

Songs We Thought We Knew:
A Conference Celebrating the Work
and Thought of Delores S. Williams
and the Future of Womanist Theology

APRIL 30, 2004 AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Question of the Day

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quiet as it's kept

it would seem that there are some

certainly not in this place

but perhaps so

who have this notion that womanist theology and womanist work

is a fad

a passing fancy

a momentary bout of theological indigestion

now like all conspiracies

which the phrase "quiet as it's kept"

marks

the word does get back to those who are being talked about

behind their backs

quiet as it's kept begins toni morrison's first novel, *the bluest eye*

in fact, there is more: "quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. we thought at the time, that it was because pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. a little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seed were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did."

well, we are engaging in a little examination today

with very little melancholy

we are noting the seed that has not sprouted

we are marking the rows

and thinking through the terrains we must account for

this day

we gather to celebrate the work and thought of delores seneva
williams

and the future of womanist theology

true to form

delores did not want this conference to be all about her

like the bloodmother, othermother, teacher, and faithful presbyterian
she is,

she is more concerned about the future

which is not the same as legacy

it is definitely not delores' style to worry about piling up accolades with some warped hosannas thrown in on the side

yet it is this decided lack of concern for legacy that she leaves us a great legacy to ponder

what does it mean to put survival before liberation

not as a smooth cool pose theological move

but as one that is saturated with the life experiences—social, political, economic, religious—of black women in the u.s.

and perhaps beyond

but perhaps not

yet rather than focus on this set of troublesome possibilities

the same woman filled with *poetry* who gave us demonarchy and just last week, protogesis

has provided us with another question to send us on our way, or at least tarry with this day

to be sure, by seeking to *begin* to answer it, we begin to think through issues of survival

and, perhaps, even thriving

and so, the question of the day is this:

How do you see the future and development of womanist theology and who should it be in dialogue with?

each of the panelists for today has been asked to answer this question

we will then open it up to the audience so that we do what womanist work insists on

we talk amongst ourselves and listen to what we have to say

no room of our own

no solitary mind at work in a concrete world spinning out abstractions

who hopes to save

but ultimately cannot

we've done our best to create a kind of kitchen-table in this space, but at least if we fail

we fail in the attempt to work in a community committed to justice

perfectly and imperfectly

morrison's *bluest eye* mirrors, in part, the greek myth of demeter and persephone

it is fractured tale

when demeter's daughter persephone is picking flowers in a meadow, the god hades kidnaps her and takes her back to his realm, the underworld of the dead, where he rapes her

not knowing where her daughter is, demeter, the goddess of agriculture, goes into such deep mourning that she ignores the prayers of human beings, and nothing grows on the earth

seeing that the world will starve, the other gods intercede

they find persephone and promise that if she has not eaten anything in the underworld, she may return to demeter

alas, persephone had eaten six seeds from a pomegranate

so the gods work out a compromise by which persephone spends six months of the year in the underworld, during which demeter mourns and we have fall and winter, and six months with demeter, during which we have spring and summer

in morrison's hands, this is just the beginning of the story

and on this day and the days to follow, what we do should only be the beginning of the story

for when we refuse to live the conspiracy of our plotted, if not longed for demise, we will find ways of telling the story—but it will not be a monotone or monolith

it, in fact is not an it, but many

many stories that help us understand the fractures of living as well as the smooth places

to do any less means we become like the kidnapped persephone

raped

in hell

among the dead

and we have no demeter to mourn our absence

no other gods to broker a compromise for our living

if delores' work has taught us one thing

it is that we have learned how to survive

and we must teach those who have not how to

survival skills are practiced in the everydayness of life

they must be

because as delores' work has said so pointedly: violence, survival,
and patterns of survival culture do not spawn any ultimate safe
spaces

that are permanent in any of our social, political, religious, or
cultural configurations

rather than mourn this, delores wisely uses the intricacies of
atonement (not the blood dripping off the cross and other weird
stuff atonement theory) to weave a lament of truth-telling and
naming

as she has sought, in her classes, to help students (and the rest of
us) understand survival strategies

even as we come, many of us, from conditioned middle class and
upper middle class cultured despair and angst

that does not teach us or encourage us to step far from our
navels and into the flux of creation

yes, this means in the halls of academia and within the walls of religious
places, too

the question of the day:

**How do you see the future and development of womanist
theology and who should it be in dialogue with?**

alice walker sure didn't know what she was fixin' to start

but some of us are brave

won't you join us?





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