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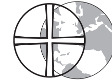

Sawubona in a Pandemic: Black Churchwomen, Embodied Ecclesiology, and Sacred Spaces in Cyberspace[1]

IRIE LYNNE SESSION

During this unprecedented time of a global pandemic, theologically progressive black churchwomen are creating ecclesial communities situated outside normative religious and denominational structures to provide themselves opportunities to experience *Sawubona*[2] as a strategy for spiritual well-being and liberation. "Sawubona" is the most common greeting among the Zulu tribe in South Africa and means "We see you . . . we value you." Offering the greeting of Sawubona is a way for the other person to feel visible and important, regardless of their social location, views, values, or flaws. For black churchwomen, Sawubona has taken on a deeper, more nuanced meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[1] See also Kimberly Knight, "Sacred Space in Cyberspace," *Reflections*, Yale Divinity School, https://reflections.yale.edu/article/how-firm-foundation-churches-face-future/sacred-space-cyberspace.

[2] Roche Mamabolo, "Sawubona: More Than Just a Zulu Greeting," rochemamabolo, March 12, 2018, https://rochemamabolo.com/2018/03/12/sawubona-more-than-just-a-zulu-greeting/.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, theologically progressive black churchwomen have created spaces for embodied ecclesiology outside of traditional church structures. These are alternative communities, and especially digital ones, where black churchwomen experience Sawubona—being seen and valued.

As of May 23, 2021, nearly 600,000 people in the U.S. have lost their lives to the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly thirty-four million total cases. But COVID-19 isn't the only pandemic being experienced by black women and other socially excluded communities in the US population. The murder of George Floyd exposed another pandemic that is global in reach and structural in nature. This pandemic continues to wreak havoc in the lives of black and brown people in the US and abroad. The colonization and extermination of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, and Jim Crow segregation are just a few examples of the devastation wrought by this pandemic—the pandemic of racism. It is shocking and unbelievable that today, in twenty-first-century America, we continue to live with racism and its destructive consequences. Here, Sandra L. Shullman, president of the American Psychological Association, explains further:

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> George Floyd, dead after a police officer knelt on his neck. Ahmaud Arbery, fatally shot while on a jog. Breonna Taylor, shot to death by police raiding her home. Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin—the list is far too long and ever growing. . . . The deaths of innocent black people targeted specifically because of their race—often by police officers—are both deeply shocking and shockingly routine. . . . We are living in a racism pandemic, which is taking a heavy psychological toll on our African American citizens.[3]

Black people are forced to navigate multiple pandemics—COVID-19, racism, classism, and gendered oppression. COVID-19 has laid bare long-standing structural barriers, institutionalized racism, and interconnected oppressions historically experienced by socially excluded communities in the US. Such gross systemic inequality renders people of color, and black women in particular, invisible.[4]

Current research reveals, "Black women sit squarely at the confluence of multiple systems of oppression, and are experiencing a disproportionate loss of life and livelihood in the era of COVID-19."[5] During the COVID-19 pandemic it has also been reported that "Black women are nearly twice as likely as White men to

[3] Sandra L. Shullman, "We Are Living in a Racism Pandemic," American Psychological Association, May 29, 2020, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/05/racism-pandemic.

[4] Treva Lindsey, "Why COVID-19 Is Hitting Black Women So Hard," *Women's Media Center*, April 17, 2020, https://womensmediacenter.com/news-features/why-covid-19-is-hitting-black-women-so-hard.

[5] Brandi Jackson and Aderonke B. Pederson, "Facing Both COVID-19 and Racism, Black Women Are Carrying a Particularly Heavy Burden," *Washington Post*, September 4, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com

say that they've been laid off, furloughed, or had their hours and/or pay reduced . . . [and] more likely than White workers to work outside the home as essential workers."[6] Research bears out that during the COVID-19 pandemic, black women are at greater risk of financial hardship, economic disenfranchisement, and employment instability than whites.

While there is much debate as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic is of human origin, there is no debate about the multiple pandemics of racism, classism, and gendered oppression. The pandemic of COVID-19 is spread through the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The intersectional pandemic of racism, classism, and gendered oppression is of human origin. Racism, classism, and gendered oppression are tools of human destruction originating from the delusional ideology of what is often referred to as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[7] Three writers come to mind as I think about this intersection that indubitably affects the lives of black women.

In her book *I Bring the Voices of My People*, clinical psychologist and public theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes defines white supremacy as "the notion that White people . . . are inherently superior to all other races and therefore should wield dominion over the rest of creation, including other people groups. . . . White supremacy is a systematic way of ordering societal systems, ideologies, and relationships so that political, economic, cultural, and social dominance accrues to Whites."[8] Walker-Barnes offers an astute definition of white supremacy as a false ideology of whiteness as a superior embodied reality. White-body supremacy inaccurately assesses black women's bodies as inferior and invisible, and renders them inconsequential as viable sources of beauty, brilliance, ingenuity, and knowledge production.

The work of bell hooks also informs my understanding of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and the ways in which black women experience the multiple pandemics of COVID-19, racism, classism, and gendered oppression. In *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, bell hooks provides clarity:

> I began to use the phrase in my work "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality and not to just have one thing be like, you know, gender is the important issue, race is the important issue, but for me the use of that particular jargonistic phrase was a way, a sort of short cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives and that if I really want to understand

/opinions/2020/09/04/facing-both-covid-19-racism-black-women-are-carrying-particularly-heavy-burden/?outputType=amp.

[6] Jackson and Pederson, "Facing Both COVID-19 and Racism."

[7] Irie Lynne Session, Kamilah Hall Sharp, and Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *The Gathering, A Womanist Church: Origins, Stories, Sermons, and Litanies* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2020), 19.

[8] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision of Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 43.

> what's happening to me, right now at this moment in my life, as a black female of a certain age group, I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of race. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking through the lens of gender. I won't be able to understand it if I'm only looking at how white people see me.[9]

White supremacist capitalist patriarchy speaks to the ways in which black women, on a daily basis, experience life in a culture that fundamentally devalues their person and presence. hooks's emphasis on *capitalist patriarchy* makes it plain that the economics of capitalism and the cultural expectations of patriarchy are critical undercurrents of the waters that black women must navigate.

Reflecting on black women, Ciera Graham notes, "Race is omnipresent, and operating in a system that continues to uphold racist and gendered institutionalized practices has severe consequences for Black women who are trying to be both seen and valued in predominantly white spaces."[10] Black women in a variety of religious spaces, including Christian congregations in North America, are still in danger of invisibility. Their scholarship, cultural assessments, social critique, and strategies for transformation and change all too often go unvalued, unnoticed, and, most certainly, unheeded. Thus, black women are aligned with and supportive of religious organizations and denominational institutions where they are neither seen nor heard. The church has therefore been an unsafe space for them to grow into the fullest expression of their spiritual potential.

And yet, despite the harsh reality of the many barriers inhibiting them from experiencing the church as a safe, nurturing space in which to actualize their full spiritual potential, black women are finding ways to "do the work their souls must have."[11] Black churchwomen are taking their spiritual gifts, divinely given creativity, and need for soul-healing outside of traditional church spaces. They are creating sacred spaces in alternative communities. With goals of self-actualization and thriving, black churchwomen are experiencing Sawubona outside the institutional church.

Faith-filled Christian women have always gathered outside traditional meeting spaces to experience spiritual sustenance, community, and authentic worship. In the New Testament, situated in Acts 16:13–34, we find the story of one such gathering of women:

[9] *bell hooks—Cultural Criticism & Transformation* (transcript) prod./dir. Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997), 7, https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf.

[10] Ciera Graham, "Hypervisible, Invisible: How to Navigate White Workplaces as a Black Woman," Career Contessa, June 3, 2020, https://www.careercontessa.com/advice/black-woman-white-workplace/.

[11] This quote is derived from a reservoir of transformational thought and womanist wisdom taught to her students by the late Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, the first black woman ordained in the United Presbyterian Church USA, in 1974. Dr. Cannon was a Christian theologian and womanist ethicist, and the Annie Scales Rogers professor of Christian ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, until her death on August 8, 2018.

> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message. (CEB)

On the Sabbath, the apostle Paul and his companions sought a place of worship. However, the city of Philippi didn't have a synagogue, so they went down by the river in search of *a prayer-house*. It wasn't uncommon for Jewish places of worship to be located by water. In fact, many synagogues and prayer-houses were built near water for the purpose of ritual washings.[12] Down by the river Paul and his ministry partners came upon a gathering of worshipping women. Lydia's story of gathering down by the river with other God-fearing women brings to mind the experiences of another group of women who sought renewal outside traditional meeting houses and the watchful eyes of oppressors.

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Enslaved African women also gathered by the river, a sacred space, as a means of self-care and to refocus on the truth of their intrinsic worth. Down by the river, communing with nature and summoning the Spirit, enslaved African women "gained perspective and realized they were not intended to be slaves nor victims of violence."[13] These healing spaces where African peoples would *steal away* are known as "hush harbors."

In her article "Digital Hush Harbors," Dr. Melva Sampson, scholar of Afrocentric and womanist preaching at Wake Forest Divinity School, describes these secluded areas where enslaved African women were able to "hone and express their own beliefs about God as well as their beliefs about themselves."[14] During the pandemic of African enslavement, hush harbors were remote and sacred spaces where "enslaved women could regain their composure and move toward their dignity and space in the world."[15] In hush harbors, enslaved African women were able to experience the life-giving affirmation of Sawubona.

[12] "Several first-century literary sources make it quite clear that many Diaspora Jewish communities actually preferred having their synagogues outside the city and near a body of water such as the *proseuchē* (a place set aside for prayer) at Philippi in Macedonia." Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 316.

[13] Renee K. Harrison, "Five Strategies of Subversion and Freedom," in *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155.

[14] Melva Sampson, "Digital Hush Harbors: Black Preaching Women and Black Digital Religious Networks" in *Fire!!!* 6, no. 1, Theorizing the Digital Black Church (Spring 2020), 48. Here Sampson quotes Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 36.

[15] Sampson, "Digital Hush Harbors," 48.

Digital Hush Harbors on Facebook

During this season of the COVID-19 pandemic, black churchwomen, like their ancestral African mothers, are also curating sacred spaces to experience Sawubona, places where their race and gender are celebrated rather than problematized. Black women's sense of identity is constantly undermined by a society that devalues their full embodiment. This constant undermining necessitates the creation of alternative spaces, outside traditional religious spaces, where black churchwomen have an opportunity to flourish spiritually and actualize the fullest expression of their humanity. Sampson argues that digital hush harbors are sites where black churchwomen can both create and curate safe and sacred spaces for being church in a manner that is unhindered by religious prohibitions based on race or gender.

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Of the many digital platforms available to black churchwomen, Facebook is one of the most popular and accessible. Black churchwomen are creating digital hush harbors using Facebook groups, pages, and personal profiles. Of these three major Facebook features, Facebook groups are especially beneficial for creating spaces for Sawubona. Facebook groups are readily accessible to anyone who has an account on the Facebook social media platform. Facebook groups can be public or private. Facebook group features such as units, discussions, and live videos make this an ideal platform for sharing life and exchanging ideas. *Units* make it easy to teach classes and offer training. *Discussions* are ideal for holding conversations on any number of subjects and topics. *Live videos* are perfect for promoting sermons, teaching live courses, and holding webinars and face-to-face media training. Amani Allen-Beale describes the relevance of Facebook groups for black women:

> In a world that can still feel debilitating for women of color, organically built online communities have become a safe haven for many. From Facebook groups to WhatsApp, online communities for black women with specific interests have been popping up within the past few years. These digital communities are safe spaces for like-minded people to come together, speak freely, and get access to resources that they need to thrive in their industries or in life.[16]

[16] Amani Allen-Beale, "9 Empowering Online Communities for Black Women," Bauce, April 17, 2019, https://baucemag.com/online-communities-for-black-women/.

In 2020, I created the Facebook group *SiSTARS in Ministry & the Marketplace*[17] with the purpose of helping progressive black churchwomen thrive in transforming their ministry ideas into income-generating businesses. The group focuses on providing tools and strategies that enable black churchwomen to identify and leverage their spiritual gifts, professional ministry experience, and expertise in order to transform their ministry into a sustainable business. Black churchwomen, and clergywomen in particular, are typically unable to earn a living solely from serving a church. During the COVID-19 pandemic this problem was exacerbated. Many black clergywomen were forced to cancel speaking, teaching, and preaching engagements that augmented substandard church salaries. Consequently, being church for black churchwomen in this season of the COVID-19 pandemic means helping black clergywomen through economic disenfranchisement. In the book of Acts, in the early days of the church there is guidance for meeting the economic needs of disciples. Among first-century disciples the writer observes, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34–35). Through my Facebook group of over six hundred women, black clergywomen's need to create alternative sources of income is met as they learn strategies to monetize their professional experience and expertise. Black churchwomen also receive spiritual support, prayer, training, opportunities for Bible study, and strategies to help them excavate latent capacities that have lain dormant for much too long.

Another digital hush harbor meeting the needs of black churchwomen in the season of COVID-19 is Pink Robe Chronicles (PRC). Curated and created by Dr. Melva Sampson, PRC is an online worshipping community that goes live on Sundays at eight a.m. Eastern Time on her Facebook personal profile page. Each week Dr. Sampson conducts worship wearing what she describes as a "tattered" pink robe. Weekly she preaches to an audience of hundreds, generating thousands of views and comments. According to Sampson, PRC was birthed out of necessity. After a female parishioner in her congregation expressed displeasure with her "pulpit presence" and demanded the senior minister never allow her to preach, Sampson needed a place to express the depth of her pain; a place where she could experience Sawubona. Giving voice to her spiritual longing, Sampson explains, "I needed a clearing—a space to moan, protest, and affirm the sound of my own voice, even if others would not. I needed a place to lament. I needed a place to live out my vocation, and I refused to wait for permission or to be approved by a governing body."[18] For Sampson, and other black churchwomen and clergywomen,

[17] SiSTARS in Ministry & the Marketplace is the Facebook group I created and administer to address economic inequities experienced by progressive black clergywomen, women in ministry, women of a certain age, and black women in church and society by helping them leverage their experience and expertise to make a living for themselves unhindered by unjust systems and institutions never intended for their thriving: https://www.facebook.com/groups/dreambigsistars.

[18] Sampson, "Digital Hush Harbors," 17.

cyberspace has become sacred space: a modern-day hush harbor where black women's visibility isn't vilified.

What these examples make clear is that black churchwomen are discovering alternative and creative ways of being church in a pandemic. One reason for this occurrence is black women's expansive ecclesiology,[19] which begins with black women's experiences and extends to the entire world. Both womanist and feminist ecclesiology hold that women *are* church. For example, black churchwomen like Kimberly Peeler-Ringer, curator of the Churched Feminist,[20] a blog and Facebook Bible study, identify the church through a feminist lens. Peeler-Ringer maintains that her Facebook Bible study is a form of worship to God because a feminist ecclesiology holds that women are church. Feminist theologian Natalie K. Watson, in *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*, moves from locating women *in* church to *being* church.[21] She explains further, "Women are church whether they choose to remain within existing institutional frameworks or to find other spaces for their discourses of liberation from the restrictions of the patriarchal church."[22]

Similarly, the radical subjectivity of a womanist ecclesiology celebrates and affirms black women's embodiment and their experience of being church. Such a pronouncement of black women requires a theological anthropology that identifies human beings, embodied in flesh, as very good.[23] Therefore, as a womanist practitioner and preacher, I propose a shift in epistemology to articulate church as embodied flesh. An epistemology of church as embodied flesh opens a door of freedom for black churchwomen to create and curate sacred space in digital spaces to experience Sawubona. Such liberation is made possible because, as embodied flesh, theologically progressive black churchwomen *are* church and, therefore, are the body of Christ.

Embodied Ecclesiology

The church is embodied flesh. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12 paints a vivid picture of *embodied ecclesiology*,[24] one characterized by various parts of the human body—feet, hands, ears, eyes. Thus, the gathered community of Christ-followers, the church, is a collective of diverse human flesh. As a black clergywoman and

[19] *Ecclesiology* comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* and is the study of the church, its practices, sacraments, mission, and very being. Ecclesiology seeks to answer the question "What is the role, function, and purpose of the gathering community of Christ followers—the church?"

[20] The Churched Feminist can be found at https://www.facebook.com/churchedfeminist.

[21] Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 53.

[22] Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*, 53.

[23] In Genesis 1:31, at the end of the first creation account and particularly after the creation of humankind, the author writes, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." *Very good* includes every human being and is not based on any hierarchy of human value. Thus, every body, along with every other creation of God, is stamped with very-goodness. That very-goodness includes black women's bodies.

[24] An e*mbodied ecclesiology* is a concept I am developing to explain a central purpose of the church as internal transformation of the gathered community with a focus on spiritual formation and transformation of individual members for the purpose of communal transformation.

co-pastor of The Gathering, A Womanist Church,[25] I know that conceptualizing an embodied ecclesiology requires an acknowledgment of the myriad ways in which the bodies of black women have been problematized. An embodied ecclesiology reminds us of the unfortunate reality that in both church and society, all bodies are not valued equally. Certain bodies, misrecognized as less than fully human, have been perpetual sites of violence, hate, brutality, abuse, sexual objectification, dissection, experiment, and exploitation. The misrecognition of black women's embodiment as subhuman, animal-like, and without sexual restraint dates back to the era of the enslavement of African peoples. The historical dehumanization of black women's bodies is at the root of present-day racial and gender disparities in several categories. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed economic, health-related, and employment disparities faced by black women. Such inequities challenge black women's self-perception and spiritual well-being. And yet, black churchwomen are meeting those challenges head-on, finding enclaves for their spiritual well-being in digital hush harbors on Facebook and other online spaces. Melva Sampson affirms the healing nature of digital hush harbors for black women: "Bodies dismembered by religious, cultural, political, and societal hurdles are validated in curated digital space."[26]

I believe God's Spirit is guiding the church to reclaim an ecclesiology of embodiment—a theological understanding of church as human beings who seek to follow the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus Christ—those who gather together in order to be shaped by the Spirit for the purposes of God. An ecclesiology of embodiment is more concerned with why the church gathers than where it gathers; being church takes precedence over going to church. What an embodied ecclesiology makes clear is that the church is flesh and blood rather than brick and mortar. If the church is willing, black churchwomen who have created their own spaces of embodied ecclesiology, their own hush harbors, who have found their own Sawubona, can lead the way.

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[25] The Gathering is a three-year-old church plant with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The term *womanist* was noted by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*; a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color. We intentionally identify as a womanist church to amplify womanist tenets as defined by womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Professor of Ethics and Black Church Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. The Gathering seeks to follow the radical message of Jesus by lifting up three social justice priorities: racial equity, LGBTQIA+ equality, and dismantling patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism.

[26] Sampson, "Digital Hush Harbors," 55.