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# THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE FORMATION AND LIMITATION OF FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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## Abstract

My thesis explores the methodological and political im/possibilities opened up by the incorporation of feminist theory and WGS into the study of religion. Drawing on intersectional feminist scholarship, my thesis will be organized around case studies of feminist and womanist scholarship in the study of religion and theological studies in order to examine the history of how feminist theory became institutionalized within the academic study of religion and theology, fields that are both masculine and hierarchical in structure, in order to locate the possible limitations this institutionalization has for creating space for political activism. In addition to religious studies, I will be drawing from theological studies because feminist approaches to scholarship on religion first appeared in theological works, while also drawing on works from different periods in time in order to discern shifting historical trends in feminist scholarship. My analysis of the scholarship in my case studies will take a comparative approach that is framed by the assumption that feminist scholarship is inherently political due to its focus on representation and power.

THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE FORMATION AND LIMITATION OF FEMINIST  
SCHOLARSHIP IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

By

Hayden E. Hains

B.A. Meredith College 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Religion

Syracuse University  
August 2018

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## **Introduction: In Defense of Normativity**

*“Feminism: how we pick each other up”* - Sarah Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

What is feminist academic discourse supposed to do? What political roles and responsibilities ought it assume in and outside of the academy, specifically within theological and religious studies? Like many political, academic, and identity related categories, reaching a shared consensus on the meaning and goals of feminism, or even the meaning and goals of an academic discipline, is a difficult, if not, impossible task. Often times one can find resistance to agreeing to a clear definition or set of goals as a way of refusing any and all forms of normative practice. This resistance is a response to the ways in which normative structures and practices can constrict, erase, and do violence to non-conforming bodies. So, in many instances, resistance to normative practices is a necessary response. While I certainly understand and in many ways identify with a resistance to normativity, I also recognize that many, if not most people, think and act in normative ways, which begs the question of whether or not normativity be left behind completely. I ask these questions in light of the larger interest of this project, namely the ways in which feminist theory and women’s and gender studies are grounded in critical methods and political ambitions that emphasize activism and cultural transformation, yet other academic disciplines, namely religious and theological studies, that have adopted feminist theories and methods, are not, or, at least not necessarily.

In light of these political and methodological commitments, however, one wonders: has the sharpness of the ethical and political commitments in WGS and feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.

theory been dulled through its incorporation into theological and religious studies? While religious and theological studies continue to see an increasing amount of feminist approaches to scholarship that draws on WGS, one wonders whether or not the field of religious studies has maintained, or at least been open to the *political* commitments and methods of these feminist approaches. In other words, have the academic fields of theology and religious studies committed to maintaining a space for the activist sensibilities that were and are central to the emergence, development, and maintenance of feminist theoretical and methodological approaches.

Concerns over theoretical and methodological approaches are inherently tied to the notion of having an object or objects of study that define and shape any given academic discipline. An “object” of study can refer to what is primarily focused on in a piece of scholarship, but the ways in which an object is focused on in any particular research project can vary. For example, some works seek to question the object itself, i.e. what is gender? What is sexuality? What ontological status have these categories been given? In other instances, the object of study, and whatever meaning is ascribed to it, are reified for the sake of putting more focus on the ways in which those categories are operating in other settings that a scholar may choose to place primary focus on. For WGS and religious studies, objects of study can include but is not limited to, sex, sexuality, gender, race, texts, popular media, art, history, court cases, public policies, legal systems, activism, and personal narratives of one’s lived experiences. While there is overlap in objects of study between and within academic disciplines, the ways that a scholar chooses to place focus on any given object(s) of study can radically change the final product. In

other words, two texts that both focus on gender and sexuality can take completely different approaches to how those objects of study are presented.

In Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* she seeks to help readers "see both inside and across the critical habits and political ambitions of identity knowledges in their current institutional and intellectual formations in the contemporary United States."<sup>2</sup> Wiegman's text is helpful for thinking about objects of study in various disciplines and how those objects of study become defined and solidified as foundational to an academic discipline. Wiegman is less interested in the degree to which a disciplinary field succeeds in being oriented towards activism and social justice. Instead, she seeks to locate the ways that a discipline (whether it be WGS, ethnic studies, religious studies) holds a version of a commitment to politics and justice as a self-constituting fact.<sup>3</sup> To better understand how some academic disciplines formed a commitment to politics and justice, she begins with asking

What has enabled or emboldened, allowed or encouraged scholars to believe that justice can be achieved through the study of identity? How have identity objects of study been imbued with political value, and what does "the political" mean in those academic domains that take critical practice as the means and measure for pursuing justice? What kind of power is invested in the act of thinking, and what kind of thinking is considered most capable of acting, such that the political commitments and critical itineraries of identity knowledges can be fulfilled? <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. While Wiegman's text is useful for thinking about how fields of study become constituted by their objects of study and the possible political commitments of those objects, my analysis raises questions about the strengths and weaknesses of how the academic fields of religion and theology have adopted feminist approaches to scholarship. So, for both Wiegman and myself, the "political" remains a primary object of study.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Wiegman is interested in looking at how these political commitments shape the academic discipline, a useful inquiry that can be expanded on when flipped to ask what happens to political and identity categories when they become disciplined within the academy?

One response to this question can be found in Ellen Messer-Davidow's *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, where she claims that the primary effect that the disciplining of feminism into the academy created was a problem of translation. Messer-Davidow came to this realization when trying to respond to her own concerns over the problem of the cleavage between knowing change and doing change.<sup>5</sup> She writes "The cleavage that vexed me was a translation problem: the social change I knew from activism I couldn't reformulate as academic knowledge, and the social change I knew from academic theories I couldn't deploy in activism."<sup>6</sup> When reading this description of this problem of translation, I am reminded of those texts that are deeply theoretical, beautifully complex, and utterly groundbreaking. For example, the first time I read Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, it took me three reads through, and a great deal of funded access to other texts and expert advising to fully comprehend Butler's text. When I finally understood, *Gender Trouble* shattered my perception of the world and permanently changed how I understood so much in and around me. I also became aware of how it can take a great deal of time and access to resources in order to understand the basic arguments of that text, a reality that I find troubling. How can an esoteric text like *Gender Trouble* function politically as a tool for activism? I raise this

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<sup>5</sup> This problem of cleavage between knowing and doing change was one brought to Messer-Davidow's attention by her by Warren Bennis. See Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11

question not to say that the text cannot function politically as a tool for activism, but rather, to foster more conversations about where and how this can (or has) happened. I am interested to see how and where this problem of translation is occurring in religious and theological studies while also keeping in mind that not all scholars and not all scholarship see translation as a problem, even when a scholar or a piece of scholarship employs political categories.

While theological and religious studies did not begin with commitments to activism and politics, both fields of study have certainly experienced a shift towards politics and justice since the 1960's. One reason for this shift was the observation that many foundational and highly respected texts in religious and theological studies failed to account for gender, sex, race, class, and the ways in which all of these categories always intersect. While work in religious and theological studies can still reflect the norms of a white, racist, and patriarchal discourse, more work has and is continuing to be published that accounts for the previously mentioned neglected categories. I am interested in the possibility of how normative claims for what WGS and religious and theological studies scholarship could look like, namely the claim that scholarship can and should do more than provide diagnostic services, might shape how we consume and produce work that is identified under and/or utilizes political categories like race, sex, feminism, and gender.

This thesis explores the methodological and political im/possibilities opened up by the incorporation of feminist theory and WGS as objects of study and methodological tools for analysis in the study of religion and theology. Drawing on intersectional feminist scholarship, this thesis is organized around case studies of feminist and womanist scholarship in the study of religion and theological studies in order to examine

the history of how feminist theory became institutionalized within the academic study of religion and theology, fields that are both masculine and hierarchical in structure, in order to locate the possible limitations this institutionalization has for creating space for political activism. I draw from both religious studies and theological studies because feminist approaches to scholarship on religion first appeared in theological studies. My first chapter includes an assessment of Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, and Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way*. The second chapter is an assessment of Caroline Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*, and Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy*. I am also drawing on works from different periods in time in order to discern shifting trends in feminist scholarship. My analysis of the scholarship in my case studies takes a comparative approach that is framed by the assumption that feminist scholarship is inherently political due to its focus on representation and power.

As will become clear, the concept of "activism" is central to my research. Because this is the case, I will clarify how I am understanding what activism is and how it relates to scholarship. My conceptualization of activism in scholarship draws from Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional approach to feminist theory and practice, and how her intersectional approach influenced methods of doing feminist theory.<sup>7</sup> As a lawyer, activist, and scholar, Crenshaw developed her concept of intersectionality out of experiencing the ways in which the intersections of race and gender were not accounted for in the United States judicial system, an oversight that has and continues to perpetuate violence on black women's bodies. In an interview published by the Columbia

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<sup>7</sup> See, Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.", *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* Vol. 1989 (1989).

University law school, with Joy-Ann Reid, Eve Enlser, and Barbra Smith, Crenshaw defined intersectionality as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”<sup>8</sup> Since her coining of the term, intersectional approaches to scholarship have steadily increased to the extent that many feminist scholars, namely Sara Ahmed, have taken on the perspective that all feminist work must be intersectional if it is to be considered feminist.<sup>9</sup>

Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim, both professors in WGS departments, describe the influence of Crenshaw’s intersectional approach as accomplishing three interventions in feminist theory:

(1) It grounds theory in the lived experiences of the marginalized so as to identify counterhegemonic narratives. This allows theorists to identify not just oppression but also to pay attention to privilege. (2) It pushes theory beyond essentialized identity categories by allowing for nuanced accounts of complexity and variation within and across difference. It forces us to consider the various possible meanings of terms like Latino/a, African American, Asian American, and white, as well as the heterogeneity held with the category. (3) It attends to the multiple domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal) that operate with and through each other in people’s lives. Thereby intersectional feminism maintains a political commitment to empower its subjects through work that combines “advocacy, analysis, policy development, theorizing, and education.”<sup>10</sup>

Crenshaw’s intersectional approach aims to locate the various conditions that result in violence and oppression. Intersectionality accounts for the ways in which identity

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<sup>8</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later.” (*Columbia Law School*, 8 June 2017).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Carole R. McCann, and Kim Seung-Kyung, “Kimberlé Crenshaw-Intersectionality” in *Feminist Theory Reader*. (London: Routledge, 2016), 165.

categories like race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, age, disability, and body size can overlap. Because these categories can overlap, the violence and oppression that is faced as a result, cannot be understood only through one category. In Crenshaw's essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", she argues;

Contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy. Focusing on two dimensions of male violence against women-battering and rape-I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized .<sup>11</sup>

Crenshaw's argument helps to shape the critical lens through which I will be asking critical questions about the works I have chosen to analyze. I want to see where Crenshaw's work can help locate and describe the different methods and limitations of feminist scholarship in the study of religion. I am also interested in considering the prose of Crenshaw's writing along with the writing in the texts I am assessing, since the effects of any text is a result of not just what the author said, but how they said it.

In my reading and assessment of the texts in my case studies, I will be applying Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality and activism in scholarship as one way of identifying the characteristics and possible limitations of the institutionalization of feminist theory and WGS in the study of religion and theology. In light of Crenshaw's influence on feminist analysis, I currently understand activism to be an effort to locate

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<sup>11</sup>Kimberlé Crenshaw "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Violence Against Women: Classic Papers* (1991): 1.

and then undermine, in both material and immaterial ways, the stability of power structures that are responsible for the erasure and oppression of people. While I will not argue that complex theory and words alone are incapable of doing political and activist driven work, I will fiercely interrogate the accessibility of words and how the accessibility, or lack thereof, expands and/or limits who is impacted by those words.

Intersectional analysis is able to do this activist work because it starts from a place of locating injustices that go unrecognized, specifically injustices that black women face, and then offers a more nuanced way of understanding why and how those injustices occur. In my reading of Crenshaw, this locating of injustice and erasure, is also a call to do something about it. For example, Crenshaw's "Say Her Name" campaign is a direct effort to resist erasure and injustice by raising awareness about the number of black women that are killed by law enforcement. Theoretical analysis remains a useful tool for understanding the categories of feminism, womanism, race, gender and sex, but the function of theory seems primarily diagnostic, which has led me to ask scholars to seriously consider the implications of this limited function. My goal is to expand and challenge how I understand activism in relation to conversations about the intersections of activism, theory, and practice in the academic study of religion, theology, and WGS.

Each chapter of my thesis will consist of a group of multiple texts that engage with feminist approaches to the study of religion and theology. In my assessment of these texts and their methods, I hope to answer the following questions: For what purpose is this text engaging with feminist thought? Does this text engage with discussions of activism and/or social justice? Can this text be considered intersectional? Where and how has this text been used and responded to? If the text seeks to problematize normative

readings and practices within religious contexts, then what work does the author expect this problematizing to do? Does this text's employment of a feminist critique facilitate new conditions of possibility to think or act, and if so, for whom? For whom is this text accessible? Is this text addressing any particular form(s) or oppression and actively attempting to either ameliorate or alleviate suffering caused by oppression?

My first chapter examines feminist and womanist approaches to theology. The texts I compare include Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (2008). These texts have been paired for multiple reasons, first, each text is situated in a different time period, which helps to demonstrate the ways in which feminist and womanist theological works has changed over time. Second, these text show some direct and indirect dialogue between feminist theology, produced primarily by and for white women, and womanist theology, a dialogue that also helps demonstrate the ways in which race and gender are inexorably intertwined, while also showing differences in methodology between feminist and womanist scholarship. Lastly, these two texts are well known and have been responded to in and outside of academia.

My second chapter examines historical approaches to religious studies scholarship that specifically focuses on the categories of gender and sex, as well as the experiences of women. The texts I compare in this chapter include Caroline Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (1991), and Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (2002). Similar to the first chapter, these works were selected due to their similarities in method, and the differences between the time periods in which they were

produced and published. These texts are also widely known works that serve as examples for how women's experiences and feminist sensibilities in scholarship began to develop within the study of religion, while also being distinct from theological works.

With these case studies, my aim is to explain how feminist and WGS has found a place in the academic study of religion and theology. Did this institutionalization come at a cost—namely, an over-emphasis of theory at the expense of practice? Implicit in this notion of cost here is my normative claim that the political- and activist-driven characteristics of feminist theory and WGS must be retained in order identify a piece of scholarship as feminist. If it is the case that the institutionalization of feminist discourses into the study of religion was costly, then the cost of this institutionalization implies a cost to both WGS and the study of religion and theology.

The final section of my thesis begins with a more comprehensive assessment that puts the methods of each text in a more in depth conversation with one another. The purpose of comparing of these text is not to only craft critique and criticism. I do not aim to label some texts valid and others not, rather I want to see what can be gleaned from looking at four different texts through the lens of theoretical and methodical approaches that call into question the role that academic work can have. This assessment will then help me conclude with both critiques and suggestions for possible options for further study that can, if necessary, assist in reorienting the study of religion and theology in a way that holds a larger space for activism. Before moving into my comparative assessments I want to make note of my own subject position in the production of this project.

I am neither a theologian nor an historian, so I am unable to speak in depth to normative rules and practices of discourse in either field. My own training and interest in the reading, comparing, and critiquing of these texts is to pay close attention to the authors' key arguments, premises, and methods. Lastly, I am offering these assessments from my experience as a white woman who has been educated and trained at private liberal arts institutions in the United States. My claims to what I think are effective or ineffective academic methods and projects cannot speak comprehensively or infallibly to the experiences of all women. So, while my arguments are mostly normative and are claims I have confidence in, they are open to critique and change.

## Chapter 1: Feminist and Womanist Approaches to Theology

While the interests and training of theologians and scholars of religion merge, the two are to be understood and marked as distinct academic disciplines. However, the ways in which they have and continue to overlap, especially in regards to how each field incorporated feminist approaches to scholarship, makes a consideration of both helpful in trying to answer the primary questions of this thesis. Before emerging in the methodologies of religion scholars, feminist and womanist methodologies first appeared in theological studies. This chapter will focus on and compare Mary Daly's feminist theology in her book *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's liberation*, with Monica Coleman's womanist theology *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*. The two texts selected for this comparison vary in focus, method, and date of publication as an effort to demonstrate the similarities, differences, and the changes that have occurred since the emergence of feminist and womanist theology. My comparing and contrasting of these two different texts will be centered around questions about the role and effect of making normative claims, esoteric versus exoteric writing styles, commitments to a group or class of people, finding new ways of dealing with evil and suffering, acknowledging the past, and facilitating change. My focus on these topics and questions directly reflect the questions and concerns in both Daly and Coleman's work, as well as in feminist discourse both in and outside of academia.

In some instances, these texts will both directly and indirectly be in conversation with one another. Examining and comparing feminist and womanist theological works helps to better understand how feminist theory and women's and gender studies first began to appear in the methodologies of other disciplines, namely disciplines concerned

with the category of religion. Before exploring these texts, and how they compare with one another, I want to first introduce some of the basic methodological differences between theology and religious studies, as well as feminist and womanist approaches to theology before moving into my reading and assessment of the primary texts in this chapter.

While some scholars wear both hats, whether through joint appointments in multiple departments, or in their own research, religious studies and theology are widely understood as two separate and distinct disciplines. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on the basic and definitive differences between the two. One of the more conventional, and more dated approaches, put forth by David Ford, a theologian at the University of Cambridge, understands the primary difference between religious studies and theology to be located in the types of questions the two fields attempt to answer. Ford broadly describes theology as “thinking about questions raised by and about religion... Theology considers its questions while being immersed in the changes of modernity and at the same time drawing on the wisdom of one of more religious traditions.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, religious studies is not inherently concerned with having a commitment to a particular religion. Rather, religious studies scholars are primarily committed to the norms of the university and academic discourse.

While Ford’s text provides a basic and general understanding of theology that can help to distinguish it from religious studies, his text also serves as an example of how theology remains a discipline in which white male perspectives are privileged. For

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<sup>12</sup> David F. Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2013), 1-10.

example, the word womanism never appears in the text in its explanations of various types of theology, despite the fact that the text was published in 2013, and womanist theology has remained a steadily growing approach since 1985.<sup>13</sup> Second, feminism/feminist appears twice in the text but Ford makes no effort to explain what feminist approaches aim to achieve and why those approaches came about.<sup>14</sup> In effect, he fails to name the ways in which his work, and the history of the field in which he works, is implicated in the violence that led to the development of theologies that account for race, gender, sex, and nationality.

The history and foundations of both religious studies and theology are primarily white, male, and from either the U.S. or Europe. Theological works are also primarily of and about Christianity. As a response to this history and the structural oppression it has and continues to create, scholarship emerged that aimed to account for the way in which race, gender, and sex have been ignored. Feminist theology attempts to locate and undermine the effects of the white male bias that characterizes many theological works

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<sup>13</sup> See Emile M. Townes “Womanist Theology”, (New York, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 2003), 159, 164, 175. In this chapter Townes describes the formal beginning of womanist theology as occurring in 1985 with the publication of Katie Geneva Cannon’s article “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness.” The first time the term womanist theology was used was in Delores S. Williams’ 1987 article “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices.” Townes also notes how while most of the discussions and publications of womanist theology are within the United States, there are also more discussions occurring among women in Brazil, the Caribbean, and the Netherlands.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 115. Here, Ford mentions the variety of “liberation theologies” when writing “Latin American liberation theology has been paralleled, with the same stress on solidarity with victims and on radical praxis, by the theologies of other marginalized and oppressed groups, such as black people in the USA and South Africa, ‘Dalits’ in India, indigenous populations in former colonies and elsewhere, and women, homosexual, and transgender people all over the world. Feminist theologies, theologies of gender, sexuality, and race, and post-colonial theologies continue to be significant and have developed in many directions other than the ‘liberation’ model.”

and religious communities. To accomplish this, writers of feminist theology seek to ground their work in the experiences of women while also accounting for the injustices caused by a structural sexism.<sup>15</sup> If theology is an attempt to answer questions by and about religion, then feminist theology attempts to accomplish this in a way that honors, empowers, and is reflective of women's experiences. However, the majority of feminist theology, especially when it first emerged, is penned by white women whose research and arguments primarily reflects only the experiences of other white women. Consequently, much of feminist theology obscures and/or completely neglects intersections of gender and race.

As a response to this myopic approach to feminist scholarship, black women scholars have and continue to produce womanist approaches to theology that places primary focus on the experiences of black women. In Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas's introduction to the anthology *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, she elaborates on the goals of womanism and the methods of womanist scholarship;

Womanism is revolutionary. Womanism is a paradigm shift wherein Black women no longer look to others for their liberation, but instead look to themselves. The revolutionaries are Black women scholars, who have armed themselves with pen and paper, not simply to dismantle the master's house, but to do the more important work of building a house of their own. As intellectual

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 4 (1991). In this essay Scott argues for a more critical method of inquiry into how scholars (namely historians) use the term "experience" as a kind of historical evidence. Scott emphasizes how experience is often assumed to be a kind of truth that transcends discourse which in effect obscures the ways that discourse is always shaping the ways in which experience is articulated. Scott aims to establish a method that requires experience to always be historicized so that people can better "understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed", 792.

revolutionaries, womanist scholars undertake praxis that liberates theory from its captivity to the intellectual frames and cultural values of those which cause and perpetuate the marginalization of Black women in the first place....What characterizes womanist discourse is that Black women are engaged in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos. <sup>16</sup>

For Floyd-Thomas, it is clear that womanism works to both critique and create, to make space and to undermine the power structures that work to maintain exclusionary barriers and violent oversights. Her naming of womanist scholars as “intellectual revolutionaries” also demonstrates the possibilities of scholarship doing transformative political work. She also provides a descriptive critique of the study of both religion and theology, a critique that should shape the lens of how scholars process and acquire knowledge.

Since its inception, the academic study of religion and theology in America has been the domain of white men. The sources and norms of theological study were drawn from their experience and largely served to reinforce the misnomer that objective inquiry and universal truth could only be achieved by answering the questions posed by white male subjectivity. <sup>17</sup>

Floyd-Thomas’ words are useful to keep in mind for the theological texts examined in this first chapter, but also the texts that will be explored in the second chapter, as her critique applies to both fields of study. Keeping these distinctions and critiques in mind, the first text I will explore in this chapter is Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*. Published in 1973, Daly’s text comes during the emergence of feminist theological works that were often inspired by the women’s and civil rights movements of the 1960’s.

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<sup>16</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

### **Feminist Theology in Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father***

*The cutting away of this phallogentric value system in its various incarnations amounts also to a kind of exorcism that essentially must be done by women, who are in a position to experience the demonic destructiveness of the super-phallic society in our own being.—Mary Daly*

Although she may not have been the first to provide explicitly feminist analyses of religion and theology, the radical nature of Mary Daly's analyses in *Beyond God the Father* solidified her work as groundbreaking and polemical—and, more than this, politically motivated. Written in 1973, *Beyond God the Father* articulated a radical feminist vision that sought to advocate for the liberation of religion through the disruption of the syntax and grammar of then-dominant theological discourses. For Daly, “Women moving beyond god the father find that the mysticism of words is twined with the mysticism of creation. Wording is one fundamental way of Be-Witching- Sparking women to the insights and actions that change our lives.” (xxv) Daly's work carried within it an explicitly political vision inspired and buttressed by the concrete political efforts of women across the world. Her text is intended to incite thought and action;

Real insight implies commitment to changing the destructive situation, and the implications of this are not comfortable. For the person who has learned to see sexism, nothing can ever be the same again. Yet there is hope involved in the insight into sexism...The beginning of an adequate response is a will to integrate and transform the heretofore divided self.<sup>18</sup>

For Daly, the women's movement is not to be treated as a purely secular phenomenon, but rather as an expression of an ultimate reality that liberates the flourishing of women. The role of Daly's feminist theology is not only to place focus on women's experiences,

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God The Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 50.

but also to utilize language, through grammar and/or metaphors, as a method for shaping individual and collective sensibilities in ways that incite actions that help create changes, namely, a change that allows for women's liberation.

Daly's method for constructing her theology does not predominately foreground specific Christian doctrine, rather, her theology is in many ways a critique of masculine and sexist theology, and a critique of how Christian figures, and the dominant interpretations of those figures, serve to sustain patriarchy. Her knowledge and use of doctrine is not applied to women's liberation, rather, it is used to show how the women's movement is an ontological, spiritual revolution and that "the becoming of women implies universal human becoming. It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God."<sup>19</sup> For example, in Daly's re-interpretation of various dogmas about Mary, she argues that Mary must be understood as having an independent status apart from her relationship to Christ. For Daly, Mary's virginity is to be read as an example and image of female autonomy and the immaculate conception can be read as another example of Mary's autonomy where she is creating herself without men. Daly writes,

The message of *independence* in the Virgin symbol can itself be understood apart from the matter of sexual relationships with men. When this aspect of the symbol is sifted out from the patriarchal setting, then "Virgin Mother" can be heard to say something about female autonomy within the context of sexual and parental relationships. This is a message which, I believe, many women throughout the centuries of Christian culture have managed to take from the overly sexist Marian doctrines.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 85.

In this re-interpretation of Mary, Daly points out how many theological interpretations of Mary only see her in relation to men. Consequently, Mary as a figure that points towards the independence of women is often ignored and completely unnoticed by other theologians. It is this erasure and oversight that Daly wishes to challenge as a practice of working towards women's liberation.

According to Daly, women's liberation is a spiritual revolution, a revolution that achieves freedom from the bondage of patriarchy through both individual and communal efforts. Citing Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy, Daly contends that it is helpful to think of women's liberation as an ongoing process fueled by the revolutionary powers of hope and rage.<sup>21</sup> Her use of Whitehead is tied to her focus on women becoming and how for that to happen there needs to be a transcendence beyond sex-role socialization. Daly's work is categorized as feminist theology because it provides reflections and interpretations of religious texts, practices, and symbolism, in ways that reflect and empower women's experiences while also attempting to delegitimize the patriarchal power structures that perpetuate sexism.

To accomplish this, Daly argues that god ought to be understood as a verb, not a noun, effectively troubling ideas of a personified male god, and destabilizing the significance of Jesus as a central figure in Christianity. *Beyond God the Father* is both descriptive and prescriptive, Daly's words are not intended to remain within the confines of the bounded text. She writes;

This book announces the moral imperative to live "on the boundary" of patriarchal institutions. "The boundary"- the location of new space/ new time- is understood primarily in a psychic sense of woman-identified integrity, but this is

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 25.

closely associated with the claiming of physical space/time by and for women. Such space/time is “on the boundary of all that has been considered central.”<sup>22</sup>

This living on the boundary of patriarchal institutions is for Daly, not only essential to women’s liberation, but also essential to any and all other forms of oppression. She argues that “The feminist movement is potentially the source of real movement in the other revolutionary movements (such as Black Liberation and the Peace Movement), for it is the catalyst that enables women and men to break out of the prison of self-destructive dichotomies perpetuated by the institutional fathers.”<sup>23</sup> Implicit in this stance, is Daly’s assumption that only by first overcoming sexism can other oppressive structures be torn down. Her re-reading of Christian texts and practice is not intended to serve or add to religious institutions. Rather, her theology is done for the benefit of the women’s movement, which she argues is in need of some kind of theological and/or cosmological perspective. Daly’s project is radical, ambitious, and aims to be transformative in both material and immaterial ways. *Beyond God the Father* has and continues to be a text that is praised as much as it is critiqued.

Looking at Daly’s work through the lens of the questions raised at the start of this thesis, and through the words of those who praised and critiqued her, will help to assess and clarify the ways in which is her text is both productive and problematic. Her text can be productive in providing new and radical feminist methods for resisting a patriarchal society and the institutions that help sustain it, but her text also remains problematic because these radical feminist methods for resistance do not consider the inexorable relationship between race and sex. First, the question of for what purposes has Daly has

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,190.

produced a text that engages with feminist thought. Armed with these feminist sensibilities, Daly's text is intended to produce a series of effects in its readers by shaping and creating sensibilities that aim to undermine the patriarchal power structures that are responsible for the oppression of women.

In doing so, Daly's text attempts to engage with discussions of social justice and activism but does so in, according to Carol Anne Douglas in her review of the text, quite abstract terms that can leave readers with an unclear vision of exactly *how* women will accomplish this task of changing the world.<sup>24</sup> This criticism of Daly's abstract articulation of how she envisions change occurring is not to say that the use of abstract theory and language is unproductive. Rather, the skepticism and criticism around abstract theory and language can be understood as a request that those abstract terms and ideas are thoroughly broken down in ways that allow Daly's work to be accessible to readers who do not share her familiarity with language and theoretical discourse. While Daly's text aims to facilitate new conditions of possibility for women, a number of responses to her text argue that because Daly fails to adequately address race in her text, the sharpness of her critiques are dulled and the scope of who her work can impact is limited to the lives and experiences of white women.

One of the most notable responses to Daly's racial myopia is Audrey Lorde's open letter to Daly that was published in 1979. Lorde's letter, which is in direct response to Daly's text *Gyn/Ecology*, but still cites *Beyond God the Father*, praises Daly's work for the intent with which she produced her books, and the contributions they have and

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<sup>24</sup> Carol Douglas, "Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly." *Off Our Backs* Vol. 30 (2000).

continue to make for feminist thought. However, in her praise for Daly, Lorde also takes issue with and questions Daly's erasure of black women's experiences;

I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish, and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change... The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout her letter, Lorde's words are sharp and critical, but her words also generously create a space for a constructive dialogue with Daly. In reading Daly's work, Lorde found that the vast majority of Daly's sources and sites of application were the works and experiences of white women.

While Crenshaw's coining of the term intersectionality had not yet occurred at the time of Daly's work or Lorde's response to it, the criticism of Daly's work demonstrates its complete lack of any intersectional analysis. In response to these observations Lorde asks Daly, "Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us?"<sup>26</sup> Daly's erasure of black women's work and experiences is just as concerning as it is common. Lorde not only questioned the methodological choices Daly made in her work, but also took the time to locate just how that erasure continues to do violence to black women and the goals of women's liberation;

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<sup>25</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, Crossing Press, 1984), 66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women — the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of Color, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make Black women prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city. When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.... The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood is still racism.<sup>27</sup>

The critique of and struggle with Daly's white feminism remains a topic of discussion among theologians and scholars of religion. The strong criticism of Daly's work is not intended to render it insignificant, but rather, it works to build and maintain sensibilities that holds feminist scholarship accountable for the ways in which it does or does not account for race. In 2012, Traci C. West, a professor of ethics and African American studies at Drew University, published an article titled "The Gift of Arguing with Mary Daly's White Feminism" in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. In the article West describes her first encounter with Daly's work in her search for scholarly work in religious studies that "“substantively engaged politics and offered insights about systemic injustices.”<sup>28</sup>

In Daly's work, West appreciated the critiques of sexist church practices and ideas for achieving women's liberation, but these positive aspects of Daly's work were

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Traci West, "The Gift of Arguing with Mary Daly's White Feminism, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 28 (2012): 112.

often overshadowed by Daly's "disregard for the salience of white supremacy."<sup>29</sup>

Keeping these critical issues within Daly's work in mind, West also finds that the political motivation and radical sensibilities of Daly's work are characteristics that are hard to come by in the academy today. West argues;

Too much theoretical feminist discourse nicely accommodates itself to the prevailing ethos of the religion academy where intellectual language and goals bypass structural critiques and actual transformation of the institutions in which we are heavily invested. Most often, our ego needs for institutional acceptance win out over a notion of embracing change that risks the perpetually embattled pariah status that Mary Daly occupied in the academy. In addition, women's studies scholars in religion tend to fit themselves into neat silos of white feminist, womanist, black feminist, mujerista, Latina feminist, Asian feminist, or indigenous/Native feminist groupings. Separate silos allow us to avoid the raw, brushing conflict that might erupt if we directly engaged our differences with one another as it did when black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde published her open letter to Mary Daly...I confess my own apprehensions about the costs of such conflict. Also, it is difficult to analytically focus on white racist feminism without undercutting the antiracist goal of decentering whiteness. Yet I am also certain that leaving white racist feminism in religion and elsewhere uninterrogated destroys all possibility of the structural change envisioned by both Daly and Lorde. Avoidance of this challenge also betrays the project of risk-taking, radically emancipating, social order transforming sisterhood that they left unfinished, bequeathing it to us .<sup>30</sup>

West's argument places an imperative on feminist scholars in and outside of religious and theological studies to maintain the political commitments of earlier feminist scholars as well as a sensibility that places importance on self-reflexivity and a willingness to engage with the questions, concerns, and disagreements of other feminist and womanist scholars. Not only should feminist scholars engage with the difference and disagreements of scholarship, but there should also be an engagement with critical thought and questioning around the structures and norms of academic discourses and institutions. While West has

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 114-117.

observed a hesitation for feminist scholars to engage with differences and disagreements, there are still instances where this critical engagement occurs. For example, the work of Monica A. Coleman, a professor of Constructive Theology and African American Religions, directly engages with other feminist and womanist scholars in her own works. In her text *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, she engages directly with Daly's work. Putting Coleman's text in conversation with Daly's will help to reflect on and answer questions about the differences in the goals and methods of both feminist and womanist thought.

### **Womanist Theology in Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way***

*"Theology, while personal, cannot be private. It must be something that could apply to someone other than the theologian. It should be something you would recommend to others. It should be something you'd be willing to preach."*<sup>31</sup>

In Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way*, she has put forth a text that seeks to both describe and create a postmodern womanist theology. Coleman describes a postmodern womanist theology as a theology that does not attempt to posit a universal response to all suffering but instead, maintains an "openness to meaning and authority from un-expected places- from science to the lived experiences of women and people of color."<sup>32</sup> While her text is posited as more of a communal particularism, it is fair to ask where and how her text may suggest a kind of universalism; not because Coleman ever suggest that her ideas are reflective and fitting for every experience and every person, but because she leaves space open for her text, that while made by, for, and about black

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<sup>31</sup> Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), ix.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

women's experiences, can also speak to anyone who comes across it. For Coleman, her articulation of postmodern is predominately used to emphasize the ways in which human life, at individual and collective levels, is always interconnected and it is this interconnectedness that helps her to understand what gives life meaning, and what also helps her understand how power, pain, and pleasure can simultaneously coexist in a vision of the world where a god exists. In the foreword to the text, Katie Geneva Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn describe Coleman's postmodern womanist theology as a piece of scholarship that speaks to both faith and social responsibility. For Coleman, a postmodern framework for her theology helps to reflect the ways in which her work is a pursuit of justice.

This pursuit and commitment to justice reflects the methodological commitments of womanist thought. Coleman describes the effects and goals of womanist theologies as aiming "for the freedom of oppressed peoples and creatures. More specifically, womanist theologies add the goals of survival, quality of life, and wholeness to black theology's goals of liberation and justice."<sup>33</sup> For Coleman, problems of suffering, survival, and attaining an individual wholeness, are central concerns to how she constructs her theology. These problems are not unique to Coleman's work, rather, these questions about suffering, survival, and wholeness characterize womanist theology as a whole;

As a form of liberation theology, womanist theologies aim for the freedom of oppressed people and creatures. More specifically, womanist theologies add the goals of survival, quality of life, and wholeness to black theology's goals of liberation and justice. Womanist theologians analyze the oppressive aspects of society that prevent black women from having the quality of life and wholeness that God desires for them and for all of creation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

In her commitment to the goals of survival, Coleman's postmodern womanist theology is also one that troubles the assumption that womanist theology can only be done via a Christian vocabulary. Instead, Coleman asserts that a womanist theology that reflects the spiritual commitments of African American communities, will maintain a respect and sensitivity to religious pluralism.<sup>35</sup>

Also central to Coleman's postmodern womanist theology, is the ways in which she is influenced by Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. Similar to Daly, Coleman also cites Whitehead's process philosophy as a helpful and constructive way of thinking about how to achieve salvation. Whitehead's process philosophy suggests that nothing in the world is static. Rather, everything is the result of temporal processes. From this perspective arises the question of how we understand God as not static, but as being just as involved with the fluid, ever changing process that characterizes the world. For Coleman, using Whitehead's process philosophy and understanding of god and the existence of evil and suffering in relation to black women's experiences helps to locate ways of responding to the oppression that black women experience. Through Whitehead's understanding of evil, freedom, immortality, and God, Coleman finds a way to acknowledge and understand the experiences of suffering and salvation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn, "Editors' Foreword by Katie Geneva Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn in *Making a Way Out of No Way*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), vii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 37- 39, 72. In her discussion of how a postmodern womanist theology will reflect a religious pluralism, Coleman places primary focus on the influence of African traditional religions and the recognition that black women around the world identify with various religious traditions including but not limited to Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.

Coleman understands salvation and liberation as processes, processes that involve the relation of people and events. Whitehead's process philosophy shapes the structure and goals of Coleman's postmodern framework. Coleman asserts that, "A postmodern framework will emphasize five qualities. (1) the ongoing process of life, (2) individual ability to exercise power, (3), the inevitability of relationships on all levels of reality, (4), the eternal vision of God, and (5) opportunities for immortality in the midst of pervasive loss."<sup>37</sup> Salvation and liberation are key concepts in not only Coleman's theology, but in womanist theology in general.

The five qualities of a postmodern womanist theology that Coleman lists are intended to help clarify why and how salvation and liberation are processes, and to help facilitate those processes. For Coleman, the eternal vision of god means that while god has various hopes and preferences for the world and remains actively involved in the world, the choices people make are ultimately conditioned by their own freedom because these eternal visions, this ordering of the world by god, is not a rigid or fixed ordering.<sup>38</sup> Immortality is found not just in a community with god that exists outside of this world. Rather, immortality can be attained by memory, by the remembering of our past and the past of others. Coleman writes;

In the midst of the ongoing process of life, there will be loss, but there are ways to preserve life. As the events of the world become part of God's nature, we live on in God. We have a kind of eternal life within God. Yet we don't have to wait for the community of God outside this world to experience any level of immortality. As we remember the past, we keep it alive within ourselves. When we become one of the factors that influence other parts of the world, we live on. Who we were in our last instance, last moment, last year, is gone. What we just did is indeed over. But our impact is felt by others in the world and throughout the world, it is still alive. This kind of immortality gives our lives meaning. Our

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

legacy matters. The facts of who we have been and what we have done can live on long after they have actually occurred.<sup>39</sup>

In her explanation of how immortality is attained, it becomes clear that her theology is highly relational, self-reflexive, empathetic, and by her own description, postmodern. No event or experience occurs in a vacuum and Coleman demonstrates a clear understanding of the ways in which humans are inextricably tied to and influenced by various normative discursive practices. Interestingly, I find her articulation of a postmodern theology, and or postmodernism in general, exoteric because it resonates more with what it is like to live a complex and interrelated world. In other words, she articulated a post-modern sentiment without having to heavily rely on some of the more esoteric vernacular that is often used to describe what post-modern means.

When thinking about Coleman's text in relation to Daly's, more specifically in regard to the accessibility of the texts, Coleman's efforts to outline the main ideas of the work she uses and builds off of makes her text accessible to those who primarily learn and live outside of academic discourse. In other words, Coleman is able to achieve the theoretical sophistication that meets the often unofficial but pervasive academic standards for respectable scholarship, while also managing to produce a text that is more accessible to the general public. In doing so, Coleman's womanist theology remains intact with the political commitments and goals of womanist and feminist thought. In Stacy Floyd-Thomas' *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*, she argues that

Womanist ethics is constructive in that it seeks to determine how to eradicate oppressive social structures that limit and circumscribe the agency of African American women. Womanist ethical reflection provides descriptive foundations

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 76.

that lead to analytical constructs for the eradication of oppression in the lives of black people and, by extension, the rest of humanity and creation.<sup>40</sup>

If womanist ethics and feminist thought aim to assess and create analytical tools and constructs that help lead to the eradication of oppression, then those tools and constructs must be accessible to the people who live in and experience that oppression. While this accessibility of ideas and texts remains as part of the commitments and goals of womanist thought, the criticism of more esoteric writing styles is not to suggest that scholars should completely do away with esoteric writing or high theory. Rather, the critique is to first point out how often times the communities of people that inspire many esoteric academic texts may not be able to understand them, and second, place more onus on scholars to account for, in some way, the gap between esoteric and exoteric. The existence of this gap is not always necessarily problematic, but the failure to recognize it, the refusal to help build a bridge and reach out to offer tools for understanding is.

Coleman's text, while deeply theoretical, also proposes ideas for how to move forward with the analytical tools and ideas that she has offered in her text. In a subsection titled "What We Can Do", she outlines the roles that art, adventure, the world's memory of the past, and faith, can have.<sup>41</sup> For Coleman, art "is produced when what we actually become "summons up new sources of feeling from the depths of reality" Thus art promotes change."<sup>42</sup> In promoting change, art is also a means of preventing the repeating of the past. Adventure is means of responding to disharmony and suffering in the world because it opens up the possibilities of finding *new* ways of dealing with disharmony and

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<sup>40</sup> Stacy Floyd- Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

suffering instead of relying on previously used methods. The world's memory of the past helps to address the issue of loss and how it is always a part of our process of becoming.<sup>43</sup> To remember the past and acknowledge the ways in which it has impacted people, is to offer the past, and what has been lost, a kind of immortality.<sup>44</sup>

To remember the past however, is not always to honor it. Rather, remembering the past and its effects helps to maintain a sense of the relatedness of the world, which in effect shapes the way people understand the world and shapes how the events of the world impact ourselves and those around us. Faith, or peace, is what helps people to acknowledge the pervasive existence of evil in the world, while also maintaining the strength and resiliency to continue on in the process of change and becoming Coleman also includes a section that describes concrete examples of where she observes communities that embody postmodern womanist theologies.<sup>45</sup> This looking out into the world for concrete examples that demonstrate the ideas in her text helps to make Coleman's project even more grounded and embodied, which adds to its functional value as a text that is produced within academia, but its lessons and effects are able to move beyond to reach and affect the communities and institutions which inspired it.

If we examine Coleman's work through the lens of the questions raised at the beginning of this project, it becomes clear that the methodological commitments with which she produces her work, can serve as one kind of template for producing what

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 69. Coleman's description of art adventure, the world's memory of the past, and faith, are all influenced by Whitehead's ideas on what he thought these activities and dispositions can accomplish. Her use of faith and peace interchangeably reflects how Whitehead used and defined the terms.

scholarship that employs the politically charged categories of feminism, womanism, race, gender, and sex, have looked like. First, is the question of why Coleman produced *Making a Way Out of No Way*. In her own words, Coleman described her text as a place “to talk about how we can make our way forward in today’s society and how we can make the world a more just place.”<sup>46</sup> Coleman also engages with discussions of social activism and justice, not just in her theory and method, but also in the application of those theories and methods to concrete experiences and communities. Coleman’s application of the theories and methods in her text helps to demonstrate for readers *how* and *where* these ideas have been applied outside the confines of the text. Doing so helps to acknowledge the gap between academic, political, and cultural institutions, and then offer ways of bridge building that helps to expand the accessibility and functionality of her text.

**Conclusion:**

Womanist and feminist thought emerged out of a place of desiring change in the way things are and Coleman’s text acknowledges and maintains that desire. Coleman’s text is also intersectional due to how she engages with and acknowledges the reality of racism and sexism and the ways in which the two can merge in ways that creates harm that too often goes unnoticed and unrecognized. Coleman’s inclusion of the narratives of black women’s experiences of racism and sexism in and outside of religious settings and the respect and empowerment with which she presents and responds to those narratives, works to undermine the sexist and racist norms and practices that led to those experiences.

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<sup>46</sup> Monica Coleman, “Making a Way”, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DjQcE5zo1Y&t=44s>.

While Daly's text lacks any intersectional analysis, readers can still learn a great deal from her re-interpretations of religious figures and symbols, and her insistence that the words we use and how and when we use them, carries a great deal of power. Daly's re-interpretations, her goal of facilitating liberation from patriarchy for women, and her preoccupation with the use of language, helps to demonstrate that her text is feminist because her text is a practice, a practice in utilizing her own feminist sensibilities in a way that works to dismantle the normative power structures that work to build and maintain a sexist society. Womanist thought, as Coleman's work demonstrates, shares these same goals and practices, but does so by foregrounding the fact that sexism and racism are inexorable from one another and that often times feminist practices fail to recognize this connection.

Coleman's text, and the methods and sensibilities with which it was produced, helps to serve as a demonstration for what scholarship that takes on political categories like sex, gender, and race, look like. Daly's text, while keeping the critiques of her work in mind, also demonstrates a commitment to the activist sensibilities that were central to the development of feminist thought. Coleman's use of Whitehead's process philosophy as a way of understanding god, evil, loss, salvation, and liberation, as well as her foregrounding of the thoughts and experiences of black women, helps to ground her work in a way that reflects the way people experience the world, and more specifically, it reflects the ways in which many people experience and understand change. Both Daly and Coleman understand change and liberation as an ongoing process, not a linear path with a clear destination.

Daly and Coleman's texts help to serve as examples of feminist and womanist scholarship, but the texts cannot speak comprehensively to the differences between feminist and womanist thought. What the two texts can do however, is to help guide us to some of the major questions, themes, methods, and goals of these two different disciplines. Liberation is a central goal for feminist and womanist scholarship, but for whom that liberation is for is still at times in question, namely due to the fact that a feminist theology and a great deal of feminist scholarship remain areas where intersectionality cannot always be assumed. Reflecting on past interpretations of religious texts, practices, and imagery, and then offering ways of critiquing and then doing re-interpretations work to not only empower women, but to chip away at the cage that those dominant interpretations built around them.

This thesis began with a chapter on theology because it was in theological studies that feminist and womanist thought first emerged. Daly and Coleman's texts serve as examples of what scholarship that is identified as feminist, can and does look like. Religious studies followed suit with its incorporation of feminist thought, and the categories of sex, and gender, as objects of study and methods of analysis. Keeping the ideas and methods of Daly and Coleman in mind, this next chapter will examine two texts, Caroline Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*, and Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy*. Published a decade apart, these texts are situated in religious studies and were written by feminist scholars whose work foregrounds the histories and experiences of women, and are often identified as pieces of feminist scholarship in the study of religion.

## Chapter 2: Feminism in the Study of Religion

*“It is evident that some fields of study are less receptive to feminist perspectives and feminists in these areas have had to spend significant amounts of time and energy convincing their androcentric colleagues that their theoretical concerns are valid. The study of religion has been one of those disciplines resistant to feminist thought”- Darlene M. Juschka*

In Darlene M. Juschka’s introduction to *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, she points to the receptivity, or lack thereof, to feminism within academia. Increase in receptivity occurred at varying levels in different disciplines, and for Juschka, the study of religion is among the least receptive. In arguing this, she is not claiming that feminist analysis in the study of religion is nonexistent, rather, she is pointing to how feminist scholarship in the study of religion tends to be ignored or not taken seriously from androcentric scholars. Feminist scholarship in the study of religion both challenges and encourages types of normative methods of analysis. There is a challenging of normative ways of thinking that are primarily white and masculine. But, in this challenging of white, masculine normativity, there is also a place for normativity in arguments where scholars wish to engage with human activities and identities, but do so with methods that refuse to rely on data that only reflects on the experiences of white men. The rise of feminist scholarship in theological studies was and remains influential to feminist scholarship in the study of religion.

This chapter explores two texts located within the study of religion that are produced by feminist scholars, namely, the works of Caroline Bynum and Amy Hollywood. Both are historians of medieval Christianity whose works often foreground the history and experiences of medieval women. Both scholars do so through the lens of various theoretical frameworks as a way of raising and/or answering questions about the

theories they build on and the relevance of those questions to modern issues. Bynum is often recognized as a scholar whose work played a key role in introducing sex and gender as viable objects of inquiry in religious studies, more specifically, in the study of medieval Christianity. While Hollywood's work is often classified under the same genre, her work represents the interests and methods of a different generation of feminist scholars in the study of religion. Bynum's work is known for being among the first of feminist text in the study of religion, namely for her focus on medieval women's experiences and how some those experiences can be read as acts of resistance. Hollywood's work came later, and under the influence of Bynum's work, but her work differs in scope and method. So, while the differences between these two scholars cannot be attributed solely to difference in time of publication, the two texts can help provide a glance at how their shared specialty continues to evolve over time. Before exploring into each text, I want to provide some brief context for how, why, and when gender, sex, and feminist analyses made their way into the study of religion.

In R. Marie Griffith's essay "Sexing Religion" she assesses the history of religious studies via the history of sex as an object of study within the discipline. For Griffith, the purpose of her essay is to approach the reality that "not all who work on sexuality are aware of the field's complex inheritances; still fewer of us have probed the implication of these inheritances for current research agendas."<sup>47</sup> Griffith notes the influence that thinkers like Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich have on feminist theologians and how their works began to reflect an explicit goal of "freeing women from

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<sup>47</sup> Griffith, Marie, "Sexing Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 358.

patriarchal structures and developing more satisfying models for sexual ethics and sexual relationships.”<sup>48</sup> In her recognition of the influential feminist scholars and activists that inspired many feminist theological works, Griffith also makes note of the influence that feminist theological scholarship had for scholars situated in the study of religion.

However, the introduction of feminist analyses, and of sex, sexuality, and gender as objects of study in religion was not solely due to the work being produced by feminist theologians. Griffith points out that the historical contexts of these shifts in academic discourse, namely the political climate of the 1970’s and 1980’s, and the scholarship that was being produced at that time, also influenced research agendas of religion scholars;

Following the first American edition of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, published as three volumes in 1978, the 1980’s witnessed a new flourishing of research into religion and sexuality within religious studies. This boom occurred as part of a much longer trajectory in the discipline in which categories of gender, race, class, and the body were coming to the fore. Yet the study of sex seemed to offer new promise, the hope that innovative exploration of something so fundamental to human existence and experience as sexual desire or behavior would generate new critical perspectives on religion.... The roots of that shift are, in large part, cultural and political. As the movement for gay rights developed, sexual minorities challenged scholars and religious leaders alike to rethink what had been taken for granted about the intersection of sexuality and religion.<sup>49</sup>

Griffith is not alone in her observation of how political climates influence scholarship, particularly scholarship that employed feminist theories and methods along with identity categories like sex, sexuality, gender, race, and class.

In Darlene M. Juschka’s introduction to *Feminism in the Study of Religion*, she notes how the concerns of feminist scholars, while often inspired by the global political climates around them, were also motivated by a desire to disrupt the politics of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 355-356.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 355-356.

institution in which they work, and the scholarship so often valorized in their fields of study;

These women did not merely want to add women as active cultural participants to existing fields of knowledge, they wished to challenge those cultural productions already in place. The cultural productions- the institutional and cultural narratives generated thus far that historically legitimated and defined human existence- were dominated by upper-class white men and prescribed the world according to how they perceived it.<sup>50</sup>

The push to challenge and disrupt the norms of discourse in religious studies along with the political structures that work to sustain the privileged, white male perspective in scholarship, was also matched with the concern to disrupt the global political climate of the 60's and 70's. Juschka cites the influence of Angela Davis and Malcom X as being responsible for facilitating political and social awareness about

racial equality and the new threat of global war. Global nuclear annihilation appeared on the horizon of human consciousness in the West; ecological disasters began to occur on a global scale; and awareness of overpopulation all generated a cultural consciousness of concern. Added to this consciousness of concern was a sense of political responsibility.<sup>51</sup>

In looking at the history of how and why feminist theory, and categories of sex, gender, race, and class became objects of study, the shifting political commitments of academic disciplines, specifically religious studies, becomes clearer. Even before the 60's and 70's, one can look further into the political climates and experiences that both directly and indirectly shaped the work of many scholars.

For the purposes of this project, I want to pay special attention to, and keep in mind, the how and why behind the establishing of feminist scholarship in the study of

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<sup>50</sup> Darlene Juschka, "General Introduction" in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A reader*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

religion, namely the ways in which political commitments, to both the institutions of academia, and to national and global politics played an influential role. If Caroline Bynum is credited in part to the establishing of sex, sexuality, and gender, as objects of study in the study of religion, then how ought we to read her work in light of the historical context and political commitments that inspired feminist scholarship in the first place? What method did scholars like Bynum and Hollywood take to doing feminist scholarship and what can we learn about feminist scholarship in the study of religion by assessing their methods through the central questions of this thesis?

Caroline Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, explores the relationship between bodies and the religiosity of medieval people, particularly medieval women. In doing so, Bynum is able to show readers that questions about the body, mind, self, spirit, sex, and sexuality were present in the Medieval ages. It is these questions that help demonstrate the ways in which "the oddest medieval concerns are no more bizarre than modern ones...It is clear both that questions of survival and identity are not, even today, solved, and that they can be solved only through the sort of specific body puzzles medieval theologians delighted in raising."<sup>52</sup> Bynum's text provides deep historical research, with a primary focus on text and imagery. Her method is not overtly theoretical but she does utilize her research findings to ask questions about dominant histories and theories on religion, namely the works of Max Weber, Victor Turner, and Leo Steinberg. The way that Bynum presents her historical research is self-reflexive in that, as her title suggests, history can only be

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<sup>52</sup> Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1991), 296-297.

presented in fragments, so her tone is provisional and aware that her findings and the conclusions she draws from them are not infallible.

While Bynum is open and honest about the provisional nature of the history she presents, the goals and convictions that she writes with seem (and appropriately so) less open to change. Bynum aims to undermine universal claims in medieval histories, and theories based off of those histories, that do not account for women's experiences and the ways in which gender difference and the power structures that formed in light of those differences influenced medieval life. In her own words,

We hear women of the past speaking exactly as (and only to the extent that) we hear ourselves. If we have confidence in the righteousness of our own rage and in the diagnosis of our own oppression, how can we deny the power of female communities and female visions that, different from our own, are nonetheless our heritage? My essays are all undergirded by the conviction that we do hear creative female voices- not merely literary genres or male superegos- speaking from the past. They are also, in their recognition of the partial, committed to the proposition that women in every age speak in a variety of accents.<sup>53</sup>

It seems then that Bynum is challenging readers to consider how various forms of oppression that occur at different times, are not isolated incidents. It is important to Bynum that the interconnectedness of women's oppression, in its many forms, in different times, is in need of more visibility. What Bynum seems to be pointing to is that while different in vein, idiom, and language, the struggles of medieval women are both contemporary and historical. In other words, Bynum's work points to the reality that what is often identified as *progress* in undermining and disrupting patriarchal systems of power, is better described as *change*, a change that is not always necessarily an advancement.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

In addition to advocating for the voices and stories of medieval women as helpful and relevant to modern issues, especially issues that women have and continue to face, Bynum is also utilizing this historical work to question normative practices within historical scholarship, namely the erasure of women's experiences and perspectives. She argues that

When even the small bit we are able to retrieve about medieval women's experience is taken into account, each modern theorist appears less universal in conclusion and implication. The course of history seems more complex. Periodization must be revised, influences reassessed... My essays would indeed suggest that generalizing from the experience of one gender is far more likely to reduce history writing- as well as art history, sociology and anthropology- to a monochromatic *longue durée*.<sup>54</sup>

In her foregrounding of medieval women's religiosity, Bynum hopes to not only undermine the theories and histories of medieval religion, but also locate moments in history where medieval women's sensibilities and religiosity reflects a resistance to the oppression that women experience under patriarchy. In her account of these moments of resistance, Bynum attempts to frame the history of medieval women in a way that empowers those women's experiences, which in turn can create moments of empowerment for those who engage with that historical account.

While Bynum is clear in her attempt to present medieval women's religiosity in a way that is empowering, she also acknowledges that even when a practice and/or perspective was intended to be empowering, there were also moments of great struggle. She reminds the reader that,

We must never forget the pain and frustration, the isolation and feeling of helplessness, that accompanied the quest of religious women. For all her charismatic empowerment, woman was inferior to man in the Middle Ages; her voice was often silenced, even more frequently ignored. Not every use of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 16.

phrase “weak woman” by a female writer was ironic; women clearly internalized the negative value placed on them by the culture in which they lived.<sup>55</sup>

The convictions and goals that underlie Bynum’s text, and her foregrounding of the experiences of medieval women, and the categories of sex and gender as viable and necessary objects of study helps to demonstrate why Bynum, and her scholarship is categorized as feminist. Bynum’s narrative of medieval religion and of medieval women, works to address the frequent erasure of women’s history, a feminist practice that thinkers like Monica Coleman and Mary Daly reflected on and endorsed. Bynum’s work helps to show how this telling of history can be utilized as a feminist tool of resistance and empowerment.

While this telling of history and resistance to the universalizing of perspectives that only draw on men’s experiences demonstrates a connection to the goals and methods of feminist and womanist theologians, Bynum’s work is considerably different in prose and content. In discerning how Bynum’s scholarship is different from the womanist and feminist theologians who helped facilitate the increase in scholarship that took on feminist perspectives and agendas, I am left with some crucial questions and concerns about Bynum’s approach to feminist scholarship. Bynum argues that “The study of gender is a study of how roles and possibilities are conceptualized; it is a study of one hundred percent, not of only fifty-one percent, of the human race”<sup>56</sup>, but, as Crenshaw and other feminist scholars have argued, any study of gender must also be a study of race, because to ignore the inexorable relationship between gender and race, is to ignore and erase the experiences of women of color. Crenshaw makes clear the necessity of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 235-236.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17.

intersectional analysis when she points out that identity politics and identity studies often ignore the relationship between race, gender, sex, and class. She explains that,

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite- that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that frustrates efforts to politicize violence against women.<sup>57</sup>

Nowhere in Bynum's text does she locate her own whiteness or the whiteness of her sources and subjects of inquiry. Nowhere in my reading of various book reviews of Bynum's text did I find a similar question and concern raised.<sup>58</sup>

While I am sure that conceptions and ideas of race have and continue to change over time, I am left wondering why and how Bynum produced a four-hundred-page text that foregrounds the experiences of women and takes on an ostensibly feminist perspective, but lacking in the text is a discussion of how race is inherently related to her discussion of gender, sex, and the oppression that medieval women faced. If as Bynum herself states, that her essays "suggest that generalizing from the experience of one gender is far more likely to reduce history writing- as well as art history, sociology and anthropology- to a monochromatic *longue durée*", then it would seem to me that the same logic could be used to argue that any generalizing from the experience of one race is also likely to reduce history writing, art history, sociology, and anthropology. However, the scope of Bynum's work does not consider race as a conceptual frame of reference and exploration.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1.

This lack of a discussion of race as it relates to gender, sex, and medieval studies as a whole, is not unique to Bynum's text, nor is uncommon. For me, and for those that engage with the questions raised in this chapter, there is a question of why there is an absence of discussions of race, and whether or not race is or ever was a relevant conceptual frame of reference for medieval studies. Cord J. Whitaker, a professor of Medieval English literature, medieval religious conflict, and the history of race, at Wellesley College, has written extensively about the relationship of race to medieval studies. In his article "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race, and trippin' in the future" he addresses the major questions, concerns, and critiques of whether or not race is a relevant category of inquiry for medieval studies. Citing the work of Toni Morrison, namely her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Whitaker notes how Morrison's work traces the erasure of black presence in the middle ages. Whitaker writes,

On the contrary, the erasure of a black presence from the European medieval past is part of the dynamic Morrison otherwise traces – a dynamic in which blackness quietly, silently provides the framework on which whiteness is built. Whiteness disingenuously takes the credit for producing meaning when it would in fact be incapable of producing meaning without blackness, against which it sets itself off.<sup>59</sup>

This erasure of black presence from European medieval past has consequently,

denied blacks the right to a shared medieval past that would, in turn, authorize them to share the present that emerges from it. In other words, denying blacks medieval coevalness allows Euro-centric cultures to relegate modern blacks to a *strictly* modern status in which their history appears to be without the authorizing length and depth available to whites. The denial of medieval coevalness encourages students to ask, 'Where were the black people in the

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<sup>59</sup> Cord J. Whittaker, "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race, and trippin' in the future", *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* Vol. 6 (2015).

Middle Ages?’ in a tone that suggests they are not entirely certain whether black people existed at all.<sup>60</sup>

Whitaker is aware of and makes note of critiques that question whether or not race is a relevant or pressing category of inquiry for medieval studies. The concern of these critiques are usually founded on the question of whether or not people will be able to grasp how race was conceptualized differently from modern understandings. For some, this question is grounds enough for arguing that race in medieval culture may not be worth exploring. Whitaker asserts that over the last fourteen years, great progress has been made in and outside of medieval studies in regards to whether or not race matters to the middle ages. It is in the light of that progress that he argues that race *is* a relevant concept to medieval studies;

the Middle Ages have been thoroughly raced. The question at hand is, exactly *how* are they raced? Not whether, but *how* is medieval race-thinking different from modern racism? How does it contribute to the formation of modern racism? What can we decipher of the intellectual, cultural, psychological and even emotional dynamics that give rise to race-thinking in the Middle Ages? In short, how does medieval race work from the inside out? <sup>61</sup>

If we consider and take seriously Whitaker’s arguments, then it seems that while race may not have been a pressing or relevant concept for some scholars in mediaeval studies, race, has been and remains a relevant conceptual frame of reference, and an unawareness of this is not an adequate reason for its neglect.

In addition to the racial myopia of the text, Bynum does not make it explicitly clear the limitations of her text, or, more specifically, the limitations of the feminism/feminist perspective, that her text presents. I make this criticism knowing that

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

the practice of naming one's subject position and naming the limitations of one's scholarship is not the most popular of practices in humanities scholarship. An account of the experiences of medieval women and their religiosity may certainly serve as a helpful and empowering feminist practice for some, whether it be in the production or consumption of Bynum's text and/or texts like it. But these texts are primarily produced in and for academic institutions, which brings me back to the question of what exactly academic feminism, or feminist scholarship is supposed to be and do. If, as Ellen Messer-Davidson points out in *Disciplining Feminism*, there is a problem of cleavage between knowing change and doing change, then how can we understand this problem as it relates to Bynum's work? Bynum demonstrates a knowledge of change, and why change is integral to the social and political activism that inspired feminist scholarship, but exactly what kind of change is Bynum's text producing? In my reading of the text, I locate the doing of change in both Bynum's production of a history that gives voice to the experiences and modes of resistance of medieval women, as well as the sharing and consumption of that history. However, I am left wondering who the intended audience of that history is or can be.

Similarly, Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, while notably different in method and prose from Bynum, left me with similar questions about how to understand the feminism that is at the foundation of the historical and theoretical work in both of their texts. In *Sensible Ecstasy*, using the works of twentieth-century intellectuals, specifically Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille, Hollywood explores the fixation with forms of Christian mysticism that these thinkers demonstrated in their works. This more

contemporary interest in mysticism, as Hollywood argues, reflects a desire for rituals that address the loss and trauma that humans inevitably face. Weaved throughout the text, and placed most blatantly in her conclusion, Hollywood advocates for the ways that female medieval mystics are relevant to feminist thought.

For Hollywood, it seems that for a number of twentieth-century intellectuals, mysticism plays a crucial role in their work, and if that work often inspires and shapes feminist scholarship, then feminist scholars ought to consider what role those affective and bodily forms of mysticism might have in feminist thought. She argues that feminism

needs to leave room for the tragic or, as Beauvoir would say, the metaphysical, but in ways that dissociate it from, and look toward an end of, the regime of binary sexual difference. We need to articulate responses to suffering, illness, death, and mortality that give attention to the role gender plays within our experience, but that also enable us to recognize these human realities as themselves irreducible to sexual difference. ...Feminism needs to find a place for the rituals that help human beings sustain loss and support subjectivity. At the same time, feminism requires a place for the apophatic, the ritual unsaying of those imaginary and symbolic supports that work to efface death's reality- and with it, the deep pleasures and pains of the speaking body.<sup>62</sup>

Hollywood locates the relevance and usefulness of female mysticism for the thinkers she highlights, as a method for demonstrating for readers how and why mysticism remains relevant for feminist thought. For Georges Bataille, a thinker she devotes a large portion of the book to, mysticism offers ways of coping with and resisting oppressive political institutions;

What I hope to show is that during a historical moment in which concrete political action seemed hopeless and the threat of death pervasive, Bataille turned to mysticism as an alternative form of community building. Bataille's own chance survival of the war and his inability to participate in the movements of history generated intense guilt. In response, Bataille recreated a mystical path of contemplation made up of "compassion, pain, and ecstasy." Rather than marking

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<sup>62</sup> Hollywood, Amy, *Sensible Ecstasy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 20-21.

a willed rejection of history, mysticism offers a form of community and action in the face of chance events that lie outside the control of individual subjects.<sup>63</sup>

When reading this I am reminded, slightly so, of Coleman's elaboration on the idea of making a way out of no way, of finding ways to respond to individual and collective trauma in ways that form community and give people a vocabulary, practice, and opportunity to address their oppression and suffering in ways that law and policy cannot. However, in my recall of Coleman while reading Hollywood's text, I am also aware of how, like Bynum, Hollywood's text presents a feminism that is not intersectional. While Hollywood's notes the whiteness of some of her source material, namely Bataille and Lacan, she only does so in a section where she is referencing and explaining the ways in which Irigaray's work articulated that sexual difference is the one universal form of bodily difference and that race is always secondary.<sup>64</sup> Similar to my concerns and frustrations with Bynum, Hollywood produced a text that aims to contribute to feminist thought, but does so with no explicit recognition that any and all of the oppression and trauma that women experience in a sexist (and racist) society, is never solely because of sex, but rather, is the result of multiple social and political categorizations.

Alongside my frustration with what appears to be a white feminism in both Hollywood and Bynum's texts, is a hope, articulated eloquently by Robyn Wiegman in *Object Lessons*, that "If only we find the right discourse, object of study, or analytic tool, our critical practice will be adequate to the political commitments that inspire it. Intersectionality is not alone in posing and then providing an answer to this, the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 190-191.

fundamental conundrum and animating question of identity studies.”<sup>65</sup> Can we read and approach the “high theory” and more academic feminist texts like Hollywood and Bynum’s as working to maintain a space for the activist sensibilities that were and remain central to the emergence of feminist scholarship? For what purposes did these scholars produce these texts? How does the employment of feminist thought and the categories of gender and sex in these texts facilitate new conditions of possibility to think or act, and if so, for whom?

Hollywood argues that “At the very least, feminist philosophy should follow these women in opening itself to the messiness, multiplicity, and pain- as well as to the pleasure, beauty, and joy- of embodied subjectivity.”<sup>66</sup> It is clearer to me then, that feminist scholarship, can offer ways of thinking and acting within a world where the trauma and oppression caused by sexism and racism seem inevitable. But, I am still left with the question of who exactly this type of feminist thought is for. Hollywood demonstrates a mastery of a great deal of theoretical material, a mastery of names, concepts, and a general vernacular that without having, makes the text and the goals Hollywood has for the text, less accessible to those who do not share a similar academic training. Even among scholars who have engaged with Hollywood’s work, namely in J. Heath Atchley’s review of the text, he suggests that Hollywood’s arguments were difficult to follow partially due to the illusiveness of her subject materials, and her attempt to present the text as a unified whole, rather than a collection of essays.<sup>67</sup> My

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>67</sup> Heath J. Atchley, “Review of Sensible Ecstasy”, *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* Vol. 4 (2001): 111-112.

concern with the accessibility of Hollywood's discourse brings me back to the broader question of what feminist scholarship can be and is supposed to do. Feminist scholarship can, and does take on different forms, methods, and vocabularies. But, how might a more normative understanding of what feminist scholarship is, namely that feminist scholarship will be intersectional, self-reflexive in the naming of its limitations, and clear in its goals and purposes, make for a more productive and inclusive academic feminism?

## Conclusion

*“My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” - Flavia Dzodan<sup>68</sup>*

This thesis began with questions about the meaning and goals of academic feminism, namely the meaning and goals of academic feminism that is situated in religious and theological studies. My search for answers to these questions was also rooted in a broader question about normativity, namely a normative understanding of what constitutes feminist scholarship, and whether or not there is/should be a place for this kind of normativity. Feminist theory and women’s and gender studies are grounded in critical methods and political ambitions that emphasize activism and cultural transformation, yet in my reading of texts from religious and theological studies, I have discerned the ways in which some scholars have adopted feminist theories and methods that are not, or, at least not necessarily. It seems to me then, that the sharpness of the ethical and political commitments in WGS and feminist theory have at times been dulled through its incorporation into theological and religious studies. This conviction comes from my observation of three key issues I have with the texts I assessed. First, is the issue of instances where a scholar’s prose and key arguments are inaccessible, or, is not easily translatable to those outside academia. Second, is the lack of intersectional feminism in three out of the four texts. Third, is the lack of clarity as to why the text was being written, and why the text was being identified as feminist.

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<sup>68</sup> Flavia Dzodan, “My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or it Will Be Bullshit”, (*Tiger Beatdown*, 2011).

Implicit in these concerns is the question of what consequences stem from the separation of different institutions, whether it be academia, political activism, popular culture, or corporate settings. What are the consequences of an obtuse academic prose that causes a piece of scholarship to become institutionally isolated from the same people who either inspired or are reflected in that work? Prose, however, is not my only concern here, the academic training and professionalization of the scholar can be constricting, because what is often considered “academic” writing, or publishable writing, is a writing style that demands a mastery and use of lexicons that by and large is only understood by those who share a similar training.

Additionally, the majority of feminist scholarship is written for other scholars, which in effect limits the scope of people who would encounter a text or journal article that could potentially offer more accurate and nuanced understandings of different concepts and institutional structures. For example, intersectionality is a term that is now widely used in non-academic settings, namely in popular news outlets, more popular audience books, and corporate diversity programs. Often times, the use of intersectionality in these settings misrepresents what intersectionality is and why it is needed. In effect, a lot of material and policies get produced and consumed by the wider public that misleads and misinforms people as to what intersectionality is.

My questions and concerns regarding the isolation of different institutions has led me to listen to and look for narratives that reflect those concerns. In this quest, one particular example has stayed with me. On May 25<sup>th</sup> 2018, *This American Life*, a weekly public radio program, released an episode titled “LaDonna”, which tells the story of LaDonna Powell, a former airport security employee at John F. Kennedy International

Airport. During her time with Allied Universal Security Services, LaDonna experienced harassment and abuse from her male peers and superiors and witnessed that same harassment and abuse happen to her other female colleagues. For example, LaDonna's managers would often times refuse to give her lunch and bathroom breaks. To adapt, she would bring small plastic cups and toilet paper with her to her posting. Eventually, LaDonna was promoted to a manager position. In preparation for this change in her job, she read Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, where Sandberg explains why few women receive promotions to reach the top ranks of their professions.

According to Sandberg, the reason for this is because women are systematically underestimating their own abilities which hinders their ability to see themselves as bosses, as people with authority and skill. LaDonna recounts the thoughts and anxieties she had prior starting her new position;

It was like, do I really want to be in charge of other people? And then I have to take a step back and say, do I really want these kind of people in charge of me? It's like, I never had that moment until then. These are the guys in charge of me? I'm peeing in a cup outside. These are the people in charge of me. So I really had to evaluate what I was doing-- what I was doing mentally to myself. Like, I was literally my biggest enemy.<sup>69</sup>

Once LaDonna began her role as a supervisor, a role she thought and hoped would give her a sense of authority that would inherently demand more respect from her male counterparts, the harassment and abuse only continued. In a meeting with a male colleague, LaDonna was forced to watch a video of two women pole dancing and was then asked by the man showing her the video, if she could do the same things the women in the video were doing. In that moment, LaDonna tried to channel the assertiveness that

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<sup>69</sup> LaDonna Powell, "LaDonna", *This American Life*, (2018).

Sandberg's texts attempted to instill in its female readers, however, LaDonna's objections and demand for respect were met with laughter. Eventually, LaDonna left Allied, and began working for customs at JFK, a job with a higher status and higher pay, and a job where she was not experiencing the same abuse and harassment from her employer. Despite her efforts to report the men working for Allied, those men were merely reassigned to a different airport. Despite getting a new job, and working in a different place from the men who harassed her, her experience at Allied continues to haunt her. After seeing a former manager at JFK while at work, the only thing LaDonna felt was fear. Below is the dialogue between LaDonna Powell and Chana Joffe-Walt, a producer at *This American Life*:

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** One of the men from Allied, a supervisor named Osvaldo Ortiz, the guy LaDonna says let the guard bleed on herself instead of giving her a bathroom break. He was coming into Terminal Four to get a coffee from Dunkin' Donuts.

**LaDonna Powell:** And then I just-- literally, I'm walking, and I'm fine. I'm talking, we're laughing, very militant, walking. And I'm fine. I got my gun. I'm holding it like this. And I turn, and I get a sign of him. And then he sees me. And then I just turned my whole body, shifted to the left, and I ducked down.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** LaDonna ducked as she was telling this to me. This is a man who, at this point in time, has no official power over her. She doesn't work for him. She's not financially dependent on him.

**LaDonna Powell:** Literally, I am-- I felt afraid. It's like, I'm nervous. Like, I started sweating and everything. It's like, why am I scared of this guy? It doesn't make sense to me. Regardless of me being a badass Customs Agent with a gun, still the sight of him makes me cringe.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** And you're escorting a fancy diplomat.

**LaDonna Powell:** Exactly.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** Who's here for important business.

**LaDonna Powell:** Yes.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** Who needs your protection because you are able to provide protection.

**LaDonna Powell:** Protection. Right, right. And then I feel like I couldn't protect myself in that moment, yes.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** And you have a gun.

**LaDonna Powell:** And I have a gun. It's kind of horrible.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** Yeah. And that guy has a Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

**LaDonna Powell:** Coffee. And I still feel, yeah, at his mercy. So power? No. I feel like I am caged because of them.

**Chana Joffe-Walt:** The cage is invisible, of course-- or it was until recently, just like the NDAs, and the reassignments, and everything else LaDonna can now see. She's still trying to map the contours of this cage, its full size and shape. It's hard. It's not written down anywhere or clearly marked. And that's what makes it scary. LaDonna needs to know exactly what she's dealing with. Then she can figure out her next move.<sup>70</sup>

When hearing LaDonna's story, two moments stood out and stayed with me as I was reminded of the central questions of this thesis, questions that have been in the forefront of my brain for almost a year now. First, is LaDonna's choosing of *Lean In* as a text that could help guide her in her new role, and help her understand why things were so difficult, unfair, and inevitable. A number of other books that I think would have been more helpful for LaDonna came to mind, but *Lean In* is what she reached for, but why? I can't help but wonder and assume that she reached for *Lean In* because it was popular, easy to read, and lauded for being a helpful resource for working women.

Second, was her description of feeling caged, and the response that Joffe-Walt gave in reflecting on that description. To be caged is to be controlled, and in order to be outside that cage and free from the confines of another's control, you have to have power. To be able to understand how power functions, how cages are built and maintained, is itself empowering. Power, freedom, choice, oppression, objectification, and representation are all concepts that scholars go to great lengths to understand. So, even though mere understanding of a cage does not set you free, understanding where and what you are a part of and/or controlled by, can help provide someone with an intellectual tool-box that can help them rattle the stability of the structure(s), they live in.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

There are people doing the work to map out the cage that LaDonna is trying to understand, however, those charged with doing that mapping often times write within and for an institution that is not always expansive or clear enough to people who do not have the same access to and understanding of academic texts. What can make power and oppression so scary is that it is not always understood. If you don't know where or what you are being held captive in, then how can you even begin to resist and escape the power and structures that imprison you? How can scholars show the public that people *are* working to map the world's cages? Understanding how power works, being able to map out the cage, its measurements, its inhabitants, those who stand outside of it, those who built it, and those who have the key, is itself a way of offering a lifeline. If scholars of race, gender, sexuality, popular culture, politics, and religion are among those who are best at this mapping, at understanding the working and contours of this world's cages, then the purpose our work has to extend beyond producing scholarship solely for the purpose of scholarship, for the professionalization of the scholar.

I began this thesis with questions about the meaning of feminism, and the academic work that feminism has inspired that now has its own space within academic institutions. What does it mean to be feminist scholar? More specifically, what does it mean to be a feminist scholar in religious and theological studies? What can/should this academic feminism be doing? In my reading and assessment of feminist and womanist theological texts I was able to glean insights that helped answer the questions I came to this project with. Mary Daly's work taught me about the power language has in shaping feminist consciousness. Her work, along with Audre Lorde's response to her work, taught me about the wounds that are created and sustained by unchecked white feminism.

Monica Coleman's work taught me about the role and power of community building, and that healing and transformation can take place in the most mundane acts of care. Her work also showed me what scholarship that is both deeply theoretical, personal, and accessible, can look like.

In my reading and assessment of feminist works in the study of religion, I gained a better understanding for what the work of feminist historians of religion can do, but also what work still needs to be done. Caroline Bynum and Amy Hollywood's works shed light on the lack of intersectional feminism in feminist scholarship in the study of religion, and the often times inaccessible writing that hinders some works from being readable and relatable to a non-academic audience. Their works also taught me more about the power of writing history and how that work can help other feminists discern the ways in which the struggles, oppressions, and questions that medieval women had, are not all that different from modern struggles, oppressions, and questions. Hollywood's insights into the lives and minds of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars, sheds light on how we can better understand the texts we read if we make an effort to understand what inspired the minds that created it. In my reading of these texts in search for understanding exactly what academic feminism is and does, I also reached for Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, a text that helped shape not only how I understand what feminist scholarship is, but also shaped how I understand what it means to be a feminist in my day-to-day life, a life where scholarship is part of who I am and how I process the world around me.

In January of 2017, *Living a Feminist Life* was published, a text written by a scholar, whose others works were predominately written for other academics. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed did something different. She wrote the book after leaving the

academy and its prose is deeply personal, theoretical, and it remains a text that is popular in and outside of academia, a text that to date has sold over 10,000 copies. In the text Ahmed reflects on the ways in which feminist theory is produced from the everyday practice of being a feminist at home and at work. In doing so, Ahmed crafts her own understanding of what it means to be a feminist and what questions feminists must grapple with at individual and collective levels. She asks “If we become feminist because of the inequality and injustice in the world, because of what the world is not, then what kind of world are we building?”<sup>71</sup>

This question had led me to ask what world is feminist scholarship in religious and theological studies building, in and outside of academia? How do feminist scholars of religion and theology build feminist dwellings in academia that are also dwellings open to those who live and work outside the walls of our own institutions? If feminism is, “the dynamism of making connections”, how is academic scholarship making connections outside of the academy?<sup>72</sup> My questions and concerns regarding the accessibility of academic feminism is not a push to make every feminism in every space, homogenous. Rather, I want to challenge what I perceive to be a dense and opaque wall that separates academic feminism, those whose training and critical thinking sensibilities have so much to offer to other feminist dwellings.

Feminist scholarship can and has done so much more than produce scholarship for scholarship’s sake. A text can change and save a person’s life by offering them insight or by giving visibility and legitimacy to experiences that go unnoticed, misunderstood, or

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 3.

completely erased. For Ahmed, her encounter with Audre Lorde's work was foundational in her own becoming of a feminist scholar. Ahmed describes her experiences reading Lorde's work as feeling

like a lifeline was being thrown to me. The words coming out of her description of her own experience, as a black woman, mother, lesbian, poet, warrior, found me where I was; a different place from her, yet her words found me. Her words gave me the courage to make my own experience into a resource, my experiences as a brown woman, lesbian, daughter; as a writer, to build theory from description of where I was in the world, to build theory from description of not being accommodated by a word. A lifeline: it can be a fragile rope, worn and tattered from the harshness of weather, but it is enough, just enough to bear your weight, to pull you out, to help you survive a shattering experience.<sup>73</sup>

In the same way that Ahmed credits Lorde's work for throwing her a lifeline, how can feminist scholars in religious and theological studies understand their own work as offering up a lifeline?

The call for feminist scholarship to always engage with the world in ways that maintains the political commitments and activist sensibilities that were and are central to the emergence, development, and maintenance of feminist theoretical and methodological approaches, is a call that has normative standards. To do this work means to account for the goals and impact of one's work, it is answering the "so what" question, it is leaving readers with an idea of where to go from here, it is recognizing the urgency behind the political nature of the categories one chooses to employ in one's work. The questions that led me here are the same ones that led me outside the academy, and the conclusions I have drawn have shaped not only my view of what constitutes feminist scholarship, but also what it means to live, and work as a feminist. As I transition from academia to corporate America, this thesis is itself a practice in trying to better understand how to

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 12.

build bridges and doors between these isolated institutions. I am a scholar by training and always will be, and I hope that the questions raised here are ones that facilitate conversations about what feminist scholarship in religious and theological studies is and just how far it can reach.

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