"Wading through Many Sorrows": Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective

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Suffering is universal, an inescapable fact of the human condition; it defies immunities of all kinds.[9] Suffering despoils women and men irrespective of race or tongue, wealth or poverty, learning or virtue; disregards merit or demerit, reward or punishment, honor or corruption. Like sun and rain, suffering comes unbidden to the just and the unjust alike.

Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness. It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. Suffering can maim, wither, and cripple the heart; or, to quote Howard Thurman, it can be a "spear of frustration transformed into a shaft of light."[10] From some women and men, suffering coaxes real freedom and growth, so much so that Thurman insists we literally see the change: "Into their faces come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way."[11] From other women and men, suffering extracts a bitter venom. From still others, suffering squeezes a delicious ironic spirit and tough laughter. Consider the Gullah [woman's] proverb: "Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and ah licked de pots clean."[12]

A working definition of suffering is the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence. Evil is the negation and deprivation of good; suffering, while never identical with evil, is inseparable from it. Thus, and quite paradoxically, the suffering caused

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by evil can result in interior development and perfection as well as in social and cultural good. African Americans have encountered monstrous evil in chattel slavery and its legacy of virulent institutionalized racism and have been subjected to unspeakable physical, psychological, social, moral, and religious affliction and suffering. Yet, from the anguish of our people rose distinctive religious expression, exquisite music and song, powerful rhetoric and literature, practical invention and creative art. If slavery was the greatest evil, freedom was the greatest good, and women and men struggled, suffered, sacrificed, and endured much to attain it.

This essay is a theological meditation on "the maldistribution, negative quality, enormity, and transgenerational character" of the suffering of black women.[13] Such particularizing of suffering requires neither qualification nor apology. However, there can be no ranking of oppression or suffering; no men or women are excluded from the canon of anguish. Indeed, the historic suffering of the Jewish people and the oppression of the hundreds of thousands of indigenous peoples of the lands of the Americas weigh heavily in any discussion of ethnic suffering.[14] Further, the specificity of this essay neither discounts the humiliating racism black men suffer, nor does it undermine the grievous sexism women of all races and cultures endure. Rather, I hope that the reader shall situate this particularizing of suffering within the ongoing Christian theological effort to respond to the human condition in new and graced ways.

The focus of this essay is not the formal, self-conscious, and bold contemporary articulation of womanist theology for an authentic new world order, but rather its roots in the rich historic soil of black women's experiences of suffering and affliction during the centuries of chattel slavery. In the first section of the essay, enslaved or fugitive black women speak for themselves.[15] Scholars estimate that black women wrote about 12 percent of the total number of extant slave narratives, although none of these is as well known as the narratives by fugitive and emancipated men.[16] Mary Helen Washington observes that male slave narrators often render black women invisible or relegate them to subordinate roles. When black women are referenced in men's narratives, they are depicted as "the pitiable subjects of brutal treatment, or benign nurturers who help the fugitive in his quest for freedom, or objects of sentimentality."[17] Black women slave narrators offer a stiff antidote to the (hegemonic) cultural stereotypes that black men seem to have imbibed. As Hazel Carby points out, when these women relate and interpret their experiences on their own terms, they disclose a very different sense of themselves:

> In the slave narratives written by black women the authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects; represented as acting their own visions, they are seen to take decisions over their own lives. They document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of the resistance of that brutality.[18]

Only by attending to black women's feelings and experiences, understanding and reflection, judgment and evaluation about their situation

can we adequately challenge the stereotypes about black women—especially those stereotypes that coalesce around that "most popular social convention of female sexuality, the 'cult of true womanhood.' "[19]

The centerpiece of this first section is the story of emancipated fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[20] Jacobs's controversial narrative is quite likely, "the only slave narrative that takes as its subject the sexual exploitation of female slaves—thus centering on sexual oppression as well as on oppression of race and condition."[21] Here, we apprehend not only the intersection of gender and race and class, but a most excruciating form of the suffering of enslaved black women.

Womanist theology claims the experiences of black women as proper and serious data for theological reflection. Its aim is to elucidate the differentiated range and interconnections of black women's gender, racial-ethnic, cultural, religious, and social (i.e., political, economic, and technological) oppression.[22] Hence, a womanist theology of suffering is rooted in and draws on black women's accounts of pain and anguish, of their individual and collective struggle to grasp and manage, rather than be managed by their suffering. Drawing from these narratives, the second section discusses those resources that support black women's resistance to evil and the third section sketches the basic elements of a theology of suffering from womanist perspective.

Black Women's Experiences of Suffering

Composite narratives and interviews with emancipated men and women, as well as their children and grandchildren, have given us a picture of daily plantation life.[23] These include chronicles of the horrors and anguish they endured under chattel slavery: the auction block with its rupture of familial bonds, the brutalization of human feeling, savage beatings and mutilation, petty cruelty, and chronic deprivation of human physical and psychological needs. But accounts of the rape and sexual abuse of enslaved black women are told reluctantly, if at all. James Curry, after his escape, recounting some of the "extreme cruel[ties] practiced upon [some] plantations" around Person County, North Carolina, asserted "that there is no sin which man [sic] can commit, that those slaveholders are not guilty of." And Curry lamented, "It is not proper to be written; but the treatment of females in slavery is dreadful."[24] Still, some men and women dared to write and speak about that dreadful treatment—the coarse and vulgar seduction, rape, abuse, and concubinage of black women under chattel slavery. . . .

Resources of Womanist Resistance

Almost from its emergence, Christianity has been described as the religion of slaves.[25] Space does not allow me to elaborate here the nature and character of the psychic moments, spiritual experiences, preaching and teaching, rituals of passage and praise, spirituals and shouts and dance, visions and vocations that signify the distinctive African appropriation, if not reception, of biblical revelation by the enslaved Africans in the Americas. From their aural appropriation of the Bible and critical reflection on their own condition, these men and women shaped and "fitted" Christian practices, rituals, and values to their own particular

experiences, religiocultural expectations, and personal needs.[26] The slave community formed a distinctive image of itself and fashioned "an inner world, a scale of values and fixed points of vantage from which to judge the world around them and themselves."[27]

Christian religion was a fundamental resource for womanist resistance. Many women drank from its well, yet selectively *so.* Harriet Jacobs was critical of religious hypocrisy, speaking of the "great difference between Christianity and the religion of the south."[28] Slaveholders who beat, tortured, and sexually harassed slaves prided themselves on church membership. The planter class held one set of morals for white women, another for white men, and assumed that enslaved women and men had little, if any, capacity for real moral experience, moral agency, and moral virtue. All too often, Christian preaching, teaching, and practice complied. Black women's narratives counter these assumptions and stereotypes as well as discern and embrace a religious standard that exposes the moral hypocrisy of the planter class. Moreover, these women are living witnesses to the power of divine grace, not merely to sustain men and women through such evil, but to enable them to turn victimization into Christian triumph.[29] Jacobs records the lines of this old slave hymn that sings the distinction between a pure or true Christianity and that poisoned by slavery: "Ole Satan's church is here below/Up to God's free church I hope to go."

The attitude of the master class toward worship by slaves was not uniform. On some plantations slaves held independent, and sometimes, unsupervised services of worship; on other plantations, they attended white churches, sitting or standing in designated areas; on still others, they were forbidden to worship at all and they were punished if found praying and singing. Yet the people persisted. Christian biblical revelation held out formidable power. It offered the slaves the "dangerous" message of freedom, for indeed, Jesus did come to bring "freedom for the captive and release for those held in economic, social, and political bondage."[30] So it offered them the great and parallel event of Exodus, for indeed, it was for a people's freedom that the Lord God chose, called, and sent Moses. Christian biblical revelation provided the slaves with material for the singular mediation of their pain. The spirituals, "forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor,"[31] were an important resource of resistance. In and through these moaned or sung utterances, one woman's, one man's suffering or shout of jubilation became that of a people. The spirituals reshaped and conflated the characters and stories, parables and pericopes, events and miracles of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. These songs told the mercy of God anew and testified to the ways in which the enslaved people met God at the whipping post, on the auction block, in the hush arbor, in the midnight flight to freedom. The maker of the spiritual sang: "God dat lived in Moses' time/Is jus' de same today." The spirituals served as coded messages, signaling the arrival of Moses in the person of Harriet Tubman or other ex-slaves who went back into Egypt to "tell ole Pharaoh, Let My People Go." "Steal away," sang the maker of the spiritual, "the chariot is comin.' " And, if the makers of the spirituals gloried in singing of the cross of Jesus, it was not because they were masochistic and enjoyed suffering. Rather, the enslaved Africans sang because they saw on the rugged wooden planks One

who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them. The enslaved Africans sang because they saw the result of the cross—triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world.

The slaves understood God as the author of freedom, of emancipation, certainly. Harriet Jacobs recalls Aggie, an old slave woman and neighbor to her grandmother. When Aggie hears the other old woman weeping, she hurries to inquire. But, when told that the grandmother is weeping because her grandson has escaped North, Aggie's joy admonishes Jacobs's grandmother.

> Is dat what you's cryin fur? Git down on your knees and bress de Lord! I don't know whar my poor chillern is, and I nebber 'spect to know. You don't know whar poor Linda's gone to; but you do know whar her brudder is. He's in free parts; and dat's de right place. Don't murmur at de Lord's doings, but git down on your knees and tank him for his goodness.[32]

For the slaves, "the God of the fugitive is a God who offers immediate freedom and deliverance to his [sic] chosen people," even if this deliverance sometimes entails trial and fear.[33]

Even as Linda Brent joins in thanks for her brother's safety, she does not hesitate to question God. Brent's experience of oppression forced her "to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the [dominant] culture and the Bible that [she found] obnoxious or antagonistic to [her] innate sense of identity and to [her] basic instincts for survival."[34] In the following passage, Brent speaks for so many who puzzled and would puzzle at the maldistribution, enormity, viciousness, and recrudescence of this peculiar suffering:

> I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children. Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter.[35]

Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent has made a space for Alice Walker's Celie. Tormented in heart and mind and body, Celie declares that God "act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, lowdown . . . If he [sic] ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you."[36]

For the enslaved community, memory was a vital and empowering act. Remembering gave the slaves access to "naming, placing, and signifying,"[37] and thus the recovery, the reconstitution of identity, culture, and self. Memory, then, was an essential source of resistance. As a young girl, Lucy Delaney's mother, Polly Berry, was kidnapped from Illinois and sold into slavery. Like Harriet Jacobs, Polly Berry's emancipation is bound up in a slaveholder's will that an executor disregards. Delaney

writes that "my mother registered a solemn vow that her children should not continue in slavery all their lives, and she never spared an opportunity to impress it upon us, that we must get our freedom whenever the chance offered."[38] Delaney's mother kept alive for her children the memory, promise, and possibility of freedom. Fugitive and emancipated slave narrators remember and recall for us, not only their own experiences and suffering, but those of other enslaved women and men as well. Mary Prince explained her own commitment to their memory simply and eloquently: "In telling my own sorrows," she declared, "I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs."[39]

Linda Brent, her grandmother, Mary Prince, and Polly Berry all use language to defend themselves from sexual and physical assault and to gain psychological space and strength. *Language* was a crucial form of resistance. In these narratives, women model audacious behavior: wit, cunning, verbal warfare, and moral courage. These black women *sass! The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines sass as impudent or disrespectful back talk. Enslaved black women use sass to guard, regain, and secure self-esteem; to obtain and hold psychological distance; to speak truth; to challenge "the atmosphere of moral ambiguity that surrounds them," and, sometimes, to protect against sexual assault.[40]

Joanne Braxton explores the West African derivation of the word *sass*, noting its association "with the female aspect of the trickster." Sass comes from the bark of the poisonous West African sassy tree. Deconcocted and mixed with certain other barks, sass was used in ritual ordeals to detect witches. If the accused survives the potion, she is absolved; if not, the sass poisons, it kills. For enslaved women, sass is a ready weapon; it allows them to "return a portion of the poison the master has offered."[41] There is strong sass in the lines of a song women cutters sang in the Louisiana cane fields: "Rains come wet me/Sun come dry me/Stay back, boss man/Don't come nigh me."[42] An emancipated slave recalls Sukie, an enslaved black woman who used her fists and sass to protect herself from the sexual assault of a Virginia slave master. In revenge, he sells her to traders who, the narrator reports, "'zamined her an' pinched her an' den dey open her mouf, an stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an' tole old nigger traders to look an' see if dey could fin' any teef down there."[43] Strong sass!

Linda Brent uses sass to ward off Flint's sexual and psychological attacks. When the physician mocks her marriage plans, calling her fiancé a "puppy," Brent sasses: "If he is a puppy, I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. . . . The man you call a puppy never insulted me." Infuriated, Flint strikes her. Brent sasses again: "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" "Do you know," Flint demands, "that I have a right to do as I like with you—that I can kill you, if I please?" Unbowed, Brent sasses yet again: "You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me." At this, Flint is enraged: "By heavens, girl, you forget yourself too far! Are you mad?"[44] Indeed, sass is Linda Brent's means of physical and psychological resistance. Brent is *not* mad. Of course, thinking that Brent may be mad makes it is easier for Flint to dismiss her behavior—and salvage his ego. Rather, Brent

and her sassing sisters are naming their own standards, claiming their own bodies, their own selves.

An Outline for a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective

It is ironic, perhaps, that a theology of suffering is formed from resources of resistance. It is not womanist perspective that makes it so, but the Christianity of the plantation. In its teaching, theologizing, preaching, and practice, this Christianity sought to bind the slaves to their condition by inculcating caricatures of the cardinal virtues of patience, long-suffering, forbearance, love, faith, and hope. Thus, to distance itself from any form of masochism, even Christian masochism, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective must reevaluate those virtues in light of black women's experiences. Such reevaluation engages a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of resistance; but that reevaluation and reinterpretation must be rooted in a critical realism that rejects both naive realism and idealism as adequate foundations for a theology of suffering.

Chattel slavery disclosed the impoverished idealism that vitiated the Gospels, left Christianity a mere shell of principles and ideals, and obviated the moral and ethical implications of slavery—for master and slave alike. Likewise, a naive Biblicism is impossible: "the Bible has been the most consistent and effective book that those in power have used to restrict and censure the behavior of African American women."[45] Womanist Christian realism eschews naive Biblicism, dogmatic moralism, and idealism distantiated from critical knowledge of experience, of human reality—of black women's reality. Thus, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective begins with the acknowledgment of black women's critical cognitive practice and develops through their distinctive Christian response to suffering.

Recalling her father's stories of slavery, Ruth Shays reflected: "The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same. But this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don't even have to think about. . . . it is life that makes all these differences, not nature."[46] As a mode of critical consciousness and emancipatory struggle, black women's critical cognitive practice is glimpsed in the earliest actuated meanings of resistance by captured and enslaved African women in North America. This practice emerged even more radically in the patterned operations of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshaling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, and deciding, speaking, writing. As a mode of critical self-consciousness, black women's cognitive practice emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on the experience of that oppression, and activism to resist and change it. The matrix of domination is responsive to human agency: the struggle of black women suggests that there is choice and power to act—and to do so mindfully, artfully.[47]

A theology of suffering in womanist perspective grows in the dark soil of the African American religious tradition and is intimate with the root paradigms of African American culture, in general, and African American women's culture, in particular. Such a theology of suffering attends critically and carefully to the differentiated range of black women's

experiences. It holds itself accountable to black women's self-understandings, self-judgment, and self-evaluation.

- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective repels every tendency toward any *ersatz* spiritualization of evil and suffering, of pain and oppression. Such a theology of suffering seeks, on behalf of the African American community whose lives and struggles it honors and serves, to understand and to clarify the meaning of the liberating Word and deed of God in Jesus of Nazareth for all women and men who strive against the principalities and structures, the powers and forces of evil. A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is characterized by remembering and retelling, by resisting, by redeeming.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective remembers and retells the lives and sufferings of those who "came through" and those who have "gone on to glory land." This remembering honors the sufferings of the ancestors, known and unknown, victims of chattel slavery and its living legacy. As Karen Holloway indicates, this "telling . . . is testimony that recenters the spirits of women, mythic and ancestral, into places where their passionate articulation assures them that neither geography nor history can separate them from the integrity of the essential Word."[48] And that "recentering" revives the living as well. Black women remember and draw strength in their own anguish from hearing and imitating the strategies adopted by their mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, great-great-grandmothers to handle their suffering. These stories evoke growth and change, proper outrage and dissatisfaction, and enlarge black women's moral horizon and choices.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *redemptive*. In their narratives, black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of black people. They make meaning of their suffering. Over and over again, black women under chattel slavery endured pain, privation, and injury; risked their very lives, for the sake of the lives and freedom of their children. Praying in her garret, Linda Brent offers her suffering as part of the price of the emancipation of her children. Mattie Jackson recounts that during their escape, her mother fasted for two days, saving what food she had been able to carry away for Mattie and her sister. And, by their very suffering and privation, black women under chattel slavery freed the cross of Christ. Their steadfast commitment honored that cross and the One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity's vulgar misuse.
- A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *resistant*. With motherwit, courage, sometimes their fists, and most often sass, black women resisted the degradation of chattel slavery. Sass gave black women a weapon of self-defense. With sass, black women defined themselves and dismantled the images that had been used to control and demean them. With sass, black women turned back the shame that others tried to put

on them. With sass, black women survived, even triumphed over emotional and psychic assault.

Moreover, in their resistance, black women's suffering redefined caricatured Christian virtues. Because of the lives and suffering of black women held in chattel slavery—the meanings of forbearance, long-suffering, patience, love, hope, and faith can never again be ideologized. Because of the rape, seduction, and concubinage of black women under chattel slavery, chastity or virginity begs new meaning.

Harriet Jacobs's sexual liaison with Mr. Sands causes her great remorse and she experiences a loss of self-esteem. Indeed, for Jacobs, this spiritual and existential agony shadows the remainder of her life. A theology of suffering in womanist perspective ought offer her comfort: Does not the sacrifice of her virgin body shield and preserve the virginity of her spirit and her heart? And, of what importance is a virgin body if the spirit and heart are violated, raped, crushed? And can we not hope that in the life of death, Harriet Jacobs has found "god in [her]self and loves her/loves her fiercely?"[49]