

MY SISTER, MY BROTHER



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**Womanist
and XODUS
God-Talk**

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My Sister, My Brother
Womanist and Xodus God-Talk
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Dedicated to the ones on whose shoulders we stand:

Henry and Ella Mitchell

and to our youngest child of three:

Desiree Aisha Dawn Baker-Fletcher

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Introduction

THIS BOOK is an affirmation of mutual respect and uplift between an African American woman and an African American man. In tones strong and urgent it declares a positive message in the midst of our social devaluation. Yet how can we as Black women and men affirm our love in a land which presses us down and spits us out? We need to look at the issues which sometimes render our love ineffectual and mute. What are these issues in the Black community today? The media gives us one set of representations. If we relied upon the media, we would be led to believe that every Black man in America is an admitted wife-beater and potential Bigger Thomas. The power of these negative portrayals was most recently iconized in the frenzy over the O. J. Simpson murder trial. The fallout after he was acquitted demonstrated that putting a Black face on domestic abuse is considered newsworthy. Media images of Black women are mixed but equally problematic: Black women are always suspect even when in high political office as evidenced in rumors of Joycelyn Elder's support of the legalization of narcotics and her motherhood of a son convicted of drug possession. Lani Guinier, respected law professor and legal scholar, was not even allowed the professional courtesy of defending her controversial views on the reallocation of voting rights by the "moderate" Democratic president who had nominated her for attorney general. And the entire nation fixed its fascinated attention on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings.

In the midst of media-driven controversies, particularly regarding cases like the Thomas/Hill hearings or the Mike Tyson/Desiree Washington legal suits, Black women and Black men have divided views on gender issues. Through exaggeration of such division and the iconization of particular successful Black males and females into demonized, universalized symbolic figures of fallenness and failure, the media generates a spiral of controversy. This spiral is akin to a social tornado which sucks into its vortex both pertinent facts of our multiple situations and distortions of our humanity. Our energies dissipated and enervated by reactionary postures, it is impossible for us to name our own realities, issues, and concerns before they become media fodder. Such spirals have a Machiavellian

effect, supporting our suspicions that there exists an intentional strategy of “Divide and Conquer” practiced by White institutions of sociopolitical and economic power.

This book seeks to move “beyond the veil” created by the maelstrom of racialized iconography that feeds sociopolitical and economic disinheritance. How do we move beyond this force that seems to obsess, oppress, possess, and depress us? It seems that only powerful rituals of exorcism can rid us of these demons. Before we can celebrate our life together, our struggles, our disagreements, and the many creative ways that African American women and men have found to overcome adversity between us, we must rid ourselves of the “voices” of those who do not understand our ongoing struggle.

Sadly, some of those “voices” are not only from outside hegemonic sources, but arise from within. Products of dreams deferred, economic opportunities denied, and misguided applications of patriarchal power, these “voices” are destructive of love and generate division. Threatening to annihilate our future, these inner voices deny wholeness and communion as thoroughly as do the external forces. They produce division not only in the Black secular community but in the church as well. Moreover, women are divided among themselves about Black women’s responsibility to uphold and uplift Black men at all costs in the name of protecting the Black community and family. The virtuous Black woman is she who “stands by her man” come hell or high water. Those who publicly resist patriarchal abuses of power in the Black community all too often are considered suspect, disloyal, sell-outs, and are cast as castrating money-grubbers. This is part of the story and part of the reality among Black folk today. Yet, it is not the entire story. What of those who envision a new reality for male/female relationships? We are affirming the internal community of aunts and uncles, cousins and friends, brothers and sisters, all of whom are beloved however whole or fragmented they may be.

This book is a Creative Space where systematic theology dances with ethics, the two intertwining and flowing into each other. The concerns of an academic systematic theology are to clarify, elaborate, and exemplify an understanding of God that is appropriate, credible, and morally adequate.¹ The task of an academic exercise in ethics is to provide a rational accounting of various theories of morality, human agency, good and bad, and the process of decision making. Such understandings separate theology and ethics as having fundamentally divergent tasks — theology being concerned with the things of God, ethics taking as its aim to provide a “science” of morality. Womanist ethics describes any appropriate, credible, and morally adequate theology and ethics arising from Black ex-

periences as addressing persons, according to Katie Cannon, “with their backs up against the ‘Wall’ (of Life), holding it up for the young to pass by unscathed.”² Such a view presses academic theology and ethics out of their depth, but makes it possible for African American religious folk to see the tasks of theology and ethics as both fundamentally united and necessarily inseparable. Some of our philosophical colleagues have noted that the kind of pragmatic imperative Cannon articulates is precisely why it is existentially “difficult” for Black students to study the precise abstractions of Higher Thought — as couched in philosophy, of course! We laugh, wondering if they realize how thoroughly deluded they are in valorizing any field that cannot conceive of putting the practical tasks, flesh-and-blood pain, and ongoing struggle to maintain a sturdy sense of human dignity together with the keen insights, clear-sightedness, and intellectual vigor of a relevant theoretical construct. Any articulation of womanist or XODUS God-talk must hold theology and ethics together, with just as much determination and zeal as is necessary to hold back the crumbling “Wall” of despair.

The Womanist Context

Since the terms “womanist,” and “XODUS” may not be familiar, it is important to clearly state what we take these terms to mean and to describe the contexts from which they emerge. When Alice Walker coined the term “womanist” in 1983, a number of Black women religious scholars and clergy quickly accepted and built on the term as one that best described their own interests and concerns. Womanist theology is based in part on Walker’s definition of “womanist,” which emphasizes a love for Black women’s history and culture. Most simply, Walker explains, a womanist is “a black feminist or feminist of color.” The term “womanist” comes from the Black cultural understanding of “womanish,” which is the opposite of “girlish,” frivolous, irresponsible, lacking of seriousness.³ It means acting grown up, serious, and in charge. Womanist theology and ethics draws extensively on Black women’s culture, religion, and experience, particularly as it is found in narrative. Narrative includes all kinds of texts, from historical documents to fiction, poetry, and song. Each of these resources represents a variety of African American women’s voices. During the last decade, womanist theologians and ethicists have dusted off forgotten and neglected texts, recovered the memories of living Black women in the aural-oral tradition, lifted theological and ethical themes from such cultural resources, and are in the continual process of analyz-

ing, critiquing, and building on those themes that meet contemporary needs and concerns.

Walker does not define what she means by “women’s culture” in her definition of “womanism.” One can gather from the corpus of her writings that she has in mind Black women’s particular forms of creativity in language, writing, relationships, religious and political understandings, moral values, and articles of beauty that Black women have created for everyday use from flower gardens to quilts to blues and literature. She suggests such an understanding in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in which she speaks of her appreciation for her mother’s “love for beauty” and “respect for strength.”⁴ This love for beauty and respect for strength is evident in Walker’s description of her mother, praised by people who came from three counties to be given cuttings from her flowers “because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that . . . perfect strangers and imperfect strangers . . . ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art.” Walker further describes her mother as one “who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers.”⁵ She was one who had the power to make a way out of no way, a woman of vision. For Christian womanists like Delores Williams and myself, the source of that vision is “a God of Seeing” who empowers the dispossessed with vision and a “creative spark” to make a way out of no way. This “creative spark,” I would say, makes possible the creation of positive, life-affirming Black and women’s cultures even in the midst of dominant, oppressive cultural strategies in the larger society. While larger southern culture, and American culture in general, deemed that Black women, children, and men were fit only for shacks with holes in them, women like Walker’s mother moved and acted out of cultural norms that were resistant to dominant cultural expectations.

By surrounding her family with beauty in the midst of poverty, Walker asserts, her mothers and grandmothers, “more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see.”⁶ Walker’s words suggest that culture and spirit are within each other. The creative spark she refers to is spiritual and concrete. It is empowering and sustaining in ways that are palpable. Within Black women’s culture there is enormous creativity that is usually passed on by women whose names are never recorded in history books or museums.

One might say that Walker’s mother overcame the conditions created by the power of negative, evil, and oppressive systems of racist, sexist, and classist injustice in Euro-American culture (especially in the South)

by the strength of her own creative power. Walker is not clear about the source of this creative power in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." However, in her definition of "womanist," Walker emphasizes that a womanist "*Loves* the Spirit." Both Walker, who would not describe herself as Christian, and Christian womanists find loving the Spirit to be an important aspect of Black women's culture. This love is not separate from love of self, folk, or the music, dance, and food in women's culture. Nor is it separate from love of nature and the cosmos (the moon) or one's own body (the roundness of Black women's hips, for example). Love of creation, Spirit, and Black women's culture are deeply intertwined and interrelated. These are all qualities of God that I derive from the works of various Black women and womanist writers.

It is important not to ignore Walker's inclusion of all women of color, and not only Black women, in her definition of "womanist." Such inclusion indicates to me that Black womanists must be open to and in solidarity with cultural perspectives of other women of color. While the vast majority of those who call themselves womanist are of African descent, theologians like Rita Nakashima Brock, who is Asian, Native American, and Hispanic, has called herself womanist. African scholars like Mercy Amba Oduyoye as well as Caribbean women are increasingly engaged in women's studies from their own cultural perspectives as well as cross-culturally. Hispanic and Latin American feminist theologians, such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz, employ the term *mujerista* to refer to their distinctive understanding of feminist theological issues. *Mujerista* means "womanist" in Spanish. There is at once a sense of solidarity with other women of color and of self-naming in the use of the term *mujerista*. Although I focus on the relationship between theology and culture from a Black Christian womanist perspective in this book, I find it important to acknowledge that there are other voices with distinctive perspectives to offer in women's dialogues.

From slavery, to the Reconstruction period, through Jim Crow, and during the post-Civil-Rights anti-affirmative action era, the social historical context for Black women in America is one in which racism, sexism, and classism have been daily evils to confront. Moreover, as Alice Walker points out in her lengthy definition of "womanism," a womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color affirms women's culture and other women regardless of sexual preference. A womanist, then, is not heterosexist.

Another "ism" that has historically assaulted women of color and the Black community as a whole is environmental racism. This issue emerges in Walker's corpus of writings and is a womanist concern. A woman-

ist, because she faces jeopardies of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and environmental racism, has been required to develop survival, liberationist, and resistance ethics. Such ethics have been necessary in contexts that are dehumanizing to Black women and the Black community as a whole.

In addition to the universal evils of illness and death, Black women in America have relentlessly struggled against the particular evils of racism, sexism, and classism. While White women daily struggle against the evil of sexism, and classism in the case of those who are not affluent, they are in a position of privilege in regard to their race. While Black men daily struggle against the particular evils of racism and, disproportionately with regard to Whites, classism, they are in a position of privilege in the matter of gender. While Whites and Blacks, male and female, wrestle with the evils of heterosexism and environmental abuse in varying degrees and hold these in common, what makes Black women's oppression distinctive is that such evils are — *always* — combined with the evils of sexism *and* racism. Classism, environmental racism, and heterosexism for Black women, then, take on a particularly *thick* character. While the Black middle class has expanded to around 33 percent, Black women still make less than Black men; 66 percent of the population is working poor or unemployed poor, and Black women are disproportionately poor in relation to White Americans and African American men.

Moreover, just as the land of their African and Native American ancestors has been raped of its peoples, so Black women have been physically raped and bodily exploited for the satisfaction and economic gain of their oppressors. Just as the land from which Africans were stolen has been raped of gold and diamonds, so have Black slave women been raped of the dignity of owning their own bodies, choosing whether or not to bear children and with whom. Black women in America were used as surrogates to nurse the children of their masters and as broodsows to breed new slaves. After slavery, working Black women — especially in domestic and menial work — have had to resist abusive advances by their male bosses. Black women today are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment in the work place. Black women live disproportionately in poor urban and rural areas where hazardous waste sites, incinerators, and industry are located. They are more likely to work in polluted, unhealthy work environments.

While it is difficult for Black heterosexual women to find employment to support themselves and a family, it is even more difficult for Black bisexual and lesbian women to find or retain employment. Such women face exacerbated levels of hostility from their employers and sometimes

are sexually harassed *because their supervisors know or suspect that they are gay*. Whether the church is scripturally confident about salvation for gays, bisexuals, and lesbians, it is nevertheless called to decry social, economic, and physical abuse wherever it exists. We act idolatrously, as pseudo-gods, when we determine that we, not God, will judge *which* human beings are worthy of compassion and care.

Finally, because we are both earth and spirit, we are called to be not only good stewards of one another but also good stewards of the earth, working with God to sustain it and resisting destructive acts against it. Our present context is not only one of xenophobia that creates isms against one group or another daily, but also one in which we risk losing the planet we depend on for daily physical bread because of abusive habits, negligence, the greed of an economic industrial elite, and the militaristic angst of nuclear-weapon-holding nations and terrorists.

The evils of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and environmental abuse have required an ethics of resistance. They have also resulted in an ethics of survival and liberation. Black women in America are able to celebrate resistance and survival despite a lack of equal opportunity. Moreover, there have been celebratory moments of liberation — the Emancipation Proclamation, increased educational and economic opportunity during Reconstruction, the establishment of Black colleges for women and men, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Voting Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1965, gains in desegregation. Each liberating event presses home our equality in spirit *and* body, ontologically and existentially. The context out of which womanists construct theology and ethics is a complex context of struggle and celebration, evil and goodness, abuse and survival, bondage and liberation, illness and health, sorrow and hope. This is the context in which those who are Black and female in one body define what it means to be human in relation to God and work toward the survival, liberation, and wholeness of entire communities *male and female*.

The XODUS Context

“XODUS” is a term which arose in KASIMU’s mind as a creative way of naming the various liberative responses — in second-generation Black male theology — to the crisis in African American hope and vision in the early 1990s. The most spectacular example of the increasing frustration and disillusionment with the deferred promises and cancelled policies of the Civil Rights era that many of the poorest of African Americans are experiencing was the conflagration in April 1992 in Los Angeles, which

followed the acquittal verdict of four “Anglo” policemen for beating African American male Rodney King. Under the shrewd counsel of their lawyers the policemen turned the infamous video-taped beating of Rodney King into what was called a “justifiable use of force,” subdividing the gruesome fifty-one second beating scene by “explaining” the reason for each stroke of their batons. The “justifiable use” strategy convinced the all-White jurors of Simi Valley. The explosive reaction to this verdict is still variously described by Angelenos as “rebellion,” “outcry,” “revolution,” “wake-up call,” and “riot.” A studied analysis of “the Event” (my own naming) infers that it was all of the above. Initially it began as the angry rebellious/revolutionary outcry of predominantly young African American males, which was projected in the arresting counter-symbol of young Black men beating Euro-American truck driver Reginald Denny.

This image of “Black violence” became the media-promoted “take” on the entire four-day Event. However the Rebellion which surged out onto the streets on April 29, 1992, was multiracial. The poor of all colors, particularly Latinos, as well as some Koreans and Euro-Americans, were the ones who chanted the phrase “No Justice, No Peace!” The night of burning was followed by days of looting and pillage, yet most of those arrested for this period of the Event were Latino (some 51 percent), while the media continued to portray the Event as “Black rage” about the verdict. A synergy of justifiable rage and crass opportunism conspired with the inaction of Chief of Police Daryl Gates to keep the Event unfolding over a period of four days. Images of entire sections of the city in flames caught the attention of the entire world, but such images do not adequately portray the gutted terrain of lost opportunity and imprisoned economics which afflicted most of the poor who participated in the Event.

XODUS is a way of naming the necessary theological, ethical, political, and economic analysis and constructive alternatives which second-generation Black theology must address. To the issue of racial justice, which James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, and others so aptly addressed in the first generation, XODUS theologians must now address the interlocking issues of gender discrimination (sexism), class privilege (classism), and homophobia (heterosexism), as well as some of the lesser recognized forms of oppression in the dominant society, such as discrimination against the aged (age-ism) and revulsion toward the physically challenged and infirm (able-ism). Initial work on these issues has already been done by first-generation Black male theologians. Our work — especially that of Dwight Hopkins, Josiah Young, Will Coleman, Anthony Pinn, George Cummings, Jon Michael Spencer, Elias

Farajaje-Jones, Theodore Walker, Darryl Trimeuw, Cornel West, and KASIMU — is to “stand on their shoulders” and reach a little further than they could. XODUS, therefore, is not a radical break from the past but, in the best of African traditions which honor and respect the elders, sees itself as building on the work of those who have gone before us. Black feminists and womanist scholars such as Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Cheryl Sanders, Renee Hill, Kelly Brown Douglas, Toinette Eugene, and Karen Baker-Fletcher are active dialogue partners to the constructive energies of XODUS creativity. All of us were raised as “Children of the Dream”⁷ of Martin Luther King *and* as heirs to the legacy of uncompromising militant Blackness as espoused by Malcolm X and the Black Power movement.

The “X” of XODUS reminds us of that “lost-found” legacy of West African ancestry remembered by Malcolm X and others of the Nation of Islam. Not only are we Martin’s Dream Children, we are also an X People who no longer “remember” our ancient kinship names. As Dream Children we seek a place and Space BIG enough for our Blackness, Roundness, S/spirit, food, music, struggle, and the funkiness of our African selves in all their variety. As X People we gather in a Circle of Love and recount the Ancient Stories which have been neglected and dis-remembered. As Dream Children and X People African Americans of the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century stand on the brink of an important transition. Is our future that of complete and utter assimilation into Euro-Americanness, or are we to stand firm as a distinct “Black” culture in the midst of the “White” United States of America? Are we really “Americans,” or are we, as Malcolm X said so long ago, Africans who happen to be in America?

The XODUS theological answer to these questions can be summarized in the works of several authors.

- *XODUS theology and ethics insists that the contributions of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz was his last Name) must be brought together.* Cone’s *Martin & Malcolm & America* insists that the next step for Black theology must be to find a way of holding these two legacies together. Cone lifts up Malcolm’s fiery militant and prophetic rhetoric as the greatest safeguard against the genocide of our culture and bodies. Cone embraces Martin’s prophetic vision of the moment of destiny for America, as well as his multicultural inclusiveness as a complementary tradition which ought not to be lost.⁸ Dwight Hopkins’s research indicates that both Malcolm and Martin criticized the lack of economic opportunities and access afflicting Black Ameri-

cans and leaned toward a socialist recasting of the economy.⁹ Both were pan-African, deepening their struggles here in the USA by extensive international African contacts.

- *XODUS theology and ethics resonates with liberation theology.* Such a statement does not preclude attention to the personal, individual, or psychological, but places concern for these matters within a contextual framework of social analysis. In my own work *XODUS: An African American Male Journey* I use a great deal of space demonstrating the ties between media portrayals and society's stereotypes and expectations, on the one hand, and the actual psychospiritual health of African Americans, on the other, insisting that it is precisely in the area of inner transformation that social frameworks and space are created.¹⁰ Further, XODUS liberation does not confine the term "liberation" to political or economic policies or timetables, but insists that traditional Christian understandings of "salvation" and "atonement" would benefit from a more concrete "this-worldly" interpretation which presses toward greater political action. Finally, along with womanists, XODUS theology and ethics insists that liberation ought to be for the *entire* community. Thus it looks closely at the ways in which relationships between men and men, women and men, women and women, parents and children, and children with each other can be strengthened.

- *XODUS theology and ethics moves beyond liberation to Reconstruction.* As the "New South Africa" struggles to find ways to rebuild, heal, and reconstruct aspects of Black South Africa's economic, psychological, and spiritual structures, so XODUS theology and ethics sees its task as envisioning the reconstruction of a people. African Americans live in a confusing miasma of postliberal political ideology in which even the most unmasked forms of racialized rhetoric are deemed "acceptable" in the public sphere of the USA. So-called "conservatives" revel in casting African Americans as pariahs who must learn how to "do for yourself" and stop asking for "hand-outs." We live in a post-Freedom-Struggle, post-Civil-Rights era which has no patience or interest in hearing about "Black problems." We have gained *legal* and *civil* rights, but those victories of an earlier generation are thrown in our faces in the most uncivil and vitriolic form of racialized rhetoric! The effect on our self-image, self-respect, and confidence has been devastating. After those few gains won in the civil rights battles to gain access to the Industrial Age, its factories and assembly-line disappeared in the wake of the high-tech Information Age. After experiencing a kind of "Second Reconstruction" of gains in legal and civil rights, we have suffered the indignity of being humiliated by the demise of the industrial era's economy because so many

of our folk were heavily invested and trained in industrial skills. Now, forced to work in the lowest-paying service sector jobs, many young men, in particular, have opted for the high-risk possibility of large sums of cash by selling illegal drugs. The drug culture has replaced the honorable “Mom and Pop” entrepreneurship of the Jim Crow era, and all African Americans are paying a tremendous price because of the attendant violence. Various theories of “White conspiracy” concerning the influx of drugs into Black communities point to the objective reality that Blacks use 17 percent of the drugs in the USA but comprise 55 percent of those arrested and 74 percent of those sentenced!¹¹ In light of these statistics and the fact that one of every three young Black males between the ages of eleven and twenty-five is involved with the criminal justice system (either in jail, on parole, or awaiting trial), we see the virtual decimation of future Black manhood already becoming a reality. At the same time Black women and Latinas comprise 77 percent of the most recently reported cases of HIV/AIDS. Such a people require a reconstructed view of themselves, one sturdy enough to withstand the dire consequences of politically institutionalized neglect and malevolence.

- *XODUS theology and ethics practices genuine “family values.”* In our time the phrase “family values” has become a political football passed back and forth between the two poles of “conservative traditional values” and “progressive politics.” In the African American community “family values” is not a slogan of political competition for votes but rather often makes the difference between those who survive and those who do not. Since family was the first victim of the rupturing experience of enslavement for Africans, nurturing kinship ties remains one of the most important loyalties of African American Folk. First-generation Black theologian J. Deotis Roberts presciently wrote about “family values” in 1980 in his volume *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*.¹² A more controversial treatment of family ushers forth in Theodore Walker’s *Empower the People*.¹³ Walker’s call for early marriages and early sex education demonstrates his willingness to engage in issues critical to this formative Space for nourishing Black life and resonates with XODUS energy.

- *XODUS theology and ethics is church-based and church-nurtured.* The wellspring and source of Black Theology was in the conversation of Black Christian males between their Black church experience and their critical appropriation of the European-American-dominated academic theological milieu. This intellectual and theological conversation has been rich and multivalent, but it has also left behind most Black church pastors and members. Perhaps those of us who write Black theology are trying

to speak to two different kinds of audiences in a language which is not comprehensible or acceptable to either! Nevertheless XODUS theology, as a second-generation Black male theology, arises from the experience of GOD, Christ, and SPIRIT in various Black churches, as did the first-generation theology. Bridging the gap between the academy's interest in a philosophically sophisticated theology (a form of *didache*) and the church's need for proclamation (*kerygma*), XODUS theo-ethics places itself in the mediating position — teaching both audiences about each other. Why do we do this? It is necessary that the intellectual life and the spiritual life be brought together. Despite frequent references in Black preaching to the lack of SPIRIT in the “cemetery” (the often repeated humorous term for “seminary”), XODUS theo-ethics pushes itself to remain true to its SPIRIT-based church roots. As a seminary professor I can attest to the power of Black preaching as a gift not just to our own churches, but also to the Universal Church.

- *XODUS theology and ethics is “Streets”-aware.* For those on XODUS JOURNEY the Streets are a SPACE of enormous pain and power. Such painful power cannot be passed over for more traditionally accepted resources. So, flying in the face of what would be considered “normal” theology, XODUS turns to the streets in order to be “real.”

- *XODUS theology and ethics is pan-African.* One of the best examples of intentionally self-conscious pan-Africanity is in the work of Josiah Young.¹⁴ While there are various definitions of “pan-African,” I specifically want to *differentiate* a pan-African perspective from an “Afrocentric” approach. A *pan-African theology and ethics is African-appreciative* — willing to tease out and analyze all cultural, psychological, and normative patterns of a practice and concept that owe something to various African cultures and traditions, *but is not ideologically African-centered.* XODUS thinking values things African. To express such ideas publicly usually produces a barrage of questions which imply that by valuing Africa and African ideas I mean to devalue other cultures, particularly the European and Euro-American. I have tremendous respect for the accomplishments and legacy of achievements in all cultures. One cannot help but stand in awe of the magnificent dynasties of China, the legacy of spiritual warriors in Japan, the technological genius of various European nations, and so forth.

Nevertheless, we live in a world where European and Euro-American historical accomplishments are still deemed “classic” and “basic,” allowing ignorance and misconceptions about Native cultures that flourished for a millennium on this “American” soil and disdain for Africa to go unchallenged. Africa becomes nothing more than a geographical locale where

“we” got “our” slaves, even though NOW “we” are too “Enlightened” to believe in slavery anymore. Africa is not presented as the place where one of the longest (some say *the longest*) civilizations flourished for thirty-five hundred years, the ancient Egyptians who called themselves “Kamites” or “Black Ones.” Africa is not presented as a place where Timbuktu existed as one of the greatest centers of academic learning for over eight centuries. The accomplishments of great Angolan warrior-queen Nzinga are never mentioned, nor are the civilizations of Mali, Songhay, or the Yoruba at Ife, even though most African Americans could trace some of their ancestral lineage to such places if the means for such tracing had not been erased.

XODUS ethics necessarily insists that until such a time as these things are taught with the achievements of other eminent cultures, Africans living in places like the USA have the moral duty and obligation to be *African-appreciative*. Africans are now scattered throughout the globe. Their contributions have richly mixed with those of Europe, South America, and North America in particular. The pan-African perspective of XODUS theo-ethics insists that *one ought to lift up the inherent diversity, hybridity, and complexity of African presence rather than press toward the identification of an ever elusive, purported “authentic” African “essence” that appears to be one of the fundamental presuppositions of Afrocentric scholars.*¹⁵ Thus, to be pan-African is to be *appreciative of African presence in all of its rich particularity*, seeking a complex and diversified conceptuality of Blackness or “Africanity” grounded in examples taken from a variety of different African peoples throughout the globe. Pan-African analysis stresses:

1. historiographic retrieval of various African contributions to cultures and civilizations, such as those of Egypt, Cush, Ghana, Songhay, Mali, and the USA;
2. critical contemporary reinterpretation of ancient traditions which insists upon the importance of valuing those aspects of a historic culture appropriate to our contemporary context and Christian values; and
3. casting a wide net of examples, looking for the “particulars” of African cultures before attempting tentative generalizations in order to avoid simplistic idealizations of “Africa” or a romanticized uncritical appropriation of anachronistic attitudes of an ancient time.

• *XODUS theology and ethics is Nature-Grounded and SPIRIT-filled.* Ecological consciousness is not a “White thing,” but a human thing. Tra-

ditional autochthonous (earth-grounded) cultures throughout the world have always honored the SPIRIT-filled Power and Awe that comes from communing with the ALL that surrounds us. Currently throughout the pan-African Diaspora Afrikan¹⁶ persons are arising to the challenge of saving the earth from human abusive practices. In Zimbabwe ZIRRCO (Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation) has been organizing an ecumenical group of over one hundred African Independent churches for the explicit purpose of waging a *chimurenga* (war of liberation) for the planet. In Zimbabwe efforts are being made at reforestation of millions of the deforested acres and delivering the earth by *clothing the land* with trees (*kufukidza nyika*).¹⁷

Efforts to bring Black churches in the United States into the “green army” have met with varying levels of success, dependent on whether the environmental group leading the cause has shown sufficient understanding of the interrelationship between racist policies and ecological abuse. Greenpeace has one of its primary bases in a poor Black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and has helped local people to fight against toxic levels of lead. XODUS theology and ethics sees the necessity of re-Connecting human beings with the Earth. To speak of re-Connection is to recognize that the onslaught of modern technology also brought a wake of technicized instrumentalized logic which reduced the Earth to its objective “function” as a site for exploiting “natural resources.” This mentality has spread over the face of the globe. It afflicts the moral and spiritual imagination of every continent and nation. XODUS African Americans join persons throughout the globe, and particularly other Afrikans, as we all struggle together to become EARTHKEEPERS¹⁸ rather than earth-exploiters.

To value the Earth and all of Her creatures is an essential task of being HUMAN, according to Genesis 1:28, and so XODUS reflection points out that as we are “earth creatures” (*ha adam* in Hebrew) taken from the earth (*ha adamah*), so we must treat the ground as Sacred GROUND. From the Sacred GROUND GOD has formed and fashioned us, and we are made of the same materials as the trees, rocks, eagles, bears, and the soil under our feet. As we have emerged from COMMON GROUND, so we *are* COMMON GROUND.

- *XODUS theology and ethics creates Psycho-Spiritual SPACE through the use of Visualized Written Rhetoric.* There is not enough linguistic breathing space within the traditional confines of traditional academicism for the flesh-and-blood terrors, joys, and frustrations of being “Black” in a “White”-dominated cosmos. Throughout our sojourn in the so-called “New World” Africans have taken the language of the masters/mistresses

and reshaped it into something meaningful to our experience. We have elongated the sounds of words to provide a sonic painting of the meaning of the words. So “long” became “lo-o-o-ong” and “hot” was transmuted into a staccato shout — “HOT!!!” So doing we Africanized English, painting words into the world of meaning, as is true for several West African cultures. The flat, dull, monochromatic, and unmodulated drone of traditional academic “description” is at odds with the en-fleshing, vitalist linguistic style which is still present in African American speech patterns.

XODUS theology and ethics insists that such vivifying practices have more to offer the academy than the academy has to offer them. Therefore the rhetoric of XODUS shifts, CAPITALIZES WORDS it deems important, Disrupts using **boldface** and *italics* in “inconvenient” places, all in the attempt to actually VISUALIZE the language. Such disruptive patterns are not random, but designed with the intent to bring to the WRITTEN WORD, something of the salty, tangy, pungent urgency and expressiveness which *is* BLACK ENGLISH, or, as it is referred to in the Afrikan-centered Community of scholars — EBONICS. Staying true to an Ebonic sense of the flow and rhythm of the language is a hermeneutical demonstration of the underlying liberative intent of XODUS analysis — to free Afrikans of their unconscious assimilation of monochromatic Euro-ness. If we cannot WRITE in a fashion that actually *expresses* our deepest longings, desires, and reflections, we perpetuate and unconsciously condone the centuries-long modulation of our Afrikan-ness into something deemed more “acceptable” to European “standards.”

Methodology

Dialogical. Our methodology is similar to what Gordon Kaufman and David Tracy refer to as theological conversation. Will Coleman refers to it as tribal talk. It involves the talking out of theological and ethical ideas in a dialogical process. We take seriously the notion that theology is God-talk. God-talk is a dialogical encounter. Here, it is dialogical in a literal sense because we are two voices — one womanist and one XODUS. The purpose of writing this book is not to come to full agreement on various theological issues. Rather our purpose is to engage in dialogue in an appreciative and critical manner to reveal both similarities and differences in Black male and Black female God-talk. We are *only two voices*, bringing our distinctive perspectives as a womanist and a Black male theologian. We hope that more womanist and Black male theologians will engage in this kind of dialogue in the future. Such dialogue is important be-

cause it values the ongoing process of theological reflection. It neither pits ideas against one another, nor gives token nods to each other. Genuine engagement is necessary for real theological and ethical change to take place in the academy, church, and community. This book is an exercise in dialogical theology and ethics.

Each chapter includes two perspectives on theological doctrine and theological ethics. A womanist and an XODUS angle of vision are presented in full. Following the two presentations are our responses to each other's theological and ethical constructions. We have chosen this format so that the reader is required to fully listen to and become familiar with each perspective in order to ascertain some of the similarities and differences in our thought. This also requires that we, the conversationalists, listen to one another in full before determining where our thought is similar and where differences arise. Since our intent is not to blend or blur our ideas, our conclusions will discuss a range of ideas presented. The objective is not to come to any comfortable resting place or caesura in the restlessness of theological process. Our goal is to leave signposts marking the direction we discern our theological and ethical ideas are moving.

Inductive. Inductive logic is a way of reasoning that starts with particular facts, building them toward a general conclusion. Unlike deduction, which begins with a general proposition or principle and proceeds with demonstrations of the particular, induction privileges the ability of particular experiences to create a more complete understanding when they are brought together. Womanist theology and ethics begins with the facticity of Black women's daily lives. It quilts these particular experiences into a pattern of conclusions about the general situation of Black women. XODUS theology and ethics privileges the raw experiences of Black men speaking for themselves, not being spoken about by others. Both womanist and XODUS thinking insist upon the ability of the microscopic data of real lives to make an impact on the macroscopic conclusions which an argument seeks to achieve.

Diunital. Womanist theologians and ethicists have long proclaimed the importance of moving beyond the strictures of either/or means of logic to a both/and method of thinking. H. Richard Niebuhr employs a similar method in his well-known work *Christ and Culture*. Theophus Smith, African American cultural anthropologist and philosopher, has identified the *both/and* approach as a uniquely African retention in African American culture. Citing philosopher Vernon Dixon, Smith names this approach "diunital."

Diunital thinking involves appreciating the tensions of difference. It affirms the facticity of contrasts, opposites, and apparently conflicting co-

existence. For example, much moral truth in life is neither purely innocent nor purely evil, but rather is a frustrating combination of both. A question that arises in response to this kind of thinking is: So, what? Does that mean anything goes? That is not the purpose of diunital thinking; it is rather to clarify the complexity of genuine moral dilemmas. For example, no one who participated in the April 1992 Uprising/Riot/Rebellion of Los Angeles can claim innocence in the face of their justifiable rage at an unjust verdict. Neither can the legal system be exonerated from taking responsibility for its participation in creating the conditions whereby feelings of deferred justice and dispensability of people of color and the poor could boil into such a massive outpouring of rage.

The purpose of diunital reasoning is not to blur the lines between good and evil, but, to the contrary, it clarifies the complexity of moral experience and reclaims those goods which have been falsely labeled evil by oppressive forces. Womanists seek to rename and reclaim female *and* male, Black *and* White, rich *and* poor as ontologically, existentially, and aesthetically good in a patriarchal, Western culture in which femaleness, Blackness, and the poor have been cast as evil. XODUS thought seeks to reclaim ancient Kemetic moral notions of Blackness as spiritually positive. Doing so does not negate White people. XODUS thought further insists on African peoples throughout the world finding their own socioeconomic and political determination, but does so within the global affirmation of multiculturalism. Womanist thought likewise seeks a positive reclamation of color within the affirmation of multiracial and multicultural reality.

In both XODUS and womanist thought, neither Blacks nor Whites, women nor men, rich nor poor are purely good or evil. Each is fully human. Each is capable of participating in human existence both as oppressor and oppressed. This means that while Black women and White women are both on the receiving end of sexist acts, White women can be racist and Black women who are middle class can be classist. While poor White men and poor Black men are both victims of classism, White men can be racist and Black men can be sexist. On the positive end, such diunital thinking moves beyond the problems of sin and evil to consider the positive moral values in the cultures of women and men, Blacks and Whites, rich and poor. It moves beyond the problems of sin and evil to look for solutions. To this effect, it examines the liberating, saving, healing faith doctrines and moral powers of dispossessed peoples, particularly those of Black men and women.

Diunital thinking is ontological and axiological, that is, it moves throughout the realms of both be-ing and do-ing. We cannot confine it

to the realm of Be-ing alone or to the realm of Act-ing alone. Rather, because our characters consist of both moral excellences and spiritual torpor (Calvin's term for that aspect of our spiritual self which is asleep, dulled, and unenlightened), we are capable of both good and evil decisions. In XODUS the diunitality of moral life is to develop greater awareness and facility in living in harmony with the GOOD which is GOD, while simultaneously achieving a more chastened power over those weaknesses, faults, and rebellious ways which enervate and undermine our virtues. In ancient Kemetic thought this moral aim, to develop greater harmony with the cosmos and greater powers of virtues and self-control, culminated in gaining the high title of *geru ma'at* ("one who is self-mastered"). Christian Scripture refers to this same process as developing the "fruits of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:20–24.

In womanist thought, who human beings are cannot be separated from what they do. Beingness is inextricably interrelated with acts. Anna Julia Cooper refers to such a diunital mode of thinking in her essay "The Gain from a Belief," in which she emphasizes *faith that works* in contrast to skeptical philosophical systems. Such an emphasis points to faith as more than a state of be-ing. Faith is evidenced in action. Jacquelyn Grant in her womanist Christology refuses to separate the "person of Christ" from the "work of Christ." In womanist thought one discerns that Jesus is the Christ by what he does. In this sense, womanist thought is in keeping with the book of Mark, where Jesus' identity is revealed through appellative acts.¹⁹ During slavery, one refrain of a popular spiritual proclaimed that "everyone talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there." *Claiming to be* Christian did not mean you *were* Christian if you did not *act* Christian. The song indicates that slaves were valuing the consistency of moral acts in relation to *claims* of belief as the plumblineline of true faith. Slaves insisted on the inseparability of moral actions and claims to ontological goodness. Such a hermeneutic of suspicion is still in effect today. KASIMU refers to this hermeneutic as *iconoclasm*.

Iconoclastic. XODUS and womanist theology and ethics are iconoclastic—they are idol-identifying and idol-smashing enterprises. One of our most influential professors was womanist ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon during our graduate school sojourn at Harvard in the 1980s. She embodied iconoclastic methodology. Her style of teaching was rooted as much in "down-home" southern Black women's cultural traditions as in academic traditions. Well-versed in classical and modern ethical "canons," these were always intentionally interpreted through "Katie's Canon." Her "Canon" is not an individual possession, but a canon of Black women's writings and oral traditions that reveal moral agency, virtues, and val-

ues. From her comes the insight that the task of a liberative ethics is threefold:

1. *debunk* to undermine oppressive foundations and assumptions which bind hopes, smash dreams, and keep the poor locked out;
2. *demystify* to cast off the illusions, obfuscating language, and faulty logics that legitimate systems of oppression; and
3. *disentangle* the webs of lies, distortions, manipulations, and perversions of truth which pass for social norms and values. Disentangling's second task is to tease out and lift up strands of hope and the dreams of the dispossessed from the morass of silencing in order for the narratives, lives, and traditions of survival-in-the-midst of oppression to finally be heard publicly.

Social-Historical. Womanist and XODUS theology and ethics are contextual. The starting point is social-historical experience, as evidenced in written and oral sources by Black women and men, from the modern period to our postmodern present. Both perspectives presuppose that theology and ethics move from a particular body of experiential knowledge to universal claims and understandings about the God-human relationship. They are both particular and universal, continuing in the diurnal process of reasoning described above.

Out of the sociohistorical contexts and experiences of pan-African women and men there is a complex dynamic of oppression, reaction, occasional eruptions of freedom, and an ongoing praxis of psychospiritual character building. African experiences in the Americas cannot be reduced to a shallow victimology or a dialectic of accommodation and resistance, nor can it be trumpeted as a stream of temporary "victories" in the midst of tyranny. It is a complex interactive dynamic in which the historical fact of oppression cannot be understood unless one also factors in the melody of eruptive victorious resistance and the counter-melody of occasional repressive backlashes by dominant populations. This complex interactive dynamic is a strange "music," dissonant and atonal even though there are moments of sweet melody and glorious harmony.

The praxis of psychospiritual character building is something passed on from one generation to the next. In recent years many of the best African retentions (such as the Ashanti proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child"), practiced and learned for generations as part of the embedded reality of being "Black," have been neglected and discarded in the rush to join the European American middle-class mainstream. Those precious "village ways" by which every adult not only *felt responsible* for

all of the children, but *acted responsibly* have been lost in a mad rush for American "success."

Are we condemning the values and norms of the United States of America? Not completely, because we are as much *American* as we are still *African*. Rather, we write in keeping with the positive longing within many contemporary circles for persons to gain a genuinely *multicultural* consciousness. Womanist and XODUS theological-ethical creativity pushes against the tide of uncritical conformity to both European American-influenced "middle-class" values *and* against romanticized visions of a "glorious" African past which can never have much relevance for overlapping crises threatening Black folk today. Our dialogue will seek to systematically plumb the theological and ethical resources available to those who love themselves and God... *regardless*. With a firm faith in the possibilities of two heads being more wholistic and inclusive than one, we put our minds and spirits together in the service of God's Reign on Earth.

Notes

1. These are the three desiderata of former colleague Clark Williamson of Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis.
2. This is one of Katie Cannon's favorite images of African American traditional mores. She repeats it in various forms whenever she lectures.
3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.
4. *Ibid.*, 231-43.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 240.
7. This is a phrase which Karen Baker-Fletcher uses frequently to describe those of us whose childhood encompassed the promising, hope-filled, yet harsh period of early integration from 1955 to 1975.
8. James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 315-18.
9. Dwight Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 195-97.
10. Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher, *XODUS: An African American Male Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
11. These statistics were taken from a 1995 survey at Harvard University.
12. J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).
13. Theodore Walker, *Empower the People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).
14. Josiah Young, *Black and African Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), and *A Pan-African Theology* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992).
15. One cannot read the important conceptual works of Molefi Kete Asante without recognizing that he presumes to identify a *simple, nonhybrid, and non-*