

“I Kicked Myself Back to Life”

Womanist Reflections on Awakening During Religio-Academic Sleep

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ABSTRACT

Within the Academy, Black women have long endured micro-aggressions which challenge our epistemological awareness – particularly within the religious academy. Yet, epistemology, as the theory of knowledge, is a tool which identifies foundational awareness of what we hold as truth and justice – the tool also supports evaluating the power dynamics which both influence those concepts and the actions which support them. As a theological framework, womanism deliberately engages the matrix of gender, race and class. It has been adopted as a kick against the socio-religious proclivity to push Black women to the margins of religious knowledge production. Katie Geneva Cannon, largely recognized as one of the pioneers of womanist approaches to theology, spoke regularly of her own “kick back to life” in 2016. Similarly, Black women in academic and religious institutions throughout the world have embraced aspects of womanist approaches within their scholarship and preaching as their own means of kicking themselves back to life.

Standing in a room of a predominantly White church in San Leandro, California, four years ago, I was queried about my work by one of the male parishioners. I explained that I am a historical theologian. He raised his eyebrows in surprise, “Do you have a degree in theology?” I responded that I did and received my PhD from the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) and University of Gloucestershire (England). He appeared deep in thought, as if trying to square what I’d said with his own internal dialogue. He finally asked, “Do you think the PhDs are easier to get now?”

For a moment, that query knocked my breath out of me. But something within me rose up, like the kick of a baby being laid down, screaming and refusing to be put aside. I responded quickly with a bright smile. “No. If that were the case, *you’d* have one, too.” He let out an uneasy laugh and I joined in.

The micro-aggressions Black women have endured from White men in various social spheres, form a history we know well. Even using the word “epistemology” is often met with scorn by colleagues as we are presumed ignorant and thus unable to produce knowledge. Yet, the definition of epistemology, broadly understood as

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