

2016

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Recommended Citation

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Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

***The Women Gathered – Stringing Beads of Resistance:
Identity, Lament, and Hope: A Pastoral Care Reflection and Response***

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Part of **JRER Special Issue:**
***Proceedings and Reflections – The 2012 Consultation
of African and African Diasporan Women in Religion and Theology,***
edited by Rosetta E. Ross and Evelyn L. Parker

This essay shares reflections on the 2012 Consultation of African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology by two professors of pastoral care and counseling. Using their experiences of Christianity, womanist theology, and African American history, they consider social constructs of race and gender and their effects on violence against women of African descent. The essay discusses civil rights, the enslavement practices of *trokosi*, the importance of self-care and positive self-identity construction, and the need for communal lament. The authors also discuss the need to affirm interdependent realities of African and African Diasporic women who live with experiences of violence, and include reflection on how such experiences shape women's lives. The act of "re-membering" is explored through art, conversation, and reflections on the pilgrimage through castles of enslavement to offer a model of self-care and potential ways to use pain and memory to re-construct identity.

Nyame Biribi Wo Soro
"God, there is Something in the Heavens
God let it reach our hands
For we struggle for it."
Mercy Oduoye¹

In the poem "Biribi Wo Soro," Dr. Mercy Oduoye, or "Auntie Mercy," as she is fondly called, writes, "there is something in the heavens... for we struggle for it." The "something" is peace, harmony, and safety for all of God's people. We struggle to live it, and we struggle to obtain it. Yet, still we have "hope." In July 2012, a consultation was held in Legon (near Accra), Ghana, where we who are African and African Diasporic women in religion and theology gathered to strategize ways to address the struggles of African-descended women and girls of who are victimized by violence while striving to live into the heavenly promise of peace, justice, and security.

¹ This is an excerpt from a poem by Dr. Mercy Amba Oduoye written for the The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians' (EATWOT) Women's Commission Meeting. The excerpt is taken from the book *Poems of Mercy Amba Oduoye* (Accra: Same-Woode, 2001), edited by Elizabeth Amoah (70). The collection was published for the Circle of Concern African Women Theologians.

Our religion and theology conference in West Africa was historic. We represented Christian, Muslim, Traditional African Religions, and Buddhist teachings. We shared presentations. We marched in protest; we pilgrimaged through slave castles/dungeons; we sang; we prayed; we laughed; we ate; we cried; we danced; and we participated in Forum Theatre. We strategized; we donated; we planned; and we cared for one another. Our meeting was challenging as we focused on the theme “Hope is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing Amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora.” The more we learned and experienced the ravages of violence, including the still practiced horror of trokosi,² the more we saw the need to be intentional about caring for ourselves in terms of finding balance between intensive work and intentional self-care and ever carving out and articulating what we think and how we feel about our identities as African and African diasporic women.

In this essay, we share and reflect on our experiences of this historic gathering and dialogue with each other about our “re-membering.”³ We look particularly at how the violence of raping our African mothers during and after the Maafa⁴ has impacted/affected our internalized self-images and self-messages, and how we struggle to cope with feelings of loss that affect our

² Trokosi means “wife or slave of the Gods” in the Ewe language of Southeastern Ghana. In trokosi, adolescent girls, usually virgins, become ritualized servants of shrines to pay for offenses of family members. The girls do not consent to being trokosi, and serve priests and the shrines without remuneration. See Dorothy B.E. A. Akoto, “Women and Health in Ghana and the Trokosi Practice” in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 96-112. (New York: Orbis, 2006) .

³ The term “re-membering” is written in this manner to intentionally denote the connection of oneself with oneself as well as with the community. See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1995).

⁴ Maafa is a term that names African descended peoples’ experiences of the history and continuing legacy of colonialism and enslavement. For additional information about “Maafa” see Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton: Africa World Press 1994).

identities and impede our work. We will propose that in the midst of womanist work, there is a need for self-care. In that vein, in the midst of the heaviness of discussing the topic of violence, we, too, must make room for the voice of the poetic, so we began – and will end – this article with poetry by Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

Pastoral Theologians and the Lenses We Wear

The authors of this essay are pastoral theologians who embrace a Womanist perspective.⁴ We affirm and believe, in our theology and praxis, that God is committed to Black women's survival and wholeness. We believe that women, especially conscious caregivers and pastoral theologians, have to face the issue of violence. We operate with at least four theological and therapeutic understandings:

First, we understand the importance of strategically revisiting violent experiences and the ways in which they have ravaged our being and negatively impacted our relationships with men and other women.

Second, we understand that we have to wrestle with feelings such as anger, rage, hurt, shame and even guilt associated with violence, especially rape.⁵

⁴ For more on our perspectives of Womanist theology, see Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1983); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1989); Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene: Wipf Stock Publishers, 1998); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993). Note that this list is not exhaustive.

⁵ Also see Carolyn Akua L. McCrary, "Intimate Violence against Black Women and Internalized Shame: A Womanist Pastoral Counseling Perspective," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 28, nos. 1 2 (Fall 2000/Spring 2001).

Third, we understand the need to address the issues of grief and loss⁶ and the notion of being “Strong Black Women”⁷

Fourth, we understand that we must examine the misrepresentations of ourselves that have been internalized causing splitting and/or fragmentation of our psycho-emotional spiritual core.⁸

In spite of and in light of the violence against us, women of African descent have to re-author our self-narratives and re-fashion our core self-identities based on an innate sense of self as divine beings of infinite worth and value.⁹ As pastoral theologians, we recognize through our own healing work, the need for women to acknowledge the pain and the trauma that impact the work of addressing violence.

Connecting and Re-membering

Connecting with the Aperewa and Others

The words of the “*aperewa*,”¹⁰ Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, the host of the conference, could not be ignored. She called for the collective voices of women to come together and be heard and to strategize on ways to address violence against women and girls in Africa and her Diaspora. Dr. Oduyoye, along with African American womanist theologians Dr. Rosetta Ross and Dr. Evelyn

⁶ Paul P. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, *African-American Grief* (New York: Brunner Routledge Press, 2005).

⁷ Beverly R. Wallace, “A Womanist Legacy of Grief and Trauma: Reframing the Icon of the Strong Black Woman” in *Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Order in a Multicultural World*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); also see Toby Thompkins, *The Real Lives of Strong Black Women – Transcending Myths, Reclaiming Joy* (New York: Agate, 2004).

⁸ Carolyn L. McCrary, *Interdependence as a Norm for an Interdisciplinary Model of Pastoral Counseling* (Th.D Dissertation, Interdenominational Theological Center, 1989).

⁹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949); Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1956). Also see Carolyn L. McCrary, “The Wholeness of Women,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 25, no. 3 (Spring 1998).

¹⁰ Aperewa means a woman seasoned with age and experience.

Parker, invited us for this “*palaver*”¹¹ of international proportion and ramification. Included in the “*palaver*” were African traditional women leaders. One of the traditional women was vibrant and wise Queen Mother Nana Amba Eyiaba of the central region of Ghana, Cape Coast. Queen Mothers, the “*Ohemaas*,” are regarded as the “mothers” of the monarch, and the mothers of the Akan people. This tradition of female monarchs or “female pharaohs” goes back as far as the ancient African kingdom of Kush.¹² In discussing the role of African women in leadership, Queen Mother Nana Amba told of the origin and the responsibility of Queen Mothers, and lamented the erosion of women’s traditional leadership roles. As told in the text celebrating the Queen Mothers (made available to participants of the conference) it was the alliance between colonial administrators – male members of the traditional African elite and Christian Missionaries – that gave new meaning to gender relations favoring male domination in decision-making structures.¹³ Subsequently, this male domination has been perpetuated by independent African governments. Only recently, as Queen Mother Nana Amba informed us, has the constitution been changed to officially recognize and include Queen Mothers in the House of Elders. The fact that Queen Mother Nana Amba and other Queen Mothers fought to affirm their traditional role is a testimony to the power of the collective voice of women. Dispelling

¹¹ Palaver is a dialogue in which the destiny of distressed people, in this case, women and girls in Africa and her diaspora, is urgently discussed in a meaningful context.

¹² “*Ohemaas*” are regarded as the “mothers” of the monarch and the mothers of the Akan people. This tradition of female monarchs, or “female pharaohs,” originated in the ancient African kingdom of Kush. See *Council of Women Traditional Leaders: Tenth Anniversary of the Formation of The Council of Women Traditional Leaders* (Accra: Fanben Print, 2011), published for the 10th Anniversary celebration (November 24- December 8, 2011) of forming of The Council of Women Traditional Leaders.

¹³ See *Council of Women Traditional Leaders: Tenth Anniversary of the Formation of The Council of Women Traditional Leaders*.

hegemonic assumptions, her presence was a reminder and gave life to the re-membering of power and status of women in traditional Ghanaian African governance.

Drs. Oduyoye, Parker, and Ross made it possible for a variety of religious voices to be heard. Of particular note to us were the presence, the participation, and the engagement with sisters of the Islamic faith. Our “*harambe*”¹⁴ was wonderfully powerful. One Muslim professor and theologian, Sistah Fatima Sulemanu, did not hold back when she critiqued her own religious tradition while, at the same time, embracing her spirituality and her womanhood. She recounted that when confronted by persons of the Islamic faith who want to justify the oppression of women on the basis of the Qur’an, she says, adamantly and demonstratively, “Show me the page.” Her voice and other Islamic sisters’ voices were important to the discourse and to the agenda of addressing violence against all women and girls of African descent.

Re-membering and the Dungeons

Because this was my first time in Western Africa, I (Wallace) was excited to know that part of our conference experience of re-membering would be visiting the “Dungeons.” I wanted to see the place where my ancestors last stepped off the African soil. I wanted to view that “door of no-return” about which I had heard so much. I wanted to experience whatever emotions arose in being at this doorway to my past.

I decided to dress in white to honor this sacred place. I remembered wearing white at the request of the elders for my grandmother’s funeral more than thirty years ago, and so I thought it

¹⁴ “*Harambe*” is a Kiswahili word meaning “let’s pull together for a cause.”

appropriate and felt it respectful to do so for this occasion. I wanted this to be an honoring time, a remembering time, a time for touching a part of my spiritual past.

As we visited what I viewed as dungeons, my emotions were many. There was my sadness. I questioned: “Why the abuse of Black men and especially Black women’s bodies?” There was the emotion of wonderment: “Why was I a Christian, especially in remembering the relationship of the church to enslavement, and now seeing the location of a church in proximity to the dungeon rooms?” Seeing and knowing that it was the Christian Church that played a major part in the enslavement and rape of my foremothers, forefathers, sisters and brothers, I paused to wonder, to re-member, and to question my Christian belief system.

I also re-membered experiencing the emotions of resistance and survival. Visiting the site was difficult because I could feel the spirit of my ancestors – could imagine their pain. I also imagined how I might have lived through such horror. While the sun was shining, the harshness of the experience was not brightened by the sun’s rays. I saw the ball of resistance, a heavy stone in the dungeon’s courtyard. I want to believe that I would have been one of the women chained there, who resisted the demands to have my body further violated by the male capturers. I felt that I might have died in the sun chained in that brutal situation. But I also reflected and remembered that I was part of the line of women who did survive and was proud to be a living legacy of those who resisted in many ways, even as I lamented the loss of so many of my kinfolk – folk I could not know, connections lost forever.

As I felt the spirit of our ancestors, I also re-membered experiencing the emotion of sacredness. Moving through the dungeons, I heard the guide describe the ground we walked on.

The floors in these prison chambers, sacred floors with the excrements – blood, urine, feces – had hardened to form the ground we were standing upon – blessed grounds. I did not want to walk on that sacred floor, so I stepped gingerly around this hallowed and holy place. I also felt the spirit of those who lost their lives, and I reflected on lives, our lives that have forever been changed. A baby girl, on the tour with her family, cried. I believe she felt the same spirit that spoke to me. I think she knew in her young spirit the pain that was there. Her father told her to stop, but she cried on. The women on the tour looked at him and, like me, I believe, wanted to tell him to let the little girl cry. But the ancestors handled this; when the father walked through the doorway of one room in the dungeon with a low ceiling, while still telling the little girl to hush, he hit his head. The ancestors spoke. Experiencing the dungeons and re-membering, I was angry – too angry to cry. Unlike the baby girl, my own tears would not flow.

The wailing that I (McCrary) experienced on my first pilgrimage to Ghana several years ago and these houses of horror, still called “Castles,” wasn’t present this time in the dungeon hull, just gasps and heads shaking, backs bowed and eyes lowered. Fingers still followed scratches etched in the “castle/dungeon” wall. Or were they desperate “clawings” from great-great grandmothers and great-great grandfathers, leaving a sign or a name to mark the horrific tragedy of African peoples’ bodies and souls being pillaged, shackled, beaten, raped, and sold for European and African greed and profit? We didn’t cry out loud this time. I wondered, “Why?”

We were all women (except for the tour guide), African women, from Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and the Diaspora – Jamaica and the United States. We represented Christian, Islamic, and traditional African religious traditions and Buddhist traditions. We were scholars, teachers,

graduate students, ecclesiastical administrators, church women and pastoral counselors. We certainly were separate and different persons, not a monolith, yet we were all women. Were we viewing the dungeons like the history of “some other people”? Was it too painful to even cry aloud? They say women are allowed to cry, even wail out loud. Some even say women are supposed to cry. Yet there were no visible tears, not at that moment anyway. Only sad faces, low toned moans, and poignant questions trying to understand the extent of the inhuman brutality.

However, some of our deep-seated feelings of rage, hurt, and shame about the violence of African women being raped by Europeans bubbled to the surface, as a result of our pilgrimage through the second dungeon called Cape Coast Castle. Pausing in front of the women’s dungeon, the guide said, “The babies of raped African women bore names like Von Dyke, Dever, Blankson, Boise, Jackson, and Johnson.... You see, they were no longer African... They were... They were...” He stuttered and paused, seemingly searching for the “proper” words while looking into the regal faces and the women of rainbow colors, of visible age differences, hairstyles, head coverings and dress. Instructively, Queen Mother Nana Amba Eyiaba offered the terminology, “half caste.” “They are called ‘half caste,’” she repeated, seemingly indicating that the babies of the raped, enslaved African women, in the dungeons/castles, in the governor’s large bedroom beside the chapel, could no longer claim African, and more specifically, Ghanaian identities. These off-spring were deemed “half African” and “half something else,” like Dutch, Dane, Portuguese, or British.

Some of us resonated with this psychological/physical/emotional/spiritual trauma, though the rapes of some of our African mothers were on other than African soil. Not only were the

bodies of our mothers raped (taken, violated, penetrated and infused with foreign entities), so were our legacies, our names and our identities. For a long time thereafter, our African identity was lost to us, as our African history and culture were intentionally stripped from us or misrepresented to us by Europeans, resulting in much of it being unknown or not re-membered by us. So in the dungeons, this time, we re-membered.

And we were dis-membered. We were told that some of us did not belong to Mother Africa.

Re-membering and the Question of Indigenous Sources

The above-noted experiences of visiting the second dungeon and the question of the identity of those who were deemed “half castes” connects with my (Wallace) questioning and wondering about African American indigenous sources that could be used for the work at hand. One of our experiences at the conference was to hear more about the violence against women and girls in Africa and in our contexts. We were then asked to identify and use indigenous sources to address these atrocities and, perhaps, employ another way of understanding and reframing our story from which to tease out a spirituality of resistance. In the small group that I (Wallace) was in, I shared that I did not know what was indigenous from my context. That which we had, I felt, was a synthesis of experiences of being of African descent born and reared in the United States. Our experiences were our own. But would that be enough? This directive of identifying indigenous sources from an African American perspective had me and others look deep into who we are and what we could bring to the tasks and the directives of the conference.

It appeared that our African sisters had historical sources they could access to give them tools to utilize. Their legacy and reclaiming their legacy of pre-colonial women's leadership, for example, was acknowledged. What historical resources could we of the Diaspora claim? I watched and listened to see how both my African sisters and African Diasporic sisters engaged these tasks. Listening was helpful. This exercise of contemplating our indigenous resources, remembering and claiming who we are helped me form a connection with the legacy that I would claim for myself, to re-member myself, gaining power and a sense of confidence and perhaps an African counter-narrative to move forward with the work to be done in spite of the trauma and in spite of being called by others "half-castes."

The Existential Context

The consultation gave us an opportunity to understand, become aware of, and be exposed to some of the violence known and unknown to us, and which continues to be experienced by our African sisters and daughters. We learned of the problems of "Widows' Rights,"¹⁵ the practice of "Female Genital Cutting," as well as issues known in the American context, "Domestic Violence" – men attacking and abusing women in the home – and "Sex Trafficking." We also learned of a form of violence against girls and women called "trokosi." A form of violence

¹⁵ Our widowed African sisters, particularly in post-Civil War areas, experience an increased amount of violence and discrimination without a male head of household to be their voice. Various international organizations deemed this a human rights issue and, therefore, petitioned local and culture-based communities for "Widows' Rights" to allow equal opportunities for widows.

tragically affecting girls and women in some parts of Africa is the practice of *trokosi*.¹⁶ Of particular interest to us was the willing involvement of family members under the influence of an embedded toxic theology, which mandates enslavement and rape of mostly young girls and women “to appease the gods of fate and sometimes fortune.” We learned that girls and women are still being enslaved and raped in the name of the gods. The *trokosi* practice is carried out by some groups in Togo, Benin, southwest Nigeria and in Ghana, mostly among the Ewe people.

In the Ewe language, “tro” refers to the deity and “kosi” means “slave or wife” and is translated it means “slave or wife of the gods.” The customary practice is that a young virgin daughter is given to the priest of a local shrine to atone for the illegalities or “sins” committed by someone in her family. The crime could range from petty theft to murder, past or present. The young girl atoning for the crime would be enslaved for life, in most cases, by the priest who operates the shrine and would be required to fetch water, cook, farm, sell produce, clean, and, after the onset of her menstruation, obligated to have sex with the priest. Any child or children born to the enslaved young woman, the *trokosi*, is also the property of the shrine. If the young woman runs away, especially to her family, she is returned for fear that the gods will be angry and revengeful.

In 1998, after many groups had campaigned for the abolition of the practice and the releasing of all *trokosi*, the constitution of Ghana outlawed the practice citing it as a form of

¹⁶ I (McCrary) learned of this practice from Dr. Oduyoye about ten years ago when “Auntie Mercy” hosted a small group of women religious leaders at the Talitha Cumi Center. Talitha Cumi, the name of the center founded by Dr. Mercy Oduyoye in Accra, Ghana, is a scripture reference from the Christian Bible in the book of Mark 5:41 (New English Translation) which reads, “*Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.”*”

enslavement, which probably helped to liberate some 2,800 girls. However, as we found out at the conference, though outlawed in 1998 and renounced by some of the *trokosi* priests themselves, the practice continues. Economic, cultural, legal, and theological barriers prevent the liberation of these girls and young women. Some groups advocate maintaining the practice because it is a part of the African cultural and religious heritage. Many priests fear losing their livelihood; many families still fear retribution from the gods.

We learned that some churches and other entities pay the priests for the freedom of girls and young women, and give the girls resources to help them begin a new life. During another smaller conference ten years ago, women theologians helped a group of church women raise money for sewing machines and purchased cloth to support some of the liberated women's entrepreneurial efforts. As one can imagine money and other resources are needed to secure housing, clothing, education, counseling and, often, legal fees to definitively extricate the girls and young women from their "religious" enslavement. Now, one subgroup of this conference, with an emphasis on economics, is choosing to raise money to help defray the legal costs of these survivors/victims. We were also concerned about the counseling that is needed by these girls and young women after having been enslaved, sexually violated by priests, and betrayed and deserted by their own families. One of our group members from Ghana who works with local officials, Sister Sylvia, committed to research what services were being made available to girls and women being "liberated" from this horrible modern day enslavement in the name of the gods.

A Pastoral Analysis

The women of this conference – mothers, daughters, wives, widows, sisters, aunties – were all touched by all the forms of violence about which we heard. As we put on our lenses as pastoral theologians, we began to take note of how we women who were gathered to address violence were dealing with our simultaneous objective and subjective participation in this inquiry about violence. Through our objective lens, we have reflected not only on how conference participants responded to information about experiences of violence, but we have reflected also on our personal and subjective experiences (as shared above) and on how the topic and the inquiry have impacted the two of us who are African Diasporic women as well as pastoral theologians.

As pastoral theologians, we recognize the need for at least three tiers of reflection about the pain, grief and losses involved in processing violence against women and girls. The first tier of reflection is the processing and lamenting of all violence against women and girls of Africa and her Diaspora. The second tier is noting the need for processing and lamenting the pain, the grief, and the losses of the women participating in the conference. The third tier is the recognized need for us, as the authors of this essay, to process and lament some of our own pain, our own grief, and our own losses. As is evident from these three tiers, our experiences, our processing, our lamenting and our responses to violence against women and girls is an interdependent reality fraught with compelling need for self-care. We need each other to help each other. Our personal processing, lamenting and self-care helps our own healing from violence, giving us a clearer sense of who we are, which increases our hospitable space to listen to, care for, and reflect with

others. Through reflecting on this question of who we are, the need to revisit issues impacting our own identities relative to violence, became apparent. We recognized this to be a significant issue that arose not only for us, but for our sister participants as well.

Identity

Our personal stories of identity development parallel some of the dynamics that we witnessed relative to issues of identity and their significance for our working group of African and African Diasporic women. I (McCrary) revisited a certain part of my culture and history as a young girl living in Macon, Georgia. In the 1950s and early 1960s in the Southeastern part of the United States – before James Brown smashed the cultural barrier and dared expose our internalized shame and our hate about ourselves with the blockbuster hit “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” – any statement that referenced or reminded us of the melanin in our skin or our African heritage was interpreted as pejorative or a big put down. Being called “African” or Black was fighting words. If we wanted to make another person feel really bad or ashamed, we would use African or black as an adjective or a noun. Being called “lil black gal” or “lil black picaniny” was a humiliating experience. Immediately, images of Tarzan in Africa and animal-like savages with bones in noses, or at least the immature monkey-like servile and/or comical creatures, were conjured in our psyches. The last thing that we wanted to be called was African. In fact, for the most part, black people identified with the white man Tarzan, and we little “colored girls” identified with the long brown haired white woman Jane. We certainly did not want to claim

“anywhere near” a half of ourselves as African. It wasn’t until the late sixties and seventies that some of us claimed our African heritage and proudly proclaimed that “Black is Beautiful.”

In the Northern part of the United States, during that same period of the 1960s and 1970s, where I (Wallace) grew up in New York, identifying with our Blackness became the norm. I also embraced the song by James Brown. We were “black,” and we were “proud,” as we also sang the song, “Young, Gifted and Black.” We wore dashikis and African patterned dresses. Our afros were tremendous and our fists were raised high. We sang the Black National Anthem, and we wanted to know everything there was to know about Africa. Some of us loved the Black Panthers, and many pondered if we should embrace the Nation of Islam rather than our Christianity. If I (Wallace) were not concerned about how the Nation treated women, I believe I would have become a Muslim during my college years. It was not a stretch later on to really identify with the shift from naming ourselves as “Black” to calling ourselves “African American.” Although we did not know where in Africa we originated, we knew that Africa was our home.

Now, in 2012, many of us African descended women at this conference, though not born on the continent, dared say we *wanted* to be called African. We were African women, bound together by our common experience of violence, specifically, “Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls.” Many of us settled for being called African American or even African Diasporic women. We identified more with the sixties song, “Black Pearl, pretty little girl... you’ve been in the background much too long!” It seemed that we had come a long way!

But the descriptor “Half-caste” that was spoken that day in the dungeon jolted some of us, brought one of our sisters to tears, and shattered our consciously or unconsciously preferred or declared group identity of oneness in African sisterhood. After all we were “African and African Diasporic Women” at this conference. Some of us saw ourselves as African women, just born apart from the soil of Mother Africa. The seemingly emotionally unfettered, and pedagogical, descriptor “half caste” offered by Queen Mother Nana and then quickly repeated by the guide, was coupled with our various covert responses to it, and brought forth the occasion to pause the meeting and purposely offer the opportunity for each one of us to share and dialogue about how and why we self-identify as an African or as an African American woman.

Finally, the wailing was audible. Amidst tears and loud laments, one of our Diasporic sisters declared that she resented and felt violated at what she perceived as derogatory name calling, that the choice of the words “half-caste” was an assault upon her personhood and an insult to her identity. She saw the label as not only a derision of her rightful place in the African heritage, but as a devaluation of her very “beingness”; the words inferred that she was no longer a whole person or a whole African woman. She spoke about how truly hurt she felt when the guide had used, what is now *her* surname, as an example of what these “half-caste” people are called.

Lamenting

The silence was broken and we dared to lament¹⁷ one of the horrors – rape of our mothers – that had been a part of our violent separation in the *Maafa*. Whether on the continent of Africa, in the Caribbean, in South America, or on U. S. American soil, one common reality was the raping of our African mothers, mostly by European men, but also by African descended men in a savage evil system of the enslavement of African people and its aftermath.

Tears flowed because of grief and the recognition of losses. However, as we noted above, for many of the participants of the conference, tears, at first, were difficult to come. Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schutt, in conducting research on grief, suggest that there is a lack of appropriate grief concepts applicable to some cultures.¹⁸ They say that in some cultures there is a sense of adaptation to losses when the experiences of grief are not acknowledged or confronted. Regulating/controlling or even the disassociation of negative emotions, they suggest, may be appropriate adjustments to loss because doing so helps maintain high levels of functioning. While this may be true, this adaptive coping method of regulating emotions and maintaining an image may, in our opinion, only further support the adherence to the image of African descended

¹⁷ Lamenting is the complaining, the process of crying, weeping, wailing even at and especially unto God about pain, losses, suffering, struggles, troubles experience by one, part of, or all of a community. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes writes that “the communal lament is used by and/or on behalf of a community to express complaint, sorrow, and grief over impending doom that could be physical or cultural. It could also be used for a tragedy or a series of calamities that had already happened. Yet the appeal is always to God for deliverance.” See Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

¹⁸ Margaret S. Stroebe and Henk Schut, “Models of Coping with Bereavement: A Review,” in *Handbook of Bereavement Research – Consequences, Coping, and Care*, ed. Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe and Schut. (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), 375-404.

women as “Strong Black Women,” making it difficult for tears to flow. As African philosopher Sobonfu Somé suggests, tears are important.¹⁹

Breaking the silence about our pain is important, and at the same time, the strength, resiliency, and legacy of African and African Diasporic women in spite of societal and structural violence must be honored. African and African Diasporic women historically provide roots of strength that are needed in order to work through the traumatic history and legacy of trauma that is embedded in being African and African Diasporic women in this world. African and African Diasporic women’s roots are also entwined with violence, pain and silence imposed by systems and institutions with the sole purpose of self-maintenance.²⁰ In the article “Narratives in African American Grief”²¹ Rosenblatt and Wallace suggest that a view of African American grief and loss that is not sensitive to issues of racism in the American experience, and we might add sexism and racism in the global experience, may lead to less than optimal support.

Interdependence and Self-Care

We gathered as a group of African “sistahs,”²² collaborating and recognizing our common and our unique experiences, gifts, talents, skills, capacities, challenges and resources, that may

¹⁹ See Sobonfu Somé is an African woman, author and lecturer in African spirituality. Somé’s texts include *Falling out of Grace: Mediations on Loss, Healing, and Wisdom* (El Sobrante: North Bay Books, 2003); *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*, (New York: William Morrow Press, 2000); and *Welcoming Spirit Home: Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community* (Novato: New World Library, 1999).

²⁰ Unpublished article written by Beverly Wallace, “African American Women’s Grief.”

²¹ Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, “Narratives of Grieving African-Americans about Racism in the Lives of Deceased Family Members,” *Death Studies* 29, no. 3 (2005).

²² In African American culture “sistah” designates non-sanguine kinship experiences.

be used on behalf of other “sistahs” as well as our own experiences with violence as women and as girls. We gathered because we recognized that we needed each other’s presence, prayers, voices, energy, strength, feet and arms to fight the worldwide physical, psychological, economic, spiritual and familial violence against us. Yet, in this common fight, we affirmed that though separated by national boundaries and oceans, our lives and our hope-filled future, like horrific episodes in our present and our past, are inextricably and interdependently bound together. Still, in this common fight, as pastoral theologians recognizing our interdependent bond, we also affirm that the necessary achievement of self-care doesn’t come easily.

Interdependence

Interdependence, as defined by McCrary,²³ emphasizes “that state of communal existence wherein each person is appropriately recognized for her-his uniqueness, encouraged in her-his need to be significantly related to others, enabled in the fulfillment of her-his potential, innate worth and purpose, and supported in her-his responsibility for the survival...of the group as a whole.” This choice by women, to invest in the communal welfare, yes, the wellbeing of the whole, has its benefits and its liabilities. Some of the questions that must be raised are: What are the personal risks and the rewards of this type of communal involvement, this kind of interdependent relating? How is this type of communally-centered relationship beneficial or of value to the woman? We know that community organizations, churches, and institutions, usually benefit from women’s choices to invest in the wellbeing of the whole. However, although being

²³ Carolyn L. McCrary, “Interdependence as a Norm for an Interdisciplinary Model of Pastoral Counseling” (Th.D. Dissertation, Interdenominational Theological Center, 1989).

in groups can be mutually beneficial, another question is: What are some of the liabilities involved in communal relationships for women?

Fundamentally, being in relationship(s) is risky business. A primary task in relationship building is to work on trust, which in most cases, is a process finessed over a reasonable period of time. In our case, we were scheduled to gather and to work with each other for less than a week, and we had lots of work to do, (with not much time allotted for “community building”). A strong tendency in any such conference group is not to become “dependent,” “get too close,” or become “overly involved” in someone else’s life, especially their challenges. After all, each one of us had a life full of other demanding relationships to which we were committed and in which we were invested. Just how much did we really have to invest in developing new individual relationships, let alone helping to form, nurture and massage a communal sacred space specifically suited for women – women who gathered to mobilize amidst violence against women and girls of Africa, our Holy Mother? So, one possible danger is not honoring our personal limitations and boundaries. The tensions around boundaries could also be reflected in anxious feelings or self-criticisms that one was sharing too much. One may have been questioning, “Who is going to take my words or my sharing out of context?” Or, who might be offended by my choice of words, of dress, of customs, of eating with my fingers, of wearing pants, of “cussing,” wearing locked hair, or wearing straightened hair, of asking a “dumb question,” or of being silent? Honestly, we do care about what people, in this case, “sistahs” think about us, and how others feel about us and with us. Sistahs, especially, need to know that one cares, that the group cares. And how can we say we care about the violated, the raped, the

enslaved, the mutilated, “sistahs” “out there,” – Mother Africa’s abused and oppressed daughters everywhere – and we NOT risk caring and depending on each other as “sistahs” in our conference group?

On Self-Care

Just how much should one “sistah” share with or care for or depend on other “sistahs” in the pursuit of self well-being or self-care? Interdependency has at its core an element of symbiosis. This tied-togetherness, this mutual need for each other, especially this “I need you, you need me, we’re all a part of God’s Body”²⁴ can feel comforting and scary or fulfilling and oppressive, at the same time. These naturally ambivalent responses (which can include other feelings) about being so vulnerable in interdependent relationship(s) with another person or group, can also feel stifling, maybe even paralyzing, or they can be/feel empowering and “growth promoting.” Some choose to run, hide or deny one or both sides of these seemingly opposing feelings. However, a “growth promoting” choice would be to embrace both polarities of feelings, analyze them, and use them in the process of honoring self-care. Sometimes these feelings can and should be, with facilitation, processed within the chosen group. Sometimes one needs, in fact, to pull away from the demands of the communal symbiotic embrace, in order to self-reflect, self-nurture and self-revitalize, for the purpose of carving out and taking care of one’s own unique vessel. Ultimately, only the person can make the choice to value and to reverence one’s self, the whole and holy, body, mind and spirit, of one’s personhood. Too often,

²⁴ Hezekiah Walker The Love Fellowship Choir, “I Need You to Survive” from the album *Family Affair 2: Live at Radio City Music Hall*, Verity, 2002.

the choice for self-care is dismissed, consciously or unconsciously, as unnecessary by “strong” women of African descent,²⁵ though it is clearly a choice we can no longer afford to ignore.

Self-care for the Good of the Whole

Thankfully our group did choose to pause, and to self-reflect, specifically to address our own self-identities as African women. In doing so it became evident how much we *needed* to hear and to feel one another. In one sense the horrible, terrifying violence of rape, in particular, showed us just how interdependent we were. From the presentations to the protest marching, to the eerie silence in the dungeon castles, to the processing in group, we began to recognize and affirm more and more, how much we *needed* to hear more of the details and the ramifications of the horrors that befell us as women, and we *needed* to share the pain.

Now, however, though we are separated by geography and tasks, each of us still needs to process (by writing, by being in therapy, or by other serious reflection) the depths of our own autonomous and communal feelings, needs, experiences and strivings relative to the actuality (or reality) of our interdependent essence of being African women living in a violent male dominated world. Our hope as women, then, is in affirming the need for the interlocking of our strong self-caring and interdependent African arms.

²⁵ Beverly R. Wallace, “A Womanist Legacy of Grief and Trauma: Reframing the Icon of the Strong Black Woman” in *Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Order in a Multicultural World*, eds. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Teresa E. Snorton, “The Legacy of the African-American Matriarch: New Perspectives for Pastoral Care” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

Self-Care and Resistance Work – A Pastoral Care Response

In this essay, we have reflected on the work of addressing violence at three levels or tiers: the global level, the first tier; the conference participants' level, the second tier; and the pastoral theologians' reflective/subjective level, the third tier. We have attempted to model (representative of this third tier) some of the reflective work necessary to engage the vicissitudes of violence. We are doing so as self-care. Working on the dynamics and the intricacies of our identities is a dimension of self-care. Recognizing and processing our personal and communal grief through lamenting is also a part of self-care. These two dimensions of self-care, identity and lamenting are necessary processes/tasks for the work of resistance, especially in regards to violence against girls and women.

“Hope is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing Amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and its Diaspora” was the theme of our conference. Though each woman was very unique, we stood united and in solidarity with Black women in the war against all manifestations of violence perpetrated against us. We resonated with the Ghanaian proverb, quoted and commented on to us by our convener and host, Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, “You don’t fight off soldier ants while standing in the middle of them. ... But we have to. We have no choice.” I (McCrary) interpreted this to mean that girls and women are surrounded by violence, which we must resist, that we are standing right in the midst of perpetrators of violence, and they are fierce, attacking us from all sides. One usually moves or runs from such attackers, but our attackers, our perpetrators of violence are so globally pervasive and insidious that running would be futile. So

we have to fight wherever we are! And this we have done. We have resisted because we have survived.

“Right on!” I thought to myself, “because we would have to leave the planet in order to escape the ravages of violence from worldwide patriarchal societies and structures, ecclesiastical/religious institutions and oppressive theologies.” Then I questioned, myself, “Even if we went ‘somewhere off the planet,’ wouldn’t we still carry our personal and interpersonal challenges resulting from unaddressed and unresolved internalized, patriarchal violence within our psyches (our inner value views)?”

While reflecting from the vista of three tiers, this speaks to the need to address the second tier. We, the women of the conference, need to further process and lament our pain, our grief, and our losses resulting from violence as African and African Diasporic women. In doing this, it empowers us to do the work of the first tier, addressing and examining global and systemic violence and the effects on women and girls in Africa and her Diaspora. And as pastoral theologians, doing the work of the third tier, we are aware that for all sisters doing this work of addressing violence, there is a need for intentional self-care, self-care for all of us who have been enslaved, sexually-violated and perhaps even betrayed by our own family members. The strength to attend to self-care is a necessary strength. Self-care for us now is more than survival, though we must applaud ourselves for being victim/survivors.²⁶ Self-care is fully acknowledging our divine worth and value, acting accordingly, and actively reverencing and nurturing “our heart,

²⁶ Victim-Survivors is a term used in Traci West’s *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) to describe both the anguish and the resiliency of black women who have experienced and lived through violence.

our spirit, our mind, and our body.”²⁷ Our sisters need to know that it is okay to care for ourselves first.

Resistance work has to do with fighting against powers and structures that are harmful to wellbeing. Therefore, part of our resistance work as African and African Diasporic women is to examine our conscious and unconscious participation in such oppressive systems that benefit from our participation in our own oppression. One example is our need to re-examine our involvement in systems that benefit from our continued adherence to the “controlling image” to be “strong.” Through this examination, we can acknowledge our pain. We can, then, envision healing – a healing strengthened by a new definition of what it means to be Strong Black Women. Another example of this resistance work is employing and using what is called “power from the periphery.”²⁸ This has to do with the redefinition of the nature of one’s involvement in an oppressive system, by establishing alternative ground rules and accepting the consequences of not doing politics according to the system’s rules. It is in doing this resistance work that we can re-author our narratives relative to the benefits of self-care. This spiritually infused resistance work promotes healing, challenging us to become whole. And it challenges us to care for ourselves even as we engage in first tier global work.

²⁷ Carolyn L. McCrary “Interdependence as a Norm for an Interdisciplinary Model of Pastoral Counseling” (Th.D. Dissertation, Interdenominational Theological Center, 1989). This reference is also from the Christian Bible, Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 22:38-39.

²⁸ Rosita deAnn Matthews, “Using Power from the Periphery: An Alternative Theological Model for Survival in Systems” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

Conclusion: Unity of Sisterhood for the Purpose of Hope and Healing

“Al’ lahu Akbar”

“True community thrives when there is sharing in solidarity.”

Civil Rights songwriters and vocalists Sweet Honey in the Rock sing a song entitled “The Women Gather.” The sisters of this consciously aware group sing about mothers, daughters and sisters gathering lamenting – “crying tears that fill a million oceans,” seeing violence within their midst, noting that it doesn’t matter where you live. Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, writes in her poem “Stringing Beads”:

I am African, here I sit
Not idle but busy stringing my beads.²⁹

“Auntie Mercy,” too, writes about Black women, gathered though quiet and often hidden, having strength to burst forth. Both Sweet Honey in the Rock and Dr. Oduyoye paint the image of Black women gathering, not just for the sake of gathering but for a particular task. As part of our conference opening, the women gathered with a ritual, the planting of a tree, singing in honor and in remembrance of our ancestors, including our beloved mujerista sister, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz,³⁰ who, in the African tradition, is still a part of the circle. We recognized that it doesn’t

²⁹ Mercy Oduyoye, “Woman with Beads,” in *Daughters of Anowa: African Women Patriarchy* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

³⁰ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz is considered the mother of Mujerista Theology. A Cuban-American ethicist, Dr. Isasi-Diaz was the author of numerous publications including *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women’s Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), *Biblical Reflections on Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), and *Mjuerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996). We celebrate the life of our sister in the struggle who died May 2012.

matter where we are from, whether we embrace womanist or mujerista theology,³¹ one of our tasks is to address violence. As part of the closing of the conference, each woman received a black bead. The bead was taken from a necklace with a large black bead surrounded by smaller ones. “Auntie Mercy” was given the larger bead. Each bead separately represented the uniqueness and the giftedness that we all contribute to the work at hand. Brought together we were and are beautifully strong. We were gathered together for the purpose of discussing, strategizing, and mobilizing as African and African Diasporic women theologians addressing violence against women and girls.

It was important that we, the participants, had some collective experiences. It was important that we experienced the castles/dungeons together. Indigenous knowledge, especially somatic epistemologies (body memory), seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, are essential to comprehensive wellness. It was important that narratives could be shared and identities could be affirmed, and a collective identity began to be re-created. Muslims, Christians, and traditional African religionists, African women from various locations, and African Diasporic women – from the United States and Jamaica – gathered for the purpose of creating a strategy for survival, resistance work, for addressing the existential and interdependent realities of violence against African descended women and girls.

Sitting in the circle sharing, listening to our “sistahs” gave us a chance to reflect on our own experiences with societal and intergenerational family violence. Fortunately we, the authors

³¹ Similar to Womanist theology, “Mujerista” is a theological perspective coined and used by some Latina theologians to define and explain their faith and their work in the struggle for liberation. Choosing to embrace a preferential option for Latina women, this liberative praxis insists on the development of Latina women’s strong sense of moral agency as well as a value of Latina womanhood.

of this essay, both have found value in revisiting the pain and re-authoring our own narratives. We found that continuing therapy, graphing our genograms,³² and continuing research about African history and African and African Diasporic women's spirituality and heritage, all enhance self-esteem and help in re-authoring our narratives, which strategically builds our own self-identities as proud African women living in America (the Diaspora).

Of course, the participants of the consultation didn't have a lot of time for each person to talk about how the violence of the *Maafa*, the raping of our foremothers and how the intergenerational dynamics of rage, hurt, shame and sadness had manifested itself in each of our lives and our relationships. But we did begin to talk, sometimes through our tears. We experienced, we modeled and we submitted to our intrinsic need for each other. We carved out some time for us to care for each other, thereby caring for ourselves. We faced each other in our sacred circle and we listened attentively to each other. We listened even when we couldn't understand all the words exactly. Some of us experienced anew how words often get in the way. Using the poem "Women with Beads" written by our host Auntie Mercy as our litany, we vowed, even as we were returning to our separate locations in the world, to come together, to gather, as a unified strand to work on the collective task of addressing violence against African women and girls and in Africa and her Diaspora. We discovered that we must continue to talk to each other and listen to each other, African Woman to African Woman, if we so identify, but minimally it will be "sistah to sistah," each sistah seeking to know herself and her sistah better; this will strengthen us in the work.

³² Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African-American Experience* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 237.

Women with Beads

I am woman, I am African.
My beads mark my presence.
Beads of wisdom, beads of sweat.
I am woman.

I am Bota,
The precious black bead,
Skillfully crafted from black sun.
I do not speak much, but I am not without a voice
The authentic black bead does not rattle noisily.

I am an African woman.
I am African, here I sit
Not idle but busy stringing my beads.
I wear them in my hair. I wear them in my ears.
They go around my neck, my arms, my wrist, my calves and my ankle.
But around my waist will go the most precious of them all.
And from this place, this hidden place
Strength will burst forth into the New me.
You see,
I'm in the process of giving birth to myself
Recreating ME!
Being the Me that God sees.

I am Woman
I am African
My beads mark my presence
And when I am gone
My beads will remain.

~ Dr. Mercy Oduoye ³³

³³ Mercy Amba Oduoye, *Poems of Mercy Amba Oduoye* (Accra: Sam Woode Ltd., 2001), 7-8.