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Kelly Brown Douglas: Womansim & Intersectional Theology

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Abstract

The Very Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas centers her work in womanist theology. Douglas' first book *The Black Christ* breaks ground on including women and multiplicatively oppressed identities into context with the gospels. She continues to write, including all who are othered by white culture. This paper discusses several of Douglas' books and their construction of womanist theology in relation to what church experiences have been and are currently. It discusses the creation of the Black Christ as a liberatory figure. Additionally, it discusses intersectional trauma as seen through, enacted by the church, and what womanism could do to heal those wounds. Lastly, it discusses the silencing that white culture encourages, and the liberation that womanist theology necessitates.

Introduction:

Growing up, I went to church, St. James Episcopal, every Sunday during the school year. I participated in Sunday School, Rite 13, and Confirmation classes until I aged out of the program and was confirmed. During my time as a youth in my congregation, I was an acolyte and would carry a familial tradition of being a female cross bearer as my mother was the first woman in our church to carry the cross. I attended The General Convention of The Episcopal Church in Salt Lake City in 2015 and in Austin in 2018. I was a representative of my Congregation at a Diocesan Convention as voice and vote.

I am a white, non-gender conforming person who was born in a female body.

As a queer person actively participating in and seeking out religious spaces, I am seen as an enigma by my peers. My peers in age and ideological construct both often found the church to be a place of harm more than a place of liberation and movement making. My experiences with Christianity run opposed to many of my friends who have been asked to leave or forcibly removed from their religious circles on account of them being queer. I attribute this positive experience and journey to my pastor, Chris Gannon. Pastor Chris organized all of the youth events, services, and outreach for all of St. James and for much of the Detroit Diocese. She also happened to be a lesbian. I know her and her wife very well and I was aware that they were a family that we went to church with, but their family structure was never anything that was questioned or commented on by the congregation.

The way that Pastor Chris brings her community together is with love and a desire for wholeness. Everyone, myself included, that was confirmed under her tutelage was taught to share love and kindness towards others even if we did not agree with them. The confirmation class of

2021 went out of their way to show St. James' kindness by having a table at a Pride festival near Detroit that was about affirming queer bodies and minds instead of the negative experiences so many queer people have had. I am privileged in that I have never felt unsafe or unwelcome in my identity in the religion or religious spaces that I grew up in.

The church community I grew up in was full of accepted and affirmed intersectional bodies. It did so not as a reaction to people's identities, but preemptively took steps to be a more inclusive community for people to come into their identities. As I grew up, my own experience seemed to not be the cultural experience of Christianity. Why is Christianity, from a surface level understanding, so deeply steeped in hate? Why is it strange for queer people to have a positive experience with a religious upbringing? How does Christianity change to better support its intersectionally impacted followers? Is intersectional oppression recognized by the Church? Is it acted on in a liberatory way? How can the Church best support those who are intersectionally oppressed?

Revered Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas approaches these questions through the lens of the Black Christ and the evolution of Black Churches. She creates a clear distinction between Slave Christianity and Slaveholder Christianity and how they continue to evolve today. Similar to Douglas' scholarly work, Denison has been able to grant me the exploration of the social and political complexities of how Christianity has been weaponized against oppressed populations. Revered Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas opens a door into how Christianity, through a divergence of the Black Christ, who liberates, and the White Christ, who oppresses, and how the Black Christ, in its definitions, still has the capacity to adapt to fight against more than just racism. She challenges the pressure to conform into oppressive behaviors to appear and feel more privileged.

Douglas graduated from Denison University in 1979 summa cum laude with a degree in psychology. After her time in undergraduate education, she went to Union Theological Seminary where she received a Master of Divinity. She made history as the first woman to be ordained in Southern Ohio and one of the first ten women to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. After her ordination, she continued to study at Union Seminary in pursuit of her PhD in Systematic Theology which was completed in 1988.¹

Douglas' first book was published in 1994 and titled *The Black Christ*.² As a student of Cone, she pays respects to the Black theologians and generations that created the liberating body of the Black Christ, while also pointing out that where the Black church, had been at the forefront of a movement of anti-racism, there was a continuous lack of support for women, queer people, and other oppressed groups. While her education was defined by Cone, she critiques and moves beyond her educators by going beyond the thoughts of a liberation from racism and introduces womanist theology as a constructive shift that includes the fight against more than just racism. This move also promotes the wholeness of a people as individuals as well as communities. She emphasizes Alice Walker's definition of womanism, not selectively as she saw other feminist theologians, but to include queer voices and identities that took up sexuality as an important and bodily topic. Douglas strives to work to include the voices of queer black people into conversation with the Black Christ as a movement of liberation.

As a womanist theologian, she includes the concept of 'wholeness.' Wholeness refers to liberation for all women, man, or gender non-conforming people. Douglas' depiction of

¹ "Kelly Brown Douglas," *Union Theological Seminary*, <https://utsnyc.edu/faculty/kelly-brown-douglas-82-88/>.

² Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (New York: Orbis Books 1994).

wholeness also includes mental and physical wellbeing as well as safety.³ While White culture does not find it productive, a counterculture of feeling a liberation is a movement of feeling whole in one's body through sexuality and non-sexuality. Wholeness also includes the community as a central body. This body acts to protect itself from oppression in all ways, whether that be from the inside of the community with interpersonal development, or outside of the community.

Douglas contemplates many questions around the wholeness and womanist theology throughout her books, speeches, sermons, and other communicative methods. Can womanist theology become the ultimate for an accepting Christian body? A practice of Christianity that fights for the rights of its peers and partners while also emphasizing loving and caring for them is a practice that dramatically breaks the stereotypes of a hateful religion.

A concept that this paper will be focusing on will be the affirming practice of embodied Christianity and womanist theology as it relates to oppressed bodies as laid out by Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas. Embodied Christianity refers to recognizing more than an oppressive, White Christ, as violent separatist culture pushes the soul and the body apart.⁴ Thusly, Womanist theology is attempting to subvert all separations and to affirm through bodily autonomy and safety for all, no matter socially assigned oppression. The embodied practice also recognizes the body as a place of history and truth as occurrences of or on the body are often steeped with White cultures' neglect of emotional recognition. Instead of separating the body and mind, they can be felt as one working unit.

³ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 128.

⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It? : Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 34-36.

In her writings, Douglas often draws on Dr. Patricia Hill Collins when referring to Black Feminist epistemology as Dr. Collins wrote about the importance of emotion, care, and experience as fact.⁵ Oppression exists and is experienced in all forms of the human body in one form or another. Douglas seeks to give those who are oppressed the space within Christianity, as a safe space of faith, to recover from those oppression, be uplifted by their religious community, and feel whole in body and community.

Douglas actively encourages separation from that that does not feed progression and wholeness. This is a powerful movement, as much of what is socially taught is based on separating by our differences. While recognizing how everyone is different and celebrating it, to actively move towards to group of identities instead of a group of individuals is a radical concept. She works towards widening the lens of the Gospels to include more identities. While her focus is primarily on Black female and gender-nonconforming bodies, Douglas' urge to include all bodies and identities transcends current movements to uplift one identity at a time. In this theology, all are uplifted.

Womansim:

Before there can be an understanding of womanist theology, an understanding of what womanism is at its core is necessary. Alice Walker, the creator of the term womanism, is an activist, author, and poet.⁶ She has won several awards for her outspoken writing including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983. She defines womanism as such:

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* (The University of Chicago Press 1989), 745-773.

⁶ Alice Walker, "Alice Walker | Official Biography," Alice Walker's Garden, Accessed July 20, 2022, <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/>.

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.⁷

This is defining womanism through a series of numbered statements. These statements outline the past, present, and future of life and movements that center Black women. Womanism

⁷ Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Mariner Books, 1983).

takes the stories and identities of Black Women seriously where White culture may find these out of character for its assigned labels.⁸ The definition of womanism is proving of agency in a system of oppression that would rather strike down outspoken voices. It is also written in a dialectical format so to honor that it is truly centering Black women and their existence. It is culturally rooted and does not conform to a white male academic standard. This definition strives to correct toxic behaviors that do not center love and acceptance. The definition specifies that this ideology is not separatist. However, it also makes an effort to include separatism when it is healthy to the whole and to the self. Consciously eliminating negatives is just as important as embracing positives. Overall, this ideology makes a conscious effort to be outspoken, care, love, exist, and fight for freedom above conformity.

Womanist epistemology can be seen across swaths of theory as well as greatly furthering Black feminist thought. An example of this is in Patricia Hill Collins *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought*, where she outlines four key tenets applicable: (1) “experience as a criterion of meaning, (2) use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (3) the ethic of care, and (4) the ethic of personal accountability.”⁹ Throughout several of her books, Douglas draws on both Walker and Collins’ writing as they construct similar ideological constructs, but in very different ways.

Womanism centers Black women and takes seriously their experiences, harms, and pressures. It is not enough to just center the Black body, but that of the Black female identity. This definition encapsulates the necessity to thrive and not just survive. Womanism also takes a

⁸ Outspoken Black women are often thought of as masculine instead of just understanding them as individually experiencing their bodies and minds as truth.

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs* (The University of Chicago Press 1989), 745-773.

definite stance in including everyone, regardless of identity, appearance, or ability. The inclusion of everyone works towards the commitment to wholeness. Wholeness challenges how intersectional oppressions keep communities from being whole and where those oppressions, even with communities are oppressed, are rooted. Additionally, womanism recognizes the body as part of all experiences. It positively recognizes sexuality and bodies of different sizes. Womanism takes an active role in bring genders and identities together to learn from each other rather than ostracizing people because of social training.

Womanism stands opposed to a culture of oppression where round, Black, sexually active female bodies are the most discriminated against.¹⁰ It actively resists and encourages everyone to resist idealized identities and bodies. Womanist ideology encourages the destruction of socialized harm in the face of a state and culture that actively uphold and encourage racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other discrimination. It encourages community and relationship building without the barriers of prescribed social norms. Womanist theology reflects these ideals into a community that is centered around religion.

A main concern of womanist theology is wholeness. Wholeness is the antithesis of White culture. White culture chooses to separate and categorize people by identity. The strategy of purposeful separation works to “break down the relationships and unity between subjugated (often racial) groups struggling for justice, freedom, and liberation.”¹¹ Instead of celebrating and learning about these differences in everyone’s lives, White culture teaches us to further ourselves from people instead of celebrating communities as a whole.

¹⁰ This is referring to the opposite of the standard of beauty that exists in White Culture.

¹¹ “Understanding and Resisting Divide and Conquer Tactics”. Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance. <https://www.powershift.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Divide-and-Conquer-1.pdf>

Wholeness can be correlated to Jesus' call to Galilee where the goal is to liberate the othered from states of oppression. It also necessitates combating all oppressions, and not just oppressions that apply to the self. Douglas challenges the position of the Black church as it has been a major leader in emancipation movements for generations but has yet to be able to talk critically about gender discrimination within its own community let alone the states oppression on Black women. Women make up a majority of the congregations in Black churches but hold little of the actual theological power in their communities. While there may be roles for women in the church, they often are chores that are placeholders for actual inclusion. Funneling certain groups of people into specific jobs also upholds a underlying sexist teaching of social norms. While there is some social and state privilege in upholding traditional gender norms, womanist theology pushes to see everyone representing their community wherever and however they want, whether it be at the pulpit, marching on the streets, and cooking dinner.

Wholeness involves reaching out to other oppressed communities, in hopes of learning and growing together, external from the oppressive force of White culture. Learning from others can also push for self-reflection, which Douglas states in several books, is not done enough.¹²¹³ Wholeness also means that the parts of the community that are harming people, are not productive and should not be a part of working towards the whole. Douglas includes in her writing, that while rap is a form of self-expression, that the misogyny that has come out of this artform is not productive and healthy to keep if the community is committed to bettering itself as an anti-oppressive movement. Rap itself is neutral, but the social pressure that often pushes musical artists to include harmful language is not producing the safety of wholeness. Embodying

¹² Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021)

¹³ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015).

wholeness is removing the harm from the neutral artform so it can transcend the negative expectations and stereotypes.¹⁴

Wholeness also includes feeling the entirety of the human experience of mind and body. Connecting the body and mind includes the feelings of bodily impulses, pains, pleasures, and other physical experiences. Socialization often pushes the separation of body and mind by uplifting acts of the mind as superior to what the body feels. Recognizing the body and mind as a whole together, is a form of radical separation from socialization. This socialized separation of the body and mind encourages a distinct lack of sexuality and positive inclusion of differing bodies. This separation also asks people to put aside all emotions that can be overruled by logic, such as anger, lust, fear, anxiety, and guilt. These emotions have been primarily categorized as feminine, and thusly, things that should be pushed against or masked in either nothingness or masculinity. Regardless of how human emotions have been categorized, living through all of them is a basis of actually experiencing a life that includes both the body and mind working in a marriage.

Feeling both the body and mind together, is a form of resistance that Douglas and womanist theology encourage. Actively going against what everyone's socializing has taught, embodies a safe space for those already exercised from the community at large. If this movement of wholeness is shared, it generates a ripple effect that no longer subscribes to separatist ideology. And while it is difficult to pursue, wholeness leads to a healthier and safer community at large.

¹⁴ Many current artists of every gender are doing this, as well as breaking stereotypes about who can rap.

Living as a marriage between the body and mind celebrates a connection with the liberated self that is not supported in a White culture that emphasizes the dualist ideology of the separation of body and mind. Understanding Jesus' story as an embodied incarnation of God reminds liberating parties that to act in conjunction with Jesus is to act in resistance to oppression while recognizing our own bodily and societal struggle. Existence is not just a move from birth to death, from miraculous birth to crucifixion, but a pilgrimage of learning difference and celebrating it. Living is experiencing all emotions, sensory feelings, and experiences that are placed in front of us rather than avoiding things because of what part of the body they provoke. Everyone feels and interacts with what they feel differently, and communities should not diminish that, but uplift the differences that make everyone individual.

Womanist theology additionally pushes to not just recognize the identities that everyone holds as an individual, but to reach and learn about those who are living in other diverse identities. Douglas state that a "...prompt womanist discourse (is) to go beyond racial constructs in in its responses to the consistency of the Black faith tradition. Womanist theology would thus question the black faith community's inability to respond to issues of suffering and injustice that seem to reach beyond what is typically regarded as a historically or culturally "black" concern."¹⁵ This is womanist theology further widening its lens to not just protect and care for its main constituents, but all that may feel the need for a community of liberation.

White Culture:

To understand what 'white culture' is, a definition of socialized whiteness is required. Whiteness, that is in skin color and action, is someone who conforms to a cisgender,

¹⁵ Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It? : Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, 209.

heterosexual, White-skinned, patriarchal, lifestyle.¹⁶ These are identities that people are born into and taught. Queer people have been pushed to live cisgender and heterosexual lives regardless of their true identity. Patriarchy is taught from a young age through social media, school yard talk, and even familial set ups. People of color, however, often are not able to fit into the box of whiteness and are punished for it. This creates the situation that privileges the idealized identities.

While whiteness does refer to skin color, it also refers to all of those that fit with prescribed cookie cutter identity either willingly or unwillingly. White culture deems those that do not fit into this box as lesser and thusly oppresses them as it sees fit. This oppression either works towards eliminating those identities into non-existence or into conformity to the white ideal.

Method of Correlation:

In Douglas' analysis of the churches ability to react to social justice movements, she points out an obvious lack in addressing oppressions beyond racism. The church is declining in numbers, but still populated with people of different backgrounds. While they have a commonality in church life, the church does not always respond to identity as well as it can. An example of this is women only recently being allowed to become priests despite them being overrepresented in the pew. This gets complicated by multiplicative oppressions such as a Black, queer woman, who must move through the world against the current of the oppressive culture that is attempting to keep difference down.

¹⁶ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective*, 17.

To better understand Douglas' deconstructions of Christianity's interaction within the current situation, it is best to look at Paul Tillich's concept called the "Method of Correlation". The church's ability to correlate the tradition and the current situation to address modern issues is a necessity for survival. Tillich offers that the push and pull between the tradition and the situation can be referred to as the "method of correlation."¹⁷ This keeps the sights of the continuous shifting on the part of interpretation and application of the tradition on an ever-changing climate. In this definition, the tradition is stable, but the ways the situation views the tradition can change.¹⁸ The "method of correlation" is never in perfect alignment. This meaning that regardless of what the current situation is, the church, enacting the tradition, has some lag time in reacting to the situation. Currently, the church can seem frozen, indifferent, immune, or non-response in conversating between the tradition and the situation. Of course, this does not apply to all churches and church experiences, but the stereotypes and recent traumas are felt in the church being frozen. To have the situation and the tradition perfectly balanced would mean that there is no divergence in personal moral opinion within the community of Christianity.

The Black Christ:

The portrait of this Christ reflects the time in which they were created, but Douglas breaks down the complexities of identity and encourages the Black Christ to remain fluid and in conversation with the situation. Opposed to a situation that is stagnant and desires a finished project, fluidity promotes a never-ending progression and adjustment to the current situation. To create a fluid outlook on Christ allows more people to connect the tradition to their own situation. Fluidity is also necessary to overall changes in the situation and how it interacts with

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Chicago Press, 1973).

¹⁸ Some of the interactions between the situation and the tradition have to do with the situations ability and diction to translate the tradition.

the tradition. In creating the image of the Black Christ, there is fluidity so people can better connect with the tradition. The Black Christ, a liberator for Black enslaved people, needs to be contextualized and understood as diametrically opposed from the White Christ.¹⁹

The origin of the Black Christ is from Slave Christianity as Christian ideals and religion in general were forced onto enslaved people.²⁰ Slaveholder Christianity was introduced as a form of ‘social correction’ and ‘civilizing’ of enslaved populations. It actively shifted generations of enslaved people away from their own culture and to a more controlled cultural ideology that was oppressive Christianity. Slaveholder Christianity justified the act of enslaving and violating people’s human dignity, while maintaining a Christian identity. Slave Christianity acts as a counter to Slaveholder Christianity as “through the cross, Jesus’ suffering and the slaves’ suffering became one.”²¹

The separation between Slave Christianity and Slaveholder Christianity creates image of the Black Christ and the White Christ. The specific divergence of the White and the Black Christ is seen in what parts of the bible are emphasized.²² Where slaveholder Christianity emphasized specific epistles and the Old Testament which justified slavery and social hierarchy, slave Christianity focused on Jesus’ liberating actions in the Gospels. The Black Christ and the White Christ exist and serve completely different groups and locations; the White Christ further privileging the privileged and the Black Christ standing against the state’s oppressive power.

The ideology of the Black Christ is a Christ of liberation and standing up to the powers that attempt to oppress. The methodology has been to use Christianity to motivate and encourage

¹⁹ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 29.

²⁰ Kelly, *The Black Christ*, 20.

²¹ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 21.

²² Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 14.

populations of worshipers to stand against the powers that govern over them. Douglas suggests that this methodology continues to be fluid and include more, Black, queer, women, as our understandings of oppression are not fully visible without the most oppressed bodies being included. The ideology of the white Christ is to oppress populations that do not fit into a pre-categorized norm so the specific few elite can govern socially and politically over all others. This is seen in methodology that reflects discrimination justifications in political and social situations.

Slaveholder Christianity idealized parts of the Bible and Biblical tradition that allowed them to justify and act atrocities on the Black body.²³ This ideology understood belief in God as the only action necessary to gain salvation. This belief protected them from worry about how their souls would measure as good Christians when they died having enacted harm. From several accounts, this made the slaveholders more violent because they did not fear for their salvation but understood that they would have a place in Gods kingdom as long as they believed in God.²⁴ Christian slaveholders, as they had savior and mission complexes, introduced the enslaved people to Christianity and Christian practices to educate, Christianize, sophisticate them. The slaveholder Christianity did its best to separate Jesus's liberatory movements from earthly freedom. The White Christ finds its place in slaveholder Christianity as God in human form, not in the liberation missions depicted in the Gospels.

The White Christ has been made into a figure head that doesn't pressure political involvement, human rights advocacy, or encouragement to critically analyze current events. For those privileged by the system already, this version of Christ is an easy sell. It does not promote

²³ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 15.

²⁴ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 19.

accountability or a questioning of privilege and what costs it has. This Christ eliminates the story of Jesus as a radical liberator and repaints him as a calm and kind do-gooder.

The biblical Christ was a criminal condemned by the law and put to death as the leaders saw fit. This Christ fought for the rights of the people to be released from their oppressions. The Christ in the gospel has been watered down to a few key tenets that can be taught without the radical liberation. This diluting of Jesus' story makes him feel safe to the commonly privileged bodies and therefore more sellable to a broad audience.

For slave Christianity, Jesus, the word made flesh, is someone who was a trusted companion of those experiencing oppression and suffering under the state. He was a companion to the enslaved people as his narrative could reflect their own and what they wanted out of their futures; in this interpretation, the next life was not limited to the finality of death, but a life removed from the current suffering. This is a liberating revelation from what White oppressive Christianity had taught. Jesus' experience on the cross became connected between the historical Jesus and the enslaved peoples' suffering, as one; Jesus felt and understood their pain and for that the relationship between enslaved people and the Black Christ became more intimate. The Black Christ was a motivator to fight for emancipation and against the oppression of the oppressive White Christ.

While the Black Christ who fought for freedom and for Black lives existed, there was a movement to visualize, depict, and think of Christ as a Black person. Doing this assisted in further empowering Black bodies as well as positively impacting self-esteem. Malcolm X was a prominent figure that fought for images of Black people to be used in education and symbols so Black children can grow up seeing themselves in media, such as tv, text, or art, and recognizing their self-worth as they are reflected. Depicting Christ as Black was also explained through the

teachings that humans are made in God's image, therefore necessitating a White Christ doesn't make sense.

Douglas emphasizes the importance of practicing an embodied view of the Gospels and not that one of platonic dualism. An embodied view of Christianity emphasized the combination of the body and the mind as one thing. They both exist naturally as God given traits of humanity and to attempt to tamper one of them does not do justice to the human experience. Platonic dualism encourages the separation of the body and mind as the mind is intellectual and rational, the body is seen as distracted and irrational. This separation is made and there is a loss of human experience with it.

Recognizing the biblical Jesus as a living, loving, struggling human grants an opportunity for a closer connection with Christ. As Jesus was a figure who got beaten down, even arrested, for what his mission was, that is reflected today in people fighting for their freedoms. Coupling this with a depiction and understanding of a Black Christ, brings into perspective an opportunity to see oneself in Christ and see acts of Christ in oneself. It is a mutual relationship of love and liberation that the White Christ and slaveholder Christianity stand diametrically opposed to. This is an additional reflection of Womanist theology that reminds people that their bodies and minds work in tandem.

As Douglas talks about in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, White culture, a culture that survives on privileging White bodies, and the White Christ, that justifies oppression, feed into each other. The counterculture of anti-racism that started with slave Christianity and the creation of the Black Christ create space for Black bodies to be sheltered against a forced practice that they do not connect with. Unfortunately, as Douglas points out, the progress stops at anti-racist movement. There is a distinct lack of inclusion across

gender, class, and sexuality. While racism is not tolerated, sexism, homophobia, classism are still upheld by the panopticon that is White culture. The portrait of the Black Christ needs to be reimagined continuously to respond to the identities of those experiencing every type of oppression, not just those in the spotlights.

From a womanist perspective, the Black Christ needs to grow. When it was first depicted it was strictly focused on liberation for the Black body.²⁵ To reenact a fluid tradition, the Black Christ needs to stay continually adjusting to the current situation and true to a movement that can liberate the Black body, in all forms. It also needs to be able to react to the biases within and without its own community. To give a singular and unchanging definition to the liberating Christ defeats the purpose of staying active in fighting against oppression. The Black Christ that was given scholarly definitions in the 1960s did not account for women, people of a lower class, or queer people. Not including these identities separated their struggles for justice and freedom from a community that could have worked together.

Regardless of the liberatory movement that the Black Christ has and can bring, everyone was (and is) socialized in an inherently sexist situations. Men have to prove their masculinity and if they cannot, their femininity is labeled. Women may attempt to be seen as masculine but will always be labeled as feminine. Other gendered people are also often defaulted to femininity because they are othered as femininity is. Sex must be acted into to so fall into line with the social expectations of gender norms. With this brings stereotypes and expectations that reduce identity and create space for violence. A conscious effort must be made to shift the ideals of the

²⁵ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 88.

Black Christ, not off racism, but to include fighting oppressions against women, queer people, people in the lower class, and other minority groups that are discriminated against.

Douglas, throughout her writing, has argued for communities fighting against oppressions on any front to be self-aware of how they have conformed to expectations of White culture to gain privileges. Academic conformity is often resorted to to be heard by a system of white culture. She states, “It serves to remind womanist theologians that the truth of their theological claims does not depend on their conformity to scholarly, conceptual standards of thinking – particularly because those standards are disinterested in the life and well-being of Black women and men.”²⁶ Abandoning the standard of the white man’s academics to serve a broader community is another step towards abandoning a culture that necessitates oppression. To be validated by the oppressive culture, we can uphold some negative traits that oppress others. This may not be conscious as everyone has been taught to oppress the other even if they are not aware of it. It does take effort to unlearn oppressive behavior and language, but that is why liberation movements, and what they can teach us about oppressed populations, is important.

Galilee: Then and Now

What is Galilee? Galilee was important to the king because it was the gateway to a part of the world that he wanted to control. The Galileans stood in defiance to his rule and were punished with oppressions greater than all others. Jesus called his followers to fight against these oppressions and stand in solidarity with the Galileans.

Why does Jesus’ call his followers to be there? Galilee was the location of the empire’s ultimate oppression. It was also the heart of revolutions and revolts against the oppressive

²⁶ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 210

power.²⁷ As Jesus is liberated from pain, suffering, and oppression in his resurrection, he calls everyone to join him in Galilee to resurrect hope through political action. The call to Galilee invites all who will follow, to rise against oppressions at the location of the greatest injustices. Galilee is not just somewhere that Jesus went to, but a place where great rebellion and liberation were sought after. Christianity reflects the divine's conscious choice to stand with and fight for violated bodies. Jesus, as the Word made flesh, was the embodiment of a connection between the lengths at which God will go to see and experience humanity and God's unwavering position with those struggling in oppression.

Movements such as Black Lives Matter, De-colonizing movements, March for Our Lives, Women's rights movements, Queer rights movements and so many more social justice movements that are intertwined in White cultures violent oppressions are examples of the call to Galilee. These are examples of a march for the liberation of the othered that can be brought to the modern era of the. So why isn't the direct correlation to the gospels being applied to modern movements that are liberation movements? There is a clear connection between the gospel and the modern struggle and yet the church hasn't shifted its views to respond to many of these outside of hateful words or passive silence. The church has stayed in the safe space of the spiritualized Christ and not moved to the Christ that was an absolute nuisance to the social and political power of his situation. The church needs to move into a space that embraces the unsafe nature of Jesus in the Gospels.

Standing against injustice isn't only seen and heard on the large stages of national and international justice movements but is required on interpersonal interactions and situations that

²⁷ Mark Chancy, "Galilee," *Oxford Biblical Studies*, September 13, 2010, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0043.xml>.

are seen by few people. For churches to openly invite women (and other gendered people) into ordination and general leadership of the church is to create a small, but safe, community where the norm is acceptance of the other regardless of the state's prescribed identity. This bubble of safety can grow further, and further as other congregations see the word of God in these actions that liberate people from the state. This ripple effect is also likely to spread outside of the church as people live their lives outside of church grounds, but not outside of uplifting and enacting the accepting word of a liberatory God.

The Christian gospel needs to regain its fluid state in this modern moment that divides easier than ever. Movements (and people) that align themselves with the word of Christ need to start asking themselves about who they are fighting with and for. If the answer is completely selfish, this fight needs to be reflected on and needs to expand to the othered as the gospels point to. Shifting from the savior complex and necessity to correct the other, to that of accepting is one that needs to happen if there is a desire to carry on positive traditions of Christianity for generations to come.

Growing up around stereotypes and history of Christianity, it seems as if the faith had and is being used to save people as its primary goal. Save people from lists of sin, wrongdoing, and generally negative stereotypes about how the world should work, laid out by translator's generations before the young adults of today were born. This tradition of a savior complex is a main contributors to declines in attendance because people are no longer being seen for what they are, but what the church thinks they should be. It is not necessarily the fault of the translators, but the people who enact the tradition for a situation that is long outdated. Language, culture, and ideology change over time within secular and religious contexts, and it should be the job of those teaching the gospel to contextualize it to the current situation. Christianity is being

used to force people with uteri to go through a pregnancy that many not be safe or the best for the people involved but are condemning queer people and sending them to camps to ‘pray the gay away.’ Where is the liberating Christ in these teachings? Where is the Christ that stands by those oppressed by the state?

The Biblical Jesus was a safe space for othered people.²⁸ Jesus is a safe space for those oppressed by the law because he was in defiant opposition to that which oppressed. In the gospels, Jesus stood with, and fought for the identities of those oppressed by the law. The biblical Jesus centered his existence in the marginalized. Contextualizing this part of the tradition to the current situation, this would include people of color, queer people, and other oppressed populations under the empire that is the social and political policing. The concept of the liberatory Christ seems to have faded in American culture as a positive religious influence. This loss directly aids the White Christ’s political state that has engrained itself in American culture. This culture paints Jesus as a savior of life, but not all life. The life that this savior has selected are extremely specific and in line with what the White cultures ideal is. This ideal being that of cisgender, white, and privileging male above female. This construction of Christ is far removed from the Jesus that called people to fight for liberation in Galilee. This Christ removes places of safety and care, as it fails to protect all who may lean towards it. Who benefits from the ‘safe’ construction of Jesus?

Those who benefit from this safe and spiritualized construction of Jesus are those who aim to uphold a violent hierarchy where privilege is the currency. There seems to be a misconception about what equality is for those who currently experience multitudes of privilege. Equality means equal standing ground for all. It does not mean that rights will get taken away

²⁸ Safe spaces refer to spaces that queer the understanding of the social constructs to best fit that group of people.

from people, just that everyone will stand from the same place. The strive for equality is not for those oppressed now to be given privileges above the cisgender, white male, but to just simple be equal. If everyone reflects God, then everyone should be granted the same opportunities and rights as everyone else. Including the currently othered, as equal, in ordination, acolyting, conversating, sharing, speaking thoughts, and everything that goes along with building a community in faith, would be a step towards privileging all and none.

The harmless Christ does not stand against the social hierarchy, White exceptionalism, savior complexes, or atrocities on the human body. This construction turns a blind eye whether harm is done in the name of God or not. The harmless Christ has an inability to productivity shift the view of the tradition. Shifting the situation calls for another construction of Christ to be brought to center stage. Moving towards a community inside and outside the church that privileges all and none, takes time. Regardless, conversation and action always need to be happening about how to best stand with the oppressed as Jesus did.

The church has been pulled into a concept that spiritualizes Jesus and God. The concept of spiritualization actively deprives beings of their ability to directly impact worldly events. It makes them harmless to the norms of society. In the bible, Jesus was a human and experienced the horror that is humanity. He directly impacted people through word and action. Additionally, God impacted people through actions and words. Instead of modern teachings of the gospels as embodied and involved in humanity, they seem to take a step away from the modern situation.

There seems to be a distortion in the vision of Jesus as a radical liberator of the oppressed. Modern understandings and depictions of Jesus are not representative of the Jesus in the Gospel stories. Contextualizing Jesus' actions to today, he would be condemned by traditional religious groups for standing with sinners and othered bodies. Generation Z and the

Millennial Generation rely on mental and physical affirmation to live their lives constructively.²⁹ If the church cannot give it to them, then there is no reason that these generations would rely on the Church as much as previous generations have.³⁰ If the current, popularized movement of Christianity was a construction that followed and cared for the othered, the bodies active in church life would be much more diverse. The church failed many people in older generations as their use of the tradition aligned with the situation for a short time, but never changed. The practice and the interpretations stayed the same instead of fluidly changing as the situation continued. For those whose practice of the tradition never caught up to the situation may view the radical liberator and the Black Christ as an ill fit for Christianity. The younger generations, however, would be likely to be drawn towards a congregation that fluidly shifts its teachings based on how the tradition and the current situation interact with each other. However, there is a roadblock in how the church is currently represented in media. Through hate speech, such as the Westboro Baptist church actively protesting gay military funeral, and politicians completely staking their moral compass in a form of Christianity that doesn't respect or care for the physical body.

Douglas suggests that in this hopelessness of a disconnection to bodily autonomy reveals God, as God pulls us out of hopelessness into hope.³¹ Hope that becomes the backbone of liberation movements led by all against individual and collective oppressions. This emphasizes

²⁹ Stephen Miller, "Generation Z and Millennials Seek Recognition at Work," *SHRM*, September 12, 2019. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/generation-z-and-millennials-seek-recognition-at-work.aspx>.

³⁰ These generations of people are also likely to not raise their children in faith communities if they see no benefit, or even active harm, from them.

³¹ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 120.

wholeness in many forms.³² Hope also continues to be a necessary trait because as the situation changes and white culture oppresses the other, new identities will require a safe space.

Regardless of identity, be where the biblical Jesus calls his followers to be, standing in defiance of the power that destroys life. Protect that which makes the community whole and disregard the traits and learned reflexes that make it not.

Crucifixion and Resurrection:

What does resurrection mean? How does Douglas contextualize modern forms of crucifixion? Modern forms of resurrection? What is the “moral imaginary” and why does it matter in context to the resurrection? Where, in modern America, are people called to Galilee? Why are rage and forgiveness interconnected?³³

The Crucifixion is the king winning; violently ending the life of a political rival. The resurrection is God and Jesus winning. It celebrates a life that is transcending the politics of the king. Jesus was crucified by his oppressors and the oppressors of the downtrodden. In taking up the cross and standing his ground, Jesus unequivocally places himself at the side of the oppressed. This action is inherently political. Douglas offers that Jesus, in standing with the oppressed, accepts the violence that barrels towards him, as proof that he stands by his word regardless of the violent and deadly consequences.³⁴ As the violent state does its best to tamper down the voice against it, God raises that voice as a battle cry in resurrection. This resurrection comes to return the voice to Galilee, to the front of the most oppressed in order to stand with the most oppressed.

³² Wholeness in body, community, and others.

³³ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 124.

³⁴ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 123.

A perspective shift needs to happen when thinking about the crucifixion. While many churches rightly teach Jesus as the crucified, an addition needs to be made by thinking about the crucifixion from the perspective of oppressed people's eyes and not just Jesus'. This is important because it gives the path to crucifixion more fluidity in who it applies to. Yes, the crucifixion applies to Jesus, being a poor oppressed man standing against a violent social/political power, but it also applies to gender non-conforming Black people dealing with the social injustice of existence. The current social norm has allowed for these people to be considered less than human, but to allow them the space to see themselves in the crucifixion would be to center them in Jesus' promise to stand with the most oppressed of a population. The "method of correlation" recognizes that connections be made between the tradition and the current situation, and as Jesus experienced human oppression, pain, and death, so do many people today. Shifting to make this connection may challenge some modern political ideologies that are based in oppression and push for a practice in social justice. This shift would also actively challenge who churches aligned themselves with and what lines to stand on as oppression is an overflowing river of difference determined by the white state.

While it may not be a literal crucifixion, there are many ways that the American social state allows violence as a form of policing of the other and the other's body. Some of these discriminations are embedded in the law, such as allowing the stereotyping and murdering of Black men, women, and non-gendered people to mask "self-protection" laws, or funding Black school districts less because test scores are not as high, as if that is the fault of the school district and not the lack of funding to begin with. Because the state is complicit with these discriminations, the social norm reflects them, allowing stereotypes to perpetuate themselves and

racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory behavior to fester in an environment that encourages the othering of people.

The resurrection of Jesus takes on several meanings as contextualized through modern events. It allows the growth of hope, encourages the marriage of both rage and forgiveness, and pushes for a revelation of a new reality.³⁵ Participating on modern social justice movements is reflective of what the gospels depicts what Jesus did in his life. Participation embodies Jesus' movement as well as carrying on the legacy of the resurrection of life.

In God's resurrection of the crucified, hope blooms. Hope grows as the resurrected are invited to move on to Galilee to stand alongside Jesus in a movement against an oppressive government and social order. The crucifixion is a symbol of dejection and despair, but the resurrection points to what could be. In this possible world of what could be, the historical disciples grapple with what could change in their time of liberation in Galilee, and a community in the 21st century grapple with what could change in ours. A liberation from oppression is long overdue as the oppressors' resort to violence in fear of the threatened health of the white state. As more and more stand in a defensive against this oppression, fear lessens. The more life is privileged, saved, and cared for; fear lessens. As social justice movements stride forward towards progress, God is felt in hope; in the celebration and care of life. This motivation turns to hope as those oppressed and standing with the oppressed see the new world that God has given in the land post resurrection.

Emotions must hold a place in any march towards liberation as the human experience cannot be overlooked in the reasoning for why the march is important in the first place. Rage, as

³⁵ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 197.

a very human emotion, should not be something to shy away from in times of oppression and liberation. Forgiveness, also as an emotional concept, is one that is often interpreted individually and separate, from what the social state has recognized as logical emotions and categorized itself in a vulnerable category. While it does find itself in a vulnerable place in a social understand, in links itself with rage for the state. On a personal level, one can be forgiven, but to eliminate rage is to eliminate to social being which upholds the oppressions. So, while the forgiveness is conditional on a personal level, the rage against the oppressive state stands strong until its dying breath.

Finally, the resurrection of Christ and the other offers a revelation of a new reality in which there is justice and equality for those who are oppressed in this moment. That new reality is one that in which all people live in harmony with each other without a hierarchical understanding or power structure. This new reality is God's just future. A future where no one starts or ends as unjust, but just is. To be, is to be equal in this structure.

To understand Jesus' invitation to Galilee and to a resurrection would be to recognize that violence may occur. Accepting that this violence may happen is more about understanding that reflexive violence will not happen, but an understanding that liberation laughs in the face of violence with the rebirth (and reinvigoration) of a new movement of liberators.³⁶ Accepting violence is a crucial part of being an ally to the other and being a part of what is dictated by the social as being wrong. There may be fear that stems out of aligning oneself with an oppressed population, but that fear cannot overcome the love that would be the outcome of a resurrected life of justice. Douglas reflects on how it feels as if the White theologians and congregations in her church community are hesitant to call out injustices about things that cause direct harm to the

³⁶ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 190.

community of color, but not that of people of differing sexualities. It seems that there is an unspoken equation that calculates the level of societal otherness that gets placed with identity and church communities decided their words and movements off this impossible equation.

Silence stands in the way of resurrection. The silence can be caused by many factors such as social pressure, hesitancy about moral stances, fear of further violence, and many more. This begs the question: how does the church, as a body seeking social freedom for its congregations, decide what movements to be loudly supportive of, and what movements to stay quiet about? As previously discussed, an attempt to gain more privilege through conformity is through confirming to expectations of silence. This silence could be about sisters and non-gendered siblings within the movement of anti-discrimination where a distinct lack of support or response to tragedy is shown.

When Douglas refers to the “moral imaginary,” she is referring to the reflexive and impulsive morals that the social has dictated. In the case of the American social, the dictation is that of harm against the expressly non-White. This moral impulse has labeled anything that is not white, and therefore pure, as something that is allowed violence to punish it for its non-conformity.

Social Construction of Reality:

Douglas’ book *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* reminds the reader that the rights to own guns and the law around guns effectively perpetuate slavery masked as self-protection. The presence of guns makes any situation more dangerous, but coupling it with racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory behavior, violence is enacted against oppressed bodies and sometimes even sanctioned by the state. Black trans women are one of the

most highly targeted groups people for hate crimes, but their stories are often not seen as they experience an extreme of intersectional oppressions. These stories are not heard because White culture has deemed them ill fit in the Anglo-Saxon ideal and such the only way to hear their stories is to specifically seek them out.³⁷ If the violent culture finds an atrocity sellable to populations, it is heard, but when Nedra Sequence Morris, a Black trans woman is shot and killed on May 14th, 2022, we do not hear anything because the culture of discrimination has found her to mean nothing.³⁸

Douglas points out that socially inflicted pain and death should not be glorified as redemptive suffering. To glorify an act that harms the bodies of so many people subtly perpetuate violence and does nothing to promote the wholeness of a community. Wholeness would be to remember that person, tell their story, and immortalize them as meaningful body even after death. As Gods reaction to Jesus' crucifixion and death was not a violent and oppressive reaction, but one that resurrected, and affirmed life. How can communities learn to react with affirmation of life rather than violence? Douglas offers that the black women, especially queer black women, should be brought to the center of the conversation.

Even in the way the Morris is talked about in her remembrance title from the Human Rights Campaign, she is labeled a "strong, feisty, opinionated Black transgender woman," and one may wonder if she was White if the same wording would be used. Social conditioning trains the communal mind to include stereotypes and often use negative language with Black bodies. Personally, I would be proud to hold these titles, but often they are used to vilify Black women

³⁷ The Anglo-Saxon ideal refers to the demonization of blackness as an opposite to white purity.

³⁸ Violet Lhant, "Remembering Nedra Sequence Morris, A "Strong, Feisty, Opinionated" Black Trans Woman," *Human Rights Campaign*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.hrc.org/news/remembering-nedra-sequence-morris-a-strong-feisty-opinionated-black-trans-woman>.

instead of empowering them. Douglas, in an interview for CNN, as well as throughout many of her books, discusses the importance of recognizing language as a violence just as much as physical violence. Violent language can be seen as less harmful as it does not actively damage the body, but normalized racist, sexist, and homophobic language standardizes harm through social and legal routes.

Discrimination is taught. It is taught everywhere from the schoolyard to the classroom, from a lack of color in make-up lines to dress codes. There is little to no access in medical textbooks or diagrams that people of color to see themselves reflected in. America's White standard actively teaches discrimination to its populous to the point of no longer recognizing it as discrimination. The construction of our current reality rests on the back of a violent and oppressive White standard.

Moral and Social Imaginary:

In conjunction with thoughts put together by theologian Willie Jennings, Douglas deconstructs what the "social imaginary" is and how it encapsulates her definition of White culture.³⁹ The imaginary and the imagination are two distinct entities and social constructions: imagination being that of the concept of a place and a people, and the imaginary being that of the moral reflexes of that place and people. The moral imaginary in America is based on White superiority and anti-blackness. This is a socially upheld reflex that diminishes things associated with anything outside of normative whiteness.⁴⁰ While movements have occurred, shifting the moral outline, the ingrained reflex is inherently racist. It is a taught reflex upheld by violent killings by police and other violent and non-violent aggressions. Everyone raised in the

³⁹ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 6.

⁴⁰ Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, 4-5.

American system is taught racism, sexist, homophobia, xenophobia, etc., regardless of their identity.

A hope for the future that centers itself in womanism is that the teachings of harm are lost after generational turnover. As everyone learns to be kinder and healthier with each other's identities, the moral imaginary will start to slip away. This, however, does not mean that there is not still a necessity to continue on a fluid path, constantly adjusting to the situations that we are living in currently and not getting stuck in the past.

Silence:

What causes silence in the face of injustice? Often fear is the answer to this. To stand loudly against the state (and other violent and oppressive powers) is to invite further violence and oppression upon oneself, but is this not worth the change that could occur? There is a push and pull of morals that people must decide on. As the social imaginary reflexively promotes whiteness as a safety net, loudly calling out injustice and supporting movements towards justice goes in the complete opposite direction of the safe norm and thusly is not the commonly chosen path. It is, however, the path that often encourages the safety and wholeness of the community as an entire entity. While the dominant and violent reflex of White culture does not see this as productive, it is exactly the work that needs to be done to overcome this oppressive narrative. Steps need to be taken towards equality, but it can be socially and physically dangerous. So, this silence is justified by fear, but what do individual and collective morals teach about standing idle while people are harmed?

Douglas criticizes churches for not being involved in social justice movements as much as they should be.⁴¹ Logically, if churches were loud about supporting and standing with oppressed populations, they themselves would be seen as less oppressive, as Christianity has been adapted in the American context as an oppressive power. Unfortunately, the fear of White culture and the social reflex has lured churches into more conservative understandings because that is what feeds into White culture the best and the most. If churches understand themselves to be following the movement of a God that situates themselves at the cross, at the point of human suffering, and in Galilee fighting for justice, then a definite change needs to be made to reflect this movement.

Douglas argues that to be a good Christian is to protest oppressions. Quietism and justifications of harm are for the White Christ and slaveholder Christianity and should find no place in a Christianity that supports the wholeness of a people. She states “Even when womanist theology remains silent on issues that affect the well-being of black people it loses credibility. By not confronting issues that impinge upon the body of any black person, womanist theology belies the very faith tradition to which it is beholden.”⁴² She depicts Martin Luther King Jr. as he chose a path of religiously based freedom fighting where heaven was not the end all be all for the reception of Black emancipation.

One person is not able to overcome all systematic injustice and oppression, but for thousands and millions of people, all standing together has and will continue to chip away at systemic issues. Fear is always easier to face as a group. The church is long overdue for loudly proclaiming statements of love and anti-oppression proactively and not reactively. This

⁴¹ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 106-108.

⁴² Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It? : Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, 210.

community has a reach that is overlooked by the stereotypes of the current generation. Often inter-generational conflicts are harder to follow, and many older generations and others struggles with connecting to recent movements because of a technological access barrier. Recognizing the invaluable teachings of a Christ who died fighting injustice has the possibility to mobilize across generations and create a safer space for those who previously did not find in churches. Loudness is a necessity in embodying and embracing Christ and Christ's teachings as an anti-oppression liberator.

Church Interactions/Stances:

There is no universal identity of Christ. Everyone experiences different things in their lives which result in differing ways of interpretation. This goes for those in the pew and those at the pulpit. This can result in everyone having relationships with the gospels as similar but never perfectly in lined with each other. This also goes for how the gospels and biblical stories are taught. For the sake of the congregations, the body of the Christ (and of God) should never be limited to specific descriptions. To assist the self-esteem of every body in the congregation, the readings of Christ and the depictions of God, should also reflect every body in the congregation. Black bodies are made in image of God just as much as trans bodies are and often this feels overlooked when decisions are made about who belongs in communities of God. This means that everyone is reflective of the image of God, and there should be no hierarchy. This is talked about, but to challenge this, as a part of regular church community accountability, has the possibility allow people to come into their own understandings of how systematic oppression has taught them discriminatory ideals without them realizing it.

As Douglas show us through several books, sermons, and lectures, the Black church has joined incredibly positive social justice movements as well as centers itself on liberation from

oppression.^{43,44} However, she challenges it to be able to respond to more than just racist oppression and join in liberation movements to seek wholeness through the sanctuary for all. There is a necessity to recognize that to be loved and held in the sanctuary is not enough as elevating the rights and social respect that every human deserves. It is the responsibility of those who are in caring and life affirming communities to never stay silent. This lack of silence includes the churches responsibility to shift conversations to include Godly responses to oppression and violence.⁴⁵

To best be able to change the community in subtle ways through a ripple effect in addition to standing with oppressed, is to be self-critical of what discriminations people continue to hold without recognizing it. Douglas pushes communities to be self-critical about their own biases, but to push further those who are self-critical have a necessity to call out discriminatory behavior, and couple it with a reeducation of positive language. The reeducation does not need to be formal but continues to teach where harm is rooted and how it can be changed through action, and just as importantly: language.

In Douglas' analysis of the churches ability to react to social justice movements, she points out an obvious lack in addressing oppressions beyond racism. The church is inhabited with people of many different identities, backgrounds, privileges, and experiences. They are often not diverse internally, but compared to different congregations, differences are seen as there are different populations that different churches attract. While they have a commonality in church life, the church does not always respond to differing identity as well as it can. An

⁴³ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 64-72.

⁴⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, "The Very Rev Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, Denison University Commencement Address, 2021" (speech, Washington, DC, May 22, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL6gqLrydck&t=981s&ab_channel=DenisonUniversity

⁴⁵ This is in reference to God as life affirming after the crucifixion in the action of resurrection.

example of this is women only recently being allowed to become priests despite them being overrepresented in the pew. This gets complicated by multiplicative oppressions such as a Black, queer woman, who must move through the world against the current of the oppressive culture that is attempting to keep difference down.

Even as some churches discuss politics and social justice, some don't directly address the topic at all. There are several reasons this could happen, but in congregations that are far more privileged than others, to challenge that privilege could be seen as a threat. Threatening privilege could cause a loss in constituency and profit for the church. However, given the ways churches could include social justice topics may invite more bodies that could offset the loss of those who felt threatened by a challenge to the social structure. This would also aid in diversifying congregations.

Paul Tillich's concept called the "Method of Correlation" is an important addition to the conversation of religious construction.⁴⁶ This process exists to be reactive to existential questions of the human condition and it flows into Douglas' construction of womanism in the church. Tillich offers that when people have any questions or issues, the church should be able to respond to them and answer questions or offer theological solutions. This push and pull of the situation that the questions come out of and the tradition of Christianity, often lead to imbalance. The culture of harm has taken over the church instead of the church seeing the tradition differently to best fit the situation. Currently the tradition is weighed heavier as women, let alone queer people, are still struggling to have their voices heard in their churches. Unfortunately, some of the bodies posing questions and issues are seen and heard more than others. To better follow both Tillich and Douglas, the church would need to make a conscious

⁴⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1*.

effort to listen, hear, and respond to everyone equally. Though this cannot happen without first creating a safe space for those farthest from the middle.

This also raises the question: why is the church reactive in the face of hate, but not proactive with love? When violent acts against the human body occur, often faith groups will be outspoken about anti-violence and love for everyone. However, there are still some instances where there is hesitancy to support the most oppressed out of a population. This hesitancy turns into a blind eye in some cases so to not challenge the social system and white culture. This was reflected during the AIDS crisis when AIDS was widely associated as a gay disease and to be support people with this ailment would be to support gay people. While recognizing that this can come from a place of hate, it can also come from the fear of losing privilege. If the state and social dictate what does not fit with the norm, then to actively speak out against that norm singles out and can oppress than person or group. Taking sides against the social norm is dangerous, but Douglas reminds people that pushing back against oppressive behavior of all types, personal or otherwise, is how change occurs. Reactions in the face of hate are an easier step to take because those occurrences of hate happen. Proactively accepting and being a place of “sanctuary and witness” are the ways in which oppression is dissolved from inside social relations before atrocities must happen for these oppression to be seen.⁴⁷

Douglas’ vision of communities and individuals taking up roles of sanctuary and witness are crucial for the bodies farthest from the middle to be seen and heard. To be a sanctuary is to be a safe place for anyone, in any identity, in any lack of identity, and in any body. A sanctuary has no place for discrimination. A conscious effort must be made to transform the everyday,

⁴⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Black Bodies and the Justice of God Kelly Brown Douglas,” *Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*, February 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0rYDQWb-M8&ab_channel=PittsburghTheologicalSeminary.

socially acceptable, acceptance, that many people close to the middle are comfortable in, to that of sanctuary of unrelenting safety.⁴⁸ The role of the witness, which sits hand in hand with the sanctuary, listens and hears the good and the bad of everyone. A witness also calls out injustice where they see it as silence breeds violence. Both places and people enacting them, are safe spaces, for anyone and everyone. Within this safe space, there is room for healing and learning as the most privileged are challenged by roar for justice. This challenge can change language, change laws, change morals, and change the violent rhetoric created by oppressive exceptionalism. Douglas offers that these two roles are found in God and Jesus, acting against oppressive powers of his moment, standing with the poor and downtrodden, and allowing community to develop through love, not hate. To reflect Jesus is to be a witness and sanctuary for all.

Is there a future where there are no reactions to hate because proactive love of the prescribed other brought everyone to the middle? This is a utopian concept, but through practices of love and care for the othered, it will creep to fruition. The church is a good place to start this as it has practice and knowledge in social justice movements; there just needs to be a push for recognizing the most oppressed, standing with them, and caring more about them more than the consequences of standing beside them. The church also has invaluable knowledge and ability about sharing love and love-based care for everyone as the Gospels reflect a Christ who stands in the trenches with the most downtrodden. To stand together is to stand stronger and as minorities slip through the cracks of fearful silence, lives are lost, atrocities are committed, and White culture gains that much more power over the other.

⁴⁸ When referring to acceptance, this is a passive role. Sanctuary must transcend base line acceptance and actively care for everyone.

To listen and to hear, respects people and their experiences. Affirming the body by hearing its pain generates a loud pushback against the silencing effect of White culture. The goal is to eliminate violence of word and action through communities that care for one another and seek to be whole in body and mind. However, to be whole includes a distinct lack of binary and White culture will push against any attempt to break the binary as it will see this as an attack on its privilege. The color line actively violates Black bodies and privileges White bodies, so why is uplifting Black bodies to the same privilege as White bodies, effectively eliminating privilege, seen as an attack on White privilege? Privileging would not be about taking away rights from the previously privileged but granting access to those who did not have it through the violent oppression of White culture.

Stereotypes:

Douglas comprehensively depicts the evolution of stereotypes and rigid constructions of sexuality on the Black body. Through an analysis of stereotype, she depicts how systemic harms towards Black body are formed. Many of these stereotypes are constructed around White culture's idealized norm of sexuality and how the Black body is specifically separated out from that.⁴⁹

She deconstructs where White culture comes from, what it is, what its power is, how Christianity is informed by and informs power, what sexuality is, and how the evolution of all of them inform each other to create a racist power structure. It also investigates White culture as a system of othering and how Michel Foucault's understanding of bottom-up power development sustains racism through stereotype, myths, penal systems, and enforcing silence.

⁴⁹ What cultures idealized sexuality leans more towards non-sexuality.

White culture's power systematically of privileges whiteness over non-White bodies. Whiteness grows to be constructed as diametrically opposed to Black. Anything that is external from the White standard cannot be considered white and thusly is oppressed as blackness. White culture creates the imbalance between racial groups by boiling them down to surface level traits such as skin color and hair texture. It sustains itself on this imbalance, and from that, doubles down on emphasizing and punishing the difference. In a structure that others the non-White body as degenerate, violence and dehumanization occur on a massive scale, but a population acting through White culture, does not react.

White culture dictates the views of sexuality acted through the Black body. White America is literally built on the back of exploited Black bodies. Douglas outlines two ways in which White culture single out Black sexuality: sexual exploitation for slave labor and desire to control purely out of fear of visual difference. She discusses how Christianity thinks about the body and the pleasures it feels as separate from the spirit; this creates a hard line between reason (spirit) and passion (body), and reason is the sinless path for the Christian thought. Connecting this to White culture's power to depict difference, pureness and sinlessness has been attached to whiteness, where dirtiness and deviant has been attached to blackness. Any Black body interacting with sexuality is condemned for being Black and for being sexual.

The stereotypes around Black sexuality are inherently racist and sexist as Europeans created stereotypes and designated them as other based on cultural and visual differences. White culture depicts Black people as lustful and hypersexual. Black women experience the intersectional stereotypes and discrimination from being both Black and a woman.⁵⁰ Douglas

⁵⁰ Kimberly Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination, Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (Illinois: University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989), 139-167

points out that this position is where White culture gets to play a large amount of its power and reduce Black women to two-dimensional identities.

One stereotyped identity is “The Jezebel” which is a woman who is completely at the whim of her sexual passion.⁵¹ When the English bought slaves from tropical climates, they mistook a lack of clothing as that of a sexual nature and not that of customary for the climate. This dichotomy furthered as wealthy white women would wear layers of clothing to be seen as respectable; the more skin showed the lewder the woman. Though this was not a choice made by the women because they were enslaved, many Black women were displayed without clothing and given less clothing that they needed which furthered the myth that they were always sexually ready. White culture, on some level, also attempts to protect the virtue of the White woman, by sanctioning the White man to violate and exploit the Black woman instead of the White woman. If the Black woman does not fall into line with this, she is either forced violently, or pushed into another reductionist category.

Another stereotyped identity of Black woman is the “Mammy,” which is the counter to the Jezebel as the caretaker.⁵² This stereotype finds its origin in slavery. The construction of this women who appears to be a continuously docile and non-sexual person who takes care of the master’s house, the mistress’ and the masters’ house, and the whim of the master. The reality of this position, as Douglas outlines, is that this position was created by White people to counter the narrative of the Jezebel as a domestic alternative. This myth depicted the ideal slave, as she would have been assimilated to white ideals of a proper household. Both the Mammy and the Jezebel dehumanize the Black woman and separate her from her autonomy.

⁵¹ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 36

⁵² Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 41.

The stereotypes of the Black male also separate him from his autonomy and White culture treats him, as it did with the women, as a zoo animal. Black men were compared to bucks, being valued on their ability to reproduce and the strength needed to work, but also in their sexual aggression and prowess. As black men were portrayed to be violent, their punishments for what the slaveowners perceived as wrongdoings, were violent in turn; some of these punishments included castration and lynching. Douglas points out that even after emancipation, lynching still occurred, and was a way that White culture exercised its power over the declared other.

Douglas contextualizes the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the violent buck, in modern situations. The Jezebel myth has shifted to the “welfare mother/queen,” and is a Black woman who is giving birth to too many children to be economically productive with little morals.⁵³ White culture sees this woman and blames her for the condition that she is in rather than how she moves, or struggles to move, through a White culture. The Mammy has turned to a “matriarch,” where she is a domestic worker for others, and the source of power in her own home.⁵⁴ A report, called the Moynihan Report, discusses a major imbalance in the Black household that this matriarch oversees. A reflection of White culture does not give space for women to be the head of house or have power. Finally, depiction of the violent buck has not change as White culture handles the reins. An example of this is how any violence towards white women puts a target on the back of Black men as their stereotype is to be violent.⁵⁵ These stereotypes are situated in direct opposition to white stereotypes and are policed by White culture violently.

⁵³ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 53.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 50.

⁵⁵ The white woman’s cry is easily, and most often, seen in the example of Emmitt Till who was violently murdered after allegedly flirting with a white woman.

Opposing White culture, womanist thought recognizes stereotypes as a path that, through social policing, keeps people separated. Ideologically, womanism emphasizes wholeness, and therefore stereotypes have no place in this construct. Stereotypes eliminate positive individuality. When only identifying the stereotypes instead of reality, there is a loss of actual human development. Stereotypes only exist because of oppressive cultures necessity to divide and categorize, but womanism has the potential to transcend this.

Sexuality:

Conversations of sexuality have been changed as White culture has created a taboo around it. Because of this Black churches and communities struggle to discuss in sexuality in any capacity, queer, or heterosexual so to not further fall out of line with White culture.

White culture and white Christianity reflect platonic dualism.⁵⁶ This theory offers “that one’s physical body and soul are cooperate entities and that one lives on after the other has died.”⁵⁷ While this separation is a common understanding and belief, it is harmful to the relationships that people have with their bodies. Many theologians have seen the body and its desires as a hinderance of what the mind could be and thusly kept it and it’s actions in a negative space.⁵⁸ Taking this into account, all forms of sexuality can be looked down upon. Anything that privileges the body above the mind can be frowned upon. A culture that already represses sexuality among the privileged, repressed those discriminated against tenfold.

⁵⁶ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It? : Black Bodies / Christian Souls*, 29-35.

⁵⁷ “Platonic Dualism: Splitting the Body and Soul.” Platonic dualism. University of Idaho. Accessed July 18, 2022. https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl257/classical/platonic_dualism.htm#:~:text=Platonic%20Dualism,after%20the%20other%20has%20died.

⁵⁸ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It? : Black Bodies / Christian Souls*, 35.

Douglas deconstructs enslaved people's sexuality and intimate relationships as a starting point to examine social policing through oppressive religion.⁵⁹ Sexuality was used against Black people as a form of dehumanization through the separation of the body and soul, as well as White Cultures desire to control othered bodies.⁶⁰ A form of reclaiming their autonomy, was to foster relationships that included intimacy, sexuality, and marriage. These intimate connections were not sanctioned or recognized as proper marriage outside of the community that they existed in. Christianity had a controlling role, that from a Christian standpoint, attempted education, and management of White cultures ideal relations. The relationships between enslaved people as well as female's ability to act in their sexuality was heavily policed by rules of conduct put forth in the Church. The policing by the White church has influenced the conversation around acceptable sexuality and conversations about sexuality to a minimum.

Douglas offers that any discourse around sexuality positivity would be a radical act that would purposefully separate itself from White cultural teaching.⁶¹ Music is one of the routs that sexuality is expressed through, two genres being blues and rap. Both express sexuality, relationships, love, pain, and stories of living. While rap draws back the curtain of what White culture has reduced Black bodies too, it also perpetuates homophobia and sexism. Douglas draws out a necessity to start conversations around deconstructing and reconstructing Black sexuality by and for the Black community to regain autonomy and agency separated from White culture.

White culture has othered the Black community from itself.⁶² Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other discriminatory behaviors are taught to uphold a structure

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 122-123.

⁶⁰ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 125.

⁶¹ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 133.

⁶² White Culture has taught every community to be sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. to the point where there is a taught feedback loop of reinforced harm regardless of community.

that only privileges cisgender, straight, white, men. In an attempt for White culture to cyclically protect itself, it creates standards and stereotypes that are taught to everyone and the use of these harms' communities of all backgrounds.

To confront and resist the stereotypes that White culture has prescribed would be to encourage self-love, self-care, and loving relation between the others in community. This discourse, as Douglas discusses, should be about how White culture has separated the Black body from pleasure. It also furthers others through gendered stereotype and what specific genders should be feeling. There is a general fear of all sexuality, especially within a church setting, which polices bodies to not act sexually unless for the express use of reproduction.⁶³ Homosexuality is an othered population that is associated with HIV, and Black bodies, queer or not, experience and disproportionally high cases of HIV positive bodies. This creates a bigger rift in homosexuality acceptance as it is seen as a threat to masculinity and strength. White culture privileges, white, heterosexual, men, which leaves a distinct lack of privilege for queer black women. This pushes a heterosexual agenda in the Black community to attempt a move back towards the center by way of heterosexuality and reflecting the White nuclear family.

Douglas roars for a discussion. She reasons that homophobia, sexism and propagation of White church ideals further harms the Black community's ability to heal itself. She points out that perpetuating harm and hate does the opposite of reifying the goals of a healthy community and accessing liberation theology. A discussion about sexuality is necessary to heal and grow from the sexist oppression prescribed by White culture.

⁶³ This is a product of White culture oppressing the connection between body.

Additionally, Douglas discusses the ways in which the body as a divine subject have been separated into the body and the spirit. She contemplates how this separated keeps Black bodies and communities from being whole. Separation also restricts the actions of the body, as bodily action is secondary to the mind. However, Jesus

To engage with the divine self as a sexual and passionate being conversates directly with the word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

She begins the section by outlining the importance of the embodied practice of Christianity as distancing the body from the spirit de-radicalizes every body as divine. The divine human is capable of loving in every relationship and to love is to reflect the word of God; recognizing this love actualizes one's humanity and opens them to wholeness. As humans reflect God, they reflect affirming, safe, and loving relationships with those around them. Douglas points out that Jesus' actions reached for justice of anyone experiencing oppression, and modern oppressions are heavily surrounding conflicts in sexuality ideology. A practice of faith centered in the body experiences passion as an erotic, sexual or not, expression of love of life.

A White Christian view of sexuality others people from their own bodies, attacking the connection to the divine in the process. Othering people from their body through violence and discrimination is what White culture is made of and is a sin. Douglas does point out that for there to be radical resistance, the Black Church and community need to resist conforming towards the middle for small privileges. She described the discrimination against queer people as something that the was taught from White culture and betrays what Black faith was and can be.

Douglas goes on to outline that wholeness, in body and spirit, in relationships, in communities, and between the secular and spiritual, is the end goal. Sexuality discourse pushes

all of these topics together. It radically moves away from White culture and the generations of ingrained sexist and homophobic teachings. Critically assessing how White culture has violently distorted Black sexuality brings a culture of affirmation and humane treatment as the other becomes part of the center. To be Christian is to “outrageously, audaciously, and courageously” stand against oppression.⁶⁴

The Why:

Douglas’s prescription of womanism theology includes everyone. It celebrates all oppressed identities. It listens to those identities. It pulls the gospels back into context and relentlessly pushes for connection between the story of Jesus as a liberator, and our modern journey of liberation from an oppressive state. This theology encourages political action whether it be on a small or large scale. It also starts to point out the ways that White culture and the White, harmless, Christ, are losing their grip on power. To practice womanist theology is to respect and care for life.

The church environment that I grew up in is similar to the theology that Douglas has depicted across her writings. While I was aware that all of the steps that we took to include people and stay politically active, Douglas’ theological break down of womanism aligns with the mission that St. James has.

Douglas, in her first book, *The Black Christ*, makes her mark by criticizing her teachers, peers, historians, and revolutionaries, for not including women in Black theology.⁶⁵ It is not a task that is taken on lightly as she carries this torch, in some way, through all of her books. She

⁶⁴ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 129. This quote is pulled from how tenets of Womanism can best engage with bettering the Black Church.

⁶⁵ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 190.

also makes a point to not stop at women. She carries through with including people of queer identify in both gender and sexuality. A point of womanism is to respect and listen, as well as hear, the stories and experiences of the othered. She also points to the concept that there are bodies that are discriminated against that we are not aware of yet.⁶⁶ In her work towards including all, an approach to be continuously fluidity is apparent.⁶⁷

White culture is not a system that in the long term, cyclically protects itself. White culture's reaction to things that it finds lesser is through violence and fear of violence. The fear is played out in stereotype, workplace norms, expectations, and attitude towards and about the other. Fear keeps people acting into their identities, but as violence is less and less acceptable, the ridged walls of identity start to lose stability. Violence will still happen, but normalizing all identities starts to eliminate targets on these identities. Thusly, the more the othered are normalized, the more white culture will lose its grip on power.

The White Christ is struggling similarly as it is not fluidly changing to address the situation of younger generations. The white Christ is appealing to those who wish to maintain a harmless and separated ideological construct. As previously discussed, this harmless Christ doesn't push at systemic issues in any way. Younger generations are being raised with more inclusive and "politically correct" language which sets them into an being more inclusive systemically.⁶⁸ Surveys find that "Six in 10 Gen Zs and 56% of millennials say that systemic racism is fairly or very widespread throughout society."⁶⁹ More than half of two young

⁶⁶ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 17.

⁶⁷ Discriminated against bodies are identities that are continuously fluctuating.

⁶⁸ Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, Ruth Igielnik, "Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues," *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

⁶⁹"For Millennials And Gen Zs, Social Issues Are Top Of Mind – Here's How Organizations Can Drive Meaningful Change," *Forbes*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deloitte/2021/07/22/for-millennials-and-gen-zs-social-issues-are-top-of-mind-heres-how-organizations-can-drive-meaningful-change/?sh=7113f271450c>.

generations are aware of social imbalance. If they are greeted with scripture and religious discussions that are stagnant and passive about social justice, then it will fall on deaf ears. A Christ that is not active in resistance and liberation is not a Christ that will survive.

Womanist thought is only as good as its ability to adapt to modern oppression, and in the future, it will adapt as it must reflect the oppressed groups of today. Enacting change through womanist theology is important as the church has a history of harming the other. Fluidity is a necessity for womanism, and it needs to be a necessity for the church. If it stays frozen, harm will be perpetuated, and trauma will cyclically continue. Womanism is a leading light that can better communities, heal wounds, and stand by those being oppressed.

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