

## **Mourning the Loss of Cultural Selfobjects: Black Embodiment and Religious Experience after Trauma**

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### ABSTRACT

Psychoanalytic self psychology is appropriated to examine the impact of embodied trauma for the development of the self and the capacity for religious and cultural affiliation. The impact of negative cultural reflections of blackness must be acknowledged as having a psychological and social impact. Specifically explored is the unconscious identification with and disavowal of negative images of self as black, and the loss of the culture's place in providing needed mirroring and idealization experiences. This loss is magnified when trauma is a feature. The de-idealization and loss of cultural selfobjects creates the need to engage a process of mourning. Overcoming resistance to mourning the loss of culture as a site for the gratification of selfobject needs is central to making a link between the individual and the social. Finally, the implications for practical theology and practice are considered.

Keywords: religion, self psychology, trauma, womanist theology.

Psychoanalyst Kimberlyn Leary has stated that "gender—like race, is worn and lived similarly and differently by each of us."<sup>1</sup> Race is worn. Indeed it is. Consider Rita, a very tall and slim blond-haired woman new to this country who was referred because her eating disorder had returned. Rita's fantasy of her new therapist did not include her being a black or large woman. Rita embodied race and she wanted me to wear *her* race too. Bradley too idealized skin color—just not his own. Bradley explained that he was depressed because no one at his all-black school liked him " 'because I am black.' Bradley's mother was dismissive. We don't even talk about color in my family. I mean we don't think about it. His father is dark skinned. That's why he married me. He wanted someone lighter so the children wouldn't be picked on like he was." Each family member wore race and color similarly and differently. Recall this

1. K. Leary, "Race, Self-Disclosure, and 'Forbidden Talk: Race and Ethnicity,'" in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 66 (1997), pp. 163–89.

scene in the media: a group of young African American women, experiencing the moment of a lifetime—they are athletes at Rutgers University, playing on a winning team. A media personality, a white man in a position of privilege, sees not success but the debased position black and woman hold in his psyche: on his radio program he refers to them as “nappy headed black hos.” Where they were once celebrated, the media now focused on *his* representation of them.

### *Black Experience, Self, and Mirroring*

The meanings ascribed to color, race, and gender develop intrapsychically in a relational context that includes family, but also contexts beyond the family, and they can be deeply embedded in one's symptoms. These vignettes compel us to think out the ways in which color, race, and gender are mirrored back to us via a variety of socio-cultural sources. Such experiences claim residence in the psyches of us all. Images shouting across the airways combine with already forming self-experiences—and adhere with surprising tenacity. It is the tenacious nature of these processes that leaves any exploration of African American women's lives limited in the absence of a psychoanalytic perspective.

In developing such a perspective, I turn specifically to Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology. According to Kohut, the self coalesces as the result of exposure to sustaining selfobject experiences of mirroring, idealization, and twinship/kinship (to which later theorists would add adversarial experiences and experiences of efficacy). Mirroring, for instance, is the need “to feel recognized and affirmed; to feel accepted, appreciated, and responded to,”<sup>2</sup> and it facilitates a firmness of self. In the clinical setting these needs may be archaic in their expression. But an important contribution of self psychology was to position them as needs that are transformed and mature throughout the life cycle. Thus we do not grow beyond these needs.<sup>3</sup> As Ernest Wolf explains,

Throughout his [*sic*] life a person will experience himself as a cohesive harmonious firm unit in time and space, connected with his past and pointing meaningfully into a creative-productive future...as long as, at each stage of his life, he experiences certain representatives of human surrounds as joyfully responding to him, as available sources idealized strength.<sup>4</sup>

2. Ernest Wolf, “Selfobject Experiences: Development, Psychopathology, Treatment,” in Selma Kramer and Salman Akhtar (eds.), *Mahler and Kohut, Perspectives on Development, Psychopathology, and Treatment* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), pp. 65–96 (72).

3. Ernest Wolf, *Treating the Self* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), p. 55.

4. Wolf, *Treating the Self*, p. 55.

A number of questions are raised by this approach viewed through the lens of black women's lives. If it is the mirroring that brings about "self," what happens to the development of subjectivity when the source for mirroring offers a distorted and exploited reflection? What happens to self when one's body is exploited and violated by those who should provide this necessary mirroring? What is the relationship of culture and society to mirroring and the development of a cohesive self? And what are we to make of this connection to past when the past is riddled with experiences that not only failed to guarantee "a creative-productive future" but seemed to promise a dangerous one? It might even be necessary to ask whether there are aspects of the personal and historical pasts that we embody with which we cannot and should not maintain a harmonious connection. Gender, sexuality, and race—embattled terms in today's cultural context—do not necessarily allow, as components of "self," for a smooth path of development. The reality of black women's complex societal contexts means that we must theoretically reckon with the impact of a mirroring that projects, along with opportunities for healthy acceptance, a distorted reflection. Self psychology would lead us to speculate that when faulty or abusive selfobject experiences of the early environment are contiguous with the reflections in the broader culture, we can expect a compromised developmental trajectory, the failure to develop a cohesive self and a conflictual relationship to cultural sites.

To counteract the invisibility of black experience and culture, self-psychology must be supplemented by a black feminist perspective. Psychologist Beverly Greene writes that African American women develop in "a social environment that is rich but also treacherous."<sup>5</sup> Frances Trotman has explored differences between African American and European American women, a premier example of which concerns physical differences: "Physical differences are the basis of initial and ongoing differences in the treatment of African Americans by both European Americans and African Americans."<sup>6</sup> Jessica Henderson Daniel, examines "racism as a reality-based and repetitive trauma in the lives of African Americans," noting that treatment strategies must consider

5. Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene, "African American Women," in *Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), pp. 10–29 (10).

6. Frances K. Trotman, "Feminist and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy with African American Women: Some Differences," in Leslie Jackson and Beverly Greene (eds.), *Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 251–74 (253).

both environmental and intrapsychic factors.<sup>7</sup> This work confirms that *both* intrapsychic processes *and* cultural experience are crucial dynamics, underscoring the need for a clear understanding of how cultural, gender, and sexual experiences take shape in the psyche and body and ultimately function in terms of the way they inform one's relationship to self and others.

### *Theological Reflection: Blasphemy and Defilement*

Theologically what we are grappling with here is sin. First is the sin of blasphemy and second, the sin of defilement, and the two are linked. Blasphemy is traditionally understood as the sin of disrespect and irreverence toward God in word and action. The social and personal mistreatment of black women is blasphemy because it runs counter to a theological understanding of human creation:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness";  
So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created;  
male and female they were created.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does the mistreatment of black women run counter to God's proclamation that humans were created in the image of the divine, and require the respect as ones emerging from the Holy's own hands. Whenever and whenever this proclamation is challenged, God's claim that "it was good" is refuted. Such blasphemy requires a theology that runs counter to the destructive messages of racism and sexism that work to defile the body and mind.

Defilement is to treat that which is sacred as if it is base and beneath its designed place. Therefore, defilement is not just considered in terms of what is done to someone but is also accessed by the impact it makes on how the recipient comes to view her or himself. Delores Williams offers a womanist perspective on defilement and calls it "the social sin of American patriarchy"<sup>9</sup> "atrocious actions against another person that constitute defilement"<sup>10</sup> and calls the "...defilement of Black women's

7. Jessica Henderson Daniel, "The Courage to Hear: African American Women's Memories of Racial Trauma," in Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene (eds.), *Psychotherapy with African American Women*, pp. 126-44 (126).

8. NRSV with revision.

9. Delores Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in Emilie M. Townes (ed.), *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 130-49 (144).

10. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," p. 145.

bodies and the resulting attack upon their spirits and self-esteem constitute the gravest kind of social sin."<sup>11</sup> In other words, defilement makes its impact on the surface and the interior; it impacts the capacity of communal relating and relating to oneself. Defilement reverses the position of the creator and the created—to name and to create order out of chaos,<sup>12</sup> and to proclaim humanity's origin as emerging from the declaration "let us make humans in our image." Finally, defilement induces corruption and decay of the spirit and community from which it emanates and upon which is collectively heaped. Williams's work addresses the social and individual expression of sin. Individually, she holds, defilement is sustained by the individual when she participates in the perpetuation and proliferation of negative and demeaning images of black woman through silence and/or adopting the devalued position of black womanhood. Individual sin is also embodying the negative and dehumanizing views of black women through "violence, exploited labor"<sup>13</sup> and, I would add, the sexual exploitation of black women common in pornography and related cultural productions.

In her discussion of the cultural production of evil, Emilie Townes includes a poetic on black women's movement to "liberatory space": "so black women can, if we must, begin with the wounds, those scars, in Eula's word, that are our mother's, daughters', sisters' thick and hard so no one can ever pass through to hurt us again the folds of those old wounds, that in some cases maimed us with lies, secrets and silences we are told about other women that are told about ourselves these wounds mark us these wounds mark us but they need not define us."<sup>14</sup> If Townes is correct, then womanists must wrestle with the reality that for some, the wounds of silence and hurt not only mark them but come to define who they believe themselves, and who they believe others to be.

Defilement requires *reconciliation* with God's original proclamation and embodied practices that repeatedly announce the goodness of all creation, and names sin as that which individually and socially blocks the way of transformation<sup>15</sup> of the individual and society, and this is where the psychological and the theological will converge in womanist perspectives.

11. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," p. 145.

12. See Lee H. Butler, *Liberating our Dignity, Saving our Souls* (Atlanta, GA: Chalice Press, 2006) for further discussion of racism in a theological and psychological perspective.

13. Butler, *Liberating our Dignity*, p. 147.

14. Butler, *Liberating our Dignity*, p. 145.

15. See Emilie M. Townes *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2006) and Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," for a finely tuned ethical discussion of these issues.

Thus, any understanding of the embodied practices of racism must address the individual and the social aspects in terms that are psychological, cultural as well as theological. It is the reality of the dualistic splitting, with its psychological and relational manifestations, that leads Kelly Brown Douglas to declare that Womanist must "advocate a sexual discourse"<sup>16</sup> and that "the radicality of God's love...means God loves our very bodies... In order to respect the bodies and lives of others, we must first respect and love our own bodies and lives."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, a *clinical* discussion involving embodiment raises to the forefront the relationship between self and others, where "others" are the family, the faith community, or broader social milieu, and it demands a theological and religious response.

### *Clinical Vignette*

Rosie, a 28-year-old black woman, was referred to me due to ten years of chemical dependency coupled with prostitution and a near indigent existence. Rosie was an only child, raised in close contact with a large extended family. Her father worked at a shoe factory, and her mother had worked in a library until Rosie's birth. Initially Rosie described a loving family where she received all the material things she needed. The family held membership in a large black church where they were very much respected, active participants, and considered pillars of the community

Rosie had stopped attending church during young adulthood. She rejected any religious affiliation and often cited the hypocrisy of the church, noting that "saved people sin and just ask for forgiveness and turn around to sin again." Occasionally, she revealed her loss of religion as a personal concern and questioned how she could approach God given the life she now lived. She sometimes made vague references to the unreliability of God. On the whole, however, she seemed to function without an explicit association to organized religion, ideology, or spirituality. More apparent was her motivation to survive the atrocities of daily life on the street and to do this with a certain attitude of toughness and self-sufficiency. Outside of her irregular family contact, her significant relationships were with other prostitutes, drug dealers, and users. She was intelligent, articulate, and something of a street philosopher—she could discuss the politics of drug laws, police brutality, and the impact of social systems on her life.

16. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 123.

17. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 123.

Although reluctant for a time to discuss her life prior to adulthood, Rosie readily recounted events leading to her ten-year cocaine addiction, her "street job" as a prostitute—the only job she had held after high school, and the power she felt over men and women who would pay her for sex. She acknowledged the violence associated with her lifestyle but expressed confidence about "doing what she had to do to make it." When she could not make it, Rosie would turn to her parents to bail her out of jail, give her money, or care for her two daughters. When her life was out of control her family most often behaved as if she were just away. While they wanted to be supportive, forgiving and ready for rapprochement, they could not understand the pain with which she lived. Several months into her therapy she visited her mother and told her she was in therapy. Her mother encouraged Rosie to "get all the help" available.

With her mother's blessing Rosie returned with a far different life story. The childhood that gradually emerged was one filled with silences and denials in a family whose violence was hidden from the public eye. Rosie's father provided for the family while controlling them with an iron fist. Rosie never saw her father's violence toward her mother, but she heard it, along with her mother's muffled cries, through the walls. In the mornings after such violence, everything would be "normal" again.

Silence also covered Rosie's own abuse. She suffered years of repeated sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her uncle Dan, whom she described as "crazy." He raped Rosie when she was nine. When Rosie told her mother, she explained that he was emotionally ill. For several weeks her parents kept her away from her cousins' home. Eventually weekend visits resumed. At the age of 15 Rosie stole a gun from her father, and during a weekend visit shot her uncle in the leg. The family reported it as a shooting by an unknown assailant. The uncle was no longer left with the children and a short time later he was arrested for molesting a child in the neighborhood. Once again, the family rallied and, rather than going to jail, the uncle was hospitalized.

#### *Color and Trauma in the Treatment: Transference and Countertransference*

Rosie's therapy was extremely painful. Often my capacity to help her regulate the intensity of her rage was stretched to the limit. During some individual sessions Rosie said that she hated me for "torturing" her by "making" her talk about painful feelings and memories. She was convinced that I, like her uncle, enjoyed seeing her in such pain.

As Rosie talked, her body ached. Rosie revealed that she was also sexually abused by her father at four years of age. She frequently spoke

of wanting to “rip her skin off.” Once when I noticeably cringed, it enraged her. In the face of pain, I too had abandoned her. The extent of Rosie’s bodily and psychic trauma was evident during an art class. As part of a project in which she was to tell her life in pictures, Rosie drew a young girl whose head was severed from its body. The vaginal area was colored in bright red blotches, and her arms and legs covered in thick black lines. The horror and pain Rosie revealed in her art was in stark contrast to the empty smile on her face as she reviewed it.

The clinical concepts of transference and countertransference raise two questions I will consider. The first, what is the impact of therapy on one’s internal sense of *imago dei*? It is clear that abuse disrupts one’s knowledge and sense of being created in the image of God. This was made strikingly clear from Rosie’s side by the self portrait—a graphic portrayal of her sense of self. She now lives with a violent dualism—her head is severed from the body, her smile is split from her affect, and she longs to rip her skin off her body. If born created in the image of God, she now sees no evidence of this for her life.

As her therapist I attempted to mirror the effect of *her* splitting by recognizing her suffering *and* her fear of living into the fullness of the *imago dei*. On a very basic level, she realized that if, through our work, she pulled together the pieces of her splintered self—she would have to risk being seen, noticed, and possibly retraumatized in this present context—and this would be torture. The longing to be recognized as a person is fraught with anxiety for many, and with terror by those who have been so violated. As with any patient, as the therapist I must sit with this dread, her’s and mine, with an eye toward hope. Sometimes failing, sometimes approximating, and sometimes, *together*, we experienced a tenacious yet powerful grace. The relational context of therapy is complex, surely, and it can be a source for healing these dangerous splits. Therapy can contribute to the emotional groundwork necessary to challenge the belief that one’s blackness and gender is the site of “badness”. But, this is a slow process and a limited context—therapy sessions last 50 minutes to an hour and they involve one person who, more often than not, will make every effort to understand—regardless. For most black women, the process of reclaiming one’s black self fully will ideally (and eventually) involve engagement in increasingly wider circles of black women where a sense of kinship unfolds. But this too involves struggle, and relates to our second question.

The second question is how might our understanding of transference and countertransference offer for re-thinking our theological anthropology in light of black women’s experience? During the most difficult times, Rosie directed her rage at herself, her parents, and me.

She felt unprotected, and violated by them. She felt unprotected by me. I was confused as to how to regulate the force of her affect, and how to protect her from it. I worried the treatment would not last. I worried that the treatment would last. She came to hate her "nice black" family, with the secrets of which many were aware, while still failing to prevent her abuse. Over time the solid family image that Rosie unconsciously retained unraveled. She was disturbed that her family myths were coming apart "around all these white people"—the other therapists. "They think black people are crazy anyway," she said, and as far as she was concerned, I was in on the betrayal. I was trying to be "more white than black." Rosie was not convinced I knew enough to help her; she was not sure I really understood the "street"—her life—and I did not. Throughout our work together, I was struck by how her feelings coalesced around her color and her body, and how her therapy with me, a black woman, evoked these feelings so intensely. If Rosie could not believe herself to be black and created as good—she certainly had to question if a black woman sitting across from her—could be good.

Is this not the struggle—to know that "and it was good" is real for the self and beyond? How must we re-think our understanding of *imago dei* in light of Rosie? Several convictions, and challenges, arise: The first conviction is that we must understand *imago dei* socially, interpersonally and individually—thus, an epistemological claim is set before us: what are our sources for making claims or even questions concerning black women and *imago dei*? When considered in light of black women's experience, it is clear our understanding should have implications for the social order—and serve as a directive for a disordered society, and the interpersonal relations shaped by society; it must also have implications the ethical norms we advocate for relationships—clinically and socially.

The challenges lie in the area of *lived* experience, and in the means for transforming de-formed expressions of the *imago dei*. While Rosie's struggle to unite good and black was intensified with me in a particular way in the therapeutic contexts (of individual and group therapy), Rosie registered these same responses outside the explicit clinical milieu. When Rosie attended AA or NA meetings, these very dynamics arose in relation to the other members, in particular to the women. Where the company of other black women could have, as noted by N. Lynne Westfield, been a site for hospitality<sup>18</sup> and healing, it was not because Rosie could not *yet* respond to what was offered without distrust. Therefore,

18. N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

Rosie raises several challenges for a practical theology. How we are to respond to projections of hatred and suffering arising from bodily abuse that results in an inner world filled with unbearable conflict related to one's color, gender and culture? The challenge is for a practical theology and practical theologian that both recognizes the reality of the outer world and the ways in which the inner world can become distorted, and helps individuals and groups to come to recognize which domain (outer or inner) is active in relation to others. This requires a practical theology that speaks to the need to enter the fire together, as did Daniel *and his companions*, and not be burned. Work such as this is not for the isolate, and speaks to the necessity for therapists and pastoral caregivers alike to seek out others to hear alongside us, to think theologically with us and to witness the suffering that occurs in the process of giving care. This practical theology recognizes that while as black women—patients and/or therapists—we have not all experienced the bodily physical violations, we each know intimately the cultural and other forms of interpersonal violation that occurs in myriad ways which we must resist. For the clinician who is a practical theologian several implications are apparent: she (1) must have engaged in her own treatment, at the deepest level, the issues of color, race and gender; (2) must have pursued a graduate training program that at least adequately addressed these concerns; (3) continuously work to integrate her clinical work and theological convictions with black women's experience as the point of departure. Finally, we cannot disregard the challenge to articulate a psychodynamics of self that includes culture, race and gendered experience.

*Cultural Selfobjects and Rosie's Attempts  
to Compensate for Selfobject Failures*

At the time of his death, Kohut was only just beginning to explore the territory of cultural experiences and their significance for self and group cohesion. Noting that cultural experiences and events function psychologically for both individuals and cultural groups, he wondered whether "there are ways by which the deep insights psychoanalysis has gained about the individuals can be brought to bear on group psychology in a sensitive and creative fashion."<sup>19</sup> His view of culture was that it served to facilitate group cohesion by expressing the deepest longings, sufferings, and celebrations of the group. This experience of culture he labeled "cultural selfobjects" which he understood as those creative persons in

19. Heinz Kohut, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writing of Heinz Kohut: 1950–1978* (ed. Paul H. Ornstein; New York: International University Press, 1978), II, pp. 530–46 (530).

"religion, philosophy, art, and the sciences" who are in "empathic contact with the illness of the group self and, through their work...mobilize the unfulfilled narcissistic needs and point the way toward vital change."<sup>20</sup> These creative persons name the cultural malaise and the societal conditions that perpetuate group illness. He suggested that "cultural imagoes" have a role in the celebration of the self that is part of group belonging, and that this experience may function for the individual (and group) as a developmental step toward the formation of a cohesive self.<sup>21</sup>

Rosie's life calls for an understanding of how individuals as well as groups experience cohesion around negative experiences, or how people's cohesion may be organized and maintained around negative aspects of self *and* social experience, including race and gender. Rosie's uncle and her family were sources of abusive selfobject experiences. We might then expect that her experience of herself and significant others would retain—or repeat—aspects of the abusive experience. Given that she also experienced herself, at times, as capable of ending abuse to herself, as she did with her uncle, it would seem that she also retained aspects of this capacity to end abuse in future experiences.

For instance, her relationship with me as her therapist was painful partly because, as a black woman, I too closely reflected her relationship to black culture, black women, and men, and black skin was embedded in conflict and fear of betrayal. At times Rosie was able to end or modulate some of her negative experiencing of me. She raged and accused, and when I could acknowledge how my response or lack of response was experienced as faulty she experienced some form of efficacy. She railed that I stood by and let her suffer when I did not make an intervention or interpretation quickly enough. When I was able to acknowledge her experience, and stay with her in her rage, she sometimes experienced a degree of efficacy in her capacity to elicit my interest and help. Thus she could, for that session, end the abuse. When I could really hear her feelings of hatred about blackness, and only then, could we see how the confusion and pain of being with me was related to her experience in her family and the split evidenced by their "religious," "good family" public presentation.

Rosie railed, and needed to, in order to keep me at bay. She would vacillate between feelings of power and control, and despair and help-

20. Heinz Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), p. 84.

21. Kohut, *Self Psychology*, p. 84. Also see Mark Gehrie, "The Self and the Group: A Tentative Exploration in 'Applied Self Psychology,'" in Arnold Goldberg (ed.), *Advances in Self Psychology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), pp. 367–82 (372).

lessness. This shift between feelings of grandiosity and inferiority was the legacy of her abuse and neglect. We know that "events are traumatic when they severely damage an individual's sense of self *in relation to the selfobject world*. In the aftermath of trauma, an individual does her or his best to restore a sense of self, but inevitably must resort to methods of self-restoration for which a heavy price is paid."<sup>22</sup> One of the prices for such individuals is that fear of re-victimization becomes a central organizing force of their personality.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Rosie, trauma, and the lack of an empathic response to that trauma, resulted in her experiencing her body, and her very self, as suspect. Rosie's response, while generally detrimental to her wellbeing, was, we need to remember, aimed at psychological survival.

The family's concealment and lack of response to her abuse left Rosie without the necessary selfobject experiences that would have permitted her to feel emotionally and physically protected. Rosie's mother's own unresolved issues prevented her from fulfilling this function; in fact, she could barely acknowledge Rosie's experiences. Rosie eventually expressed great anger about her mother's inability to intervene and protect her. Rosie experienced her mother as abandoning and unable to protect her. Nor could she regulate or modulate Rosie's terror-induced fragmentation following the abuse. Rosie employed splitting as a way of managing her pain of the abuse, but also against the pain and anger related to her mother's powerlessness and the resulting abandonment.

Rosie's splitting was evident in her fantasies and feelings regarding the prostitution and cocaine abuse. The great inconsistencies of her life (evident in her life choices, her belief systems about her family, herself, and her children) are evidence of severe splitting. The childhood traumas to her body and psyche were so severe that she was unable to integrate them, which meant that important aspects of her development remained at the level of development when the abuse occurred. Grandiosity, in particular, was vertically split in her personality structure. If she felt powerful and in control, she did not recall that she had felt and could feel otherwise. She actually believed that she was powerful merely because she was *not feeling powerless at the moment*. The two feelings were not modulated and, consequently, not integrated.

22. Laura S. Josephs, "The Treatment of an Adult Survivor of Incest: A Self Psychological Perspective," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 52.3 (1992), pp. 201–12 (201).

23. See Doris Brothers and R. B. Ulman, *The Shattered Self* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1988); Doris Brothers, "The Leather Princess: Sado-masochism as the Rescripting of Trauma Scenarios," in Arnold Goldberg (ed.), *Progress in Self Psychology* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1997), pp. 245–68.

Rosie attempted to live up to a version of "the icon of the Strong black Woman," as described by Regina Romero. The paradox of the image, writes Romero, is that

she wears it like a suit of armor, a badge of courage. While it helps her to maintain tenacious [grip] against the dual oppression of racism and sexism, it is also an albatross around her neck... It keeps her from falling victim to her own despair, but it also masks her vulnerabilities... It is the substance around which folklore and legends, fact and fiction, have been written.<sup>24</sup>

Rosie used her involvement in prostitution in part to bolster her feeble self and to "mask her vulnerabilities." She was most often unaware of the feelings of powerlessness she had felt as a child or their relationship to her current experiences: her addiction to cocaine as well as the prostitution which made her a frequent target of unwanted sexual demands and violence. Betrayal by customers and "boyfriends" as well as "girl-friends" was common. In speaking of her childhood experiences, she attempted to ward off painful effects and the fear of further fragmentation through disavowal and by focusing on the actions that protected her and her siblings from their uncle. She was terrified of recalling her experiences of powerlessness and repeated trauma.

Her attempt to ward off her feelings can be recognized in the posture she had long maintained toward her father. For much of her life she retained a "trusting little girl" stance toward him—in and out of her therapy. In her early descriptions he was the idealized father: strong, caring, and a good grandfather to her children. Yet, as an adult, there seemed to be a correlation between the deterioration of her self-cohesion and the development of her daughters. Her depressive episodes and alcohol and cocaine abuse became more problematic when her daughters reached age four and five. Her daughter's development reactivated feelings related to previously unacknowledged abuse by her father. Fearful of confronting him, she initially withdrew from her daughters and extended family. The lack of appropriately protective responses during her development had left her inadequately prepared to respond to the needs of her children. Rosie's father did provide her with money, an apartment, and/or food; he did save her from further self-destructive episodes. Rosie felt dependent on him and did not have to relinquish her wish for an idealizable experience of him. He was not forced to acknowledge his abuse of her as a child, and he did not. Rosie had not grown up, and in fact had actually been discouraged from doing so. Rosie's trust of him permitted her to retain a

24. See Regina E. Romera, "The Icon of the Strong Black Woman: The Paradox of Strength," in Jackson and Greene, *Psychotherapy with African American Women*, pp. 225–38.

defensive trust in his motives, allowing her to split off the reality of her betrayal.

W. W. D. Fairbairn observed that children from obviously neglectful and abusive homes often employ a "moral" defense whereby they protected their parents by claiming—and believing—that the parents were good and they, the children, were bad to the core. These children were ashamed of themselves and their behaviors. "It becomes obvious, therefore, that the child would rather be bad himself than have bad objects (internalized experiences of the parent)... By using this moral defense, the child sacrifices his goodness; however, he is compensated by the illusion that he is attached to a 'good' object."<sup>25</sup> The need for the parent compels the child to choose the fantasy of a good parent over reality. The price paid is the malformation of the child's character.<sup>26</sup>

When one internalizes aspects of the abusing parent and, as a consequence, experiences one's internal life as abusive and unreliable, trust is a predominant concern. Doris Brothers' work with patients sexually abused by parental figures, helps us understand this aspect of Rosie's experience: "sexual trauma, as the pathogenic factor, cannot be valued highly enough," including the familial aspect, when "people thought to be trustworthy...misuse...the child."<sup>27</sup> Such abuses result in a derailment of the child's development of the capacity to trust because the child desperately needs to preserve the relationship of trust with the parental figure and uses "various psychological strategies including 'identification with the aggressor,' (to) maintain an illusion that his or her trust has not been betrayed."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Rosie suffered from what Brothers has conceptualized as a disturbance in "self-trust." It is the "hope or wishful expectation of obtaining from others and providing for others the self-object functions necessary for the development, maintenance, and restoration of self-experience." Self-trust, then, is a requisite, or necessary nutrient, for a sense of interior safety.<sup>29</sup> Rosie's disturbance of self-trust placed her in the position of making distorted attempts at self-repair in the context of her relationship with her father and mother, as well as in the relationship with prostitutes and drug-users. Her self disturbance

25. David Celani, "Applying Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory to the Dynamics of the Battered Woman," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 53.1 (Winter 1999), pp. 60–73 (65).

26. Mark J. Gehrie, "Empathy in a Broader Perspective: A Technical Approach to the Consequences of the Negative Selfobject in Early Character Formation," in Goldberg, *Progressions in Self Psychology*, XII, pp. 159–79 (163–64).

27. Sandor Ferenczi quoted in Doris Brothers, *Falling Backwards: An Exploration of Trust and Self Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 76.

28. Sandor Ferenczi quoted in Brothers, *Falling Backwards*, p. 76.

29. Sandor Ferenczi quoted in Brothers, *Falling Backwards*, p. 77.

was also evident in her intrapsychic use of (ambivalent relationship to) her perceptions of black culture and black communities. Hers were not attempts to re-experience her trauma, as some theorists suggest, but rather manifestations of her longing to “re-script the original trauma scenario.”<sup>30</sup> Rosie sought not only to alter the bodily significance and relevance of these—but she also sought to alter the ways in which her trauma was integral to her current cultural experiences. By contextualizing her experience via African American women’s experience, especially the experience of cultural mirroring, we can better understand how it is that Rosie chose prostitution as the means to force a form *self coherence*—between how she felt about herself and her family and black community.

### *Black Feminists and Womanists on Traumatic Cultural Experiences*

Patricia Hill Collins and other black feminist/womanist scholars help us to see how African American women are gazed upon through the hostile lens of white domination. Mirroring—or what is reflected back—is the sexualized and distorted racialized vision (representation) in the gazer’s eyes.<sup>31</sup> What we see reflected in the gazer’s eyes teaches us about “race, gender, and social class without obvious teaching or conscious learning,” and these images “grafted onto existing social institutions are so pervasive...black women’s portrayal as the Other persists.”<sup>32</sup> This *otherness* is perpetuated through the daily experiences of projection and internalization of negative representations of “black” and “female.”<sup>33</sup>

The bodily features of black female experience—dark skin, nappy and short hair, big and wide noses, and big bodies, as well as “yellow” skin, “good hair,” and pert noses—are integral to black women’s daily experiences of black culture as well as the dominant culture. These descriptors are entangled in the intrapsychic experience of culture, and need to be included in our understanding of black female development.<sup>34</sup> An aspect of Rosie’s struggle to work with me, a black female psychotherapist, was related to this dynamic: I was a complicated expe-

30. Brothers, *Falling Backwards*, pp. 82–83.

31. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 231.

32. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 78.

33. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 79.

34. Only very recently has this aspect of race and self begun to be included in the critical work pertaining to African American women’s lives. See Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, and Katie Canon, “Womanist Perspectival Discourse and Cannon Formation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9.1-2 (Spring–Fall 1993), pp. 29–37 (36).

rience for Rosie because I was black and woman, and possibly resembled too closely the early figures in her life. My embodiment was quickly appropriated in her internal struggles of blackness, gender, and self. Rosie's development was marked by the experience of her family, which was incongruent with stated cultural and religious ideals, so that we might understand her adult life as an attempt to bring about coherence between her psychic, cultural, and embodied experience. Rosie's sense of self fluctuated among the diminished and humiliated child, the grandiose prostitute, and the angry clinical patient.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, a womanist sociologist, holds that African Americans, and particularly women, suffer a diminished "self-esteem due to bodily humiliation"<sup>35</sup> because many have internalized the negative and oppressive views of black women that permeate the cultural representation of blackness. As a result, "self hatred may one of the deepest sources of conflict and turmoil in the African American community. This may be especially true concerning women and their bodies."<sup>36</sup>

Others' responses to women's "embodied experience" of such features as hair, skin, and size often outweigh any sense they might have of positive self-image and esteem.<sup>37</sup> Yet if we pursue even a brief history of black women's relationship to their bodies—even when we are sure to include the long history of black women's resistance to cultural humiliation—there remains "a sordid history of exploitation"<sup>38</sup> and abuse of black women's bodies that reaches far beyond representation. This exploitation continues within black communities as well as in the wider culture. Exploitation through the sexual and domestic subordination of black women psychically and relationally reproduces the history of enslavement and misuse of black women's bodies.<sup>39</sup> Taking critical note of the reproduction and appropriation of black women's lives should remind us that the violence Rosie experienced "should not be seen as iso-

35. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Loves and Troubles of African-American Women's Bodies: Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," in Emilie M. Townes (ed.), *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 232–49.

36. Gilkes, "The Loves and Troubles of African-American Women's Bodies," p. 232.

37. Gilkes, "The Loves and Troubles of African-American Women's Bodies," p. 238.

38. Gilkes, "The Loves and Troubles of African-American Women's Bodies," p. 248.

39. Phillis Sheppard, "Fleshing the Theory: Critical Analysis of Theories of Embodiment in Light of African American Women's Experiences" (Dissertation, Chicago Theological Seminary).

lated or perverse behavior but must be explored as structural normative control over women and children that encompasses not only physical violence but also cultural and religious construction of...feminine bodies and...selves."<sup>40</sup> bell hooks calls for black women to resist the cultural representation and reproduction of slavery and sexual exploitation by taking the "oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped"<sup>41</sup> and Shawn Copeland calls for a black religious discourse that recognizes that the "abuse of black women and children is (both) a sin and a crime."<sup>42</sup>

Rosie was emotionally and sexually a captive, but her life included acts of resistance—including the shooting of her abusing uncle, her commitment to difficult and painful psychotherapy, and telling her story. Her life as a prostitute in a community filled with brokenness told a truth about her experiences, anger and pain, and resisted the lie that her parents and the church, as well as a part of herself, wanted her to believe and live. She suffered by living this form of expression. Steven Pile observes that

Freud provides a developmental account of the psyche that simultaneously reveals the ways in which people give meaning to their world, where they act according to the interactions between these worlds, and where people are resourceful and devious in the ways that they deal with, and express, the pleasures and pain that they live through.<sup>43</sup>

Rosie lived her sense of otherness, her grief, her memory—in the open. Like the self-portrait revealing the trauma of her life in bold red colors with her head severed, her life was a shocking and compelling attempt to give voice and meaning.

Her neighborhood was one that had been abandoned for the most part, and was now economically and socially depleted. The street was lined with houses that had been boarded up for years. This environment—depleted, broken, dangerous, and often blatantly antagonistic toward black females—made up her primary selfobject milieu. Rosie's distress was related to her past familial and sexual trauma, but it was

40. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Violence against Women," *Concilium* 1 (1994), pp. vii-xxiv. Italics added.

41. bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representation of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 113-28 (128).

42. M. Shawn Copeland, "Body Representation, and Black Religious Discourse," in Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (eds.), *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 180-98 (193).

43. Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 8.

also embedded in the absence of appropriate mirroring from, and of, her current (and past) cultural group. Prostitutes and drug users served her need for cultural affiliation. An aspect of this affiliation was the sexualization of her betrayed childhood needs for protective and idealizable others in her life, for appreciative mirroring of her developing self, and her need for kinship to bolster her sense of belonging. Clearly Rosie's cultural attachments (and therefore her affiliations) were compromised—not because of where she lived and her associates—but more because of the conflictual relationship she maintained within herself and those with whom she lived.

#### *Failed Cultural Selfjects: Black Religion, Culture, and Loss*

What is the relationship between culture, in particular religion, and the self? Research suggests that the religious experience and institutions of African Americans provide a setting for cultural affiliation, self-enhancing experiences, and group belonging. Gilkes has stated that black religious practices have served to lessen the symptomology associated with mental illness.<sup>44</sup> Nancy Boyd-Franklin has warned clinicians in the mental health field that they are viewed by many African Americans as “antspiritual” due to their “neutral” stance, adding that “black churches have long served a multitude of needs in African American communities” through the creation of educational, political, economic, and social services.<sup>45</sup> However, Rosie could not turn to the black church as a reliable cultural institution they way her family had. Her church did provide social resources to the community—what it did not provide was protection for members suffering abuse at the hands of some of those in leadership, a failure that contributed to the legacy Rosie carried in relationship to this cultural institution. Ultimately, her relationship to herself, family, and black culture was not resolved in a way that freed her from the conflict presented by her family's position in the church. The message is clear: early experiences of the body will permeate later experiences of culture and self.

44. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “The Black Church as a Therapeutic Community: Suggested Areas for Research into the Black Religious Experience,” *The Journal of the I.T.C.* (Fall 1980), pp. 31–32; also see Nancy Boyd-Franklin and Tonya Walker Lockwood, “Spirituality and Religion: Implications for Psychotherapy with African American Clients and Families,” in Froma Walsh (ed.), *Spiritual Resources for Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), pp. 90–103; A. J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” of the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Archie Smith, “Religion and Mental Health among Blacks,” *Journal of Religion and Mental Health* 20.4 (Winter 1984), pp. 264–87.

45. Boyd-Franklin and Lockwood, “Spirituality and Religion,” p. 93.

The increasing acknowledgment of stories such as Rosie's have prompted black feminist and womanist scholars to show how the Church is an ambivalent cultural institution for many black women, despite the historical role of the black Church as site of group belonging, efficacy, and mental well-being. Black religious experience is not free of sexism, abusive power relationships, or theologies that warp the psyche and spirit.<sup>46</sup> Cultural selfobjects can serve the mirroring, idealization, and kinship needs of groups, providing a sense of self continuity—or they can fail to serve them. Clearly we require exposure to mirroring from cultural sources, and where this is absent or compromised, the consequences for the self be severe. As Mark Gehrie notes, "Without...mirroring from, or... an idealized attachment to, a culturally cohesive ideology...the child's cultural group membership...may not be integrated into the psyche, and will be experienced with a...sense of foreignness and rejection."<sup>47</sup>

I take this statement to mean that mirroring from a culturally cohesive ideology to which one is attached is *essential* for an integrated psyche. Theologically, we are speaking of (1) being *in* and recognized by a community that affirms our relationship to the *imago dei*; and (2) being in relationship to a community that is deeply related to the Idealized One. This One speaks to the commands "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One," and in so doing affirms Her kinship with the individual and community. It is this kinship that counters the sense of foreignness and rejection. It fosters firmness and conviction of identity. The absence of deep kinship leaves one flailing. Thus Rosie's structuring of her relationship to her childhood community as well as her structuring of her relationship to her current community, suggests something about the state of her self. Clearly she felt both foreign to and unaccepted by her family's community—including their religious commitments, practices, and values. She did not acquire the experience of kinship or mirroring in the contexts handed down to her, and neither ideology nor lived practice provided opportunities for her to satisfy her idealizable selfobject needs. Furthermore, Rosie was unable on her own to discover aspects of the religious and cultural legacy to engage in an adaptive or substitutive fashion, rendering her attachment to religion and culture and race ambivalent and hostile, with unmodulated ties to her early parental imagoes and selfobject needs.

46. For examples, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Jo Anne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); James Evans, "Black Theology and Black Feminism," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 38 (Spring-Summer 1982), pp. 43–53.

47. Gehrie, "The Self and the Group," p. 381. Italics added.

Rosie's responses to her early experiences suggest a need to examine the place of cultural selfobjects—including those comprised of religious experience—in our patients' lives. In her case, adequate cultural selfobject experiences may have helped buffer some of her early trauma. The groups to which one claims affiliation and the dynamics of those relationships are certainly influenced by early self-enhancing or self-fragmenting milieu. For Rosie, black culture was either a false expression of family care, because she was not protected, or it was *real*, like her life as a prostitute, and again dangerous. It is important now that Rosie, though filled with racial ambivalence, anxiety, and rage, sought out some form of affiliation that *included* a black cultural group experience. We see here that identification with a cultural group had taken place, albeit, in most respects, limited and distorted in scope. The structural deficits with which Rosie lived made it impossible for her to respond to her situation with an awareness of the magnitude of her loss because just that awareness may have left her far more fractured and less able to function. Lacking a social context to compensate for the deficits in her familial environ, mourning therefore *had* to be sacrificed.

*Mourning Failed Black Religion and Culture as Self Enhancing Selfobjects:  
Implications for Womanist Practical Theology and Practice*

In the book of Lamentations,<sup>48</sup> the movement in the text suggests an important dynamic for mourning. Early on we hear "*Lonely sits the city Once great people! Bitterly she weeps in the night, Her cheek wet with tears. There is none to comfort her of all her friends... Zion's roads are in mourning*" (1.1a; 1.2a; 4.1a). There is deep unavoidable despair here. It is a communal mourning wrestling with the past and the present. Thoughts of future offer no solace. The language fluctuates between the first person "I" to the communal "we" and "our": "I have called on Your name" (3.55) and "our hearts are sick" (5.17a). After destruction and forced exile, mourning is a requisite in the moving toward prayer for restoration—of relationships, the faith community and self. Exile is emotional, spiritual and, again, it must be communal. It is also embodied, and throughout the text we hear of cheeks covered with tears, energy being sapped, misery like a yoke upon the neck, and there is disabling shame. Exile is to be in relationship with one's God and one's people in a broken way; exile is a soul sickness that forces the question "Who can heal you?" (2.13b).

48. *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford, 1985).

Can Rosie experience healing and what is the relationship of Rosie's individual suffering to her community? Rosie's experiences reveal that the "structural deficits" were not limited to her individual intrapsychic life—rather, her structural deficits are also communal. We are confronted with the lack of a "supportive, rehabilitative, social milieu" following her earliest abuse. Is this not what Lamentations is telling us—that there is no one who understands and weeps for the suffering? Unlike the writer of Lamentations who can, at one point, proclaim, "But this do I call to mind, therefore I have hope: the kindness of the Lord has not ended... ample is your grace." (3.21a, 23).

Martha R. Fowlkes, writing about grief, notes that when resolution is achieved in a timely fashion, "the personal and social are so closely intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable."<sup>49</sup> Thus, if the grieving process moves forward quickly, we are less likely to notice the role of the cultural domain in mourning. In the absence of a supportive cultural context, in contrast, we are more immediately drawn to consider the necessary influence of the work of culture in mediating trauma. We may look at Rosie's relationship to black religion in two ways. Lee Butler labels black spirituality as "one of the most influential forces within the African American community. It is the core resource that has shaped the community from within."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, within this pastoral theological framework, religion and spirituality are to be understood as resources for survival. Another view is that Rosie's rejection of black religion also expressed a form of resistance to pain suffered within the family. Accepting that her response was a form of resistance would also have to acknowledge that her resistance sustained by rejection and avoidance proved insufficient. In fact, her fluctuating feelings about her black self actually revealed her longing to an experience wherein the abused and abusers would co-exist but not in secret (that there would be a context for *truth-telling*—shared by her mother who eventually sent her back to therapy with her blessing), and one where the institution of religion would offer protection and acceptance of those like her. Self restoration—individual, familiar and communal, from this perspective, would have required that Rosie not *take in* her family's experience of the black church, but rather to have mourned it. She needed to mourn black religion's failure to serve adequately as meaningful religion and as a cultural selfobjects—not just avoid or even reject it, but rather to fully engage this mourning. This mourning, of course, reflects the need for a much broader mourning.

49. Martha R. Fowlkes, "The Morality of Loss – the Social Construction of Mourning and Melancholia," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 27 (1991), pp. 529–51 ( 532).

50. Butler, *Liberating our Dignity*, p. 105.

On another level, aspects of Rosie's ties reflect aspects of the history of African Americans. As Maurice Apprey<sup>51</sup> and Michelle Scott<sup>52</sup> have shown, African Americans' current life stories must be understood in light of a much broader history, specifically the disruption and exploitation of black people whose ancestors were enslaved in the Western hemisphere, along with the many contradictions embedded in this history. This history also contains the legacy of religion appropriated to sustain relational patterns of abuse: religious institutions supported and financed enslavement. Slavers regularly engaged in sexual exploitation, creating families in which blood ties were denied and split off from public celebrations. These traumas are part and parcel of the history of black-white relations in the Western Hemisphere. We hear this history embedded in Rosie's anger about "all these white people" somehow involved in her pain. The historical, familial, and personal converge, revealing a cyclical repetition, one aspect of which includes unfinished mourning.

As Rosie could not mourn her past, it was impossible for her to imagine a future different from the one she was living—a re-enactment of the past. No amount of treatment could give back what was taken from Rosie, and this made mourning all the more necessary. Much repair could be done, but the past could not and cannot be replaced. Because she could not grieve and mourn these losses, she could not reconceive of herself and her relationship to her broader religious and social context. Fowlkes makes the case that loss resides in the social and intrapsychic<sup>53</sup> spheres, and mourning leads to a transformed view of the world and self. Fowlkes, not a practical theologian, offers a theological statement: this transformation radically alters one's tie to that which has been lost, and, furthermore, this shift in attachment allows for the re-engagement with life that is creative.<sup>54</sup> This transformation, then, comes about through engagement with a broader, caring community, and this honest engagement is the path to hope.<sup>55</sup> This we

51. Maurice Apprey, "Reinventing the Self in the Face of Received Transgenerational Hatred in the African American Community," *Mind and Human Interaction* 9.1 (1998), pp. 30-37.

52. Michelle Scott, "A Perennial Mourning: Identity Conflict and the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma within the African American Community," *Mind and Human Interaction* 9.1 (1998), pp. 11-26.

53. Fowlkes, "The Morality of Loss," p. 529.

54. Fowlkes, "The Morality of Loss," p. 529.

55. The application of the idea of the inability to mourn to cultural phenomena is not an idea unique to my work. For recent applications, see: Avner Falk, "The Problem of Mourning in Jewish History," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society: Essays in Honor of Alan Dundes* (New York: Analytic Press, 1993), XVIII, pp. 298-315; Peter Homans, *The Inability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

witness in Lamentations, hope begins to emerge in the naming of the suffering and in the midst of mourning. Then we can bring to mind that the "Lord's kindness and grace is ample".

This discussion can direct us to important elements for practical theology. Clearly we must take mourning, even the necessity of mourning black religion and trauma, seriously. If practical theology is to shape practices of care that have any meaning for African American women, then we must recognize black embodiment as a theological and ethical category. If we seek to wrestle traumatized individuals and communities from the horrors of abuse and exploitation, we must bring an understanding of the intrapsychic and the social to practice. Therefore, a womanist practical theology must move forward on the basis of the following conclusions: (1) Trauma and mourning processes are religious experiences occurring in the intrapsychic and social dimension of experience. (2) Experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and religion are integral to the formation of the self and group affiliations. (3) It is necessary to understand religion and religious experience—whether rejected, adopted, or disavowed—as part and parcel of a process of mourning cultural and personal traumas and disappointments. (4) Practical theology must listen to the critical perspectives heard in the stories of those who have abandoned religion and religious institutions. (5) Practical theology, emerging from the reality of black women's experiences, must, then, *become* embodied in *practices of transformation*, giving to mourning the personal and social dimension that connects culture, religion, and trauma. Ultimately, when we have brought these concerns together, we will have a womanist practical theology of care that is both psychoanalytic and womanist, and articulates the means toward healing.

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