

If Womanist Rhetoricians Could Speak...

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With all of the national debates about race and racism that discuss the killings of young black men by police officers, the excessive police force used on African American women, the Charleston Church Shooting by a white supremacist, and even our reactions to Bree Newsome removing a confederate flag from a state capitol building; we have heard from political pundits, social activists, religious leaders, some educators, and university administrators, but there is still an important voice that is missing. This article asks the question: where is the womanist critique? When will we hear and recognize a womanist voice in the midst of all the discourse? The article not only seeks to explain why womanist rhetoricians have been missing in action, it will begin to define womanist criticism and offer a womanist critique to the discourse on race and racism.

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In the aftermath of so many racially charged incidents involving African Americans, people are talking. National debates about race and racism have sparked from coast to coast in discussing the killings of young black men, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray, by police officers. The unsettling video images of a California patrol officer beating a 51-year old great-grandmother on the side of the freeway; or the excessive force used by a Texas police officer, caught on camera, who threw a teenage girl down to the ground before pinning her with his weight had people talking as well. Along with the Charleston Church shooting by a white supremacist; or the news footage of social activist Bree Newsome removing a confederate flag from a state capitol building, many have spoken—political pundits, social activists, religious leaders, some educators along with university administrators. However, in the midst of all of these conversations, it still seems as if a voice is missing. Therefore, I have to ask: where is the womanist critique? When will we hear and recognize a womanist voice in the midst of all the discourse?

In the book *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*, Joe Feagin describes systemic racism as that which “includes a diverse assortment of racist practices; the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites; the continuing resource inequalities; and the white-racist ideologies, attitudes, and institutions created to preserve white advantages and power.”¹ The problem is this “racist America” that Feagin describes stands in contradiction with the notion “The land of the free.” In the United States Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers made the claim, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, which among these are

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¹ Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”² Yet, the founding fathers never meant for these natural rights to apply to women, much less African Americans. It is morally impossible to guarantee natural rights to everyone and to be a slaveholder at the same time. Nevertheless, this is the type of systemic racism, prejudice, and discrimination that has been ingrained in the political fabric of this nation.

Unfortunately, these same inequalities have been rooted in the system-wide operation of many academic institutions. The lack of womanist speakers, and the lack of womanist rhetorical scholarship implies that the same systemic hegemonic power structures that womanism seeks to come against in this country is alive and well within the brick and mortar of our academic institutions, which has led to a marginalization and silencing of African American women in higher education. The same patriarchal power structure that seems to govern this country is also governing our academic institutions. This may explain why the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics claims, “In fall 2011, of those full-time instructional faculty whose race/ethnicity was known, 79 percent were White (44 percent were White males and 35 percent were White females), 6 percent were Black.”³ According to IES Institute of Educational Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, out of the faculty in higher education, during fall of 2011, whose race and ethnicity were known, black women only made up 3% of the total faculty population.⁴

This lack of African American female faculty in higher education along with the absence of a discourse or rhetorical criticism that analyzes the dominant forms of oppression that affect black women in their everyday lived experiences strongly suggests that the African American woman’s experience is a generic experience / standpoint that can easily be represented by their white feminist sisters from the Feminist Movement or their black male counterparts from the Civil Rights Movement. Feminism looks at gender equality while the Civil Rights Movement looks at race and class equality. Why should the work of the African American Woman scholar / orator have to be classified under feminism or civil rights rhetoric when neither terminology fully represents the African American Woman in terms of RACE, CLASS, & GENDER EQUALITY? In the area of rhetoric, we have Feminist Criticism and Social Movement Criticism. However, what we have yet to define and fully develop is a Womanist Criticism.

In *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse*, Marsha Houston and Olga Idriss Davis argue:

Because black women as a social group are still marginalized and oppressed in the United States, research *about* us is not necessarily empowering or emancipatory *for* us. For example, ‘us too’ or ‘add Black women and stir’ studies that uncritically apply masculinist or whitecentric concepts and methods to Black women’s communicative lives may actually have the effect of maintaining or deepening gendered racism and other oppressive communication

² “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” July 4, 1776, *U.S. National Archives & Records Administration*, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.

³ U.S. Department of Education and Institute of Education Sciences: National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education 2014” (2014-083), 207. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014083.pdf>.

⁴ IES Institute of Educational Sciences: National Center for Educational Statistics, “Digest of Education Statistics, Table 315.20. Full-time Faculty in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Academic Rank: Fall 2009, Fall 2011, and Fall 2013,” *U.S. Department of Education*, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_315.20.asp.

practices. Producing *more* research without careful attention to the conceptual frameworks underlying that research places Black women in jeopardy.⁵

As an African American woman who happens to be in academia, we have to stop allowing hegemonic structures to define who we are. We have to use our own voices, our own experiences, and our own standpoint to voice who we are, what we think, and what we want. We have to utilize our own *agency* in order to fight for what we want.⁶ In the article, “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic: Validating Self and Violating the Space of Otherness,” Olga Idriss Davis makes the point: “When a discipline concerned with investigating the relationships among language, culture, and society fails to explore the multidimensions of Black women’s lives—family, sexuality, age, spirituality, nationality, intellectualism—how then will “building community” occur in communication scholarship to include the social realities of all oppressed peoples?”⁷

Systemic racism influences institutional racism, which continues to perpetuate the silencing of our black female scholars in academia. However, if womanist rhetoricians could speak, we would create a womanist criticism that ties back to the four tenets of Alice Walker’s Womanist Definition from her book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*.⁸ Walker’s definition claims that a womanist is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people regardless of race, class, or gender. Womanists love life, love being responsible, and, most importantly, love themselves. This self-love empowers womanists to combat the deeply rooted forms of oppression that continue to marginalize African American women, so that we can liberate ourselves, our families, and all who are oppressed.

I like to use Stacey Floyd-Thomas’ phrased tenets—radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement—from her anthology, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* to remember Walker’s four-part definition.⁹ From a rhetorical standpoint, while radical subjectivity does illuminate a person’s moment of epiphany when she begins to act in a courageous manner to get herself out of an oppressive situation, when a person has died, I think the charge of radical subjectivity is for the speaker to use rhetoric that affirms the personhood of the deceased (who has been victimized) and then utilize rhetorical agency to re-image that person from being a victim to now being a victor / conqueror. Traditional communalism coincides with the rhetorical Jeremiad because it calls people back toward the values of their own community / ethnicity. Redemptive self-love refers to rhetoric that can change society’s negative perception of an individual and re-image that person from being a villain to being a heroine by proving that the individual unashamedly loved herself and stood up for herself in the midst of her oppressive circumstances. I think of critical engagement as a cultural

⁵ Marsha Houston and Olga Idriss Davis, eds., *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002), 3.

⁶ I define *agency* as that which enables us to redefine ourselves in order to work on behalf of self and community in the midst of our social realities.

⁷ Olga Idriss Davis, “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic: Validating Self and Violating the Space of Otherness,” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 21, no. 1 (1998): 77-90.

⁸ Drawing from Walker’s expanded definition, for the purposes of this paper, I highlight the following characteristics of the definition. *A black feminist or feminist of color....Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist.... Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.* See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden’s* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983), xi-xii (italics added).

⁹ Stacey M. Floyd, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8-10.

critique that calls for a critical evaluation of society's cultural norms. Critical engagement examines the hegemonic power structures to see who gets marginalized and figures out how to move them from the fringes of society to the mainstream.

If womanist rhetoricians could speak, we might offer a four-part critique on how to discuss the current race & racism problem in this country, through a womanist lens. From a radical subjectivity standpoint, we could look at the June 17, 2015, Charleston church shooting massacre where a gunman entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (also known as "Mother Emanuel") during a Bible study and killed nine people—all African-Americans, including the pastor and eight parishioners. Police contend that the attack was racially motivated because the 21-year old gunman has been linked to white supremacist views. When such a heinous crime has been committed and lives have been cut short, it is the responsibility of the speaker to make sense out of what would otherwise remain senseless. Brandon Risher, in describing his late grandmother, Ethel Lance, at her funeral said, "She has to represent something we all know is there—love.... She is a victim of hate, but she can be a symbol for love. That is what she was in life. Hate is powerful, but love is more powerful."¹⁰ Risher re-imaged his grandmother from being a victim to being a victor or conqueror by juxtaposing love with hate. As opposed to forever being remembered as a victim of a hate crime, Ms. Lance will now be remembered as a symbol of love that has conquered hate.

Similarly, we could look at the language that President Barack Obama used, in the eulogy that he delivered to re-image all nine of the individuals killed in the Charleston church shooting from being victims of a hate crime to being individuals who found "the power of God's grace."¹¹ He then urged the people to tap into that same grace. Obama stated, "If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change"¹² At the end of Obama's eulogy, he reminded the audience that each one of the nine individuals found that grace. Obama juxtaposed hatred with the power of God's grace and God's grace becomes more powerful than hatred. So, not only have the slain individuals found God's grace, but we too must tap into God's grace in order to see where we have been blind and where we have been lost, so we can find our best selves and find our way as a country again.¹³

A traditional communalism critique could examine the racially charged police brutality killings of African American men or even the unsettling citizen journalist video images involving our African American women at the hands of police officers. The rhetorical critic would look for evidence of institutional racism within the police precinct, which may or may not be present because it could be an isolated incident involving just one officer. Regardless, the fact that police brutality cases continue to increase means that some police officers need to be reminded of the values and ethics expressed in their Oath of Honor:

On my honor,
I will never betray my badge,
my integrity, my character,
or the public trust.
I will always have

¹⁰ Lizette Alvarez, Nikita Stewart and Richard Pérez-Pena, "In Two Funerals, Remembering the Victims of Hate as Symbols of Love," *The New York Times* June 26, 2015, p. A14.

¹¹ Barack Obama, "Full Transcript of President Obama's Eulogy to Sen. Clementa Pinkney," *The Island Packet*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.islandpacket.com/2015/06/27/3813877/full-transcript-of-president-obamas.html>.

¹² Obama, "Full Transcript."

¹³ Obama, "Full Transcript."

the courage to hold myself
and others accountable for our actions.
I will always uphold the constitution
my community and the agency I serve.¹⁴

The oath requires officers to give their word as a guarantee that they will not dishonor the office that they hold, they will not dishonor their integrity or the character that an officer must possess, and they will not break the public trust that officers will protect and serve the people. This oath also holds officers accountable for their actions as well as the actions of each other to always support the constitution, uphold the community, and the law enforcement agency. Some of this traditional communalist work might be achieved through further racial reconciliation / diversity training of our law enforcement officers.

At the same time that officers need to be held more accountable, communities—more specifically, the people within those communities—need to be held more accountable too. Racial reconciliation / diversity training needs to be ongoing for both law enforcement officials and the people that they serve. The public, particularly the African American community, needs to be reminded of the African proverb that claims, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Perhaps, we have to ask ourselves, what are we doing to contribute to the racial problem? What are we doing that perpetuates the stereotype of the black man or black woman? What are we doing that continues to feed this distrust of police officers and the judicial system? How do we work together as people of all different races to make sure that our communities are safe, that our young people are set up for success instead of failure, that racial profiling and hate crimes become a thing of the past, and that the words from the Pledge of Allegiance, “liberty and justice for all,” become more evident in the lived experiences of all Americans?

One can see redemptive self-love in the symbolic action of Bree Newsome removing the Confederate flag from the state capital building in Columbia, South Carolina. For many Americans, the Confederate flag is a symbolic reminder of the slavery that plagued this country for centuries, as well as a reminder of the white supremacists / extremist groups that relentlessly lynched and murdered blacks because of the color of our skin. Newsome scaled the 30-foot flagpole with a helmet and her climbing gear in order to take down the flag that she found offensive. In the eyes of the law, Newsome’s behavior was inappropriate and she, along with her friend Jimmy Tyson, were arrested and charged with defacing state property, which can carry a \$5000 fine, and up to three years in prison.¹⁵ Just before Newsome took down the flag, she yelled out, “You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today!”¹⁶ Redemptive self-love critiques have to work at taking the socially perceived shame away from the individual’s actions. In other words, we have to go back to this notion that the law sees Newsome as an offender. When someone breaks the law, society attaches shame to its perception of that person. However, the task of this particular womanist lens is rhetorically to remove the shame by persuading the audience that Newsome loved herself enough to no longer allow the Confederate flag to enslave her to the fear of racial intimidation. The power of this type of self-love is what re-images Newsome from a villain / an-

¹⁴ “What is the Law Enforcement Oath of Honor?” *International Association of Chiefs of Police*, <http://www.theiacp.org/What-is-the-Law-Enforcement-Oath-of-Honor>.

¹⁵ “Bree Newsome: As SC Lawmakers Debate Removing Confederate Flag, Meet the Activist Who Took It Down,” *Democracy Now!* July 6, 2015, http://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/6/bree_newsome_as_sc_lawmakers_debate.

¹⁶ “Bree Newsome.”

ti-hero to a heroine—one who inspires others to utilize their own human agency to act on behalf of self and community.

A critical engagement of race and racism would call for a cultural critique on the various displays of racism that are on the systemic and institutional levels to see how they influence individual racism. One would need to reexamine the Declaration of Independence and/or the amendments in the Constitution of the United States to understand how racism and oppression got woven into the fabric of this country. Then, we would need to look at our countless institutions to comprehend how those racist practices and ideologies were perpetuated in our schools, our places of work, our communities, and so many other organizations. This is similar to what I attempted to do at the beginning of this article when I sought to prove the extent to which the African American female voice has been silenced in academia. The next step is to analyze the individual acts of racism and hate crimes in order to discover what the community can do by coming together to prevent any future acts of racism. One of the tasks of critical engagement is to uncover what the community can do as a whole in coming together to prevent future perpetrations of racism. It is not enough simply to name the form of oppression, one must figure out its lineage, gain a clear understanding of how it infiltrates institutions and organizations, and then devise a communal plan to stop the infiltration.

Ultimately, a womanist rhetorician not only serves to liberate women, but all oppressed people of all races, ethnicities, sexualities, and genders. When we liberate those who are oppressed, we oppose a culture of domination, a culture of alienation, and a culture of despair. Womanist criticism must analyze the ideology of domination that marginalizes individuals until it is able to construct a rhetorical agency that affirms the humanity of those who are marginalized. Womanism transcends beyond our shared religious beliefs to fight for the survival and wholeness of *all* people because its moral arc always falls within the circumference of liberation and social justice.