To Be Called Beloved

Womanist Ontology in PostModern Refraction

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to be called beloved
is to be called by God
to be called by the shining moments
be called deep within deep

to be called beloved
is more than one plus infinity
more than the million breaths of loving
than the sounds of tomorrow's horizon

to be called beloved
is the marvelous yes to God's what if
the radical shifting of growth
mundane agency of active faith

to be called beloved
is to ask the question
    what would it mean
    what would it look like if we actually believed
    that we are washed in God's grace

to be called beloved
is to answer the question
    we are not dipped
    we are not sprinkled
    we are not immersed
    we are washed in the grace of God

to be called beloved
is to listen to the words of Baby Suggs
    holy
    who offered up to them (us) her great big heart

                   "untitled"
                     -emt

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke

them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you*!
. . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet
that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need
arms, strong arms I'm telling you. . . . So love your neck; put a hand on it,
grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as
soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love
it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet.

   More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-
holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your
heart. For this is the prize."[1]

   This admonishment/sermon to love one's heart is an individual and
a communal call to question the radical nature of oppression and
devaluation of the self and the community in the context of structural
evil.   This line of questioning can and should take a multitude of
directions because it addresses the nature of *systemic* evil, not individual
sin alone. My aim is to consider what it means for African American
society and culture to love our heart, to be called beloved, under the
rubric of womanist ethical concerns for ontology, and by praxeological
extension, wholeness.
   A womanist ontology is a radical concern for is-ness in the context
of African American life.[2] This concern for being is not rooted in trans-
empirical realities or with a world behind the world of Black life in the
United States. Its primary concern is concrete existence (lived life) and
the impetus for a coherent and unified relationship between body, soul,
and creation. In this sense, it is consonant with African cosmology that
understands all of life as sacred. A womanist ontology seeks to
rediscover this apprehension in Black life in the United States.
   Because of the nature of its project, a womanist ontology rejects
dualism and argues for wholeness. The subject-other relationship is held
in the web of creation or in my terminology, is-ness. This runs counter
to the self-other opposition that underlies much of western thought.
Being is physical and spiritual in a womanist ontology. Therefore, a
womanist ontology recognizes the subject-other split that is intrinsic to

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[1]Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 88-89.
   [2]Although Paul Tillich's work in *Systematic Theology, Vol.1* (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1951) is helpful in addressing ontology rather than metaphysics, this is not my
concern in this essay. Tillich addresses two major dimensions of reality—the ontic and the
ontological. For him, the ontic dimension deals with characteristics of objects and beings in
the subject-object constructs of spatial and temporal reality. Ontology deals with reality as it
is before it has split or divided itself into subject and object. In Tillich's understanding,
ontology is non-dualistic and immanental. Therefore, for Tillich, ontology is the study of
being.

western culture as a crucible that must be part of ontological reflection for it is part of reality as a whole. While recognizing this split, a womanist ontology advocates the self-other relationship, for it is in the relational matrix that wholeness can be found for African Americans.

This concern for wholeness is shaped within the rise of postmodern discourse as it responds to modernist inadequacies. The irony is that postmodernist discourse often excludes even though its theoretical intent is to call attention to and appropriate the experience of difference and otherness as legitimate discourse for critical theory and rigorous ethical reflection. Categories of otherness and difference can swerve toward abstractions at best and become tools for hegemony at worst.

This possibility, which is often reality, is alarming from a womanist ethical stance. The promise of postmodernism is that it provides a way for many to think their way into concrete knowledge of and contact with African American realities. However, when the discourse remains only at the thinking stage, postmodernism commits many death-dealing errors found in modernist assumptions of universal rationality, objectivity, value free established knowledge, individuals who create communities rather than being birthed/formed by community, institutionalized radical doubt, and knowledge as hypothesis.

Postmodernism has a radical historicity in which plurality, particularity, locality, context, the social location of thought, and serious questioning of universal knowledge are key features. Such concerns are consonant with an ontology of wholeness. Issues of diversity and context have long been problematic for African Americans in the United States. Black men and women writers from Phyllis Wheatley to Claude McKay to Toni Morrison to Randall Kenan have wrestled with what it means to be Other in our society. They have served as literary critics for how modernist constructs serve to deny, extinguish, and devalue the distinctive features of blackness and the critical comments of African Americans on United States' life and injustices.

Black writers have provided a way into the bounty of Black life in the United States. Their work has fed (and has been nourished by) African American intellectuals as well as folks like Miss Nora and Brother Hemphill. The growing body of Black voices in our socio-cultural matrix make it difficult to maintain modernist protestations toward universalities. More than ever before, we are challenged to consider the radical nature of particularity as foundational for ethical reflection.

Although this work has opened greater possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, the notion that we are aware of another person's feelings and experiences only on the basis of empathic inferences from our own veers into solipsism. Self-consciousness and awareness of others are not natural dance partners. Understanding the Other is not

predicated on how the individual (or the group) makes the shift from the certainty of her inner experiences to the unknowable person. This tenuous shift often produces two outcomes: romanticization and/or trivialization. African American women and men and children experience racism, sexism, and classism in a multitude of ways. This is borne out in the stereotypical images of blackness as equivalent to poverty and destitution. Such one-dimensional representations of Black life are narrow, constricting notions of African American life.

Postmodern discourse and analysis that obscures the true diversity of life in the United States for Black Americans collapses African Americans into one grand master narrative. This narrative makes no distinction between the legacy of lynching in the United States, issues and concerns of Blacks in the rural South, or the rise of the Black cultural elite. Black folk become one dark stroke across the landscape of hegemonic discourse. The promise of postmodernism fails its liberative agenda. The call by Baby Suggs to love our hearts is a pithy reminder that particularity is more than an abstract construct of philosophical colloquy. Particularity, historicity, locality, and context all represent human beings. Concrete material existence and abstraction can and should meet in postmodernism. Perhaps Baby Suggs can help us toward such ontological wholeness in her call to love the "beat and beating heart."

To Love Our Necks Unnoosed and Straight

Lynching a whole people is an obscenity. The specter of the noose is a daily reality for womanist ontological reflection. Baby Suggs again reminds us, "And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight."[3] This ever-present reminder of the fragility of life under domination and subjugation is grim reminder that loving the heart is a theo-ethical and political act.

The patterns of southern (as well as northern, midwestern, and western) segregation are our legacy from slavocracy. Racial segregation had it roots in the North where it matured before moving to the South. Although slavery was nearly nonexistent in the North by 1830, a strict color line was in place. Free Blacks enjoyed limited freedom. They could not be bought or sold, they could not be separated from their families, they were paid for any work performed. The Negro Convention Movement and such figures as Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker

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[3]Morrison, *Beloved*, 88-89.

illustrate that free Blacks of the North could agitate and organize for racial justice.[4]

However, northern Blacks did not mistake their limited freedom as equivalent to an absence of racism. Whether pro-slavery or anti-slavery, the major political parties and their respective constituents believed Blacks to be inferior. Few whites believed that Blacks had any other place in society than one of subservience. The methods used to assure this place for Blacks in northern society were both legal and extralegal. By 1860, nearly every phase of Black life in the North was segregated from whites. Railroad cars, stagecoaches, steamboats all had special Jim Crow sections designated for Blacks alone. This segregation extended to theaters, lecture halls, hotels, restaurants, and resorts, to the schools, prisons, hospitals, and cemeteries. In white churches, Blacks sat in "Negro pews" or in "nigger heaven" and had to wait to receive communion after the whites.[5] Until Massachusetts permitted Black jurors in 1855, Blacks could not serve on juries throughout the North.[6] Northerners contented themselves with a virtually slave-free society. However the presumptions and stereotypes undergirding the attitude of white supremacy and Black inferiority made the North a poor teacher for the South during Reconstruction and beyond.

In the South, the social disorganization of the initial years of Reconstruction (1865-1877) engendered white fear of Black insurrection. Provisional state legislatures adopted the Black Codes designed to relegate Blacks to a presumed inferior place in the southern social, political, and economic structure. The states of Mississippi, Florida, and Texas adopted racial segregation laws for the railroads in their boundaries. The 1866 Texas law was the most extensive requiring all railroad companies "to attach to passenger trains one car for the special accommodation of freedmen."[7] The segregation of the public schools, colleges, jails, and hospitals were all features of Reconstruction and sanctioned by Reconstruction governments.

Simultaneously as segregation became more institutionalized in the South, Blacks began to appear as jurors, judges, legislators, voters, and merchants. *The Standard* of Raleigh, North Carolina, noted "the two races now eat together at the same table, sit together in the same room,

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[4]C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3d ed., rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 18.

[5]Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 97.

[6]Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 20.

[7]Quoted in Woodward, ibid., 24. No source given.

work together, visit and hold debating societies together."[8] Although the observations of the newspaper were not the norm for the South, there was some movement to mix the races.

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 with its incipient Jim Crowism drew heated protest from Blacks. Demonstrations in New Orleans; Richmond, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina, focused on segregated street cars. The 1868 state legislatures of South Carolina and Mississippi received demands from free Blacks that the civil laws protect their rights on common carriers and public accommodations.[9]

These acts of radical protest were not the norm for Blacks. Blacks rarely entered public accommodations that were clearly inhospitable. Black leaders drew a distinction between social equality and public equality and sought the latter. Public equality meant civil and political rights to the mind of these leaders.[10] This form of equality recognized the humanity of Black folk. In acknowledging this humanity, Black leaders pushed for civil rights. Social equality was an unthinkable goal, even to activists such as the young W.E.B. DuBois. Social equality meant a transformation of the natural order.[11]

C. Vann Woodward credits the South's embrace of extreme racism with the relaxation of significant opposition to racism by the liberal North, the decline of the power and influence of the southern conservatives, and a corollary decline of the influence of the idealism of the southern radicals.[12] When the liberal North agreed to the Compromise of 1877, this signaled the beginning of the North's retrenchment on race.

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[8]Quoted in Woodward, ibid., 26. No source given.

[9]Ibid., 27.

[10]Ibid., 28.

[11]W.E.B. DuBois, "An Open Letter to the Southern People (1887)," in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 4.

> Let us then, recognizing our common interests . . . work for each other's interest, casting behind us unreasonable demands on the one hand, and unreasonable prejudice on the other. We are not foolish enough to demand social equality or amalgamation, knowing full well that inexorable laws of nature regulate and control such movements. What we demand is to be recognized as men, and to be given those civil rights which pertain to our manhood.

In later years, DuBois moved from this position radically.

[12]Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 69. The southern conservatives believed Blacks to be inferior, but did not conclude that an inferior race should be segregated or humiliated. Conservatives practiced paternalism vis-à-vis free Blacks. The southern radicals were Populists. They were vigorously anti-lynching and sought to bring an end to the color line and grant full rights to Blacks.

Eventually the North and South differed little on their race policies. Northern liberals and abolitionists began to give voice to Black innate inferiority, shiftlessness, and hopeless unfitness for full participation in the white man's civilization.[13]

By the beginning of the 1890s the door was wide open for untempered racism in the South. Economic, social, and political encumbrances combined to create a social and economic depression. Social and political reforms did not materialize in the manner hoped for, leading to further frustration. In this climate, the South sought a scapegoat. With the sanctions against racism lifted, Blacks within the United States became the target of white frustrations.[14]

In 1898, during the northern retreat from the South and increasing disinterest in emancipated Blacks in the South, the United States expanded into the Pacific and the Caribbean. This expansion brought eight million people of color under United States rule and dictate.[15] The attendant attitude of imperialism is found in the pages of *The Nation* magazine that responded matter-of-factly, "of course, [they] could not be allowed to vote."[16] The ideology of racism extended beyond African Americans in the continental United States to include Hispanic, Asian, and Caribbean peoples.

This is the context for lynching as it emerged from an area on the south side of the James River in Virginia to become a national phenomenon in the late eighteenth century.[17] The form of punishment consisted of thirty-nine lashes that were inflicted without trial or law, but on the suspicion of guilt that could not be "regularly proven."[18] By the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War, murder became associated with lynching. The reasons given for lynching ranged from rape and murder to mistaken identity.

Radical racists believed there was no place for African Americans in the South or in the United States. Joel Williamson observes that the advocates of radical racism believed the end might come in a race war that the superior whites would win.[19] The bottom line for the adherents

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[13]Ibid., 70.

[14]Ibid., 81.

[15]Ibid., 72-73.

[16]Quoted in Woodward, ibid., 72. No source given.

[17]Floyd W. Crawford, "Ida B. Wells: Her Anti-Lynching Crusades in Britain and Repercussions From Them in the United States, 1958" TMs, Special Collections, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Chicago.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111.

of radical segregation and racism was that whites and Blacks could not live side by side on United States soil.

Rumors of rape became a "folk pornography" in the South.[20] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes that the fear of lynching served to hold both Blacks and women in their respective places as subordinate to southern white men. She states it is "no accident that the vision of the Negro as threatening beast flourished during the first organizational phase of the women's rights movement in the South."[21] Lynching served as severe sanction against voluntary sexual relations between African American men and white women. In addition, lynching served to reenforce the hierarchical power relationships based on gender.

Southern whites followed a Victorian model for sex and family roles.[22] Men viewed themselves as providers and protectors and women were the moral guardians of the home. In the Reconstruction and Redemption eras this model evolved such that white women and Black women, like male and female slaves before them, were viewed as the property of white men.[23] White men could not tolerate the image or the reality of Black men crossing the color and caste barrier to have intimate relationships with white women. However, the prevalence of miscegenation before, during, and after slavery shows it was permissible for white men to have such relations with Black women.

Lynching was not an activity carried out by a small group of people avenging the rape of white womanhood. It involved large segments of the populace. Hall notes that it was often the presence of "men of property" leading the lynch mob that caused sheriffs to demur from upholding their legal responsibility to keep the peace.[24] In rural areas, planters sometimes used lynching for coercion and increased profit. The incidence of lynching rose in the summer months after the planting season when all that remained was the profitable harvest season.[25]

Mob violence was the instrument to maintain segregation and solidify a rigid caste division between racial groups that were bound to the same society, legal system, and economy. The drive to maintain white superiority is tied to what Hall attributes to a siege mentality. She writes, "whites felt themselves continually under siege. Lynching persisted as

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[20]Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 150. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 111-19.

[21]Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 153.

[22]Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 115. Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 148-49.

[23]Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 156.

[24]Ibid., 140.

[25]Ibid.

much to reaffirm solidarity and demonstrate power *to whites themselves* as to punish and intimidate blacks."[26] Continuing this line of insight, George Fredrickson notes that the prime agent of white-supremacist terror in the South was the mob.[27] He posits that the white power structure of the South was "relatively fragile" because it did not have within it systematic control over Black social location, movement, and labor.[28]

In the contemporary era, such control *is* systematic. The nature of structured social inequality in United States society is such that peoples are confined and warehoused either by choice or by condition. The rise of the suburbs represents chosen segregation and control. Rural poverty and urban blight are representatives of conditioned segregation and control. We are living in a system that has no heart, little compassion.

Baby Suggs' words are pithy instructions for womanist ethical reflection:

> And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it.[29]

To love the mouth, the eyes, the hands, the neck, the heart—to love the body is radical ontology within structured domination and control. The concerns for concrete material well-being *and* spiritual wholeness are imperatives in the postmodern context for African Americans.

To Love Our Eyes and Hands

Toxic waste landfills are a recent problem for African American women and men. They are contemporary versions of lynching a whole people. Toxic waste facilities are often located in Southern communities that have high percentages of the poor, the elderly, the young, and people of color. There is an excessive concentration of uncontrolled toxic waste sites in Black and Hispanic urban communities.[30] Southern Black rural communities are home to large commercial hazardous waste landfills,

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[26]Ibid., 144. Hall's emphasis.

[27]George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 252.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Morrison, *Beloved*, 88.

[30]Robert D. Bullard and Beverly H. Wright, "Toxic Waste and the African American Community" in *Prescriptions and Policies: The Social Well-Being of African Americans in the 1990s*, ed. Dionne J. Jones (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 67-68.

disposal facilities, and incinerators. These businesses are touted as tools for economic revitalization and necessary for the safe conversion of toxic waste to forms of safe energy and harmless compounds. Often, local governments and the waste industries minimize the impact of the contamination of the soils outside the immediate site areas and the effect this contamination has on surface and subsurface water supplies.

Blacks and economically disadvantaged groups are often concentrated in areas that expose them to high levels of toxic pollution—urban industrial communities and rural areas.[31] In comparison to suburban areas, air pollution in inner city neighborhoods can be up to five times greater. Racial/ethnic and low income folk suffer from unregulated industrial growth (or the lack there of), poor regulation of industrial toxins, and public policy decisions that favor those with political and economic clout. This clout controls land use.

Another feature is sparseness of population. Large toxic landfills are usually not found in major metropolitan areas. Competing uses drive up the cost of urban land and the threat to the public safety of a large population moves large toxic waste sites to the more sparsely populated areas. In the South, the population of poor and sparsely populated rural areas is most likely to be Black. When density of population is a key criterion for siting toxic waste facilities, the effect is to target rural Black communities that have high rates of poverty.

The historic 1984 General Accounting Office (GAO) study of four hazardous waste sites in the South found a strong relationship between the location of the sites and the race and socio-economic status of the surrounding communities.[32] Three of the four locations had majority Black populations. More than one-fourth of the population in the four communities was below the poverty level. Most of these poor were African Americans. The nation's largest hazardous waste landfill is in predominantly Black and poor Sumter County in Alabama. This landfill receives toxic materials from forty-five states and several foreign countries. Counter to the usual placement of hazardous waste facilities in rural areas, the predominantly Black and Hispanic southside of Chicago has the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the

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[31]Urban industrial areas often suffer from elevated air and water pollution problems. Rural areas expose the inhabitants to high levels of farm pesticides. For a more detailed description of these hazards, see Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1990) and the 1987 study by the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Social-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites."

[32]Ibid., 68.

United States. In Houston, Texas, six of the eight municipal incinerators and all five municipal landfills are in predominantly Black neighborhoods.[33]

Nationally, there are twenty-seven hazardous waste landfills operating in the continental United States. Large commercial toxic waste landfills and disposal facilities are more likely found in rural communities of the southern blackbelt. Nine landfills (33 percent) are in Alabama, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. These nine landfills represent almost 60 percent of the nation's total hazardous waste landfill capacity.[34] The four landfills in the areas with majority Black populations account for 63 percent of the South's total hazardous waste capacity. Of the four, three alone account for almost 59 percent of the hazardous waste landfill capacity.

The ninety-four uncontrolled toxic waste sites in Atlanta, Georgia, bring the devastation to micro-level. Just under 83 percent of Atlanta's Black population live in these waste site areas. This compares with just under 61 percent of the white population living under the same conditions. Both figures are unconscionable, yet when Blacks and whites are forced to endure toxic waste, African Americans always suffer a greater burden. There is something askew when over 15 million African Americans and over eight million Hispanics live in communities that have one or more hazardous waste sites. Blacks are overrepresented in metropolitan areas that have the largest number of uncontrolled toxic waste sites.[35]

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[33]Charles Lee, "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States," in *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse*, ed. Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 13.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Lee, "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States," 14-15. In 1991, African Americans comprised 11.7 percent of the population in the United States. The six cities that top the toxic waste sites list have a markedly higher percentage of Blacks:

	# of sites	% of blacks
Memphis, TN	173	43.3
St. Louis, MO	160	27.5
Houston, TX	152	23.6
Cleveland, OH	106	23.7
Chicago, IL	103	37.2
Atlanta, GA	94	46.1

Although economics is a factor, the single best variable to explain the siting of commercial toxic waste facilities is race. Communities with a single hazardous waste facility have twice the percentage (24% versus 12%) of racial/ethnic folk as communities without such a facility. Communities with two or more sites have more than three times (38% versus 12%) the racial/ethnic representation as communities without such sites.

A comparison between the hazardous waste sites in Baton Rouge, Louisiana's ten largest white and racial/ethnic communities covers twenty toxic waste sites. In these twenty communities, the toxic waste is nearly seven times the national average on a per capita basis. Alarming as this may be, it becomes more so when a closer look reveals the nuances of the sites. The white communities have five sites that account for less than 1 percent of the hazardous waste. The fifteen sites in the racial/ethnic communities house over 99 percent of the hazardous waste.[36]

The reality is that African Americans in the South bear a heavy burden. They not only battle spiraling crime rates, drug trafficking, deteriorating infrastructures, high unemployment, poverty, and the farm crisis; they also receive a great deal of hazardous trash that threatens to rip to shreds any love of heart or notion of belovedness.

African Americans, as a community, are forced to combat structural barriers that confine large segments of Black people in less than desirable physical surroundings, reduced housing and residential options, and limited mobility. Housing and employment discrimination; redlining by banks, mortgage companies, and insurance firms; public policies that give preference to the affluent; and unequal law enforcement of land use and environmental regulations are effective barriers to a communal love of heart.

Federal housing policies sharply defined residential and economic options for many African Americans. Institutional and individual discrimination in housing markets, geographic changes in urban centers, and limited incomes physically trapped millions of urban and rural African Americans in inner cities. Government housing policies fueled the white exodus to the suburbs and accelerated the abandonment of the core of urban cities.[37] White collar jobs and jobs in the service occupations moved to the suburbs. The federal and state funding of the freeway and interstate highway systems were keys in this exodus. The construction of highways and interstates often cut through racial/ethnic neighborhoods and public transportation often did not (and does not) keep pace with the economic move out of the city.

Communities lost their economic heart and became social prey for ill-advised or ill-conceived income generators such as toxic waste sites and industrial pollution. The results were and are not only economic; they are health-related. When the air is bad, communities suffer from higher

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[36]Harvey L. White, "Hazardous Waste Incineration and Minority Communities," in ed. Bryant and Mohai, 131-132. The white population of Baton Rouge in the selected communities was 124,400. This averages one site for every 31,100 residents. The racial/ethnic population in the selected communities was 110,000. This averages one site for ever 7,349 residents.

[37]Bullard, *Dumping on Dixie*, 7.

risks of emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and other chronic pulmonary diseases. This is the fate of the Black community in the urban core.

Paper mills, waste disposal and treatment facilities, chemical plants, and now hazardous waste landfills found the South to be the logical place to go in the 1970s. The "new prosperity" of the South was largely a metropolitan phenomenon. Communities that were economically depressed became attractive locations because they represented a source of cheap labor. The good business climate of the South features a large pool of tractable and nonunionized labor. Because of business policies that feature the systematic avoidance of urban ghettos and rural blackbelt communities, jobs are scarce. In some of these communities, leaders believed that having any development was better than no development. The sight and smell of paper mills, toxic waste incinerators, and chemical plants became the tradeoffs for having jobs near economically depressed communities. Toxic waste and other environmental problems have become linked to the state of the economy of a given community. The hoped-for economic tradeoffs did not materialize. The living conditions in many Black communities have not improved noticeably with the new growth.

The Black community has begun to challenge the legitimacy of environmental extortion as adequate mortgage for the health of the community and that of future generations. Baby Suggs's words to the community of ex-slaves ring true:

> They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty.[38]

The early 1980s saw the beginning of the response to love the eyes and hands. This was when the people in the communities began to draw connections between civil rights and environmental problems.[39] This growing awareness was fueled by what residents saw as unfair, inequitable, and discriminatory practices toward the poor and people of color. The key is that in loving the heart, it was the Black community that had to speak out for its survival. Those Black folk who live in the community became (and now become) the advocates for healthy communal survival and the eradication of toxic manna from human progress.

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[38]Morrison, *Beloved*, 88.
[39]Employment, housing, education, economic development, and political empowerment are the traditional concerns of civil rights organizations. The environmental movement has not adequately addressed problems in racial/ethnic communities.

The major obstacle in this postmodern age is information. Placement of toxic waste sites often occurred with little community participation and little awareness of what the site would actually house. Sumter County, Alabama is not unusual in the saga from communal ignorance to awareness. This site is the largest hazardous waste facility in the United States. It was originally a smaller landfill, partly owned by the son-in-law of former Governor George Wallace. When Chemical Waste Management, Inc. (owner of four of the six largest landfills in the nation that account for over 50 percent of the permitted hazardous waste landfill capacity in the United States) bought and expanded the site in 1977, there were no laws that dictated public hearings. The residents thought that the plant produced fertilizer. This was a welcome addition to a highly depressed economic area. The truth of the Sumter facility did not emerge until workers began to complain about working conditions and health problems.

The world behind the Sumter facility reveals a devastation of the heart. Sumter County is nearly 70 percent Black. Most of the population of 17,000 is located in the southern half of the county where most of the white population lives. The small town of Emelle is the closest community to the landfill and in the more sparsely populated and predominantly Black northern half of the county. The minority white and majority Black populations live separate social lives—cemeteries, churches, schools. The minority white population dominates the economic arena and controls most of the businesses, farms, and timber land in the area.

Sumter County has experienced significant outmigration that has combined with the decline in the historic base of the economy, agriculture. During most of the 1980s, unemployment fluctuated between 12 and 22 percent.[40] Chemical Waste Management is the county's single largest employer and it channels $15.9 million into the local economy. This includes a surcharge on each barrel of waste transported to the site that then goes to help support the school system.

The struggle for political power began in the 1960s when Blacks finally won the right to vote. In the early 1970s, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives established its main training facility in Sumter County. This helped to strengthen the local Black political organization and the initial quiet presence of Chemical Waste Management did not go completely unnoticed. In 1981, Black leaders played an important role in alerting the public to the dangers of the Emelle facility. The call to heart was embodied in the community-based and led demonstrations at the

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[40]Connor Bailey and Charles E. Faupel, "Environmentalism and Civil Rights in Sumter County, Alabama," in ed. Bryant and Mohai, 141-142.

facility. Black communities may not have a long history of dealing consciously with environmental problems,[41] but groups that do tackle environmental racism in the Black community often arise from the Black Church, civil clubs, neighborhood associations, community improvement groups, anti-poverty and anti-discrimination organizations. The yoking of civil and environmental rights is crucial to ontological wholeness.

Loving our heart is not an exercise in individualistic nihilism. It is a radical, and often communal, response to cultural, social, religious, economic, and political hegemony masquerading under the guise of cultural heterogeneity. Disproportionate stationing of toxic waste sites in poor Black southern rural communities is a cruel irony of progress. This progress is marked with the stench of domination and control. The growing protest among southern Blacks against the toxic waste dumped into their lives yokes testament and agency. To love one's heart is to care about one's environment, to strategize and anticipate the future, to draw on the community of resistance and solidarity.

Flesh that Weeps, Laughs, Dances

Recent neo-conservative and conservative African American theorists can splinter this deep connection between resistance and solidarity. Baby Suggs's reminder that "we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass" is made into a lessor order of creation. And the ontological demand to "Love it. Love it hard" is lost in a modernist drive to become one in the melting point of United States culture. African American culture and society are more complex than much Black neo-conservative and conservative thought allows.[42]

In 1990, median family income in current dollars for Blacks, whites, and Hispanics rose significantly from the 1980 figures. However, when adjusted for constant 1990 dollars, the increase is far from dramatic. The figures suggest that everyone (but those who are in the upper and elite

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[41]The first national Black environmental protest was in 1982 in predominantly Black Warren County, North Carolina when the county was selected as the burial site for 32,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with highly toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The PCBs were dumped illegally along the roadways in fourteen North Carolina counties in 1978. Although the African American led protests were unsuccessful in halting the construction of the landfill, the protest action peopled by Black civil rights leaders, politicians, and community residents prompted Congressman Walter E. Fauntroy (District of Columbia) to initiate the landmark 1983 GAO study of toxic waste landfill sites in the South.

[42]For a thorough synopsis of Black life in the United States, see William P. O'Hare, Kelvin M. Pollard, Taynia L. Mann, and Mary M. Kent. "African Americans in the 1990s," *Population Bulletin*, Vol 46, No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, Inc., July 1991).

income brackets) in U.S. society is surviving progress, but not thriving.[43] Black Americans trailed whites and Hispanics in median household income as more folk in each racial/ethnic group slipped below the poverty line from 1980 to 1990.[44] When other factors are considered (e.g. birth rates, death rates, net immigration rates, education, employment, the shifts that occur when the number of wage earners in a family are factored, and health statistics) a simple picture of life for African Americans is impossible.

To love the flesh, to care for people's lives is crucial in times such as these. The very is-ness, the ontological wholeness of African American society and culture is at stake in such a complexity of information. In 1959, 55 percent of African Americans were officially poor. Today that figure is near 36 percent. While we celebrate this shift out of poverty, it cannot be celebrated without realizing that in 1969, 32 percent of African American were poor and in 1974 only 30 percent were poor.[45] The poverty rate for Blacks is three times that for whites and education does little to diminish this wide poverty gap. Although a high school diploma decreases the chances that Blacks will live in poverty by 50 percent, the same diploma decreases this possibility for whites by 75 percent.

In the midst of this austere conundrum, sociologist William Julius Wilson tried to explain the evolution of race and class in United States history and the factors behind urban Black economic problems. His 1978 study, *The Declining Significance of Race*, suffered from a misleading

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[43]U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992*, 112th ed. Washington, DC, 1992, Table 696. Figures for 1980 in current dollars were: $18,684 for whites, $10,764 for Blacks, $13,651 for Hispanics. In 1990, these figures where $31,231 for whites, $18,676 for Blacks, and $22,330 for Hispanics. When adjusted for constant 1990 dollars, the 1980 figures are $29,636 for whites, $17,073 for Blacks, and $21,653 for Hispanics. The increase in median family income is far from dramatic and signals that as a society, we are barely keeping pace with the cost of living.

[44]Ibid., Tables 696, 724,725. The statistics reveal a complex picture. Blacks, whites, and Hispanics all make gains in median family income from 1980 to 1990. Yet as this occurred, more folk slipped below the poverty line. The 1980 figures reveal that overall, 10.3 percent of the population fell below the poverty line. This broke down to 8 percent for whites, 28.9 percent for Blacks, and 23.2 percent for Hispanics. In 1990, 10.7 percent of the overall population was below the poverty line. This was 8.1 percent for whites, 29.3 percent for Blacks, and 25.0 percent for Hispanics. Poor Black families are slipping deeper into poverty. From 1979 to 1989, the income deficit grew 23 percent for Black families. Families in poverty became poorer while families at the top end of the income scale grew richer. See O'Hare, et. al., "African Americans in the 1990s," 31-32. One sad irony in these figures is that the official government poverty index may not capture all of the poor. When asked what income level should determine poverty, the interviewees cited a significantly higher figure.

[45]O'Hare, et.al., "African Americans in the 1990s," 31.

title that helped attract a firestorm of criticism. Wilson's thesis is that the economy and the government interacted in various historical periods to structure social relations. This produced different contexts for racial antagonism and different means of access to power and privilege. From this socio-historical approach, Wilson posits that in the late 1970s, economic class was a more important factor than race because more Blacks had made it into the middle class. The highly nuanced nature of Wilson's argument was lost on his detractors.[46]

Wilson responded to this criticism in his 1987 work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*[47] that provides the outline for a more informed urban policy. He explored the social class polarization between middle income and lower class Blacks. In doing so, Wilson challenged liberal and conservative assumptions and approaches to issues of poverty and race. Wilson rejected liberal refusal to employ such terms as underclass, the emphasis on selective Black achievement and the denial of the existence of social disruption, and the tendency to emphasize racism as the sole explanation for urban problems. He rejected the conservative thesis that economic success stems from cultural characteristics and its estimate that the rise of female headed households among Blacks is caused by liberal social policy, welfare dependency, and permissive attitudes. For Wilson, the rise of the Black underclass lies in black male joblessness, the economic disinvestment in the central cities, and other economic factors. He advocates a program of economic reform, a comprehensive democratic agenda to rebuild the central cities, and the creation of new jobs and opportunities. Wilson suggests that racial prejudice will disappear because it is a barrier to an expansive capitalist economy. However, he does believe that affirmative action policies and other race-sensitive measures are necessary as long as the United States has a racially stratified work force. Wilson's work has forced a reinvigorated discussion about the root causes of poverty.

Part of this discussion was led by many upper-middle-class Blacks after the 1984 Ronald Reagan presidential landslide victory. These

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[46]William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). For a discussion of Wilson's work, see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black American, 1945-1990*, rev. 2d ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 157-158 and Gertrude Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 65-72. Among the detractors commenting was sociologist Harry Edwards, who called it a "mediocre work with a highly controversial title." Sociologists Charles Payne and Charles Willie termed it "economic determinist of the narrower sort" and representative of "particularism," respectively.

[47]Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Blacks became increasingly vocal about the limitations of supporting the Democratic Party and advocated aligning with the conservative majority of whites who were now the more influential socio-political and economic group in the U.S. Further, these new Black conservatives argued that Blacks needed to conform to the new reactionary political realities and become active participants in entrepreneurial capitalism.[48]

Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* is a case in point.[49] Steele argues that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was passed on the understanding that equal opportunity would not mean racial preference. He believes that affirmative action moved from anti-discrimination enforcement to social engineering. For Steele, the imposition of affirmative action goals and timetables create a false sense of pluralism and equality inside college campuses because most Blacks are not culturally or intellectually prepared to compete with whites on an equal basis. What we achieved, according to Steele, was a type of cosmetic diversity that did not address the roots of African American deprivation. All in all, affirmative action has caused whites to draw the inaccurate conclusion that all Blacks, regardless of their talent, achieve due to their race. Steele tells us that preferential treatment translates into a lowering of standards to increase Black participation. This then spawns debilitating doubt that undermines African American performance in the public realm.

In *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?*, Thomas Sowell claims that recent immigrants such as Asians and West Indians who became racial minorities in the United States are significantly more successful than native Blacks and rival whites in achievement.[50] He neglects-to address the fact that due to the highly selective U.S. immigration policies for Third World countries, many of these recent immigrants are skilled and educated workers—scientists, engineers, doctors, and academics. Asian immigrants have drawn disproportionately from the occupational elites, but more recent Asian immigrants include a large number of unskilled and uneducated workers. These folk stand in stark contrast to the elites.[51] Black West Indian immigrants have been more successful than

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[48]Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 201. Walter Williams of George Mason University aggressively condemned racial quotas and advocated the creation of a sub-minimum wage to promote Black employment. Robert Woodson, president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, advocated economic power that would then lead to socio-political clout.

[49]Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[50]Thomas Sowell, *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality?* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1984), esp. 77 and 130-131.

[51]Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice*, 59.

African Americans. However, Sowell does not address the racial situation in the West Indies in which there is virtually no white working class and Blacks hold the majority status. Therefore, Blacks in the West Indies have full access to acquiring skills.

Steele and Sowell should have stood in the Clearing with Baby Suggs and the other women, men, and children. The lesson for African Americans in the Clearing is that we have learned to hate ourselves without even realizing the level of our self-contempt. In loving ourselves, developing our hearts, we must become our own best critics and our greatest cheerleaders for justice and hope. Such arguments as Steele's fail to consider the nature of structured social inequality. They represent modernist notions of individualism and an ease with systems that promise diversity, but are structured to deny diversity's concrete demands for change.

The gathering in the Clearing of Baby Suggs and "every black man, woman and child who could make it through"[52] was a communal call to gather themselves into wholeness away from the racist assaults of white folks. This *could* be a reinterpretation, if not a recasting, of Black separatism. The point in their gathering is not to create a separate identity—this was accomplished at their births. The people gathered themselves into a place of political and spiritual sanctuary. In that place, they began to re-member themselves through laughter and tears and dance and song.

Steele's work is part of a historic stream in which structures of domination have relied on Black conservative (and now neo-conservative) politicians and intellectuals to justify patterns of race, class, and gender inequality. Manning Marable points to ways in which corporate America has used the ideological and social class diversity within African American society and culture. He notes that the head of Clairol endorsed the 1968 Black Power Conference held in Philadelphia by stating the demand for Black power mean "equity, empowerment—ownership of apartments, ownership of homes [and] ownership of businesses" for the Black elite.[53] In 1978, Gulf Oil funneled $50,000 to the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy (then head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference), $55,000 to the Reverend Leon Sullivan's Opportunities Industrialization Centers, and thousands more to other Black cultural groups and civic leaders when Gulf was being boycotted by Black

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[52]Morrison, *Beloved*, 87.

[53]Manning Marable, *The Crisis of Color and Democracy: Essays on Race, Class and Power* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1991), 212.

activists for its financial support of the repressive Portuguese colonial government in Angola.

Black neo-conservatives such as Thomas Sowell, Glenn C. Loury, J.A.Y. Parker, and Clarence Thomas gained notoriety during the Reagan-Bush era. Each took aim at affirmative action out of the belief that affirmative action does not help poor Blacks, only middle class ones (like themselves). This denatured view of African American life focuses solely on poor Blacks rather than the complexity of the African American socio-economic structure. The solution becomes naively monochromatic rather than multifarious. Each socio-economic class within African American society faces particular manifestations of racism, sexism, and classism. The ultimate goal of affirmative action is occupational integration no matter a person's gender, race, or class. Affirmative action is not a panacea for the injustices of structured social inequality, but it is one helpful social instrument to begin to bring all of us back to the embodied-ness of Baby Suggs's sermon in the clearing.

William Julius Wilson grants that some disadvantaged Blacks have benefitted from affirmative action, but those of ghetto underclass have not. He gives us a much more complex notion of Blacks in poverty. The underclass is outside the occupational system due to little or no job skills, long term unemployment, poverty, criminal activity, and welfare depen-dency. These are folks who are so destroyed as persons that they are unemployable and untrainable.[54] For these people, Wilson suggests, affirmative action will not help. However there are disadvantaged Blacks in the underclass who are motivated for work and training if there is access to employment. For this group, affirmative action is a viable and necessary option.

To stand with Baby Suggs in the Clearing is to listen to the diversity of voices hearing her words of challenge, hope, and comfort. Each heard her call to love eyes, back, hands, mouth, feet, shoulders, arms, neck, and the dark, dark liver from where they lay in the Clearing. They formed a community in the Clearing, but each came with her own trail of living. This is how we are in our radical is-ness in African American society and culture today. A womanist ontology based on wholeness recognizes this intricate social network of Black society.

To Dance with Twisted Hip

Perhaps postmodernist discourse can provide us with the tools in womanist ethical reflection to continue to explore this bonding between

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[54]Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 112-18.

body and spirit. However, the danger lies in abstractions. The notion of the Other is not always a helpful category to tease through the thorny, concrete issues of body and spirit. The Other, linguistically, seems too sterile a category for a people who have been told to love the dark, dark liver. The Other can be a category of avoidance rather than is-ness, a category of abstraction rather than concreteness. The Other can lean heavily toward reductionism and denial of truth, toward indignity and injustice. Like all human constructs, notions of Otherness and particularity and pluralism can become categories that objectify and possess rather than open new ground for genuine dialogue and transformation.

At the heart of a womanist ontology is the self-other relation grounded in concrete existence and succored in the flawed transcendent powers of our spirituality. The legacy of lynching, the siting of toxic waste dumps, and the rise of influential Black neo-conservative thought, each signals the need for an ontology of wholeness in which the self-other relationship becomes primary. Although these are only three moments in the stream of Black life in the United States, they indicate the kind of rending of body and soul that disseminates African American society and culture.

When we make ourselves the oppositional Other, we turn to forms of self-hatred and self-destruction. Instead of critiquing and then working to eradicate notions of individualism, we forget our African past and seek to establish our lives as separate from each other. To recognize the differences in the socio-economic structure of Black life does not mean that African Americans are free to cut those who are not in our social class or gender adrift from our lives. To divorce civil rights from environmental concerns is to live in a deadly dualism in which there will be no air to breathe. To practice historical amnesia about the legacy of lynching in the United States is to doom all of us to find new material to construct postmodern nooses.

Perhaps these cautions will be enough to hold womanist ethical reflection to a rigorous and articulate witness that avoids reductionism in articulating the experience of living and loving in African American life. Rather than intellectually tempt our work with the luxury of competing narratives, wholeness demands the whole truth—our lives are complex and have layers of experience in each moment.

To remember our fleshiness is to recognize that dualistic oppositions such as self-other, egoism-altruism, theory-practice, individual-community, and mind-body are interactive and interdependent in an ontology of wholeness. Each is relational and historical as it informs the other. Awareness of this complexity of African American life helps guard against reductionistic claims about who Black folk are and what they do. A people who run the gamut from Phyllis Wheatley to Henry Highland

Garnet to Booker T. Washington to W.E.B. DuBois to Ida B. Wells-Barnett to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Angela Davis cannot be easily defined or understood.

Defining Black people's otherness or subjectivity as victimization is a hollow and incomplete description of is-ness. We have narratives of resistance and rebellion as part of our story as well. Yet we must not rush too quickly to celebrate the victory of our diversity. Resistance is not synonymous with self-actualization on an individual or collective level.

A womanist ontology of wholeness is, finally, radically relational. The various narratives of African American life are constituent of the grand narrative of Black faith and hope in this land. This relational character calls us to moral responsibility and accountability for our lives and the lives of all those who have survived the diaspora. We are, in the most basic sense, each other's keeper. Out of this, we recognize the preciousness of life and the deep interconnection between body and spirit that will help us be made whole.

As a people who survived fourteen generations of slavery and seven generations of emancipation, the blending of body and soul is crucial to understanding and then constructing what the next seven generations will hold. A womanist ontology of wholeness is founded on the belief that values like hope, virtue, sacrifice, risk, accountability have had a different cast in the Black community.[55] The reinterpretation of these values has helped to hold Black folk in their sanity and determination.

Such values must be brought to the fore again. Our postmodern culture is breeding a kind of passivity in which the story of Black self-destruction and hatred becomes a daily item on the news wires. Black society and culture has changed and we are quickly moving away from the relational character of Black life that has sustained us and into an individualistic, nihilistic morality with no meaning-filled ethical core. This loss of values is the inheritance we gain from separating body and spirit, from placing individual over and against communal concerns.

However, in its advocacy for relationality, womanist ontology must take care that relationality itself does not slip into the miasma of abstractions. This will lead womanist ontology down the path of weak ethical reflection and practice.[56] A womanist ontology measures its

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[55]See Katie Geneva Cannon's creative and unctuous discussion of dominant ethics in *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 2-4.

[56]For an illuminating discussion of relationality as it relates to women transracially, see Marcia Y. Riggs, "The Logic of Interstructured Oppression: A Black Womanist Perspective" in *Redefining Sexual Ethics: A Sourcebook of Essays, Stories and Poems*, ed. Susan E. Davies and Eleanor H. Haney (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), esp. 99-100.

reflection against the backdrop of the socio-historic reality of Black life in the United States. This means that its project is endless as it works to discover and rediscover the intricacies of African American life from past to present. This reveals a paradoxical legacy of passivity, accommodation, assimilation, and protest. The lessons learned will always be tempered by the lessons yet to come. This makes a womanist ontology a dynamic process. In the end, we will be forced to make hard ethical choices. In a cosmos filled with worlds of oppression, we have no other option.

The task of a womanist ontology is to illuminate, question, and begin the eradication of radical oppression and devaluation of the self and the community in the context of structural evil. Such evil operates in the interstices of human existence and in the novelty of creation. Such moral wrongness is rooted in our socio-historical is-ness. Ultimately, we cannot accomplish this alone. Not only do we turn to our relational bonds with each other, we must also turn to the God who shapes our hands, feet, necks, dark, dark livers.

To be called beloved is to ponder these things in our hearts that we are to grow big. Through the toxic landfills and trash heaps of everyone else's refuse, through the decades of disenfranchisement and legalized segregation, through the violence of mobs of respectable and influential folk, through skewed gender relations that beget the noose of social control—womanist ontological reflection demands that we stand up and dance with sometimes twisted hips the rest of what our hearts are saying. The reality of Black folk will give us the music to the song we must dance. To be called beloved is to do ethical reflection with the deeply held knowledge that we are not dipped, we are not sprinkled, we are not immersed, but we are washed in the grace of God.