

# Searching for Paradise in a World of Theme Parks: Toward A Womanist Ethic of Care\*

Emilie Townes, Associate Professor of Christian Social Ethics  
and Black Church Ministry  
*Saint Paul School of Theology*  
*Kansas City, Missouri*

when i was a little girl

i spent a good deal of time trying to conjure up heaven

i thought that if i could just imagine those angels, those harps, those clouds

then i wouldn't be so scared of this big angry white-haired,  
white-bearded, white furrow-browed God the minister  
preachified about on those Sunday mornings in Southern  
Pines, North Carolina

i thought if i could see those fluffy clouds

sit on those soft-with-goose-down couches

move around with grace and style as my walk was a *glide* all  
over heaven

always being good, never having to worry about being bad

smell the tasty (cause i just knew anything that had to do  
with heaven had to be tasty) food

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the fried chicken  
 the hot-with-butter rolls  
 the spoon bread  
 the gravy made from chicken grease  
 the fresh greens  
 the fresh string beans  
 the big-grained rice  
 the macaroni and cheese  
 the mashed potatoes  
 the candied yams, coming right from the ground  
 the standing rib roast  
 the salmon croquettes  
 the salads--lettuce and tomato  
 the cakes--pound, coconut, chocolate  
 the pies--apple, sweet potato, chess, pecan  
 the kool-aid  
 the lemonade  
 the sweetened tea ('cause there was no such thing as  
     *unsweetened* tea when i was growing up)  
 and butter, butter, butter, butter

i realize now that i was associating heaven  
 with the way my grandmama's house  
 smelled on Saturday night and Sunday

i thought if i could hear the good music, 'cause even my playmates  
 and i knew that all angels knew the beat, could carry a tune and  
 played a mean harp

then i wouldn't worry so much

when the men in white sheets marched through the  
 black section of town where my grandmother and  
 all the other loving people i knew lived

i thought if i could just conjure up heaven in my mind

and in my heart

and in my prayers

then maybe

just maybe. . .

it seems interesting to me now, years later, that i never once  
consciously associated paradise with what i saw and felt on earth  
when i was a little girl

and now in our worlds of knowledge and our ability to create and  
shape our environment to fit our own levels of comfort

it is hard to imagine paradise

sometimes

that isn't beyond our technical expertise

we seem to be mired in a world of facts

statistics

data

numbers

flow charts

pie charts

forecasts and projections

we seem to delight in our abilities to prove or disprove

anything

everything

and the reality of nothing

we use our technical brilliance to explain

codify

compartmentalize

delineate

elaborate

we have created our own worlds and oceans of fun

flags over Texas

Georgia

St. Louis

river boats of delight

funhouses of sex

peep shows on paper and video and flesh

shooting galleries of death

and

enclaves of holiness

we seem to have so much knowledge

so much ability to theorize and cogitate and construct

that it often feels like womanist reflection and work is like  
searching for paradise in a world of theme parks

for far too many of us have become beggars at the table of  
religions that sanction our own destruction

we find ourselves content to live out the weary  
drama of an outdated carousel of momentary  
ecstasies

and some of us think that this is holy

i, quite frankly, have renewed my search for paradise

*Eschatological Notes on Caring*

This paradise is not collapsed solely into a terrifying apocalypse howling in the end of human history. It is connected to an understanding of humanity and our value systems and our world. Therefore, this paradise I seek, is largely focused on this life for it is intimately linked to a Hebraic focus on a good and long life as the goal of each person. This paradise causes us to hope to live on into the next generation and expects God's judgment and/or salvation in this world, it is the Day of the Lord. This prophetic eschatology envisions God accomplishing divine plans within our context through human agents. Yet it yokes with an apocalyptic eschatology that finds hope and judgment in the future. It may be that we are facing the terrible Day of the Lord and we are failing to repent.

This Day of the Lord is eschatological and salvific. Eschatologically, the tension is between our present social order and the coming Day. It is historical and temporal in this regard and provides a theo-ethical foundation for the transformation of society. This search for paradise is not a desperate search for just any kind of revelation. It is a soul-deep and wish-filled conviction that our current circumstances are not ultimately definitive or inevitable. This eschatological hope seeks consolation and fortitude in a difficult reality that holds within it evil and devastation as well as hope and a righteous justice.

Therefore, the salvific dimension of this paradise is not otherworldly. Salvation, here, embraces all of humanity for it is our kinship and relationship with God and with one another. Through this embrace, we are transformed body and spirit, individuals and society, persons and cosmos, time and eternity.<sup>1</sup> It is transformatory. The

salvation we seek must not be formed out of rampant individualism. It is one that joins in community as God touches all of humanity in a caress that is neither sentimental nor a gross spiritualization. It is one forged out of God's relentless love for us regardless of our willingness to recognize or accept such love. Yet when we enter into genuine lament out of the recognition that we need, if not yearn, for a balm and not human-made panaceas, that we open up the opportunity for God's salvation and healing to shower us with transforming power such that we can and do seek to form a world that holds the opportunity for each of us to live into justice and wholeness, it social and political.

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It is important to note that everything we do is mediated by our bodies. Part of the dilemma the Christian community faces when addressing justice is rooted in a negative dualism that separates the body and the spirit. This Cartesian separation does more than split us apart, it fractures us in such a way that we often believe and live as if our bodies and spirits have no influence on each other. We live together in a somewhat uneasy coexistence within the splinters of this fracturing. This is ironic given the way in which the material world is such a vital part of our lives. We eschew healthy living and justice itself in relentless drives for status, money, power, and privilege.

The theological root of the body-spirit fracture is the traditional Christian theological formulation of the meaning of incarnation in which being is that which is in the body yet not of it. This Cartesian formulation belies the ways in which the body is basic to much of the imagery we have concerning Jesus from nativity to crucifixion as well as our own embodiedness. The nativity is a very embodied experience. If you have spent any time in a stable you are aware of the strong odors present. The nose, the eye, and the ear are attuned to the very fleshiness and fecundity of life that is a part of a stable. The sights, smells, and sounds of birth, life, and death are very much a part of the living that happens in this environment. Yet our representations of the nativity, our conscious and unconscious imaginings of the scene often take all the is-ness of the birth of Jesus away from us. We imagine and often worship an antiseptic scene that is pleasing to a deodorized faith.

Yet as we move from the birth to Jesus' life, we see the richness of the body returning again and again to the story of Jesus. He was a carpenter, a man who worked with his body to create that which was needed in his society. Carpentry is a very physical trade. It

requires a keen eye, muscles toned to handle the sometimes intricate work needed as well as the force that must be employed. It requires maneuvering one's body and using one's body to maneuver objects. It can be hot and tiring work that causes sweat and smell and exhaustion. Yet we separate the reality of carpentry from Jesus far too often as we reflect back on these early days of his life--if we pause to consider the now contemporary working class trade he practiced at all.

The stories of Jesus sharing meals with others are replete in the gospels. Yet we tend to *spiritualize* these stories and name them miracles, which they were. We do so before we recognize the ways in which they provided concrete bodily sustenance to people. The turning of water into wine, the story of the loaves and fishes are narratives that spark the mystery of miracles for us. Yet they are also stories that point to the physical needs we have for food and drink. When we separate the mystery from the way in which it touches our humanity to offer a window *into* the mystery, we invite a fracturing of body and soul.

Many of our Christian rituals take place on the believer's body. Most of them are a re-enactment of the story of Jesus' body. In baptism, it is water that is washed on our bodies; in confirmation and ordination, we have the laying on of hands; in communion, we take in drink and bread. There is a very concrete and physical aspect to Christian faith that we often ignore because of the body-spirit fracture we have in our faith and in our understanding of faithfulness. When we live out of an incarnational understanding that takes us out of the *dynamic* dualism we have of body *and* spirit then we lapse into the *deadly* dualism that tells us that the body is inferior, if not evil, and must be transcended by the spirit of Jesus.

This poses an interesting dilemma when we state that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. His humanity, his appetites, temptations, sufferings, tend to be devalued or moved into a spiritualized realm that takes him out of the world. We do not deal seriously with the fullness of Jesus' humanity. Instead, we hold him in a transcendent realm that really does not touch us in concrete ways. He becomes the Divine Wholly Holy Other and moves out of our sight and out of the possibility of our being able to really model our lives on his humanity. We are desperately *less than* rather than believers of the fullness of his humanity and the hope that brings for all of us.

This devaluing of the body takes many forms in our society. In some cases it manifests itself as ageism, in others it is sexism, heterosexism, militarism, homophobia, classism, racism. All of these

fracturings of the body and the spirit destroy our health. We need to develop a sense of caring for each other and for ourselves; we need a communal lament to bring us back together again and to heal.

Developing caring relationships, an ethic of care, is a key social ingredient in resisting the multiple ways we fracture ourselves and cease being and living as brothers and sisters, as the body of Christ. Our churches and our worship services have become theaters rather than communities of healing, hope, and reconciliation. Our chapels hold platforms, like stages for the clergy and robed (or unrobed) choir rather than altars that are true welcome tables of sustenance and justice and spirit.

We live in a magnificently arrogant self-righteousness that tempts us daily to believe that we are *not* called to be organic communities of God, where each person is as important as the other. This is a damned lie. For we *are* to reach out as we reach within to shape and mold a genuine discipleship that is respectful and loving of diversity and difference, not merely tolerant of it. We are *not* called to live in a mean-spirited individualism that lures us away from the fact that you and I cannot heal in isolation. *We need each other.*

One way to begin to find ourselves is to develop a sense of empathy beyond the intellectual identification of oneself with another. As a moral virtue, empathy means that we put ourselves in the place of another. This means sharing *and* understanding the emotional and social experiences of others and coming to see the world as they see it. We move away from *those people* and *they* language and behavior to *we* and *us* and *our* ways of living and believing.

Yet empathy is only one layer to finding our way to justice and establishing communities upon communities that are equitable and just. We also need to reconfigure our understanding of love. In doing so, we begin to realize that we need to live our lives as if we are more united than separated. This does not mean a mindless and essentializing drive toward a unity that is fraught with hegemony. Rather it is to move in the direction of a commitment to deepen our understanding and respect for one another in our uniqueness and in our commonality without one overriding or subsuming the other.

This love, which is agapic *and* erotic, realizes the tensions and indecision with which we all live. The agapic dimension of this care is that which is unselfish and seeks the good for all of us, not just the common good. Therefore it is concerned for self *and* for others. It is a very interested love that questions self-sacrifice, self-denial, genocide,



and other forms of annihilation that are often held, by our cultures, as greater goods or necessary evils. The erotic dimension of this care is our individual and collective creative energy in which we feel what we are doing passionately and fully.<sup>2</sup> The aim of our lives becomes making that which we do in our lives, and in the lives of those generations yet to come, richer and more viable. We live our lives from the inside outward in such a manner that we begin to take on a deep responsibility for ourselves and a sense of accountability to others. We move away from the ways in which we numb ourselves through food, drink, acquisition. We choose a way of living that is an ever-evolving mutuality that seeks justice for all of creation. This erotic dimension helps us care because we seek genuine change within the world rather than a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

### *Hope*

And such is the yoking of the call for genuine lament and the call to faithfulness as we live in the present to live into the future. If we want to understand what racial justice and all forms of justice will look like for future generations, we need only look at what we are doing now. Our future is conditioned on the present and the past. Our legacy, as a nation, and as a church is not always an admirable one when it comes to how we have treated one another's uniqueness as part of blessed creation. The task before us, as we lament and as we search for faithfulness, cannot be conditioned by disillusionment, fear, or cynicism.<sup>3</sup> Such reactions and the actions they spark are defeatist and nihilistic. The ethic of care that is rooted in a search for paradise must travel up the rough side of the mountain and retain its passion, its commitment, its vision, its hope, *regardless*.

We live in a time that demands a communal lament. The realities and some of the history of what racism has been for far to many human folks in our country are our contemporary locusts. It is like "what the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten." (Joel 1:4, NRSV) It is time we blow the trumpet in our contemporary Zion and sanctify a fast. It will take all of us, peoples of color and white, male and female, young and old to carry out a communal lament. For only a lament that comes from all of us can address the complexities of what

healing ourselves into justice can and must mean for genuine faithfulness in God.

The film, *Daughters of the Dust* by the African American film maker, Julie Dash, is stunning in its power and scope. It tells the story of a Black sea-island, or Gullah family, preparing to come to the mainland at the turn of the century. It is told through the eyes of the Unborn Child who already loves her family, the Peazants, fiercely, and who understands that she is traveling on a spiritual mission. But in her own words, she admits that "sometimes I get distracted."

There is a powerful speech near the end of the film from the character, Eula, who has been raped by a white man. The narrator, the Unborn Child, is her child. Only the audience knows that the child Eula carries is truly the one she conceived, in love, with her husband Eli. As Eula speaks, she calls the women to task for ostracizing Yellow Mary, a prostitute, who turned to this life after her own experience of rape. Yellow Mary had come home to the island to be with her family again and to heal. Eula reminds them all that the fate and hope of Yellow Mary are their own, no one escapes the ravages of evil, no one stands outside the promise. Then she turns to the younger women and the words are for us as well.

There's going to be all kinds of roads to take in life....Let's not be afraid to take them. We deserve them, because we're all good women. Do you...do you understand who we are, and what we have become? We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can....We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us. We wear our scars like armor,...for protection. Our mother's scars, our sister's scars, our daughter's scars...Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.

a lament *and* a cry for deliverance

to break the fine rain of death that is falling in the lives of far too many colored folk in the united states

when it comes to justice and equality

to say, on one hand

    this is a demanding or difficult task

    that in some way we live in a social system

    that in effect calls some of us to prove or justify our very lives  
    in a court of science that may be structured so that some of us

        need not apply for justice or mercy or equality or  
        harmony or peace

    that we see (when we do not sense) that there are false  
    accusations lining the fabric of our lives

    that we are involved in an ill-designed and misbegotten contest

        that is deadly and inhumane

to say, on the other hand

    that we have expectations of and for ourselves

    that we have dreams that can be more powerful than the  
    nightmares

    possibilities more radical than the realities

    and a hope that does more than cling to a wish

        or wish on a star

        or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its  
        teeth

                after dining on a meal of disaster and  
                violence

we live in a challenge that should compel us to cry out in a communal  
lament that is brimming with hope

yet we are caught in a tension that rends the body and soul

one is Greek and classical

the other is biblical

the hope that is the standing ground for a womanist ethic of care is not the Greek

it is not the hope of Pandora's box

for Pandora, hope is an evil that comes to confuse the human spirit

Pandora's hope is one that causes us to miss the opportunities of the present because we are expecting something else

our spirits are in the future, not the present  
and so we wallow in confusion in a melancholy and morbid hopefulness for what will not come

it is not the hope of Aristotle

for he compares those who hope to naive youth

the hopeful are unrealistic

they believe too much in the good found in life

it is not the hope of Goethe

for Goethe believed "why roam in the distance? see, the good lies so near. learn only to achieve happiness, then happiness is always there"

it is not the hope of Camus

for Camus' myth of Sisyphus was to teach us that we should "think clearly and do not hope"

for Camus, hope is a tool of political and economic charlatans  
who sell life-destroying illusions in the cold porridge of  
hopefulness

no, the cry of lament that leads to hope we must have must be  
unequivocal and unambiguous

it is a hope that is found within the pages of scripture

it is enduring and pervasive

it is positive, it is the divine power of life

it is the expectation of a justice-filled future established on  
God's promise and supported by our ever-evolving and  
deepening trust in God

it cannot detach the human spirit from the present through mad  
delusions and flights of fancy

hope does not empty out our lives

it is the new heaven and the new earth

it is the eternal life of all God's creatures

who are brought to this place through God's justice

no this hope

is one that pulls the promise of the future into the present

and places the present into the dawn of a future that is on the  
rimbones of glory

For in the midst of a lament that cries out for salvation that  
leads to healing is hope. It is all too true, however, that we may hope,  
but we tinge our hope with skepticism. We forget or neglect the  
miracle of God working in us is that God takes our brokenness, the  
threads of our lives, and weaves masterpieces.

It is all well and good to talk about hope. But that conversation needs to be grounded in the lives of people who are struggling to live on into the next minute, let alone into the next day, or year. To explore the fullness of hope means to push beyond the ways in which hope imbues us with strength to acknowledge that our hopes are often tinged with skepticism, we are often afraid to live them, we can and do lose hope, and sometimes it takes sheer mulishness to hold on to it. Hope makes us vulnerable, sometimes our hopes are misplaced.

To hope does not mean that we can now ignore or suppress the meannesses of life. But we are often tempted to do so in an ill-designed search for an otherworldly, heavenly utopia. This is a dangerous place for us to stand as well. Rather than hold the prophetic and apocalyptic together in an eschatological hope, we fragment them into so many pieces. We can, and often do, only pick up those pieces that reshape reality in such a way that only a few can possibly benefit from this new design. Hope requires both covenant and commitment. It requires our decision and action to engage in exodus crossings that are not designed to annihilate peoples and their cultures, but one that seeks to transform fragmented communities.

### *Despair and Victimization*

This hope is part of who we are, how we are, and made manifest in our interactions with others. It reflects a trust in the goodness of a God who listens and responds to our communal lament that is a true act of repentance and trust. We are living in the midst of a plague of locusts. It is the task of each of us, as we join with others, to cry out and then live out a new vision for our lives. For we know and then act on that knowing that what we have now is not fated by necessity. It can and must be changed.

We turn away from despair. For Jürgen Moltmann, despair is the “tacit absence of meaning, prospects, future purpose.”<sup>4</sup> To despair is signaling that we have no confidence, no expectation, no yearning for a tangible justice or an immeasurable love. We have abdicated, we have given up. We have no confidence that our lament for salvation, our cry to our communities that we must, absolutely must, begin to choose justice in whatever small or large ways we can will do any good. So we sit and we walk and crawl and we stumble and run toward our own annihilation.

African Americans and all Americans must move out of a rhetoric of victimization that has taken hold like a dog to bone in our public and private conversations. As much as all of our lives are a cultural production, you and I must also acknowledge our individual and collective choices in how we live our lives, even in the midst of death-dealing socioeconomic and cultural realities. If you and I refuse even a limited agency when it comes to living and doing justice, then we abdicate our agency and place our fate in the hands of a powerful and absolute dominating Other that is not divine but all too human, if not inhumane. To assent to victimization, be that assent conscious or unconscious, is to live lives of hopelessness and despair. For Black folks, it is to believe the inaccurate but very effective media portrayals that African Americans are hopelessly trapped in pathologies of our own making without any recognition or analysis of larger social structures that defeat caring, compassion, and respect for all humanity and the earth itself.

The sometimes mindless, other times calculated, assertion and or declaration of a rhetoric of victimization is sinful. It does not place any of us on a higher moral ground but allows us to make claims that are often unjust and allow us to abdicate from our responsibility to work with God as partners seeking justice and wholeness. To give victimization such a large hand in all our lives means that we are no longer seeking mutual or harmonious relationships. Rampant individualism, which often fuels this rhetoric of victimization, has turned back on us in such a way that the moral arc of the universe bends toward the self (and its gain) rather than to the community (and what it means to work and live in mutuality). And there is no justice to be found. We are falling into a weird solipsism in which we are bound within the walls of our ideologies rather than expanding our vision into a radical future based on justice.

James Gustafson provides a helpful warning at this juncture. He cautions us against

. . .excessively moralizing against those who are in despair and against a Pollyana “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” optimism. The presence of despair will not be overcome by bland assurances that the abyss of hope is deeper than the abyss of despair given to those for whom there is little or no

confirmation of the reliability of persons and communities, of the openness of the future.<sup>5</sup>

Despair and the rhetoric of victimization are the natural enemies of hope. If, however, we cannot provide a hefty hope that moves in transformatory ways that are concrete and specific as they also call for vision and trust, then we cannot expect any ethic of care that is needed to address the very real inequities of life to have meaning for those who have either fallen into despair or been placed there by hegemonic forces.

This hope is far more than optimism. It moves beyond images and constructions of fatedness. This hope must be crafted out of the fight against despair and victimization. We begin this work by accepting individual and communal accountability and complicity in how we have and have not responded to the declining fate of the American dispossessed and what seems, even to my hope-filled eyes, a slow slide into genocide and holocaust.

Hope is based on the possibilities and the promises. Ultimately it rests on God's promise to us: "And my people shall never again be put to shame." (Joel 2:27) Yet this is joined by the admonition that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:31) Genuine lament guides us into a life-giving openness to the possibilities rather than mire our present or our tomorrows in narcotic selfishness and disinterest.

*Away (A Way) From the Theme Parks*

this hope

is lament

is community

is love

is justice

it is the very heart and soul of who we are and how we are and how we can be and how far we have yet to go



it is the spirit of promise

it is the spirit of refusing to accept the realities in which we all dwell

in which we try to survive--and do survive

in which we try to live and sometimes, through amazing feats  
of moving through

we not only live, but thrive

actually shimmer with life and hope and justice and  
righteous, righteous

o so holy and righteous anger

this hope reminds us that we cannot accept the death-dealing and life-  
denying ways in which we have often structured our existences

or had our worlds ordered for us

we must, through a faith that is grounded in what the wise old folks tell  
us about living and hoping and refusing and cussing and praying and  
doing

the work of love and justice to bring ourselves home again

to realize that our lives, our bodies are precious

our minds are priceless

our souls are to be cherished

and we must resist the western model of ripping ourselves  
apart

the Christian dogmas that encourage us to neglect parts of  
blessed createdness

the made in American brand of violence against everybody and everything

and re-cast our ways of being

for many of our ways of being are killing us

none too softly and with a song that assaults our very souls and spirits

hope sustains us as we refuse to accept the smallnesses of life

the amazing acts of violence and hatred

the awful indignities we inflict on others and others inflict on us

and dis-eased and mal-nourished bodies we carry around like postmodern cadavers

performing morbid minstrels shows

that no longer entertain

and our black-face does not come off

hope reminds us that there is celebrating the spirit that lives and breathes life into us beyond the seeing and knowing and believing we can do

it is a solid hope, a hope that will never fail us and never leave us alone and without support

when it's the spirit showering us with grace and hope and love

then we are set free to serve

and free others

with full hearts--we can do this

with a full ministry--God's church is never put to shame

your sons and your daughters

your young and your old

your free and your slave

them is us

and *we* are the church

we are called to love ourselves

to love one another

*to love God hard*

if we are to *live* out

the pouring of God's spirit in our lives

we must reach out to our brothers and sisters

and touch creation with our hearts and souls

the spirit will let us do much more

but it will not tolerate much less

and still allow us to name ourselves faithful

God's spirit is showering us

a womanist ethic of care asks us *these* questions

will we stand in the midst of the flux,

seek forgiveness

move on in faith  
 and work to create a justice life for us all  
 or will we wait  
 for the trumpet blast  
 and the swarm of locusts  
 and the relentless, unswerving, devastating army

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Revised edition, Translated by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 85.

<sup>2</sup>Audre Lorde, "The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Shaull states "The disillusionment, the frightened, the cynical—be they conservatives, liberals, or radicals—do not lead the way to the future, no matter how profound their insights may be regarding the nature of the present crisis. That journey is reserved for women and men of passion." Richard Shaull, *Liberation and Change: The Death and Resurrection of the American Dream* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 120.

<sup>4</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>5</sup>James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 250-251.



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