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“Carrying the Sins of Others”: The Theology of Redemption and Experiences of Black Womanhood in Pauline Hopkins’ Contending Forces

Sophia Menconi ‘20

When does the mythology of a suffering and dying Savior stop being redemptive, and instead become a sanction to endure great violence among its believers? Within the doctrine of Atonement, a foundation of conventional Christian faith, lies the coded message that suffering is necessary for love. The people who killed Jesus hated him—this is clear in the New Testament—but this close alignment of love and hate in fundamental religious teachings is extremely dangerous for women of faith who experience intimate violence and abuse. Women of faith are taught that “your life is only valuable if it’s given away” and other clichés, which all measure up to the widely held belief that suffering brings you closer to God (Brock and Parker 18). This foundation of Christianity in the belief of endurance through situations of abuse or violence often leads women who have been brought up in the faith to believe their pain is good for them, because it is the will of God. In the 1900 novel Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South, Pauline Hopkins uses Christian symbolism and activist theory to show how the doctrine of redemptive suffering leads women—especially black women—to unnecessarily
endure situations of abuse and violence in the belief that it brings them closer to Christ.

**Black Womanhood in America**

The prominent white church rhetoric during the time of enslavement in America encouraged the enslaved black people to be meek and accepting of their servitude. This is a theological framework that the enslaved people, forced to attend church by their masters, found they were unable to identify with. Thus, the “black church freedom” movement began with a theology strongly based in evangelical Christian preaching, as the enslaved people found they were able to recognize and reflect on their own sufferings through the stories of Jesus’ life (Wilmore 99). With Jesus playing such a critical role in the foundation of the black church movement, and with black women making up the foundations of most parishes, it is deeply irresponsible to ignore the impact that the preaching of redemptive suffering may have on these women.

The concept that women above all others must bear and carry the sins of those around them is a familiar framing of womanhood. This is especially true for black women, who throughout the antebellum period were systematically reduced “to the physical body” through experiences of violence which further robbed them of control over their own physicality (Putzi 4). The suffering of black women of faith who experience violence then has the potential to be unnecessarily deepened by the teachings spawned from the doctrine of Atonement. According to the research conducted by Brock and Parker, in many situations of domestic violence women of faith consistently believe that keeping the family together, despite abuse against their person, to be “doing the will of God [which is seen as] more important than [a woman’s] personal safety” (18). This is an extremely troubling worldview to then
apply back to the lives of black women of faith who are already struggling through severe disenfranchisement within the confines of the American economy.

Black women throughout the history of the United States have been put under a system of injustice and inequality, a socio-economic marginalization due to the capitalist structure of the American economy, and the construction of race as a commodity. Many turn to spirituality, with “75 to 90 percent of the adults in the typical African-American congregation [being] women,” trying to find a sense of transcendence and agency despite the system set up against them (Murrow 56). David Murrow, an expert on the relationship between men and the church, has found that “a staggering 92 percent of African-American churches in America [are reporting] a gender gap” (56). It is clear that black women dominate the black church but the preaching of redemptive suffering found in the Christian faith could further marginalize these women, as the church itself offers them very little support or means for economic betterment. “Black women (particularly poor black women) are often treated like second-class citizens because of inequitable structures and practices” in the socio-economic framework of American society (Day 27). Theologian and sociologist Keri Day argues that the church itself fails to be a “primary site of social transformation” for these women, despite the foundation of the black church being rooted in black women providing and caring for the community: the church is dominated by black women in terms of membership, organizing, and fundraising, while they receive little support or thanks (47).

Christian Symbolism and Activist Framing

Contending Forces is primarily meant to be a piece of activist literature, focused on leading black and white audiences to understand the terrorization of black people in
nineteenth-century America through telling a realistic tale of the “lynching and raping of black Americans” (Cassidy 661). With this status as a piece of activist literature, the novel is written with the aim to complicate the previously held notions of the world, as “African American women needed to reclaim their right to represent their own particular experiences” (Putzi 5). In her preface to the novel, Hopkins asserts that she is writing to “raise the stigma of degradation from [her] race,” but the novel moves beyond the “stigma” of race, as it works to uplift and redefine black womanhood (13).

*Contending Forces* focuses on the intersecting lives of two women, Dora and Sappho. They meet at a boarding home in Boston run by Dora’s mother, Ma Smith. The novel traces their lives as Sappho falls in love with Dora’s brother Will, and then disappears from society after the secret of her past life is threatened to be revealed by a spurned suitor. This metaphorical death of self suffered by Sappho as she is excommunicated from her community raises questions of redemptive suffering in the lives of black womanhood, and what it means to be redeemed. Unlike Sappho, Dora experiences no great trauma over the course of the novel, and she instead learns to live as a woman outside of the societal preconceptions of womanhood. Through presenting these two very different lives so closely to one another Hopkins complicates the perceived notions of womanhood (particularly black womanhood) that were popular at the time, and challenges the notion that a woman must experience suffering to be redeemed.

One of the tools Hopkins uses throughout the text to further her underlying political agenda, is a framework of Christian symbology. For black people living in the reconstruction era, the time in which the primary plot of *Contending Forces* is set, the inherent complicity of
Christianity with violence was incredibly evident. Augustine’s *Confessions* had been used throughout the period of enslavement as not only a justification of slavery, but also as a means to invalidate the suffering of the enslaved, using the argument that the root cause of slavery is sin, and that slavery remains as “the judgement of God” (Augustine, 19:15). Augustine also argued that it was worse to be the master than the slave, as the master was in fact slave to their own passion. He argued that sin was the worst kind of slavery, and so the suffering endured by those enslaved by man was nothing compared to the enslavement of the self by sin as experienced by slaveholders.

In trying to find their new role in post-Civil War America, the liberated black community were then often described as “bearing [their] cross — carrying the sins of others,” implying that they must cleanse and redeem the sins of the white slaveholders in order to fully take their place in society (Hopkins 332). This idea of a “cross to bear” is the same sort of pointed, religious diction used by women of faith in defending why they choose to stay in relationships where they suffer abuse: a woman “would be willing to accept personal pain” if it is a part of God’s divine will (Brock and Parker 18). In using this specific language to describe the black experience in America, Hopkins is able to draw a connection between the systemically problematic nature of the belief that suffering redeems the soul and the experiences of the characters in her novel.

**Sappho’s Experience of Suffering**

Throughout the novel, Hopkins codes Sappho’s character to live a life that figuratively mirrors the death and resurrection arc of Jesus. Within the society in which Sappho lives, a woman who loses her virginity before she is married is ruined; she is no longer fit for marriage and
subsequently, no longer fit for life in society and otherwise seen as “a death [with] significant symbolic potential” (Putzi 8). Sappho, a mixed-race woman, becomes “ruined” after she is sold into prostitution by a white uncle in her early life. Though Sappho herself firmly believes she is not to blame for what happened to her, nor does she believe she should “be condemned to eternal banishment,” she does not share stories of her life with anyone (Hopkins 100). But when the truth of her life is threatened to be revealed, Sappho excommunicates herself from her community. This death of self Sappho experiences by removing herself from society becomes similar to the death of Jesus on the cross, particularly after her later redemption in the eyes of the people around her.

Hopkins makes it extremely clear that Sappho is not in any way responsible for the abuse she suffered as a young woman, through the conversations of the women in the sewing circle and their belief that “the sin and its punishment lies with the person consciously false to his knowledge of right” (Hopkins 150). This concept is particularly important within the context of the novel as an activist work, as this notion of a woman not being responsible for the sins committed against her would be provocative and key to Hopkins’ attempts to erase racial stigma. Even after beginning a new life, when the threat of the truth coming out is made, Sappho runs away in the “deep silence” of the night out of fear of how those around her will respond (Hopkins 322).

Three days after his death, Jesus is said to have risen and been reborn — this is celebrated as the Christian holiday of Easter. In the novel, Will Smith proposes to Sappho, and she is made whole by this love. But on that same Easter, the secret of her past is threatened to be revealed, and so she vanishes. On Easter three years later, Will Smith finds Sappho and confirms that he not only still
loves her, but would never hold her “responsible for the monstrous wrong” that had been committed against her (Hopkins 396). For a man to find her worthy of being pursued and want to marry her, despite her status as being “tainted” sexually, is ground-breaking to Sappho. This declaration of love cleanses her of the moral sin of rape. Thus, Sappho’s ending is revolutionary for her time: with Will’s love confirmed she is welcomed back “right royally… as one risen from the dead” (Hopkins 394). This return to society mirrors the rising of Jesus from the dead, as it not only happens on Easter, but also makes Sappho a whole woman again. She is redeemed by Will’s love for her.

Receiving redemption from Will thus provokes the question of Sappho needing to suffer in order to earn love. However, the text ultimately proves that her suffering was not necessary because Will loves her separately from her suffering, rather than as a result of it. In his original proposal of marriage, Will confesses that he has “loved [Sappho] from the first moment [he] saw [her],” proving that her suffering was not necessary in order for Sappho to find love (Hopkins 310). Madame Francis, the fortune teller, shows John Langley, Sappho’s spurned suitor, the inevitability of this love: “a man and woman knelt in bridal dress” are revealed to him in a prediction of the future (Hopkins 284). These two people are Will and Sappho, proving their love to be a fixed part of the future – fate. Sappho removes herself from society after Langley threatens that “men do not marry women with stories like [hers],” but Will continues to love her throughout the time she is gone and searches to find her (Hopkins 320). Sappho did not have to experience the trauma of ostracization to earn this affection, and she is in no way redeemed by any of her suffering. Similar to that of Jesus, Sappho experiences an arc of death and rebirth, but she did not
need this suffering to be redeemed. She is welcomed back into society with the love of Will, something she had before the harmful ostracization she experienced. Love redeems Sappho, not her suffering. By writing a black woman who suffers needlessly, Hopkins highlights this convention of redemptive suffering within the Christian faith as harmful and dangerous, especially when taught to women.

**Dora Smith and Black Womanhood**

Hopkins further complicates the notion of Sappho’s suffering as redemptive through the presence of Dora Smith as a counterpoint to Sappho throughout the novel. Dora does not experience any great suffering: she is “a happy, healthy, active girl, with a kindly disposition,” a Christian who is redeemed without needing to ‘die’ (Hopkins 179). Dora also works as a character to disrupt an extremely common textual trope at the time of *Contending Forces*’ original publication: the “Tragic Mulatto.”

The character of the Tragic Mulatto is a mixed-race woman who suffers and struggles in her attempt to find a place in the world, as she cannot fit completely in either the “white world” nor the “black world.” Dora breaks this archetype by standing up and stating that she is “not unhappy, and [she is] a mulatto” (Hopkins 152). In allowing Dora to express her own experience of being mixed-race, Hopkins is able to challenge several conventions of what it means to be a woman in the context of this time period. Dora is presented as extremely balanced and sure of herself throughout the novel, something unheard of for a mulatto character in fiction. Through Dora’s ability to find comfort within herself and not rely on the construct of marriage to feel complete, her ability to find peace within her status as a mulatto woman and most importantly, her ability to achieve redemption without experiences of great suffering or abuse, Hopkins uses her
character to disrupt conventions of black womanhood and the necessity of suffering to find redemption in Christian life.

Throughout the course of the novel, the most difficult hardship personally experienced by Dora is the realization that the man she liked was in love with someone else. Then through this recognition, Dora becomes comfortable in the concept that she does not need romantic love to complete herself as a person. Following the breaking of her engagement with Langley, love became “another thing, with which, she told herself, she was done” (Hopkins 361). While Sappho’s plotline relies on romantic love as societal redemption, Dora liberates herself from this narrative by not feeling reliant on a monogamous love, or any love for that matter, to be a woman. Dora in fact states that the very thought of long term monogamy leaves her feeling “unsexed” (Hopkins 122). In the end, Dora does find herself happily married, in a partnership focused on a brotherly sort of respect and affection, rather than passion. In providing this alternate version of what a woman can or should be, Hopkins creates a diverse image of black womanhood, and through Dora’s lack of experience with sexual or physical abuse, Hopkins also challenges the narrative of suffering as a necessity to confirm womanhood.

**Women and Violence in Christian Teachings**

In applying an overtly feminist viewpoint to this issue, it is important to note how the teachings of the doctrine of Atonement, in which violence against the self can be viewed as bringing the sufferer closer to God, women of faith are no longer able to correctly access their erotic power as outlined by activist Audre Lorde in “Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In this essay, Lorde stipulates that a woman’s power comes through the use of
“erotic knowledge” as a lens through which to view life (57). Therefore, when a woman has been brought up in the Christian faith and is taught to conflate love with hate or suffering, this use of eroticism to “scrutinize all aspects of [her] life” becomes nearly impossible (Lorde 57). The erotic is no longer a tool of empowerment for women of faith, but it is instead tied up in the concept of redemptive suffering as perpetuated by the Christian faith: the belief that pain is a necessary part of experiencing love. In order for women of faith to be able to reclaim the erotic as a form of power, the idea of needless suffering can no longer be tied to the concept of Jesus’ death on the cross.

In the conflation of Christianity with violence, the problem of theodicy, which questions the existence of an all good God while good people are made to suffer on Earth, must be reexamined with regards to the teachings of redemptive suffering, and its impact on women who experience intimate violence. This is especially true in the black church community, which “remains largely male led but female dominated, not only in membership but also in fundraising and organizing activities” (Day 32). Through this connection between the Jesus narrative and its impact on women of faith, the life of Sappho Clark in Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* creates the space for new and profound questions of how this narrative engages with the lives of black people in America, especially the lives of black women.

**Conclusions**

In the context of Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, the Christian idea of redemptive suffering is proven to be unnecessary for a black woman to achieve a complete and happy life. Though her character of Sappho goes through the narrative arc of death and rebirth, this is shown to be superfluous, as she is not redeemed by this suffering.
Instead Sappho is redeemed in her society by love, a love which she did not have to suffer to earn.

This idea of “restored love [as] salvation” is considered by Brock and Parker to be the foundation of Christian theology, but through the doctrine of Atonement, this love is often confused with hate and the sanction of violence (9). In teaching women that their suffering is a divine gift from God, many women become trapped in a cycle of abuse and violence that they themselves do not recognize.

In the lives of black women of faith, these teachings can become particularly troubling, as many black women turn to the church in order to find their own “ultimate value” in the face of the economic marginalization they experience within society (Day 47). Ultimate value is something defined by Day as a way for women to each to find their own definition of God and spirituality in their lives, and through this discovery become agents for change in their own lives. Hopkins allows Dora and Sappho to find their own ultimate value through different experiences of womanhood, and the ability of each woman to reach redemption and find happy endings to their stories.

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