrates and consolidates their accrued experiences with their particular social realities, societal norms, and expectations (a form of integration called ego synthesis). For Black adolescent girls, this means forming a sense of self in a world in that perceives you as "other."

In 2002, human development theorists B. Bradford Brown and Reed W. Larson claimed that the kaleidoscope image is appropriate for describing the flux of adolescence in relation to culture. In the introduction of their edited volume, *The World's Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe*, they argue that adolescent studies have largely been dominated by American and European ideals of "teenagers."[223] However, a shift in adolescent studies is

[221] See D.W. Winnicott's *The Family and Individual Development* where he discusses the maturational process of adolescence along with prevailing social conditions that influences adolescent development. Also see D. W. Winnicott's essay, "Adolescent Process and the Need for Personal Confrontation," in *Pediatrics* 44, no. 5, Part I (November 1969): 752-756.
[222] Brittian, "Understanding African American Adolescents' Identity Development," 179.
[223] Brown and Larson, "The Kaleidoscope of Adolescence, 2.

emerging. Brown and Larson assert that the landscape of global youth studies is changing as adolescent studies scholars take culture seriously. They explain the following:

> The forms that adolescence takes within a given culture, let alone across cultures, are remarkably diverse and distinctive…Scholars who study adolescence, practitioners who work with youth, business leaders concerned with a new generation of employees, policy makers, and even parents must first divest themselves from Eurocentric, universalistic notions of adolescence. They must examine adolescence in historical and cultural context, be open to its variegated forms, and recognize its tentative or evanescent nature.[224]

Brown and Larson clarify that the key factors contributing to the multiplicitous nature of adolescence include family, school, and peers. As such, the moving objects-turned-pictures in the kaleidoscope mimic adolescent personality evolving at every move in relation to cultural experiences. Such a metaphor is necessary for grappling with the interconnected and complex experiences of Black girl adolescence.

Although the Kaleidoscopic Analytic Perspective (KAP) that I ultimately propose in this chapter is not directly affiliated with previous uses of the kaleidoscope metaphor, the collective lineage of kaleidoscopic perspectives inform KAP's understanding of the self, development, and cultural trauma such that it takes seriously the integrated experience of growing up Black and female in a world that often devalues being Black and female. The kaleidoscope metaphor offers a multifaceted, prismatic perspective of the self and identity development in such a way that is trauma informed. the "kaleidoscope" of the KAP is particularly useful for navigating the fluid and multiple dimensions of Black girlhood narratives.

## As told by Black girls

[224] Brown and Larson, "The Kaleidoscope of Adolescence," 2-3.

Recall the interview material with Jordan. In a candid reflection about how she navigates feelings of worthlessness, Jordan explained that she has an inner critic and an inner cheerleader. The inner critic tells her that she has no worth, whereas the inner cheerleader tells her that she is worth living for. Both "inner voices" compete to be the loudest. When asked how she chooses which voice to listen to, Jordan simply remarked, "My mom taught me. It's how I was raised." Jordan's explanation indicates three important insights supporting the use of a kaleidoscopic metaphor: (1) Black girlhood experiences are multidimensional, (2) context, or how you were raised, matters, (3) appropriate mirroring is necessary.

In regard to *mirroring*, Jordan's insights connect to the necessary mechanics of the kaleidoscope: the mirrors. According to "How Kaleidoscopes Work," a "kaleidoscope is made of two or more mirrors or reflective surfaces angled to each other, usually forming a V-shape or a triangle."[225] The case surrounding the mirror assembly is the body of the kaleidoscope. The eyepiece is positioned at one end of the body, while a collection of pieces (usually colored bits of glass) is on the other end. When the viewer looks through the eyepiece, the image that is reflected back to the viewer greatly depends on the quality of the mirrors inside the body of the kaleidoscope. In other words, if the mirrors inside the kaleidoscope are damaged or distorted, by structural oppressions, such as age-compression and adultification,[226] the resulting image will be compromised.

In the case of the kaleidoscope metaphor for Black girlhood, distorted mirrors within the body of the kaleidoscope are analogous to misrepresentations of Black girlhood. Looking into

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[225] Melanie F. F. Gibbs, "How Kaleidoscopes Work," *How Stuff Works*, January 19, 2012, https://science.howstuffworks.com/kaleidoscope.htm.
[226] See the introduction of this dissertation for a more expansive discussion on the state of Black girlhood.

these mirrors have the potential to dangerously distort a Black girl's self-images, a notion shared in Black feminist Audre Lorde's poem, "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap."[227] In Lorde's poem, Lorde writes about "mirrors" symbolically as a means of self-recognition and self-definition. The poem begins with a plea:

> It is a waste of time hating a mirror
> or its reflection
> instead of stopping the hand
> that makes glass with distortions
> slight enough to pass
> unnoticed

Lorde utilizes the figurative and psychological usages of "mirroring" to remind us of the insidious nature of false images and their potential damage to the psyche. Towards the end of the poem, Lorde recommends shattering the glass:

> or if you can see
> the mirror is lying
> you shatter the glass

According to self-psychologist Heinz Kohut's version of mirroring, an appropriate mirroring encounter involves the use of the affirming, empathic, and positive responses of others to identify positive traits within the self, leading to the development of inner strength, security, and belonging. Relatedly, if positive mirroring responses are not available, healthy self-development is impeded, creating opportunities for negative self-talk, self-deprecation, and self-

[227] Audre Lorde, "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap," in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (United Kingdom: Silver Press, 2017).

hate. In some cases, mirroring occurs in person-to-person interactions, while in other cases, mirroring occurs through cultural immersion and contextual experiences, such as thought cultivated through music, art, media, or the overall social ethos.[228] In *Self, Culture, and* Others, Sheppard critically emphasizes the concept of mirroring in light of Black women's experiences and culture. Sheppard asks: "What happens to this development of self when culture—a source for mirroring—offers a distorted and exploited reflection of the self?"[229] Sheppard argues that cultural contexts can be dangerous to healthy development of the self and proposes the need for active interventions or interferences on behalf of Black children. [230]

From a Winnicottian view, the faulty mirrors functions as a failed environment, which can impede healthy self-development during maturation.[231] Winnicott describes the maturational process in terms of a facilitating environment, also known as the holding environment.[232] He explains that "[in] such a facilitating environment the individual undergoes development which can be classified as integrating."[233] In a healthy facilitating environment, the individual's needs are met satisfactorily, thereby promoting healthy growth toward integration. However, if a breakdown occurs in the facilitating environment (characterized by a failure to satisfactorily meet the individual's needs), the individual is at risk of disintegration, a form of fragmentation that may manifest as anti-social behaviors such as stealing, destructiveness, delinquency, anxiety, depression, or other mental disturbances.[234] In *The Family and Individual Development*,

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[228] D.W. Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic Explorations: D. W. Winnicott*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 89.
[229] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 12.
[230] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 119.
[231] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 7.
[232] Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, 89.
[233] Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic Explorations,* 89.
[234] Winnicott*, Psychoanalytic Explorations,* 89–90.

Winnicott explains that "it is safe to assume that there is a connection between this development in our social awareness and the special social conditions of the times we live in."[235] Therefore, the social climate, as a facilitating environment, can support or disrupt one's selfhood. [236] [237] In the current social climate that presumes that Black girls need less support, less nurture, and less care, it is safe to assume that the social climate, as a facilitating environment, fails Black girls.

Although referencing psychonalysis is unusual for addressing Black girlhood concerns, I contend that Black girlhood experiences involves intrapsychic dimension that must be attended to in order to take the fullness Black girlhood experiences seriously. Therfore, I reference Kohut and Winnicott constructively to demonstrate the varying angles or interpretations of mirroring and what is as stake psychologically.

Black girl narratives suggest going a step further and replacing the mirror as an active form of resistance. Notably, building the mirror to replace the distorted mirror is an intergenerational process. In this instance, Black girls draw from generational wisdom and racial socialization to resist internalizing negative images in support of a mirror that celebrates their Black femaleness.[238] Replacing the mirror deflects the impacts of a failed environment.

Recall again the interview with Jordan. When I asked about Black girl childhood and adolescence, Jordan responded by saying that Black girls have "tougher" childhoods. She

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[235] Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development*, 79.
[236] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 7.
[237] Similarly, In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher sees "culture as splitting adolescent girls into true and false selves." As a clinician who specializes in adolescent girls, Pipher asserts that cultural pressures, such as peer-pressure and sexism, create a split in the self in which one self being the "authentic or true self," and the other self is the culturally-scripted "false self." While Pipher's work does not account for the cultural pressures of racism, her work suggests that culture scripts a way of being for girls to which girls often respond by presenting a "false socially-acceptable self."
[238] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 89.

explained that Black girls have to live up to higher expectations than White girls. Yet, Jordan could not imagine not being a Black girl. She insisted that Black girl childhood involves a constant push-and-pull of "telling yourself about yourself,"[239] demonstrating the demand for a more accurately reflective "mirror." KAP emerged with this in mind—as an analogy that acknowledges the twists and turns of Black girlhood in theory and practice.

## KAP in Theory: KAP's Theoretical Commitments

As a theoretical concept, KAP is particularly committed to establishing a phenomenological account of Black girlhood guided by Black girl narratives. A phenomenological account is important because it connects human experience with making meaning. As a philosophical stance developed by German philosopher Edward Husserl in the 20th century, phenomenology is the study of how the world appears to us when met with our subjective experience or being in the world. In some cases, the focus is on the phenomena through the lens of human experience.[240] However, from a different perspective, the focus can be on an individual's perception of their environment with the understanding that our perception contributes to the meaning of that environment. Although a simplified view of phenomenology, it reflects an important orientation in Black girlhood studies such that it regards Black girls as agents and producers of knowledge who are in constant relationship with others.

It should be noted that the social sciences have expanded phenomenology to include a hermeneutic, or interpretation, from the perspective of the researcher. To that end, a hermeneutic

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[239] See page seven of chapter two.
[240] Joseph Lyons, "Husserl, Edmund," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, January 12, 2021, https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/husserl-edmund.

phenomenology[241] represents interpretations of human experiences amid "everydayness,"[242] social contexts, and historical tradition.[243] It holds that a researcher interprets another's lived experiences of phenomena through the lens of their own subjectivity. A hermeneutic phenomenology holds "that since humans are 'self-making' or 'self-constituting' beings, there is no reason to expect to find fixed, unchanging regularities underlying their behavior."[244]

In a qualitative study exploring Black girl identity development, psychologist Kumea Shorter-Gooden and N. Channell Washington found that Black female adolescents are constantly processing and navigating multiple "identity domains," or contents of their identity/ies,[245] positioning Black girls as experts in code switching. As mentioned in Chapter One of this dissertation, code switching is a practice of alternating between two or more ways of being to fit in or be accepted by the dominant group. Although code switching is typically referenced linguistically as alternations between language varieties, in Black girlhood this practice can include alternating hairstyles, dress, language, or general expressions of the self. Moreover, code switching applies to navigating the liminality of Black girlhood. American sociologist Elijah Anderson refers to this practice as a balancing act in which Black girls have learned to navigate these competing identities to highlight at any given time depending on the social situation. The ideal Black girl is fluent in Black English, an important marker of Black identity, and Standard

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[241] Charles Guignon, "Becoming a Person: Hermeneutic Phenomenology's Contribution," *New Ideas in Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2012): 97–106, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2009.11.005.
[242] Emilie Townes uses this phrase in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* to describe day-to-day encounters and experiences. See page 164.
[243] Guignon, "Becoming a Person," 99.
[244] Guignon, "Becoming a Person," 99.
[245] I use this term to emphasize the self and corresponding identities as multiplicitous.

English, which is usually perceived as more likable, competent, and educated.[246] In essence, Standard English or sounding educated grants Black girls a degree of mobility and agency.

The idea of constant change and adaptation captures the most basic aims of a KAP of Black girlhood, which aims to interpret lived experiences. The resulting hermeneutic offers us a theoretical orientation to think not only of Black girls, but also the care we extend them. In the remainder of the chapter, I will introduce and discuss the key concepts that informs KAP's theoretical commitments.

## Developmental Systems Theory

From a hermeneutic phenomenology standpoint, KAP of Black girlhood posits that Black girlhood experiences must be analyzed and interpreted multi-systemically and on Black girls' terms in order to expose Black girl epistemology for further engagement. In Black girlhood studies, theorists tend to employ developmental systems theory to draw out multidimensional aspects of Black girlhood. In general, developmental systems perspectives offer critical frameworks for examining elements of phenomena. A common examination of developmental systems theories within adolescent development is the misrepresentation of Black culture and the overrepresentation of White culture. The most researched aspect of Black girlhood is Black adolescent anger, defiance, and poor psychological functioning relative to negative stereotypes, developmental systems theorist acknowledge the complexity in any given situation. Many developmental systems theorists have concluded that African American youth can feel overlooked by the American public and disrespected by negative stereotypes, which can manifest

[246] Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

in various ways depending on the youth's psychology and personal circumstances (i.e., parental involvement and socialization, religious affiliation, and other relational factors). It is important to note that manifestations include, but are not limited to, the youth's emotional responses, self-evaluation, self-definition, and use of coping strategies and processes.[247]

Further, developmental systems theories presume that children are dynamic players in the multilevel web of human development such that children shape and are shaped by multiple elements of the human condition. These elements include biological, psychological, cultural, social, and historical threads that are woven together, interacting with one another.[248] Therefore, I contend that developmental systems theories, such as Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems (PVEST),[249] offers a system for examining Black girlhood experiences, relationally and systemically. More simply, PVEST seeks to identify links between youth behaviors and their phenomenological processing, which, at its core, is a means for elucidating phenomena contributing to Black girls' ways of being. As a comparative human development psychologist, Spencer developed PVEST as a specified developmental systems theory that examines multiple phenomenological variants or contextual layers in Black child development. One way of looking at the phenomenological variants of PVEST is to consider that these variants represent the multiple dimensions of particularity that contribute to Black girls' way of knowing.

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[247] Brittian, "Understanding African American Adolescents' Identity Development: A Relational Developmental Systems Perspective," 176.
[248] Brittian, "Understanding African American Adolescents' Identity Development," 174.
[249] Margaret Beale Spencer, Davido Dupree, and Tracey Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST): A Self- Organization Perspective in Context," *Development and Psychopathology* 9 (1997): 817–33.

PVEST is a unique developmental systems theory because it begins with the interior experiences of Black child development *and* the intersection of "ecological systems."[250] The phrase "ecological systems" comes from Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which advises that children are studied across their multiple environments. With PVEST, Spencer integrates Bronfenbrenner's theory with intersubjective experiences.[251] In particular, PVEST combines an individual's developmental level with their ability to process experiences consciously and unconsciously.

The phenomenological processing espoused in PVEST is important to this dissertation project because of its relationship to epistemology. Although PVEST does not examine epistemology as a precipitant of phenomenological processing, Black feminists and womanists understand that epistemology, particularly for Black women and girls, is tied to the phenomenon of being Black and female.

### Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems (PVEST): How it Works

When developing PVEST in the 1990s, Spencer conducted a series of focus groups examining preschool children's racial attitudes and preferences, self-esteem, social cognition, and interpersonal confidence. Spencer's development of PVEST was in response to deficit thinking and defiance-based literature about Black childhood development. She demonstrated "that [preschool-aged] children can have a significant bias against the color black and black

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[250] Gabriel Velez and Margaret Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality: Using PVEST as a Frame for Adolescent Identity Formation Amid Intersecting Ecological Systems of Inequality," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2018–09, no. 161 (2018): 75–90.
[251] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST): A Self- Organization Perspective in Context," 817.

people and/or in support of the color white and white people and still maintain a healthy self-esteem."[252] This was a significant finding because it showed that during the preschool years, when children are more likely egocentric, they are protected from internalizing any negative feelings associated with racial biases in society.[253] From there, Spencer became interested in how children are able to sustain the protective factors of selfhood (e.g. resist internalizing negative emotions and beliefs concerning racial biases) through adolescence and adulthood.

Spencer's interest in "resiliency that lasts" prompted her investigation of Black adolescent strengths, resilience, and competence developed/created during the process of identity formation. Consequently, PVEST emerged as a methodological agenda that uses social sciences to maximize issues of social justice.[254] To do this, PVEST acknowledges and examines the complex systems that create various social positions and how they are experienced. PVEST explores a person's (1) net vulnerability level, which is comprised of the individual's perception of past experiences and coping strategies; (2) net stress engagement, which includes the individual's perception of past events that challenged that person's well-being and ability to cope or resolve "dissonance-producing" situations (i.e., negative stereotypes and tropes); and (3) emergent identity, which reflects a way of being established by the coping strategies and behaviors employed to make sense of the net vulnerability and stress level.[255] In this case,

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[252] Margaret Beale Spencer, "A Conversation with Margaret Beale Spencer," *UChicago Magazine*, Fall /Winter 2010 2009, https://mag.uchicago.edu/law-policy-society/conversation-margaret-beale-spencer#.

[253] Beale Spencer," A Conversation with Margaret Bealke Spencer."

[254] Julia Sandquist, "Margaret Beale Spencer: Looking At Social Justice Issues Through A Scientific Lens," *The Heights*, October 23, 2016, https://www.bcheights.com/2016/10/23/margaret-beale-spencer-looking-at-social-justice-issues-through-a-scientific-lens/.

[255] Sandquist, "Margaret Beale Spencer."

PVEST's tasks is to examine each layer, parsing out causalities and chain reactions within the system and determining intervention strategies when appropriate.

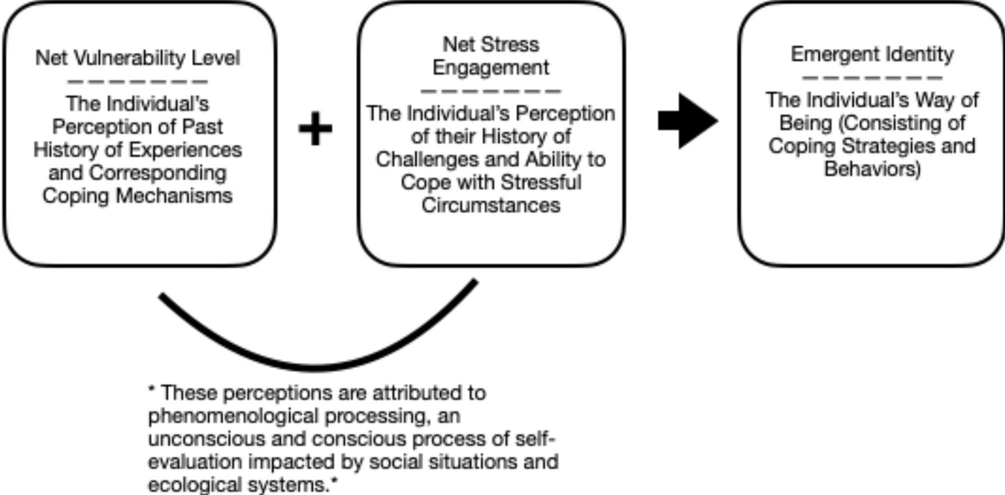


Figure 1. The PVEST Framework

It is important to note that, in each case, the net vulnerability level and net stress engagement results from phenomenological processing that occurs both consciously and unconsciously, guided by an individual's belief about their lives. Thus, emergent identity results from the interplay of that person's social situation and phenomenological processing, and it shapes future behaviors, self-esteem, achievement, and overall health. One noteworthy example of this is DuBois' articulation of "double consciousness." As noted in the previous chapter, "double consciousness" refers to the dual psychological task of being Black and American. However, according to PVEST, double consciousness also reflects an emergent identity birthed out of the high net vulnerability and stress level associated with being Black and American.

In 1997, Spencer et al. demonstrated the utility of PVEST in a qualitative study surveying 14–16-year-old adolescents and their achievement variables. Their research objective was to

examine the impetus of negative learning attitudes in minority youth based on the notion that coping mechanisms, such as negative learning attitudes, are most responsive to intervention during the “high-development” years of adolescence. While assessing negative learning attitudes as a coping mechanism of an emergent identity, they found that a youth’s net vulnerability level and stress engagement, along with the resulting coping mechanism, was linked to their experiences of race and ethnicity. Spencer et al. explains that “[f]or some, the chronic state of risk [associated with race and ethnicity] requires myriad modes of coping necessary to offset feelings of impotence and helplessness.”[256] In some cases, the resulting coping strategy is a negative learning attitude, whereas in other cases, the result is being an “overachiever.”

In another aspect of the study, Spencer et al. poignantly notes that the high net vulnerability and stress level of Black Americans trickles down into parenting and child-rearing practices that prepare the child with coping strategies to adapt to their various environments. For example, while a White girl’s yelling might be perceived as an expression of anger or frustration, a Black girl’s yelling might be perceived as loud, dangerous, or threatening. As such, Black parents might be inclined to teach their Black daughters to be silent and compliant as safeguards to offset negative attention.[257] Overall, the high net vulnerability and net stress level associated with being Black and American has the potential to prompt a variety of coping mechanisms across the lifespan.

Although PVEST is not a psychodynamic development model, it informs a psychodynamic model of the self by capturing the complexity of identity formation for

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[256] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, “A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST),” 818.
[257] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)," 818–19.

individuals living at the cross-section of multiple, converging identities,[258] situating PVEST as particularly relevant for Black girlhood studies. Each social position in Spencer's identity development schema links an individual's intra-psychic (and socio-emotional) development to complex ecological systems of power and marginality.[259] One way of looking at the phenomenological variants of PVEST is to consider these variants as threads of Black girls' lived experiences that, when woven together, inform Black girls' ways or knowing and being. In this case, the threads, or ecological systems represent structures such as family, school, religious affiliations and so on that shape our particularity and how we live.[260] Engagement with ecological systems includes day-to-day interactions, environmental pressures, such as negative stereotypes and the persistence of devaluing tropes, and the unique experiences of intersectional social positions and structures.[261] This interaction prompts sequences of self-organization and self-evaluation corresponding to one's self-perception and identity formation.[262]

The significance of PVEST lies in its emphasis on phenomenology and the individuality of one's experience. Ultimately, PVEST asserts that an individual's interpretation, perception, and processing of complex ecological systems influences how that person identifies or perceives their own stress and vulnerability.[263] To be clear, PVEST stops short at describing the phenomenological process intra-psychically, primarily focusing on the examination of its three-part system: net vulnerability level, net stress engagements, and emergent identities. However,

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[258] Velez and Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality," 86.
[259] Velez and Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality," 82.
[260] Velez and Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality,"85.
[261] Velez and Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality,"82.
[262] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)," 819.
[263] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)," 817.

PVEST allows us to see these threads more clearly as it elucidates the multiple layers of development and being Black and female

Underneath the "three parts" are individuals who continuously process multiple, converging systems of their reality, which impacts their coping mechanisms, behaviors, and consequential meaning-making processes.[264]

> Much of this work focuses on how dominant conceptions and relationships of power and marginality attached to social positions shape identity possibilities…. These phenomenological experiences represent a particular human condition, are development-stage sensitive and critical to adolescence. That is, they impact how youth (1) experience, interpret, and respond to membership in a racial or ethnic group, (2) influence how they experience and feel about gender identity, and (3) become cognizant about how their life options are affected by social status.[265]

In other words, given that adolescence encompasses vast hormonal changes, increased responsibilities, increased social encounters, and increased cognition—all while adolescents ponder greater meaning and purpose—phenomenological processing is particularly malleable during adolescence. For Black girls, processing everydayness has the tendency to become more rigid as coping mechanisms are crystallized and integrated.

Although the system of net vulnerability, stress, and emergent identities highlighted by PVEST is helpful for teasing out the phenomenological layer of Black girlhood, PVEST on its own is not conclusive of the totality of Black girlhood experiences and is therefore only part of KAP. Accordingly, KAP critically appropriates PVEST toward a robust articulation of Black girl epistemology. To do so, KAP focuses on phenomenological ways of understanding epistemology by examining Black girl narratives kaleidoscopically. It is important to note that the term "kaleidoscope" derives from the ancient Greek terms *kalos* (beauty, beautiful), *eidos* (that which

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[264] Beale Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, "A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)," 817.
[265] Velez and Beale Spencer, "Phenomenology and Intersectionality," 83.

is seen: form, shape), and *skopeo* (to look, to examine), together meaning, "to look or observe beautiful forms."[266] As such, examining Black girl narratives kaleidoscopically is equivalent to observing and honoring Black girlhood experiences in all of its beautiful forms.

## KAP in Practice: Applying KAP as a Method

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, I utilize the kaleidoscope metaphor as a means of capturing the multiplicity of Black girl selfhood and as a method. Conceptually, KAP emphasizes Black girlhood as multidimensional; methodologically, KAP functions as a tool for psychodynamic theologizing that takes seriously the variability of the researcher in tandem with Black girl narratives. The purpose of incorporating the kaleidoscope image in this way emphasizes the dexterity needed in addressing multiple aspects of Black girlhood in theory and practice. As such, aside from characterizing the multiplicitous selfhood of Black girlhood, KAP also does the work of engaging Black girl narratives by appropriating the mechanics of an actual kaleidoscope, complete with multiple lenses and infinite possibilities.

As a toy and as optical instrument, the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope is as integral to its overall function as it is integral to a kaleidoscopic analysis. In my view, the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope correlates with the gaze of the researcher determined by their self-perceptions, changing perspectives, and memories. Consider, for instance, looking into the eyepiece of a kaleidoscope. Once the viewer looks into the eyepiece, their vision is contained and restricted to the barrel of the kaleidoscope. What the viewer sees is a reflection of mirrored objects at the end of the barrel, which depends on (1) the angle of the viewer's eye as they look into the barrel, (2) the condition of the viewer's eyesight, (3) the point in time the viewer looks through the

[266] Gibbs, "How Kaleidoscopes Work."

eyepiece, and (4) the particular arrangement of glass bits at the end of the barrel. All of these factors determine what the viewer sees, similar to how the subjectivity of the researcher shapes their analyses of events, experiences, and narratives. The eyepiece in the kaleidoscopic analysis represents the researcher's lens. And, within that lens is *memory*.

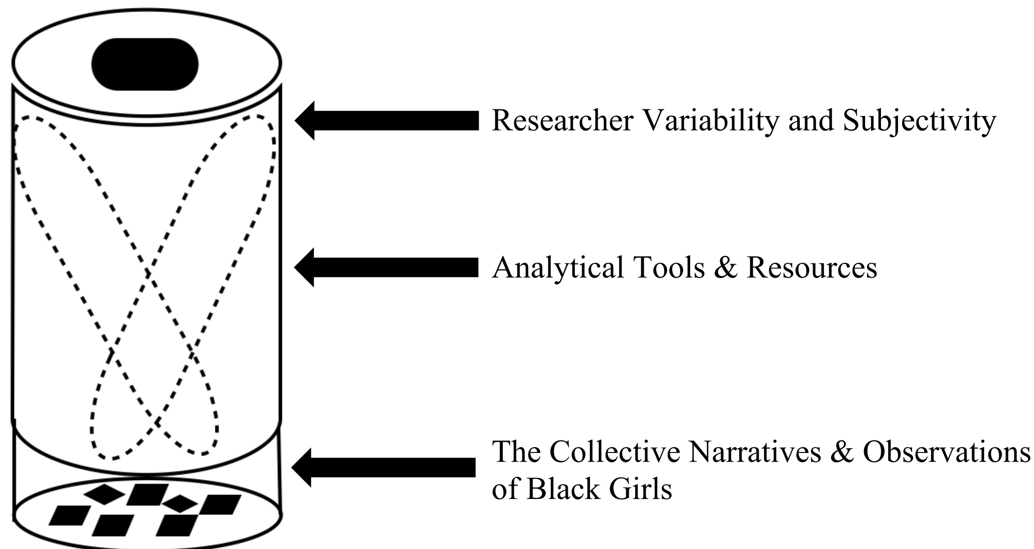


Figure 2. Internal View of Kaleidoscope and Corresponding Research Objectives

## Memory as a Conduit of Subjectivity

Aside from being a database of previous events and experiences, memory is where individuals frame, evaluate, and make sense of life events.[267] Memory is multiple; it is both personal and collective. Throughout our lifespan, memory functions as a tool of analysis and a tool for determining the next steps (i.e., "Remember what happened last time?"). Neuropsychologists suggests that memory is constructed and reconstructed by both our

[267] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 19.

conscious and unconscious minds. On a neurological level, experiences and interactions alter our brain cells and leave an imprint which is maintained by our DNA.[268] The stored information is labelled as *memory*, which dictates how we view and interpret the world. A person is said to be in a constant process of taking in information from the environment, storing it, manipulating it, and recoding portions of it for future use.

To clarify, memory is not restricted to brain function. Memory also resides in our bodies, giving us a sense of identity. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks wrote that "[w]e chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and the act of remembering."[269] Hence, the act of remembering is an ongoing synthesis our identity formation and an acknowledgement of subjectivity, which is arguably why Black women scholars frequently recall their childhoods in their scholarship. The problem is when analyses ends with memory. Toward that end, KAP extends the utility of memory and engages memory as a lens of analysis.

In *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Black girl studies activist and scholar Ruth Nicole Brown explains that "to [honor] Black girlhood does not require anyone to forget [one's self]."[270] In her book, Brown describes how a Black girlhood celebration program, Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), envisions and celebrates Black girlhood through creative performances and artistic expression. One of the many enlightening components of SOLHOT is the cultivation of Black girlhood memories. Brown explains that memories are both private and collected, and the process of remembering is a labor of love as it

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[268] Robert Martone, "Early Life Experience: It's in Your DNA," *Scientific American*, July 10, 2018, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/early-life-experience-its-in-your-dna/.
[269] bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 50.
[270] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 1.

creates space for Black girls. She emphasizes the importance of creating and preserving memories as a ritual practice. This practice honors what and who has come before and other modes of collective, cultural, and forgotten memories. Similarly, a kaleidoscopic analysis of Black girlhood appreciates the practice of remembering for its ability to add to the collective memory of Black girlhood. Additionally, a kaleidoscopic analysis recognizes memory as a subjective tool of analysis. In other words, a kaleidoscopic analysis maintains that memory is vital to the researcher's sense of identity as memory maintains our positionality to the world around us and configures how we perceive our environment.

The challenge that researchers might face is encountering false memories. Since memories are personal, malleable, and based on interpretation, it is possible to remember events differently from the way that events actually happened.[271] In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil,* Townes emphasizes that memory is a subjective experience that guides the imagination. She writes, "[memory] is a personal activity corrupted by the teller's choice of words and *[their]* sense of how to shape the story."[272] Referencing Toni Morrison's "The Site of Memory," Townes explains that "[in] memory, one has the true true through the braided plaits of the almost true, sometimes, and half true… the true true is in all memories."[273] In a kaleidoscopic analysis, it is up to the researcher to do the necessary self-work to correct and challenge their subjective lens of analyses.

## The Barrel: Black-Feminist Womanist Research Paradigms

[271] Elizabeth Loftus, "Memory Distortion and False Memory Creation," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law* 24, no. 3 (1996): 281–95.
[272] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 13.
[273] Townes, 85.

The barrel of the kaleidoscope enables the viewer to focus on the objects of discovery. In KAP's case, the "barrel" functions as the guide for seeing and analyzing Black girls' experiences. Methodologically, the barrel is an adaptation of Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigms, guiding the researcher toward ethical treatment of Black girl narratives. Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigms center Black girl agency while recognizing the depth of Black girlhood experiences.

In 2015, Black Girls Matter founder Lashawnda Lindsey-Dennis established Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigms as a theoretical framework for conducting research with African American girls. In "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm: Toward a Culturally Relevant Research Model Focused on African Girls," Lindsey-Dennis emphasizes the importance of developing culturally based perspectives about Black girlhood that take seriously contextualized experiences and the interactive forces of history, race, class, gender. She explains that this means foregoing normative identity development theories based on "middle-class, White male norms…[because] problems arise when deviations from White, male normative behavior is perceived as negative and interpreted as evidenced of maladjustment."[274]

Lindsey-Dennis advises researchers to appropriate Black Feminist Thought and Womanism as a means for examining Black female psychosocial experiences.[275] She asserts that Black Feminist thought is useful for situating Black girl as being the sole proprietors and interpreters of their experiences, whereas Womanism maintains that everyday experiences of

[274] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm: Toward a Culturally Relevant Research Model Focused on African American Girls," 509.
[275] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm," 509.

intergenerational socialization matter.[276] From this, Lindsey-Dennis proposes a set of principles for examining Black girl experiences.

> This research paradigm allows for consideration of intersectionality and metaphysical aspects of African Americans girls' cultural perspectives and demonstrates a commitment to social change and community building. This paradigm invites researchers to view their research on a continuum rather than isolated acts of data collection…. This process includes examining young African American girls' decisions and actions as outputs related to their worldviews and experiences … the researcher recognizes that intergenerational transmission of worldviews, behaviors, and coping mechanisms affects Black girls' development.[277]

In essence, the Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigm holds researchers accountable to Black girls while positioning Black girlhood as relational, context specific, and multidimensional. What remains is a tangible framework for identifying and examining factors that shape Black girlhood.

## Inside the Barrel: Womanist Theology and Developmental Psychology as a Means for Psychodynamic Theologizing

Given that the Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigm is meant to serve as research principles, Lindsey-Dennis suggests that researchers use multiple sources and research methods that move Black girls "from the margins to the heart of the inquiry."[278] In other words, the metaphorical "barrel"—that is, Black Feminist-Womanist research paradigms—serves to maintain that Black girls are at the center. However, the barrel is not hollow, nor does it stand alone.

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[276] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm," 510–11.
[277] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm," 511–13.
[278] Lindsay-Dennis, "Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm,"513.

In KAP*,* the “barrel” houses two mirrors that mutually enhance and strengthen the viewpoint. For the purposes of this dissertation, the lenses inside the barrel resemble tools for psychodynamic theologizing which, in this case, are Womanist theological resources and developmental psychology, geared toward understanding and utilizing Black girlhood experiences in theological reflections. To that end, KAP capitalizes on the phenomenological layer of PVEST.[279] Though PVEST does not specify phenomenological variants particular to Black girlhood, the ethnographic work completed for this dissertation project suggests that Black girls sometimes navigate hostile environments that perceive them as loud rather than assertive, defiant rather than determined, and fragmented rather than fluid.

As a Womanish/st pastoral theologian and practitioner, my interest in understanding the multiple layers of Black girls’ childhood experiences is to identify theological categories associated with Black girlhood, as well as obtain a glimpse of Black girl-centered spirituality. While identifying and addressing Black girl trauma as important work, the purpose of KAP is to look at the entirety of Black girlhood rather than just its traumas. However, as a project in pastoral theology, KAP is particularly attuned to theological issues and is oriented to better understand our responsibility to Black girls as well as effective care practices.

The theological component of the kaleidoscopic analysis relies on Womanist theologians to illuminate theological themes from Black girl narratives ripe for continued theological reflections. For instance, when considering/layering Black girlhood as a social construct with theological roots tied to the American perception of property, we begin to see Black girlhood as a theological dilemma. The psychological component of KAP helps us understand the impact of

[279] In “The Hermeneutics of Childhood,” David Kennedy explains that a hermeneutic approach to childhood studies is most appropriate considering the relationship and distance between adult researchers and the researched child.

these theological dilemmas by relying on the works of educational psychologist Margaret Beal Spencer to analyze the psychosocial experiences of Black girls. Use of resources depends on the angle of analysis. To this end, I read Black girlhood experiences through the lenses of Black girlhood development theory to emphasize their joys and challenges as well as point to a constructive response.

The Collective of Discovery

Lastly, the materials at the end of the kaleidoscope (opposite the eyepiece) represent the collective of Black girl narratives. These narratives come from the stories we hear from Back girls, ethnographic sketches of Black girlhood, and what we see Black girls doing in the world. At every turn, we get glimpses into their lives.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces KAP as a means to observe Black girlhood in all of its beautiful forms, beginning with the exploration of the kaleidoscope as a viable metaphor and as a critical correlational project. In *Bone Black: memories of girlhood*, bell hooks contends that Black girlhood involves a "struggle to create self and identity distinct from and yet inclusive of the world around."[280] Black girlhood involves typical developmental tasks, particularly in regard to identity formation, in a society that often devalues Blacks and women.[281] KAP is responsive to this challenge.

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[280] bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), xi.
[281] Kumea Shorter-Gooden, "Young, Black, and Female: The Challenge of Weaving an Identity," *Journal of Adolescence* 19, no. 5 (October 1996): 465, https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1996.0044.

Ultimately, my use the kaleidoscope image acknowledges the (1) variability of researcher subjectivity, (2) specificity of the analytical tools that we can employ when engaging narratives, (3) glimpses of epistemology that we get from collective narratives, and (4) the ever-changing vision or viewpoint we get when we take another look from another angle. This four-pronged approach functions as a methodological tool in Womanish/st pastoral theological reflection and vision. Phenomenologically, it attends to the particularized experiences of Black girlhood as sources of epistemology, and also engages this epistemology as a site for theological reflection.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## EXAMINING THE WOMANISH/ST TEHOLOGY LENS OF KAP

*"I know God made us all. I mean, He did make us equal. I think He's trying to tell us to love ourselves and don't let the negativity get to you… Because there's a lot of hate in the world." – Jordan*

In the previous chapter, I introduced a Kaleidoscopic Analyses Perspective (KAP) method for addressing/analyzing/understanding Black girls and their childhoods. To do so, I likened *KAP* methodology to an "actual" kaleidoscope as a means of grappling with the multi-dimensional and dynamic quality of how we think about Black girlhood. In my illustration, I suggested that the barrel of the kaleidoscope contained "mirrors" or "lenses" that reflect and capture aspects and angles of Black girlhood.[282] For the sake of this dissertation project, which is intentionally situated within Womanist pastoral theology, I intend to focus on two lenses in the kaleidoscope. I consider one "lens inside the barrel" to be psychological, while the other is theological. Each lens emphasizes alternating vantage points of Black girls and their childhoods for the purposes of painting a robust, multi-dimensional, and relational image.

According to "Black Girlhood Experiences in Church and Society," the ethnographic study conducted for this dissertation project, salient concerns that occur throughout Black girl childhood include: navigating multiplicitous ways of being, continually mending one's self-

[282] See chapter Three of this dissertation.

image, and employing various strategies of resistance to maintain wholeness.[283,284] As noted in previous chapters, the psychological "lens in the barrel" addresses the "cohering senses of self" and the psychological and development undercurrents that flow through Black girlhood experiences. For instance, it is well understood that the intersection of gender, race, and class complicates the degree to which Black girls can measure up to gender and racial expectations. Black female bodies are heavily scrutinized for their skin tone and their size, making it difficult to build healthy self-esteem and positioning them in "multiple jeopardy."[285] Black girls are not only evaluated by gender conformity but by Black respectability as well.[286] What remains to be examined is White supremacist ideology, often laced in theological language, that works to ensure Black girlhood erasure and adultification, marking a theological dilemma of Black girlhood.

In this chapter, I examine the stain of White supremacy and its theological roots as they are deeply embedded in the US imagination and serve to dehumanize Black girls. In doing so, I attend to the theological dilemma of Black girlhood, that is ontological, and a cultural production of evil and stain on the US imagination that exacerbates and encourages psychological and cultural alienation. In the process, I review previous works in Womanist theology and practice that have laid groundwork for attending to the needs of Black girls to situate. In particular, I

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[283] See Chapter Two of this dissertation.
[284] It should be noted here that wholeness is not meant to be synchronous with "unity." But the maintaining a cohering self.
[285] Termed by sociologist Deborah King, multiple jeopardy contextualizes the various dimensions of what it means to be Black and female.[285] It constitutes the web of race, gender conformity, color, physical appearance, and options for social reward mapped onto the Black female body.
[286] Sociologist Nicki Jones describes the standards of Black respectability as "the set of expectations governing how Black women and girls should act." To that end, Black women and adolescent girls are expected to navigate mainstream expectations of femininity and Black female respectability

examine Womanist theological scholarship that do not robustly consider psychological and theological dimension to gesture toward the possibilities of KAP as a method in psychodynamic theologizing.[287]

## Womanist Ontological Concerns

As mentioned in Chapter One, in the earliest developments of Womanist theology, Womanist theologians grappled with the theological problems of racism, sexism, and classism that denigrate Black women's (and by extension, Black people's) sense of *being*, particularly their self-identification as creations made in God's image, and as creations that are good. This emphasis pinpoints a Womanist ontological concern.

In Towne's essay, "To Be Called Beloved," Townes explains that "a womanist ontology is a radical concern for is-ness in the context of African American life, a radical concern that is oriented toward the 'unified relationship between body, soul, and creation'."[288] Therefore, a Womanist ontology urges a sense of wholeness that resists structural evils and the theological problems of race, and gender, that work to split or alienate Black women. The splitting referenced here is experienced psychologically and disrupts our wellbeing or sense of wholeness. Toward that end, Womanist theologians address this split by examining the systems that split us.

A crucial task in Womanist theology is examining the root causes of these systems that seek to disrupt our being which, as mentioned previously, can have theological roots and can be culturally produced. For example, in "'Take My Yoke upon You': The Role of the Church in the

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[287] See chapter one of this dissertation.
[288] Emilie M. Townes, "To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in PostModern Refraction," *Society of Christian Ethics* 13 (1993): 94.

Oppression of African-American Women," Frances Wood argues that there is a degree of pseudomoral superiority within Christianity that assures that Black females do not view themselves as good,"[289] She explains: "Christianity reinforces beliefs elevating the suffering and victimization of Black females to the status of martyrdom for the cause (of others) and a level of pseudomoral superiority designated to assure that we not view ourselves as entitled to nurturance and care or deserving of pleasure and joy in this life."[290] Thus, Wood focuses her examination on Black women and the idea of punishment and suffering as divinely orchestrated.[291] Additionally, in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes establishes that "exploring evil as a cultural production highlights the systematic construction of truncated narratives designed to support and perpetuate structural inequities and forms of social production."[292]

Identifying the root of the problem is integral to Womanist theological approaches for addressing theological dilemmas, or perpetual theological problems. However, Womanist theology has yet to explore the root of the theological problems of age-compression, adultification, and mistreatment of Black girlhood. I contend that the denial of Black girls' childhood in is a theological problem because such a denial undermines God's desire for children to experience childhood. As noted in Isaiah 11:8, God celebrates children being able to play.[293] Age-compression and adultification denies Black girls the opportunity to play and behave as

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[289] Frances E. Wood, "'Take My Yoke upon You': The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American Women," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).
[290] Emilie M. Townes, *Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 2.
[291] Wood, "'Take My Yoke upon You': The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American Women," 37.
[292] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 4.
[293] *New Revised Standard Version: The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, 1994th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 882 OT.

children. Therefore, this chapter explores the theological and ethical challenges of Black girlhood sustained by the pseudomoral superiority within Christianity.

### Theo-Ethical Challenges of Black Girlhood

Kelly Brown Douglas's *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* offers a historical analysis of America's theo-ideological framework which I find is helpful in exposing the ethical challenges of growing up in a Black girl body. Brown Douglas asserts that there is an entanglement of myths positioning the Black body as innately dangerous, guilty, morally inferior, and deserving of violent pursuit. In her text, she describes the myth of America's exceptionalism that planted seeds of racial superiority upon which the identity of the United States of America was founded and defined. She asserts that Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism dates back to 98 C. E., when the Roman historian Tacitus published *Germania*, an account of ancient Roman history. Tacitus stressed the unique superiority of Anglo-Saxons and "argued that strong moral qualities and a high regard for freedom flowed uniquely through Anglo-Saxon veins."[294]

The myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority also carried an element of divinity dating back to St. Thomas Aquinas's natural law doctrine. St. Thomas's doctrine "is grounded in the presupposition that law, a function of reason, is always 'directed to the common good'"[1] and presents natural law as a human response to God's eternal law. Thus rulers, dictated by reason, are meant to govern the community as God intended. And since the Anglo-Saxons believed themselves to be morally superior with astute capacities for reason, they believed they were in

[294] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), kindle loc 238.

the best position—the divine position—to govern. Fulfillment of God's will included embarking on a divine mission to correct a morally corrupt world.

During England's post-Reformation struggles, the radical English reformers saw themselves as the Israelites in God's master plan and began planting colonies in America for the "glory of God." In short, the sacred nature of Anglo-Saxon superiority crossed the Atlantic and shaped the governance of the United States of America with an unspoken ideology of racial hierarchy. Along with the Anglo-Saxon natural law and assumed superiority, another perversion of natural law was gaining traction—the Anglo-Saxon myth that Black people were born barbaric non-beings with a natural inclination to be subjugated.[295] In "Cornerstone Address," Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, stated, "The negro [by nature] is not equal to the white man… slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition."[296] This theo-ideology suggests that it is God's will for Whites to rule over Blacks for the sake of the common good.

The Anglo-Saxonist perversion of natural law became engrained in America's collective consciousness and equated Black bodies to dangerous bodies who are naturally immoral, barbaric, unable to control their own bodies and impulses, and in need of correction. Thus, White control over Black bodies, for the sake of the common good, was theologically justified. Post-emancipation, the theo-ideologies are deeply embedded in the American fabric to the point that racially biased laws are created to moralize the "naturally immoral Black body" and protect the cherished White body. Theo-ideology rests so firmly in the collective consciousness that seeing a

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[295] Alexander Stephens, William Harper, and William Gilmore Simms make clear that God intended for Black people to be slaves for the good of humanity.
[296] Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, kindle loc 1220.

Black person elicits an automated response to inflict moral guidance that is often violent and unjustified.

The violent automated response to Black bodies is further complicated in Black childhood given the theological, moral tensions of child-rearing. Alice Miller's *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* explains the relationship between morality and child-rearing. In a broad description of childhood, Miller references the paradox of child-rearing. She argues that child-rearing is revered in religion, yet religion destroys spontaneous growth of moral development unique to the child. A general attitude in religion directs us to scorn the child for moral purposes. Miller recounts the biblical words, "for whom the Lord loveth, he correcteth," and asserts that the Bible and other religious sources label child-rearing as an expression of love, even if it is painful.[297] Miller emphasizes that most people firmly believe that parents are always right and that every act of cruelty is an expression of the parent's love.[298] The practice of child-rearing is meant to drive out the willfulness and the wickedness of the child *and* instill a love of order and obedience.[299] As a result, the parent scolds or spanks to coerce desirable behaviors from the child and reinforce certain values that are expected of the child. Miller writes, "it is always [a parent's] main purpose to make children into righteous, virtuous persons."[300]

Miller proposes that the practices of child-rearing pose an ethical dilemma because the coercive practices of child-rearing extinguish the spontaneous moral development of the child,

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[297] Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good*, 39.
[298] Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982) 2.
[299] According to Alice Miller, willfulness is a natural recourse that refers to a child's ability to gesture for what they want, and wickedness is when the child behaves undesirably. Miller, *For Your Own Good,* 15.
[300] Miller, *For Your Own Good*, 16.

stunts the child's emotional growth, and instills values into the child that were not original to them. This child-rearing practice becomes all the more damaging when the parenting activity is directed towards a falsified image of a Black girl, who is perceived as violent, guilty, and incapable of moral aptitude. The myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy in tandem with coercive, value-laded child-rearing practices highlights the complicated web that is Black girlhood in a White America. Not only are Black girls viewed as dangerous, morally inferior, and in need of parenting—reflecting the implications of Anglo-Saxon common good law—the state-sanctioned surrogate use of coercive parenting practices instills values into the child that are not original to the child. In fact, the values imposed on the child are a racially biased ideology that deems Whiteness as superior and Blackness as inferior. Although these values are labeled "for the common good," they inhibit moral autonomy and are predicated on a false representation of Black girls, rather than actual Black girls. The "false values" are made further insidious, when they are intertwined in US culture, replicated and sustained. These false representations and insistence on the non-being nature of Black girls are also replicated and sustained in the White hegemonic imagination.

## Pickaninny Caricature

In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes introduces the most dominant methods/falsified depictions/culturally pungent vehicles for the non-beingness of Black women and girls. In her text, Townes deconstructs images of Black women and girls. These images, which are often defined as controlling images, plague culture and "ooze from the pores of videos and magazines and television and radio and music and the pulpit."[301] More

[301] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 3.

simply put, these images—products of the White imagination—are insidious and represent a falsified image of Black women and girls. The White imagination engages these falsified images of Black women and girls in attempts to remain superior to Blacks. It is difficult to get rid of these images because they do not belong to Black people or reality. These images exist in the imagination, never as aspects of a real person but rather supporting the idea of Black people as commodity and property.[302] As Townes points out in her book, these fictitious representations are a cultural production of evil that work to control and distort lived realities of Black women and girls. She explains that "[exploring] evil as a cultural production highlights the systematic construction of truncated narratives designed to support and perpetuate structural inequities and forms of social oppression."[303]

Townes engages Niebuhrian responsibility ethics. The first step is to uncover how the commodified images coerce identity and misrepresent Black women and girls. Her Womanist ethical reflection of these narratives unfolds as counter-memories in which she outlines the origins of these myths. One myth that is particularly relevant to Black girlhood is Harriet Beecher Stowe's Topsy. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe depicts Topsy as a black child dressed in rags with wooly and braided hair. According to Townes, "[t]his description of Topsy… puts in print a character who is lazy, mischievous, wild-looking, and prone to thievery. She needs constant guidance and beatings to keep her working and out of trouble."[304] Although Topsy is meant to be Stowe's literary and polemical device to respond to the dehumanization of Black children in slavery, Stowe's lazy and wild-looking image of Topsy informed and reinforced

[302] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 46.
[303] Townes, *Womanist Ethics,* 4.
[304] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 140.

public imagination.[305] This image has been reproduced, recreated, and marketed as Black baby dolls and other Black memorabilia.

Townes, in particular, references juxtaposing Black girls and White girls with the illustration of the Topsy/Eva dolls displayed in the 1945 Montgomery Ward catalogue, which labeled Topsy as a "mischievous pickaninny" and Eva as a "dear little white baby." Describing the Topsy/Eva dolls, Townes describes the doll as two dolls sharing the same body. One side of the doll was a "pretty, well-dressed, blond-haired White doll whose opposite was a 'grotesque, thick-lipped, wide-eyed, sloppily dressed Black doll'."[306] Thereafter, Black baby dolls were reproduced with parts of their body exposed, torn clothing, or rags and given the name of "mischievous pickaninny" or "nigger baby." "Pickaninny" became the standardized name for Black baby dolls and eventually for Black children.

In most cases, the pickaninny image or figurine has medium brown to dark black skin with bulging eyes and appears impoverished, parentless, and in animal-like postures. Black children depicted as pickaninnies took on sexualized and animalistic features hardly resembling a human child. This fictitious image has been reproduced in stories, on souvenirs, and other commodities, which reinforce the negative image of Black children constructed by the fantastic hegemonic imagination. The Black child as pickaninny functions as a racial trope that casts Black children, more specifically Black girls, as sexualized non-beings raised by disinterested Black caregivers. Images and tropes are worth critical analysis because, once internalized, they shape our norms, values, and beliefs about ourselves and others. In the case of the pickaninny, Black children internalize and grapple with these negative images as a part of their own identity,

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[305] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 140.
[306] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 141.

whereas others internalize these images and use them as a norm for interacting with Black children. Simply put, the pickaninny image is a conduit for the social script embedded in the fantastic hegemonic imagination that facilitates interactions with Black children, who are perceived as moral failures.[307] Townes argues that the process of dismantling this systemic evil is to engage in countermemory. "Countermemory begins with the particular move into the universal and it looks to the past for microhistories to force a reconsideration of flawed (incomplete or vastly circumscribed) histories."[308] The countermemory serves to decenter the dominant narrative.

According to Townes's analysis, "[pickaninnies] allowed many White folks to rest easier in the (mis)belief that Black parents were inherently indifferent to their children's welfare."[309] I would argue that this fictitious image of Black children and parenting grants White state power permission to step in as surrogate parents, in which the state-sanctioned surrogates perform parental duties to correct the child's behavior. These parental duties include scolding, reprimanding, and promoting "appropriate" behavior, which parenting literature in child-rearing suggest contributes to the child's overall sense of self. The issue with state-sanctioned parenting involves questions about who gets to determine what is "appropriate" and how it is enforced. The undergirding principles, laws, and policies designed to enact sanctioned parenting often contain a racial and gender bias filtered through media, law enforcement, beauty norms, education, and so on. Needless to say, the very idea of state-sanctioned surrogacy yields a wide variety of ethical challenges that are hard to trace. First, it assumes that Black girls are raised without moral values due to their raced bodies and presumed inadequate parenting. Second, it aims to impose a moral

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[307] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 116.
[308] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 8.
[309] Townes, *Womanist Ethics,* 143.

identity onto Black girls that is neither original to the child nor their family values. These challenges are particularly pervasive and difficult to address because they contain perversions of the Christian ideal of the common good, which is almost always tied to White supremacy. Notably, it is even more pervasive during childhood when people are more susceptible to childhood injury.

In *Womanist Ethics*, Townes's also asserts that "the self is formed from the basic understanding that there are inherent rights for all people and each person is an independent unit that is an autonomous, self-determining ego."[310] Misrepresentation of Black girls and their childhood undermines the development of moral autonomy in Black girls, rendering them vulnerable to distorted senses of selves. To clarify, a distorted sense of self is a psychological *and* theological injury.

**Psychological Injuries in Black Girlhood: A Theological Problem**

As noted, negative images such as the pickaninny are grafted onto social institutions, media and criminal policies, for example, and teach us about race, gender, and social relations. They are also embedded in our psyches and should be acknowledged as elements that are entangled in intrapsychic experiences of culture. These kinds of images affect our psyche through the intrapsychic processes of internalization, where Black girls grapple with their own sense of self, their sense of how they should perform, and their sense of being in the world.

In *Self, Culture, and Other in Womanist Practical Theology*, Phillis I. Sheppard recounts the cultural and intrapsychic forces that pulse through our societies and personal interactions. In her exploration of Womanist narratives of embodiment, Sheppard centers the body as a conduit

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[310] Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 123.

for understanding the self and suggests an epistemological status where Black women and girls come to know in their Black female bodies. She emphasizes that "[embodiment] is integral to how we understand ourselves and the milieus in which we live."[311] There is an undeniable connection between the body and the internal script it perpetuates.

Beginning at birth, Black girls develop an internal script and inner vision of themselves that is at risk of cultural humiliation. Their embodiment requires them to cope with cultural criticisms about the darkness of their skin or the kinkiness of their hair.[312] Sheppard acknowledges the many forces that challenge Black women's sense of self; she understands Black women's developmental experience as a push towards a cohesive self, when all the constituents of the self fuse together. Quoting Black feminist psychologists Tracy Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward, Sheppard reminds us that:

> within the biography of each individual African American, the convergence of race, gender, and class has its own unique configuration... African American adolescent girls, [like] their Euromerican counterparts, are engaged in the process of identity and self-creation... However, African American adolescent girls [who] are making this passage embedded within a family and community... [are] negatively impacted by a sociopolitical context framed by...oppression.[313]

Pointing to individual biographies, Sheppard suggests that identity development is a complicated and socially constructed process. Black girls, in particular, must navigate embodiment intertwined in often negative sociopolitical contexts throughout the process of their self-creation.

This process of self-creation is not as straightforward as it sounds. It involves racialized, gendered development, self-image construction, and battling negative representations (such as

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[311] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 14.
[312] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 238.
[313] Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 118-119.

the pickaninny caricature and White-sanctioned surrogacy). It is hard to imagine yourself as good and worthy of love amidst negative images, poor treatment in education systems, hyper-sexualization, and White supremacist ideology that identifies you as inherently bad, immoral, and guilty. Collectively, these negative associations coerce Black girl identity development through the process of internalization where Black girls come to accept norms and values that are established by others—and not always in their best interest. This in itself is the ethical challenge of Black girlhood, where Black girls are frequently robbed of their childhood and flooded with negative images of themselves, ultimately rendering them vulnerable to psychological trauma and a distorted sense of self that is not deserving of love. When expressed, this can resemble symptoms of depression, "anger issues," anxiety, and defiance, to name a few.

## Attending to the Theological Issues Within Black Girlhood

According to Womanist theology's characterization of theological problems, oppressive structures attack one's sense of being. Psychological injuries that potentially disrupt Black girlhood are categorically theological problems. Positioning Black girls as non-beings beckons theological reflection and response. Those tending to Black girl experiences are few. However, over the past five years, theologians and practitioners have begun to orient their concerns to Black girlhood. For example, in the 2017 Antoinette Brown Lecture, *Facing Pecola: Toward a Womanist Soteriologic of Black Girl Disrespectability*, Womanist theo-ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman took up the notion of Black girls as non-beings.

In *Facing Pecola*, Marshall Turman echoed Towne's analysis of the pickaninny caricature to suggest that the ethical origins of Black women's suffering actually originates in Black girlhood. Although Marshall Turman limited her engagement to Black girlhood as a

"passing-through" point to get to Black adult women, Marshall Turman likened Black girl adultification to a "moral crucifixion." She argued that the criminalization, dehumanization, and policing of Black girls in public and private spaces is a theological problem for which the Black church should be held accountable. Marshall Turman presupposes a moral continuity between Black girlhood and Black womanhood branded by the initial subjugation and erasure of Black girlhood and situates her argument in relation to the fantastic hegemonic imagination of White patriarchy. Beginning with the conceptualization of a "gendered and racialized project of age compression in Black girlhood,"[314] Marshall Turman asserted that Black girlhood has been cast as a moral and theological problem in which Black girls are robbed of their childhood and are prematurely forced into Black womanhood, beginning the all-too familiar process of Black female subjugation in which Black females are perceived as "the principle point of passage between the human and the non-human world. The root by which the dominant mode decided the distinction between humanity and other." She continues:

> When read in tandem with childhood studies that assert the flexibility in the ideology of the conjunction between childhood and innocence, classifying Black children, Black girls in particular, for our purposes here as non-feeling, non-innocent, non-children [sic]. A precise connection may be drawn between how racialized gendered logics of punishment position the Black girl as not-girl - in the effort to naturalize and justify anti-Black pedocidal politics that cast Black children in contemporary scenes of subjection.[315]

Marshall Turman's comments resemble the findings of the *Girlhood Interrupted Report*,[316] which said that adults assume that Black girls are less innocent and more knowledgeable of adult topics, such as sex. However, she did not explore how the robbery of Black girls' childhood

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[314] Eboni Marshall Turman, "Facing Pecola: Toward a Womanist Soteriologic of Black Girl Disrespectability," Antoinette Brown Lecture, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN. Delivered March 23, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cb9p83sV1ck.
[315] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cb9p83sV1ck&t=2003s (transcription from the lecture posted on YouTube minutes 32-35)
[316] Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez, "Girlhood Interrupted."

impacts Black girls, nor did she propose a means for addressing the issues. This is probably due to the fact that Marshall Turman is not a practical theologian. Nonetheless, Marshall Turman leaves us with an analysis inadequate for addressing Black girlhood concerns in a real way. Practical theologians, on the other hand, are more oriented toward transforming their theorizing into praxis.

Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, a Womanist practical theologian whose work centers on emancipatory pedagogies and the spiritual formation of youth, understands the tenable relationship between theory and practice as it relates to Black girlhood. In "Recovering the Imago Dei: The Need for Youth Ministry to Embrace an Embodied Pedagogy," Lockhart-Gilroy recalls working with a group of Black teenage girls for a Black history month presentation. In the process of preparing the presentation, she learned that these girls "struggled with what it meant to be Black and female."[317] She explains, "[in] their short lives, these girls had learned that while they struggled with negative images they internalized about their bodies" but did not feel they could ask God why God made them Black and female. "[They] struggled with the idea that God loves their hair, skin, and hips."[318] As a response, Lockhart-Gilroy explores the Church's role in addressing Black girls' concerns and proposes that youth ministries embrace an "embodied pedagogy, a teaching and ministry philosophy that helps girls feel comfortable in their bodies."[319] Correspondingly, she proposes six principles for an embodied pedagogy oriented towards teaching girls to "love their bodies as an extension of the *imago Dei* within."[320]

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[317] Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, "Recovering the Imago Dei: The Need for Youth Ministry to Embrace an Embodied Pedagogy," Blog Post, *Social Justice Leadership Project: Connected Ideas with Action* (blog), n.d., https://www.drew.edu/theological-school/2018/12/02/recovering-the-imago-dei-the-need-for-youth-ministry-to-embrace-an-embodied-pedagogy/.
[318] Lockhart-Gilroy, "Recovering the Imago Dei."
[319] Lockhart-Gilroy, "Recovering the Imago Dei."
[320] Lockhart-Gilroy, "Recovering the Imago Dei."

1. Self-care is how we honor our Divine self-worth.
2. We celebrate the great tradition of using our body to praise God.
3. Know that you control the use of your body.
4. Spaces must welcome all body types.
5. We honor the body.
6. We neither shame it nor treat it as a separate entity or something to be tamed.[321]

While I largely agree with Lockhart-Gilroy's principles, it is important to consider that she does not discuss the psychological dimension of embodiment or the process of internalization. Without this discussion, the function and efficacy of these principles are not clear, especially considering Lockhart-Gilroy's interest in reversing internalization of negative images. It seems that addressing Black girl concerns collaboratively with psychological insights with theological intent would increase the salience of these principles and have more meaning. One example of this is addressed by Black girl advocate and chaplain Khristi Lauren Adams.

In her poignant text, *Parable of a Brown Girl: The Sacred Lives of Girls of Color*, Adams brings together psychological and theological elements of Black girlhood. In doing so, Adams presents Black girl narratives as parables beaming with wisdom and proposes listening to Black girl narratives and engaging these narratives a source of wisdom, similar to parables. Adams explains that Jesus "frequently focused his parables on the neglected and unnoticed, highlighting wisdom and strength where they had previously been ignored. [Black] girls, too, are neglected and unnoticed."[322] She continues:

> Jesus Christ did some of his most valuable teaching in parables. His parables presented clear stores from everyday circumstances where the listener would be met by the spirit of

[321] Lockhart-Gilroy, "Recovering the Imago Dei."
[322] Khristi Lauren Adams, *Parable of the Brown Girl: The Sacred Lives of Girls of Color* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020).

> God alongside plain truth." Consequently, I have often wondered what these parables would have looked like with black girls at the center... Their stories share profound spiritual wisdom and invite us to experience God in a "richer, more beautiful way.[323]

In one particular parable, named "Parable of the Insecure Brown Girl," Adams recalls the narrative of Leah, a Black girl struggling with her body type. In her description of this teaching moment, Adams references that psychological processing antiblackness and internalize self-hatred. She identifies this as psychological torture.[324] Although Adams does not clarify *how* Black girls process these systemic oppressions, she is clear that there is a long-lasting psychological impact that prohibits Black girls from being able to internalize God's love and recognize themselves as being created in God's image.

> Black children like Leah… psychologically process antiblackness at young ages, having experienced it in various aspects of society and their everyday lives… These types of experiences can lead to internalized hatred for most black girls. They know they are black and they know blackness bears negative associations; therefore, they naturally associate themselves with that antagonism.[325]

In her theological response, Adams contends that God does not intend for anyone to hate the way they look. Therefore, she proposes engaging the *imago Dei* as a spiritual practice in order to show Black girls that they are beloved and created in God's image. She explains, "[*imago Dei*] must be more than an ideological concept. It has to be practical for everyone… For black girls… *imago De*i can be an intentional practice of engaging [black girls] as one would honor God. By engaging black girls as the *imago Dei*, we connect deeper to ourselves, to one another, and to God."[326] Although Adams does not explain why practicing the *imago Dei* has particular salience

[323] Adams, *Parable of the Brown Girl,* xi.
[324] Adams, *Parable of the Brown Girl,* 30.
[325] Adams, *Parable of the Brown Girl,* 30.
[326] Adams, *Parable of the Brown Girl,* 39.

for addressing Black girlhood concerns, one can imagine that honoring Black girls as we honor God would have psychological benefits.

Overall, Womanist theologians and practitioners have begun to address the theological issues and dilemmas of Black girlhood. My contention is that the psychological natures of these theological problems are rarely robustly considered, thus meaningful practices that genuinely address Black girlhood needs are at risk. I propose psychodynamic theologizing as a viable option for expanding the theological reflections to include meaningful praxis that speak directly to Black girlhood theological dilemmas.

**Womanist Pastoral Theology & Psychodynamic Theologizing**

Given the psychological natures of theological problems, such as racism, classism, sexism, and robbery of one's childhood, Womanist pastoral theologians are well-equipped for this task. As referenced in Chapter One of this dissertation, Womanist pastoral theologians often identify the "splitting" effects of structural evils while also examining the process of internalizations. A driving force of Womanist pastoral theology has been to uncover how these theological problems disrupt or fracture Black women's experiences and senses of self. Consider, for instance, Womanist pastoral theologian Stephanie Crumpton's appropriation of Heinz Kohut's self-psychology in pastoral care responses to intimate and cultural violence. In *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence,* Crumpton suggests that intimate and cultural violence have intrapsychic and spiritual consequences that must be addressed to which she proposes utilizing empathy as tool to encourage or reinforce the care seekers "inner sense of cohesion and continuity."[327] Similarly, Carolyn McCrary engages object

[327] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, 12.

relations theorist W.R.D. Fairbairn to address internalized shame resulting from intimate violence. In "Intimate Violence Against Black Women and Internalized Shame: A Womanist Pastoral Counseling Perspective," McCrary asserts that shame disrupts the development of a "proper sense of self."[328] In both cases, Womanist pastoral theologians attend to the "split," which they identify as a disruption of being that inhibits Black girls' capacity recognize themselves as created in God's image. Their theological response has been in favor of repairing the breach.

Womanist pastoral theologians have effectively exercised psychodynamic theologizing from the perspective of Black women. In order to expand Womanist pastoral theological reflections that include Black girlhood experiences, I urge Womanist pastoral theologians, and, by extension, other Womanist theologians, to engage with psychological resources and narratives that align with Black girl experiences. One way to do this is by advancing a Womanish perspective of psychodynamic theologizing via the kaleidoscopic analysis perspective (KAP).

## Womanish Psychodynamic Theologizing

A possible way of employing KAP for a Womanish perspective of psychodynamic theologizing is through D.W. Winnicott's object relations theory introduced in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Winnicott's perspective of the self presumes that the self is multiplicitous, which is notably useful for addressing Black girlhood concerns. He theorizes that the self is split into a "true self" and a "false self." [329] The "true self" represents internal instincts and private thoughts,

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[328] Carolyn McCrary, "Intimate Violence against Black Women and Internalized Shame: A Womanist Pastoral Counseling Perspective," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 28, no. 1 (2000): 34.
[329] D.W. Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 81.

whereas the “false-self” is socially constructed. The task of adolescence is to hold these two selves together while navigating defiant independence and dependence. According to Winnicott, adolescents seek “to form an aggregate through the adoption of an identity of tastes,”[330] which suggests that adolescents are constantly working to hold the multiple components of their identity together. This time period can be experienced as the inevitable turmoil of adolescence Winnicott calls doldrums,[331] which literally means “an equatorial region of the Atlantic Ocean with calms, sudden storms, and light unpredictable winds.”[332] Winnicott uses this term to highlight the sporadic ebbs and flows of adolescence.

In order for the adolescent to develop healthily, signified by their ability to hold the components of themselves together, they must have a “holding environment” that can tolerate their doldrums. Winnicott defines a holding environment as an adaptive, supportive environment that is responsive to the child’s particular needs.[333] He asserts that children repeatedly test the strength of their holding environments by talking back, having an attitude, or by being defiant throughout childhood, and particularly, adolescence. They do this to determine if they have a *strong* holding environment or a *weak* holding environment.

The *strong* holding environment is able to endure those childlike behaviors ultimately leading to the child’s personal growth, sense of security, and their freedom to develop. Maintaining this kind of holding environment requires the caregiver to respond to the child’s individualized needs appropriately and lovingly. Maintenance might include appropriate discipline, provision of care, and a recognition of the child’s developing sense of self. Once the

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[330] Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development*, 102.
[331] Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development*, 84.
[332] Webster Dictionary
[333] D.W. Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 27.

child recognizes that their holding environment is unwavering, they are free to be children and eventually develop a strong sense of self, a capacity to self-regulate emotions, and a sense of autonomy. A *weak* holding environment, on the other hand, responds to tantrums or defiant behaviors either harshly or not at all. Oftentimes, this type of holding environment lacks clear boundaries, is physically and/or emotionally abusive, and denies the child the freedom to be a child. A *weak* holding environment is psychologically damaging and ultimately detracts from the child's ability to cope with loss or regulate their emotions; it distorts their sense of self.

It is important to note that the holding environment is not limited to the youth's individual family; it extends to society at large. This means that society must also be able to tolerate the "doldrums" of adolescence and demonstrate a strong holding environment for youth. Unfortunately, due to the myth of White superiority embedded in the US imagination, a strong holding environment does not exist for Black girls in society at large. This is evident in the long-standing history of Black girls depicted as non-beings, the impossible beauty standards stipulating Whiteness as ideal, and school disciplinary policies that punish Black girls yet extend leniency to White girls. Given the uniqueness of Black girlhood experiences and the need for code switching, it is possible that there are multiple "true selves" and multiple "false selves." This complicates Black girlhood development and renders Black girls vulnerable to depression and other symptoms associated with the struggle to build coherent selves. This degree of distress also renders Black girls vulnerable to not being able to recognize themselves as good and made in God's image.

In my view, Winnicott's understanding of adolescent development points to a theological anthropology where embodied goodness (including psychological development) is taken seriously. This notion aligns with the collective work of Womanist pastoral theologians and their

implicit theological anthropology that recognizes that a healthy sense of self serves as a prerequisite for being able recognize the *imago Dei* within. With this in mind, it is worth considering that recognizing the *imago Dei* within requires a strong holding environment. Ideally, the holding environment is maintained by a primary caregiver or surrogate caregivers such as other mothers, sister friends,[334] teachers, or other communal supports. However, holding environments are also theological.

As noted in Colossians 1: 17, God, through Christ, holds together the universe.[335]

> [15] [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; [16] for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. [17] He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together…[19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

While I am not a Bible scholar, Biblical scholar Grant Osborne's scriptural commentary suggests this that this passage was written as by apostle Paul to the Colossians to convey the supremacy and sustaining power of Christ[336][337] – a notion that undercuts the myth of White superiority and recognizes the holding power of Christ. If we take seriously the sustaining power of Christ, we can imagine a theological holding environment that supersedes the weak holding environment of society. The question then becomes: How do we enact a theologically rich holding environment for Black girls? To answer this question thoughtfully, we must begin with Black girl narratives. Only with Black girl insights can we directly assess their needs and respond appropriately.

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[334] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*.
[335] Colossians 1:15-120
[336] 285-86 NT
[337] Grant R. Osborne.. Colossians & Philemon Verse by Verse Oak Harbor: Lexham Press (2016)

The Horizons

Assuredly, building strong holding environments involves addressing the multiple layers and dimensions of Black girlhood. Perhaps we start by including Black girl experiences in Womanist scholarship. Thus far, much of Womanist interrogations of Black womanhood and Black girlhood have overlooked the particular experiences of adolescent development. This deficit calls for a re-centering of Black girl experiences to better understand the necessary criteria of a strong holding environment and advance a Womanish/st pastoral theological reflection reflective of Black girlhood experiences.

## Chapter Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, I referenced a comment Jordan made in our interview: "I know God made us all. I mean. He did make us equal. I think He's trying to tell us to love ourselves and don't let the negativity get to you… Because there's a lot of hate in the world." Jordan's narrative hints at the psychological risks imminent in Black girlhood when your value and attributes are often called into question. At the age of fourteen, Jordan is already aware that there is "a lot of hate in the world." Although she knows that this hate is not from God, it is not clear how Jordan experiences or internalizes this hate. When I asked her about this hate, she struggled to articulate what it meant for her.

This chapter gestured toward unpacking this moment with Jordan through a kaleidoscopic analysis perspective in which I posed Black girlhood as a social construct demanding a theological analysis *and* considered the implications psychologically, also known as psychodynamic theologizing. Toward that end, I described Black girlhood as a theological dilemma in which Black girls are frequently defiled by negative cultural distortions of their

girlhood, despite the fact that they are wonderfully created in God's image. The dilemma is that these cultural distortions often have theological roots. Yet, by centering Black girlhood experiences, we gain new insights and counterstories that disrupt the myth of White supremacy and reasserts that Black girls embody the *imago Dei*.

In the next chapter, I continue with the work of honing in on Black girlhood multidimensional experiences and offer theological reflections based on strengths that emerge from the case study analyses, such as wholeness as a continual process, a Womanish spirituality, and the necessity of "home spaces,"/holding environments [338] and other themes that often surface in my clinical practice.

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[338] Psychologist Janie Victoria Ward's term, "home space," constitutes a secure environment where adolescents can question social inequities, grapple with their identities while in the process of becoming, and learn strategies for resisting racism and sexism effectively.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## TOWARD A WOMANISH/ST PASTORAL THEOLOGY

"Where is your faith?" – Kishundra (age 7)

While working on this dissertation project, I have had many moments of wondering and questioning whether or not I would have taken a younger-me seriously as a voice of theological reflection. Still unsure, I asked my mom if younger-me ever prompted her to see the world differently or reflect theologically. Without hesitation, she shared that I often asked, "Where is your faith?" when she was frustrated or did not see any possibilities or glimmers of hope in dark situations. She recalled that my words would often convict her and challenge her to believe in the "impossible" and honor God's power as limitless and expansive. Initially pleased by my own Black girl brilliance, I began to wonder: *Where did that Black girl go? Something changes during development.*

In *Stages of Faith*: *The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, James Fowler proposes "a theory of growth in faith"[339] that progresses over seven stages: infancy, early childhood, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and maturity. He suggests that developmental theories "allow us to speak of the dynamics of change and transformation. They also allow us to focus on equilibrium and continuity."[340] He clarifies: "as we focus here on the developmental dynamics of faith we must keep in mind that the story of

[339] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Paperback (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), xiii.
[340] Fowler, *Stages of Faith,* 89.

"stages" of faith and human development can give us half of a much larger and richer picture."[341] In other words, styles of faith move and transform over the course of a lifetime—not in a goal-like manner, but toward a larger, richer picture of *faith*. Although Fowler sees faith as a complex concept encompassing the various interrelated dimensions of human meaning-making, it is worth considering that developmental considerations also give rise to alternative glimpses and understandings of God, that, when put together, create an expansive and more robust vision of God's fullness.

This chapter leans into to capturing a more comprehensive, more robust vision of God's fullness by thinking through what I call a *Womanish/st pastoral theological reflection*. In doing so, such reflection hinges on the idea that Black girl narratives often illustrate meaningful messages, ethical considerations, and glimpses of wisdom when taken seriously as *sacred*. Toward that end, in this chapter, I advance a Kaleidoscopic Analytical Perspective (KAP)[342] of Jordan's narrative.

Recall, Jordan—a shy, fourteen-year-old Black girl from Nashville—that I interviewed for this dissertation project. As noted in Chapter Two, my conversation with Jordan was originally designed as a focus group but quickly developed into an interview when the other focus group participants did not show up. My interview with Jordan (in concert with my clinical counseling experiences) revealed that a theological reflection that takes Black girls and their childhood seriously fully commits to understanding/capturing Black girl experiences as a source

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[341] Fowler, *Stages of Faith,* 89.
[342] *KAP* has been described in this dissertation project as a dynamic methodology that engages psychological and theological lenses, known as psychodynamic theologizing, to better understand/grapple with Black girl voices as a focal point for theological reflection from a Womanish/st pastoral perspective. It is based on the premise that age and development are crucial components of our particularity, and therefore, shapes our theological reflections. See Chapters Three and Four.

of epistemology—an undertaking that necessitates the development of a dynamic methodology that examines narratives, first, phenomenologically and contextually to grasp/capture Black girls' ways of being (amid their emerging identities), and second, to draw our focus/attention to themes for theological reflection that align with Black girlhood experiences. This unexpected revelation stimulated the development of KAP, a dynamic method for engaging in a theological reflection that (1) intentionally centers Black girls and their experiences, (2) responds to their precariousness, and (3) acknowledges the multiplicity and relationality embedded in their experiences.[343]

Coming full circle, in this chapter, I engage Jordan's narrative as an epistemological source to demonstrate KAP's function as a method of *Womanish/st* pastoral theological reflection. Embedded in Jordan's story is a sacred narrative that illustrates moral and spiritual lessons. Thus, in my engagement with Jordan's narrative, I emphasize that it is ripe with theological and psychological insights, such that it casts a Womanish pastoral vision(s), a vision that recognizes and embraces opportunities for spiritual empowerment, and encouragement to consider multiple interpretations.

### Jordan's Narrative: A Site for Theological Reflection and Source of Epistemology

When I first met Jordan, I did not know what to expect, given that the questions I prepared were designed to encourage group conversation and dialogue. However, I quickly learned that Jordan had plenty to share in response to the questions posed. One of the first things Jordan shared was her strongly held belief that Black girls are intelligent. When asked about

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[343] An important element of Black girlhood referenced by Black girls themselves in my clinical practice and by Black girlhood scholars and

Black girl intelligence, Jordan described it as a unique form of knowing, rooted from within. "It's our mindset," she said. Although Jordan did not explain what she meant by *mindset*, she clarified that this mindset involved a constant re-storying and the need to remind oneself that they are smart, capable, and powerful regardless of what anyone else says. Throughout our interview, it seemed that Jordan uses this mindset as a strategy for resistance and protection. Yet, with deeper consideration, more evident in Jordan's narrative is a vision of inner strength, resiliency, and the benefits of rituals and expansive affirming communities.

## "It's Our Mindset": A Glimpse Through the Kaleidoscope

Jordan's discussion about the "Black girl mindset" invites us to consider the mechanics of developing such a mindset as described by Margaret Spencer Beal's work on "resiliency that lasts," specifically as it relates to being Black, female, and emerging into adulthood. Spencer Beal's *Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory* (PVEST)[344] asserts that the complex systems of race and gender influence social positions and how they are experienced, thereby shaping beliefs and ideologies. In Jordan's case, her resilient mindset and her reliance on an affirming community influence who she is. It should be noted that this notion of a resilient mindset in Black girlhood is not new nor is it completely unique to Jordan. Scholars in Black childhood studies have long observed that inner strength and perseverance are highly valued and emphasized in Black child development. According to educational psychologist Janie Victoria Ward, a resilient mindset is most notably developed in the parent-child relationship.

### Psychological Considerations of the Mindset

[344] See Chapter Three of this dissertation.

In “Raising Resisters: The Role of Truth Telling in the Psychological Development of African American Girls,” Ward asserts that Black parents directly (and indirectly) incorporate lessons of resistance in their parenting as a means of protecting their children. “African American parents socialize their children based on cultural and political interpretations and assumptions derived from their lived experience of being [B]lack in [White] America.”[345] These parenting practices are a means of protecting Black children from (1) future attacks against and their self-esteem and (2) anticipated devaluation of their humanity.[346] In regards to Black girlhood, in particular, these parental (often maternal) lessons of critical consciousness are meant to “set in place the psychological fortification that [Black girls] will need in order to develop into a competent and confident African American woman.”[347] Ward calls this an “intergenerational transmission of race-related resistance strategies passed down from black parent to adolescent child.”[348] She explains that this type of transmission is a type of social development and learning that ideally takes place in the safety of a *homespace*—a theoretical and actual space for Black child socialization, founded on care, nurture, and refuge. For our consideration, a homespace may also be a congregation, youth group, not-for-profit organizations, or other communities.

While homespace follows the trends of social cognitive models of parenting, such that the child begins to incorporate their parents’ values, attitudes, and behaviors, Ward clarifies that homespace is specific to Black child development and racial socialization. She asserts that a homespace represents a specialized social setting in which Black children learn about, and deal with, social oppressions, such as racism and prejudice, while developing their own racial

[345] Ward, “Raising Resisters,” 86.
[346] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 85.
[347] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 85.
[348] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 86.

identity.[349] Within the confines of homespace, parents provide their children with ways of seeing, doing, and being in the present social and political climate. This includes explicit conversations on race, whereas at other times this might include lessons on how to resist internalizing prevailing negative images and evaluations of Blackness. Echoing bell hooks', Ward explains that this process of developing resistance depends upon the Black family's "ability to invoke an 'oppositional gaze'…to observe the social world critically, and to oppose ideas and ways of being that are disempowering to the self…Lessons of resistance are those that instruct the black child to determine when, where, and how to resist oppression, as well as to know when, where, and how to accommodate to it."

Referencing Black girlhood more specifically, Ward asserts that Black daughters have historically been socialized to practice resistance, while learning gendered roles to care and nurture others (a "traditional" role) *and* work on behalf of the family (a "nontraditional" role).[350] "Parents recognize that their daughters will be at least partially, if not totally, responsible for the financial survival of their families."[351] In a contribution to the "War on Girls" segment of *Essence* magazine, Ward explains that the responsibility of Black mothers, in particular, is to:

> "teach [Black girls] that we come from women who have a legacy of standing up, of speaking out and fighting back…[our] daughters need to know…that strength came not from kicking some other sister's behind, but from never allowing anything to tear them down. Strength came from a clear sense of personal self-worth that was created by a nation of warrior women who made a way out of no way."[352]

In other words, Black mothers often teach Black girls to protect themselves psychologically. A benefit of this is that the strong mindset and sense self-worth helps repudiate negative self-

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[349] Ward, "Raising Resisters."
[350] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 89.
[351] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 89.
[352] Janie Victoria Ward, "A Nation of Warrior Women," *Essence Magazine*, December 2002.

images and helps Black girls control their affective response to oppression.[353] Although the idea of controlling one's affective response seems unfair, Black parents understand that anger is perceived as hostile when expressed by Black girls. Needless to say, Black girls who are not equipped to confront racism healthily have a higher risk of falling victim to self-deception, self-hatred, and emotional distress. In essence, a homespace is a space for Black children, more specifically Black girls, to develop and protect their mindset—a mindset that circumvents disruptions to recognizing the *imago Dei* within and recognizes/maintains that they were created in God's image.

## Theological/Spiritual Considerations of the Mindset

This connection to "the mindset" and the recognition of being created in God's image is not a novel idea. It is a reiteration of the consideration by Womanist pastoral theologians to identify cultural trauma(s) as theological problems that inhibit Black women's abilities to see themselves as "fearfully and wonderfully made,"[354] to which Womanist pastoral theologians respond with pastoral care models directed at repairing the breach. Consider Carolyn McCrary's schema for the wholeness of women and Crumpton's use of empathy: both utilize psychodynamic theologizing to address the *imago Dei*. Psychodynamic theologizing has a bent toward wholeness. However, while wholeness and continuity are important theological aims, centering Black girlhood experiences directs us to consider wholeness as a relational, non-linear process, rather than an end goal.

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[353] Ward, "Raising Resisters," 91.
[354] See Psalm 139:14 NSRV: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well."

Recognizing wholeness as a process illuminates the possibility that wholeness is not synonymous with unity. This leads to ask: What does the process of "wholeness" entail? And how do we maintain it? One possible means of maintaining wholeness could be the transmission of moral wisdom from one generation to the next.

In Katie Geneva Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*, she explains that there is a unique ethical and moral code embedded in the Black female community garnered by historical accounts of racism, sexism, and classism, and passed down generation-to-generation for the purposes on ongoing survival. Cannon adds that "[this] moral wisdom, handed down from mother to daughter as the crystallized result of experience aimed to teach [daughters] not only how to survive but also how to prevail with integrity against the cruel systems of triple oppression."[355] Moral wisdom for Black women and girls is historically and socially located and passed on through tradition. Cannon names that Black women's embodiment of moral wisdom is enhanced by theo-ethical themes in Black religious heritage,[356] such as the "*imago Dei*, love as grounded in justice, and the irreplaceable nature of community."[357] Accordingly, it is worth considering that homespace is not only psychological, but also a conduit for moral wisdom that informs our theological perspective and orients our ways of being in the world, social witness, and continued recognition of the *imago Dei*. Therefore, when we attend to Black girl as moral subjects and consider their day-to-day lives as site for ethical reflection, we find new possibilities for ethical categories to represent "both/and" perspectives rather than one-size fits all solutions.

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[355] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 101.
[356] The Black religious experience of the antebellum Black church equipped Black slaves with a religion that prompted them to act/fight against the "sources of their oppression."
[357] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 160.

**A Glimpse Through the Kaleidoscope at Black Girlhood Spirituality**

*"God wants us to be ourselves because there's a lot of hate in the world. Don't let anything change you because of what people say." 18:50 (is this a transcription notation?)*

A pivotal moment in my conversation with Jordan emerged when we talked about her inner spirit. Jordan casually explained that she is "constantly telling [herself] that 'I am intelligent, I am beautiful, I am smart, I am strong'."[358] She also shared that she posted these "I am" statements on her mirror to remind herself of who she is when she looks at herself in the morning. In essence, she actively negotiates what is reflected in the mirror because she is clear that she is not who people says she is—thereby invoking an "oppositional gaze." This process reflects Black youth spirituality, often described by Ward as a source of strength and purpose that deflects negativity.[359]

According to Ward, Black parents tend to be chronically aware of social inequalities that have the potential to wear on Black youth; they teach their youth skills and practices, often connected with themes of faith, to build a reservoir of internal strength capable of continuously resisting oppression and despair. The point of these lessons and practices is to develop spiritual and ideological beliefs that hold sustaining power and ultimately provide meaning to life. While Ward notes that some aspects of spirituality and religious teachings are absorbed as we age,[360] she clarifies that the Black church is fundamental to the development of spirituality. She explains:

> [the] black church helps us in countless…ways… It serves as an extended home space where African Americans of all ages can feel both secure and free to teach and learn the lessons of black community. It is where as children we learned the lessons that help us

[358] Interview 4:02

[359] Janie Victoria Ward, *The Skin We're In: Teaching Our Children to Be: Emotionally Strong, Socially Smart, Spiritually Connected* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 247.

[360] Ward, *The Skin We're In*, 251.

> "hold on": the sustenance of prayer and music, the healing and energizing power of spiritual assistance, the pleasure and importance and meaningful rituals.[361]

Black youth spirituality is both abstract and tangible—abstract in that it is an internal source of strength and purpose, and tangible in that it is rooted and developed in relational experiences.

This view of spirituality became clearer in my conversation with Jordan about her morning rituals and mantras. As we talked about her daily practices, Jordan reflected on their importance because they remind her that "I am not who they say I am." Jordan explained that she suspects this daily process is different from those of White girls because no one questions who White girls are but are readily suspicious of Black girls. As such, she needed a practice, or mantra, to counteract oppressive forces. Reminiscent of Womanist rituals of resistance that "admonishes us to "tell our truths, 'anyway,' even when they tell us the truth is a lie,"[362] Jordan's morning mantras served as creative disruptions and barriers to intrusive, negative self-talk. And, while some Womanist rituals are communal and serve to acknowledge connectedness and spirit,[363] Jordan's rituals are established in her everydayness to, first, restore and prepare her inner spirit for the anticipated challenges of the day, and second, to remind herself of who she really is (embodied goodness).

Interestingly, "who she actually is" became a sticking point near the end of the interview when I asked Jordan "How'd you get so intelligent?" Immediately, she beamed with excitement, unable to contain her bright smile as she asked, "You think I'm smart?" This moment mattered. It was as if I saw her, affirmed her, and reflected back to her who she actually is. As a result, her demeanor—her spirit—grew taller. This interaction pointed to a communal and relational aspect

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[361] Ward, *The Skin We're In*, 248.
[362] Revolutionaries in Zion, Canon's essay.
[363] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, 137.

of spirituality. that strengthens or empowers one spirit. This moment of "spiritual empowerment" was generated by the psychological process of mirroring which enabled Jordan being able to see herself more clearly.

## Psychological Considerations of Black Girlhood Spirituality

In my view, the aforementioned moment was an instance of needed mirroring, possibly suggesting that hearing it from her parent, or herself, was not quite enough to seal it into Jordan's psyche. As such, Jordan's reactions pushed me to consider a renewed vision of spirituality—one with the boldness of a mantra and one that include opportunities for appropriate mirroring from a self-psychological perspective. More specifically, it prompted me to consider that mirroring presumes recognition of one's humanity.

The concept of mirroring I reference stems from self-psychologist Heinz Kohut, whose self-development theory posits that the structure of intrapsychic self develops relationally in a shared relational system. In this system, interpersonal interactions, typically between a child and their early caregivers, function as psychic and emotional exchanges which shape who we are and how we understand ourselves in relation to others. [364] While Kohut's iteration of this theory is more complex than what is included here, important for our consideration is that certain emotional needs must be met in order for a healthy development of the self. And mirroring is one of those needs.

Similar to people using mirrors to check appearance, a mirroring encounter involves the use of the affirming, empathic, and positive responses of others to identify positive traits within the self, leading to the development of inner strength, security, and belonging. As pastoral

[364] Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence*, 32.

theologian and practitioner Edward Wimberly explains, mirroring is essential for youth because it is a processing of seeing and being seen. He explains that there are people that come into to your life and are able to help you recognize who you are and who you could be.[365] So, Jordan's reaction when I affirmed her intelligence, even when she had a spiritual practice in place on her actual mirror, emphasized the relational need/necessity of mirroring in Black girl adolescence/spirituality. Simply put, it is worth considering that Black girls cannot fully recognize their embodied goodness on their own.

While Kohut does not explore a theory of recognition from a self-psychological perspective, appropriate and empathic responses hinge on the matrix of recognition in the encounter. This matrix informs mutual recognition or an openness to see and be seen. In sum, this encounter embodied a spiritual practice of seeing yourself as who you are through another's eyes. When I recognized Jordan as intelligent, she did not disagree with me. She beamed with excitement because I confirmed what she already thought was true: she is intelligent.

On one hand, this realization invites a reflection on increased opportunities for recognition and mirroring in worship spaces, however, as a womanist pastoral theologian, I am interested in the function/process of being seen for who you really are, especially as it relates to Black girlhood spirituality. What comes to mind is the embodied process of social witness.

## Theological Considerations of Black Girlhood Spirituality

In *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness,* Townes describes social witness as a conduit of Womanist spirituality. She explains that "[womanist] spirituality is

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[365] Edward P. Wimberly, Dr. Edward P. Wimberly on Mirroring & Youth Ministry, interview by Yale Youth Ministry Institute, YouTube, June 13, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_92fvakf36U.

embodied, personal, and communal."[366] And, given its rootedness in Womanist wisdom and experiences, Womanist spirituality commands acts of compassion, justice, and the dismantling of oppression. According to Townes,

> Womanist spirituality is not only a way of living, it is a style of witness that seeks to cross the yawning chasm of hatreds and prejudices and oppression into a deeper and richer love of God as we experience Jesus in our lives. This love extends to others and to others. It holds together the individual in the community in a soulful relationship that cannot dwell more on one than the other partner of the relation but holds both in the same frame.[367]

Social witness fits within the framework because it describes a process of seeing, knowing, and doing that ultimately steers and orients our relationships. In Jordan's case, mirroring acted as a form of social witness. Mirroring involved an intrapsychic process between the two of us that reminded Jordan of who she is and strengthened her spirit.

Additionally, the social witnessing dynamic between Jordan and me unearthed/brought into focus the inter-relational and intergenerational aspect of God. As Marcia Riggs explains in "Living as Religious Mediators: A Vocation for People of Faith in the Twenty-first Century," "[it] is in our encounters with one another and desire to develop interpersonal relationships that the *imago Dei* begins to come into full focus."[368] She contends that encounters are integral to how we come to know God as it envelops a postmodern way of knowing through varied forms of connection. The reference to postmodernity reminds us that we define and re-define who we are in and through relationships with others. Therefore, it is worth considering our need for support in defining (and re-defining) ourselves as embodied goodness made in the image of God. This

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[366] Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 13.
[367] Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory,* 11.
[368] Marcia Riggs, "Living as Religious Mediators: A Vocation for People of Faith in the Twenty-First Century," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emile M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 249.

notion acknowledges that the *imago Dei* is fluid and not merely within us but also between and among us.

Jordan's surprise and delight in hearing that I thought she was smart sparked something within me. It mirrored back to me that I had something to offer. Prior to this moment in the encounter, I understood my role as the interviewer. However, this particular moment situated me as a participant in the web of social witness. And, this web is grounds for a *Womanish spirituality*—a form of spirituality that is (1) simultaneously abstract and tangible, (2) actively engaged in resistance strategies, (3) rooted in who we *actually* are, (4) operative in the betwixt and between spaces, and (5) decidedly interdependent. While more work needs to be done on Womanish spirituality, my conversation with Jordan is illustrative of Womanish spirituality because "[a] womanish young Black girl must not only be in charge, a gatherer of knowledge, but she must be serious about her task. Who she is makes her dangerous to hegemony."[369]

## A Third Look Through the Kaleidoscope: Keep it Simple

*"God just wants you to do your best and love everyone. He wants us to love one another. Showing kindness. Respect one another…Love thy neighbor."* - Jordan

The third and final look through the kaleidoscope is simple: Just do your best. In my view, Jordan's message is clear, concrete, and explicit. It is also a gentle reminder that all ideas or invocations of wisdom are not abstract or disguised by theory. In many cases, academics and theorists trend towards developing complex interpretations and "deeper" analyses in favor of "scholarly" sophistication. However, simplicity is just as sophisticated and enlightening as it eliminates unnecessary distractions in favor of clarity. To be clear, simplicity is not without

[369] Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 9.

context; Jordan reminds us that we do not have to complicate or complexify what God wants for us.

## Toward a Womanish/st Pastoral Vision

Jordan's message of simplicity is foundational for a Womanish/st pastoral vision: a vision that invites an abstract *and* concrete theological reflection, recognizes the fullness of Black girls' humanity, and acknowledges the transmission of moral wisdom betwixt and between generations —all while centering Black girls' *Womanish* wisdom.

In "The Womanish Roots of Womanism: A Culturally-Derived and African-Centered Ideal (Concept)", Dorothy Randall Tsuruta affirms Womanish as the roots of Womanism. She argues that Womanism is not a derivative of feminism. Instead, Womanism is culturally and inextricably linked to the term culturally specific term "Womanish." Tsurata explains that Womanish embodies a culturally derived ideal that "is rooted in the social practice of Black adults, especially Black women, of setting boundaries for Black girls, but simultaneously recognizing their coming into their own as women, making clear and steady steps toward maturity."[370] Womanish reflects the particularity of Black girls who have the wit, gumption, curiosity, and stubbornness necessary to "remain strong against attempts to undermine her intelligence or kill her spirit."[371] And, Womanish is operative in the folds of Womanist thought.[372] In this way, this dissertation, in itself, captures a vision of a Womanish/st pastoral theology.

[370] Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism," 3.
[371] Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism," 4.
[372] Tsurata, "The Womanish Roots of Womanism,"5–6.

This dissertation correlates dialogue between Black girl narratives, theological reflection, and findings from a socio-cultural critical analysis. In doing so, it introduces the Kaleidoscopic Analytical Perspective (KAP) as a method for psychodynamic theologizing with and for Black girls. To keep it simple, KAP is just the starting point for a Womanish/st pastoral theology, giving us access and insights into “not so sage” wisdom.

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