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Black Liberationist and Womanist Christologies

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Survival in the Reproductive Wilderness: Towards a Christology for Women of Color in the
Climate Crisis

In the 1970s and 80s, feminist theorists began to draw connections between women's oppression and the degradation of the environment. Drawing on seminal texts like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, these ecofeminists identified that the dual oppression of non-men and nature are both rooted in patriarchy. For example, toxic waste dumping is a feminist issue because it disproportionately affects women and children. Therefore, for the ecofeminists, the fight against androcentrism and anthropocentrism became a united movement. However, the early ecofeminists excluded women of color from their work and pushed them out of activism spaces. Women of color, who exist at the intersection of identity, face multiplied marginalization in terms of land loss, environmental violence, and health risks. The climate crisis poses a unique threat to the lives and well-being of women of color. Sexual violence rates rise with climate-related disasters, and women of color, especially those in the global south, already experience assault and rape at disproportionate rates. The lived experiences, suffering, and wisdom of women of color sit at the center of womanist theology, which rose in response to the exclusion of Black women from both feminist theology and Black liberation theology. Today, in the face of the climate crisis, the need for theology that centers women of color is stronger than ever.

In 1993, Delores Williams published *Sisters in the Wilderness*, a trailblazing text in the field of womanist theology. Williams argues against traditional atonement theories that rely on Christ standing in as a substitution or surrogate for humanity. After drawing out the way that surrogacy has been used to harm Black women, from antebellum slavery to contemporary times, Williams concludes that Black women's salvation can not rely on surrogacy, meaning that they can not be saved by Christ's suffering on the cross. Instead, Williams points to Jesus' life as affirmation of salvation for Black women, writing that "their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethics and world view."¹ Decades later, the issues that Williams raises have been given new meaning through the existential threat of the climate crisis. The wilderness looks different, but survival in the face of violence is just as necessary. In this paper, I aim to open up a Christological conversation around sexual violence in our era of climate crisis. Using Dolores Williams' paradigms of wilderness, survival, and right-relationship, I argue that our understanding of Christ must move us to relational environmental justice.

Like Williams, my theology is unapologetically shaped by my cultural context, historical setting, and lived experience as a woman of color. I am not a Black woman, so I will not make generalizations about Black women's experiences, and will limit myself mostly to sociological statements about the threats women of color across the globe are facing. But the issues of sexual violence and ecological justice are not just academic interests for me. They are embodied in me as scars, wounds, and messy realities. Given that one in five women in the United States have experienced rape or attempted rape, we all know someone who has experienced sexual violence.

¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 164.

Climate change has transformed from a mere academic debate into our daily reality, from floods to fires to the hottest days anyone can remember. I need a God who speaks to me in these experiences. My theology is shaped by this need, by the shame and pain I've been through and that my friends have been through, by the hurricanes that displaced my neighbors, by the smoke that filled my lungs all summer.

In her work, Williams links Black women's experiences to the story of Hagar through the category of wilderness. The Biblical character of Hagar is cast out into the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah after being raped, forced to carry a child as surrogate mother, and facing violent abuse. She and her child are cast into homelessness and left to die of heat or thirst in the wilderness. And in this desolate place, Hagar experiences God and calls God by name. Williams finds several points of connection between this story and Black women's history of surrogacy and exploitation in the United States. For example, just as Hagar was forced to carry a child for Abraham and Sarah, enslaved women in antebellum times were exploited as "breeder women."² Black women's reproductive history is marked by rape, exploitative conditions, and forced birth, with striking similarity to the story of Hagar. Williams traces this history of rape and surrogacy through emancipation and to her modern era, where Black women still were pushed into surrogacy roles, particularly through economic pressure and social role-exploitation. Williams uses the story of Hagar to illustrate the underexplored history of reproductive control, coercion, and intersectional oppression.

The category of wilderness experience, and its prevalence in the lives of women of color, is useful for framing issues of reproductive control and exploitation in the climate crisis. Williams uses an intersectional lens in her exegesis of the Hagar story, noting the combination of gendered, racial, and economic issues that contribute to Hagar's wilderness experience. These

² Ibid, 37

same issues combine to shape the experiences of women of color in the climate crisis today, and will continue to exacerbate the unequal effects of climate-related disaster. The story of environmentalism in the United States is dominated by the work of white men, who were interested in the preservation of “nature” out of anxiety about “unnatural” urban spaces. This thought is rooted in the idea that queerness is “unnatural,” and the historical association of white heteronormativity with “natural” spaces such as public parks. In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson trace this idea to late-nineteenth century associations between the development of American parks and white masculinity. They write, “Wilderness spaces such as parks came to be valued as sites to be preserved away from the corrupting influences of urban industrial modernity, and in particular, as places where new ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and virility could be explored away from the influence of emancipated women, immigrants, and degenerate homosexuals.”³ This historical association, which kept these “degenerate” populations out of many green spaces, still carries some weight today. For this reason, green spaces like parks, forests, and even farms have been historically gate kept from minorities under the guise of keeping them “pure” and “uncorrupted.” This has naturalized the imagination of nature as separate from humanity and the built environment, and led to an environmentalism that ignores the ways that the ecological disaster disproportionately affects women and people of color.

The classical understanding of environmentalism frames “wilderness” as neutral, uncorrupted natural space. However, as the environmental justice movement has shown, there is nothing neutral about the environment. Robert Bullard is widely considered to be the father of environmental justice studies for his tireless efforts to expose the ways that environmental

³ Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson, eds. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2010, 14.

burdens are disproportionately placed on people of color. His studies, such as *Dumping in Dixie*, show that people of color are astronomically more likely to live near toxic waste, in heat islands, or in areas with low air quality. Furthermore, this environmental violence against people of color is intentional. Race is the number one predictor of garbage dumping placement in the U.S. Heat islands and lack of green spaces can be directly mapped onto areas that have been redlined. Bullard puts it simply: “America is segregated and so is pollution.”⁴

When one adds a gendered layer to the issue of environmental justice, it is clear that women of color face unique risks in the climate crisis. As previously mentioned, people of color are exposed to more environmental threats than white people. The report “In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda” illustrates how Black women are geographically and socio-economically positioned to be most at risk from climate change. They state:

“Because they are more likely to live in poverty and to serve as caregivers, women are more likely to die or to be displaced as a result of climate-related disasters, compared to men. As a result, in emergencies, women and children comprise approximately 70-80% of those who need assistance. In addition, poverty makes recovering from natural disasters more difficult, especially for women.”⁵

Black women are both currently experiencing environmental violence and set up to experience disproportionate effects of the climate crisis. Clean water is an issue that dominates Black women’s experience and their ability to care for their families. “In Our Own Voice” ran a national poll that found that two thirds of Black women have had water come out of their taps that was brown, smelled unsafe, or otherwise needed to be boiled. As clean water becomes more

⁴ “LEARN ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE – Dr Robert D. Bullard,” accessed December 20, 2024, <https://drrobertbullard.com/learn-about-environmental-justice/>.

⁵ Marcela Howell, Jessica Pinckney, and Lexi White, “BLACK WOMEN, REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE,” ed. Susan Flinn, *IN OUR OWN VOICE: NATIONAL BLACK WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AGENDA*, n.d.

scarce, Black women are in a position of risk, and those who are caregivers will struggle to provide their children with clean water.

The reproductive and maternal issues of women of color are closely linked to their environment. A small but growing body of literature documents the rise in violence against women and girls (VAWG) that comes with climate-related disaster. “Natural hazards, disasters and violence against women and girls: a global mixed-methods systematic review” points to increases in rape and intimate partner violence (IPV) after earthquakes as evidence that extreme weather events impact VAWG.⁶ Women of color are already much more vulnerable to assault and IPV than any other group. This risk is multiplied by the high-likelihood of exposure to environmental threats and disaster. Women of color are at further reproductive risk through pregnancy. The study “Climate change and women's health in the United States: Impacts and opportunities” identifies extreme heat, air pollution, extreme weather events, and increasing threats from vector-borne disease as climate-related health risks for pregnant women.⁷ This is especially harrowing given the reality that women of color, particularly Black women, face racism in maternal healthcare leading to higher rates of maternal mortality.⁸

An intersectional lens shows that climate change affects women of color in unique ways, putting them at risk of violence, and limiting their ability to safely carry and raise children. This is the state of our modern wilderness. When one reads the Hagar story through a lens of intersectional oppression, it is clear that the wilderness is not a neutral space; rather, it is a place Hagar is pushed into because of her multiply marginalized identity. Abraham and Sarah exploit

⁶ Alyssa Mari Thurston, Heidi Stöckl, and Meghna Ranganathan, “Natural Hazards, Disasters and Violence against Women and Girls: A Global Mixed-Methods Systematic Review,” *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 4 (May 6, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004377>.

⁷ Emily Sbiroli et al., “Climate Change and Women’s Health in the United States: Impacts and Opportunities,” *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* 8 (October 1, 2022): 100169, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2022.100169>.

⁸ CDC, “Working Together to Reduce Black Maternal Mortality,” *Women’s Health*, June 16, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/womens-health/features/maternal-mortality.html>.

Hagar's status as both Egyptian slave and woman to force her into surrogacy. Williams writes, "Through the lens of motherhood we see the struggle between power and powerlessness in human relationships disrupt peace in a family unit, breed enmity between women and send a poverty-stricken female slave (Hagar) scurrying into the wilderness."⁹ Hagar certainly has agency in the story, and is a resilient character that takes it upon herself to flee from her oppressors. But it is undoubtedly structures of power that bring her to a place where she and her unborn child can not possibly survive. Hagar meets God in the wilderness twice, once when she is pregnant and flees Sarah's violent treatment, and once when Abraham throws her and her child Ishmael out of the house. In both situations, Hagar's survival is threatened by a combination of violence, homelessness, reproductive/maternal injustice, and the need for clean water. And in both situations, God promises Hagar's survival.

In Williams' analysis of both the Hagar story and the history of Black womens' surrogacy experience, "wilderness" is a desolate or hopeless seeming situation where survival does not seem possible.¹⁰ Therefore, God's promise of survival to Hagar has great theological significance. God gives Hagar water when there is nothing to drink. God assures Hagar that her child will survive, and not just him, but his entire lineage until he is "a great nation" (Genesis 21:18). Survival is an important tenet of Williams' Christology. She denounces surrogacy and salvation through suffering, and instead writes that for Black women, "their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethic world view."¹¹ A survival framework points to a God that does not intend suffering and death, but rather life and new ways of being.

⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, 108-109.

¹¹ Ibid, 164.

God's interest in our survival and well-being is crucial for this moment. It is a privilege to think that a well of water is an insignificant redemption for Hagar. Mothers who have faced extreme heat, drought, or other environmental disaster understand what a powerful thing it is that Hagar and Ishmael survived the wilderness. It is essential for us as Christians in this moment to say that God intends survival, not suffering. There is nothing redemptive about the pain women of color face through sexual assault, maternal mortality, and femicide. Most importantly, a God of survival reminds us that it doesn't have to be this way. The climate crisis is happening, and there is no avoiding the worst of it. But we can develop strategies for survival. Women and girls do not need to experience violence, toxic chemicals do not need to be dumped on communities of color, and no one should have to fear that they can't get clean water for their baby.

Sometimes when we talk about the climate crisis, we use the language of "paying the price." We say that humanity is going to reap what we sow, and some almost seem to take pleasure in the idea that our excesses will catch up with us. And yet, no one should need to suffer horrific violence to atone for the climate crisis. The rape and murder of the people who are already multiply marginalized will do nothing to redeem us. Thus, while the cross reflects the systemic violence and evil that still haunts our world, it can not be a standalone model for salvation in the age of climate crisis. Our Christology can not lead us to accept the wilderness experience of women of color, and we can not pretend that their suffering is God's will.

Instead, we can look to the life of Jesus for survival strategies and tools to resist structures of oppression. Williams uses Jesus' ministry to illustrate a redemption that comes through "righting relations."¹² This framework is helpful for understanding what redemption and God's promise to us looks like under the mounting pressures of climate change. A worldview of relationality is the only thing that will help us survive the climate crisis. Through his life and

¹² Ibid, 165.

ministry, Jesus showed us what it is to be deeply invested in the well-being of our neighbors. He did not accept suffering and violence against women as the facts of life. He protected women through his commandments concerning adultery and divorce (Matthew 5:27-32). In one day, he healed both the woman with the issue of blood and the girl presumed dead, giving us a model for reproductive healthcare, and showing a refusal to accept the necessary death of girls (Matthew 9:18-26). These are important lessons for our current wilderness. Suffering will not save us; rather, our redemption comes with a new relationality that protects the most marginalized of our society and prioritizes their survival.

Women of color are not just passive victims of the climate crisis. They are also leaders and exemplars showing us the way to survival and right-relationship. Ecowomanists use an intersectional methodology to dream creative approaches to resisting environmental degradation. In her book *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Melanie Harris writes that “Ecowomanist approaches can be described as the reflective and contemplative study of the ecowisdom that is theorized, constructed, and practiced by women of African descent.”¹³ Women of color bring unique perspectives and approaches to the environmental crisis, from both ancestral and lived experience. In her article “Between Dishwater and the River: Toward an Ecowomanist Methodology,” Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt shows that ecowomanists draw on centuries of spirituality, intergenerational knowledge, and the lived experience of women of color to develop a pluralistic understanding of human and non-human. This allows ecowomanists to interrupt the economic and cultural conditions that separate Black communities from nature, as well as the “damaging historical association of black women’s bodies with

¹³ Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Ecology and Justice, an Orbis Series on Integral Ecology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017).

“primitive” nature in Western thought.”¹⁴ The theory and strategy of ecowomanism is essential for this moment, as it speaks directly to the experience of Black women, while promoting healthier relationships both between humans and between human and nonhuman beings.

Women of color all over the world are participating in our salvation by refusing to accept climate violence as our new reality. Indigenous women and genderfluid folks are leading protests against oil pipelines that cause tremendous harm to both the human and nonhuman communities. Women farmers in the global south are starting seed banks and farming collectives to protect small farms from corporate seed banks and to preserve organic biodiversity.¹⁵ These women are providing new models of collective care, often based in old wisdom, that have the power to decrease violence and heal broken relationships. Christ’s work of redemption lives on through these women, and we all have an obligation to participate. Women of color do not need to suffer and die, just as Christ did not save us through his pain. Instead, we can look to women of color for guidance in the climate crisis, and follow Christ’s example of prioritizing the survival of marginalized peoples and repairing harmful relationships.

There’s no getting around it, the climate crisis is scary. The hugeness of what we are up against can feel incomprehensible. As a young person, I often struggle with the fact that I am inheriting such a broken world. In times of desolation and wilderness, I am glad I can still say that Christ’s work is moving in this world, and that we do not have to accept suffering and death as inevitable. Through the gospels, Jesus affirms his deep investment in our survival and well-being. In his life of ministry, there are lessons for this current moment, lessons that can help us care for each other and particularly the most vulnerable. It has been decades since Delores

¹⁴ Sofia Betancourt, “Between Dishwater and the River,” *Worldviews* 20, no. 1 (2016): 64–75, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-02001006>.

¹⁵ These stories and more: “EcoFeminism and Environmental Liberation,” *Intersectional Environmentalist*, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://intersectionalenvironmentalist.com/toolkits/ecofeminism-and-environmental-liberation>.

Williams boldly proclaimed that Christ does not save us through suffering, and linked her Christology to the reproductive and surrogate suffering of Black women. In this paper, I have argued that Williams' categories of wilderness, survival, and right-relationship are essential for addressing the realities of the climate crisis. I have drawn out Williams' work to speak to the current environmental and socio-political reality that women of color are uniquely at risk of sexual and reproductive violence in situations of environmental degradation and catastrophe. While this reality is terrifying and the profound suffering of women of color is a part of our current lived experience, I have argued that Christ's teachings and work in his life can give us strategies of survival and resistance. Further, I pointed to the work women of color are already doing as an example of this saving work on earth. Even after all this, it is hard to feel confident of our survival. But I can say with assurance that we have all we need. God is with us, and we have a long history of ecological wisdom and protest against injustice on our side. None of us face the wilderness alone.

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