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# The Word, the Body, and the Kinfolk: The Intersection of Transpersonal Thought with Womanist Approaches to Psychology

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Since Alice Walker coined the term womanist in the early 1980s, black feminists and feminists of color have created a rich, soulful body of scholarly work. Contributions to womanist thought have emerged primarily in the fields of theology and ethics. The aim of this article is to put womanism in historical context, examine transpersonal expression in womanist scholarship, and to articulate the values that inform emotional healing in a womanist context. Womanism is spiritualized due to its original definition and subsequent development, making transpersonal thought a resonant fit for unearthing paths to authentic cultural competency in psychology and other disciplines.

**Keywords:** *womanist, feminist, mujerista, transpersonal thought, depression, African Americans, somatic experiences, testimony, kinfolk, liberation psychology, engaged spirituality, narrative therapy.*

Over three decades ago, Alice Walker (1979/2006) planted a seed that has blossomed into a spirited academic movement. She accomplished this by observing a character in a short story: “the wife never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a ‘womanist.’ A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common” (p. 7). Four years later, Walker (1983) published *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, in which she prefaced her work with a more complete definition:

Womanist:

1. From “womanish” (opp. of “girlish”). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown-up. Responsible, in charge, serious.
2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and woman’s

strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for her health. Traditionally universalist, traditionally capable.

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (p. xi)

Walker’s (1983) articulation of transpersonal presence by her inclusion “loves the Spirit” (p. xi) in her definition has touched the hearts of several Christian women theologians, who, in turn, have inspired scholars in other disciplines. Since the seed was planted, womanist scholars have been defining and articulating core principles in their work within the disciplines of theology (Baker-Fletcher, 2006; Grant, 1989; Riggs, 1994; Williams, 1986/2006), ethics (Floyd-Thomas, 2006b), pedagogy (Lynne, 2006; Sheared, 1994/2006), nursing science (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Taylor, 1998, 2000), and literary criticism (April, 2003). In psychology, Lillian Comas-Díaz (2007) has worked to clearly express the active and liberating role spirituality plays

in the lives of women of color, framing it as essential to the development of womanist psychological theory. This approach to psychology resists the idea that the emotional needs of women of color can be met without foregrounding our values and investigating our lived experiences for ignored and discounted wisdom.

While most of the early work articulating this perspective has been done by black women, there is a *mujerista* movement (from *mujer*, Spanish for woman), which also has roots in the field of theology (Isasi-Díaz, 1992, 1994). The aim is to articulate a Latina feminist epistemology, taking into account the impact of colonization and economic exploitation on its development. *Mujerismo* is infused with ideas from liberation psychology and theology, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2000, 2002, 1987/2007), and the lived experience of Latina women.

Womanism has been spiritualized and oriented toward healing and wholeness from its inception, making the intersection between womanist and transpersonal thought particularly interesting to me as a transpersonalist, a psychotherapist, and a woman of color. By placing womanism in an historical context, articulating the values that inform emotional healing from a womanist perspective, and examining transpersonal expression in womanist scholarship, it is my hope that the fields of both transpersonal and womanist studies will be enriched.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first, I define womanism, explore points of resonance between womanist and transpersonal thought, and discuss unique gifts and perspectives derived from embracing woman of color consciousness. In the second part, I explore three ideological principles that have emerged from womanist scholarship. Taken together, they inform the development of *womanist mind*, the capacity to authentically appreciate the complex intersection of ethnicity, culture, and gender. While a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color, the development of woman of color consciousness, or womanist mind, is not limited to any particular ethnicity. These principles may serve as guides for those interested in cultivating this perspective. The principles are: (a) *conscientization*, a process of sociospiritual awakening; (b) redemptive subjectivity; and (c) engaged and liberated spirituality (Comas-Díaz, 2007; Floyd-Thomas, 2006b; Phillips, 2006).

In the third part, I examine the role of *word*, *body*, and *kinfolk* in womanist approaches to emotional

healing. These values represent themes that emerge from womanist literature and the lived experiences of women of color in the United States and are in resonance with the work of womanist scholars in psychology (Comas-Díaz, 2007; Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Vaz, 2006). While proposing specific psychotherapeutic interventions is not within the scope of this paper, word, body, and kinfolk provide strong theoretical roots for the development of therapeutic practices that incorporate (a) recognition of the importance of narrative and testimony as recognized paths to emotional healing, (b) re-possessing and using the body as an ally for the end of suffering, and (c) understanding the importance of community and context in the process of restoration (Asante, 1984; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Young-Minor, 1997).

As these womanist thoughts about healing surface from the literature onto these pages, my heart dances; I begin to reframe my experience in a context of my own creation, one that values my culture, deeply appreciates my constraints and opportunities, and celebrates woman in me. My framework for studying and understanding psychology broadens to include a context of my own creation, one that values my culture, deeply appreciates my constraints and opportunities, and celebrates woman in me. I acknowledge the limitations of mainstream paradigms, becoming mindful of how omitting spirituality and neglecting deeper inclusivity limits the capacity of traditional psychology to fully address my needs as a woman of color. This is the process of conscientization in action. I gently tend to the ground of my womanist heart, this piece of earth all my own. Seeds are sown, blossoms grow; my bent back straightens, I slowly turn to face the sun.

### Womanist and Transpersonal Intersections

The first time I saw my own reflection  
Was in the buckle of the boot  
That was stepping on my neck...  
(Westfield, 2006, p. 209)

This poet so truthfully expressed what it means to hold on to Divine vision in the presence of oppression. Later in the poem, she described the beauty she finds in her face, despite the distorted reflection. Womanists are “quite adamant about the reality and importance of the spiritual world, with less concern for the diversity of ways that it is conceptualized” (Phillips, 2006, p. xxvi). It is this acknowledgment of the existence, significance, and influence of that which dwells beyond ourselves that

separates womanism from other ideological perspectives and methodological approaches. This focus also serves as a point of connection to transpersonal thinking. Walker (1983) included a love of Spirit in her original definition, and subsequent womanist writing has been infused with that presence. In the section that follows, I highlight the early history of womanist scholarship while underscoring ways in which womanist and transpersonal perspectives overlap. Despite points of natural resonance, African American women's perspectives and examination of racism are widely absent from transpersonal literature.

One of the first scholars to use Walker's (1983) definition to describe the work she was doing was Jacquelyn Grant (1989) in her book *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus*. Her work was like sunlight for womanist ground, and a body of womanist theological scholarship began to emerge after her work was published. Early womanist scholars were engaged in acts of spiritual liberation, informed by their experience at the crossroads between gender and ethnic discrimination. Theology from this point of view claimed that their experiences as black women constituted valid data for theological reflection (Copeland, 2006).

Early womanist scholars re-visioned Biblical stories (e.g., Hagar in the Old Testament) and theological constructs (e.g., emphasis on Jesus as "Lord and master") in a context specific to the conditions of African American women throughout the history of the United States. Their work was important in that it extroverted themes and connections between Christian practice and African American women's lived reality, a perspective not previously included in the academic canon or considered a topic of scholarly importance. Williams (1986/2006) documented the connection African American women felt to Hagar, an exiled single mother who modeled faith and survival in the face of oppression. Grant (1989) examined the tradition among black women to frame Jesus as "divine co-sufferer" (p. 212) as opposed to master or Lord, particularly given the historical usage of Biblical text by advocates of slavery to justify the institution and preach unquestioning obedience from their slaves. Ultimately, the intention of their work was to articulate and emphasize the connection between faith, the unique aspects of black women's painful experiences, and their struggle to "manage, rather than be managed by their suffering" (Copeland, 2006, p. 228). This intention inspired womanist scholars to expand notions of what constituted a legitimate source of knowledge in a way

that has parallels with methodological innovations in transpersonal research (Braud, 1998; Braud & Anderson, 1998; Copeland, 2006; Ferrer, 2000).

Both womanist and transpersonal approaches (a) value lived experience as a valid source of data, (b) challenge paradigms that privilege mainstream assumptions (e.g., regarding the validity of including spirituality in psychology or the study of entheogens), and (c) offer empowering contexts for experiences that are often pathologized. Grof (2008) pointed out that the creation of transpersonal psychology was, in part, a response to the observation that the practice of psychology was hampered by its ethnocentricity. It was "formulated and promoted by Western materialistic scientists, who consider their own perspective to be superior to that of any other human groups at any time of history" (p. 47). It was clear to early transpersonalists such as Grof, Marguiles, and Sutitch that this stance led to a bias that automatically pathologized, devalued, or ignored a valuable range of human experience, easily dismissing entire bodies of religious practices and cultural norms in "psychopathological terms" (p. 48). While transpersonalists and womanists might differ in areas of focus and content, both work to redeem sacred human experiences from narrow paradigms that cut off valuable opportunities for expanding human knowledge.

Womanist and transpersonal approaches to scholarship have several noteworthy points of intersection. Each field honors transcendent and spiritual experience. Walsh (1994) outlined the importance of Maslow's (1968/1999) study of peak experiences to the origination of transpersonal studies. Phillips (2006) and Keating (2006) observed that while traditional academic disciplines avoid being spiritualized, womanism openly acknowledges the transcendent realm.

In addition to an inclusion of the realm of the spiritual in their work, scholars in both disciplines often find themselves countering traditional, Western psychological perspectives that are dismissive of the narrative of the lived experience. Transpersonal pioneers were not satisfied with the nature and meaning of non-ordinary experiences as interpreted by traditional, Western psychological scholarship—particularly as this perspective quite often characterized these states as possible evidence of delusion or psychosis.

Many transpersonalists engaged with Asian philosophies, which "contained detailed accounts, not just of peak experiences, but of whole families of peak

experiences and systematic techniques to induce and sustain them” (Walsh, 1994, p. 115). By moving beyond traditional frameworks, these transpersonal scholars were rediscovering and reclaiming their own lived transcendent encounters from a dominant narrative that had dismissed or pathologized this aspect of human experience. Eastern spiritual philosophies, meditations, and practices provided structured containers for processing and learning about this realm.

For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, transpersonal scholars have focused heavily on Eastern practices and philosophies (Myers, 1985), though Bynum (1992) correctly observed that transcendent experiences, by different names, are present in all societies, and in particular, African ones. Because of the important cultural role organized spiritual practice has among people in the African Diaspora, black women’s consciousness and ways of knowing have been heavily informed by encounters with Spirit (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2003). Many of us have experienced quite normalized contexts for transcendent experiences in contrast to Western scholars who pioneered the field of transpersonal studies. Whether through participation in the Black Church in the United States or exploration of other African-influenced traditions such as the Afro-Cuban practice of *Santería*, transcendent experiences are often sanctioned by spiritual authority and not stigmatized by the community. In my own culture, up close and personal experiences with Spirit were far from non-ordinary. Transcendence (in the form of being filled with the Holy Spirit) was part of a normal Sunday service; it happened every week and was expressed in a variety of ways.

While the development of both disciplines has been influenced by embodied transcendent experience, I am not suggesting that womanists and transpersonalists translate those experiences into their respective epistemologies in the same way. Womanist synthesis of the transcendent has informed an activist stance that connects political and spiritual liberation, supporting “the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression” (Phillips, 2006, p. xxiv). Transpersonal psychology has moved from an early focus on individual, beyond-ego experience to wider explorations of human transformation, consideration of spiritual experience in social and cultural contexts, the articulation of models of spiritual development, and the inclusion of transpersonal perspectives from other disciplines (Ferrer, 2000; Grof,

2008; Walsh, 1994). The transpersonal field, however, has not remained vigilant about addressing its own ethnocentricity. Published transpersonal literature has been heavily skewed toward male authorship. While there has been minor participation from non-Western scholars, those voices that do emerge are often overlooked (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007).

Transpersonalists have the tools to address this blind spot. A respect in the field for the lived experience and personal truth can facilitate authentic dialogue about gender and culture—an admittedly complex subject that can hold a lot of emotional charge. Connection to a more expansive understanding of human development provides space to move beyond bias, prejudice, and passive racism. At the same time, operating from the assumption of interdependent spiritual connection can lead to bypassing the difficult work of confronting that bias. It can be quite tempting to frame serious consideration of ethnicity and culture as issues that are irrelevant to the transcendent focus of transpersonalists’ work.

The expansive nature of transpersonal thought has space for the unique sociospiritual work womanists do, transforming constraint by giving it both political and psychospiritual meaning. Womanists teach each other “the alchemist’s secret, or how to turn dirt into gold; this spiritual transformation enables them to alchemize their oppression into liberation” (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1996, p. 17). The result is healing and increased possibility for well-being. Womanist mind is informed by transpersonal consciousness, and there is an undeniable spiritual presence in womanist philosophy. From inception, womanism has been intertwined with an acknowledgment of a transpersonal dimension of experience. The two are bound together by inclusion of Spirit, the work of early theologians who dared call themselves womanist, and the prayer I hold in my heart as I write these words. I engage this connection directly in the next section by offering a womanist perspective of the term transpersonal.

### **A Transpersonal View of Womanist Identity**

When I consider the term transpersonal from a womanist-oriented perspective, the meaning (a) is understood to represent a worldview that existed in different forms before the term was coined in mid-twentieth century California, (b) expands to include consideration of the “beyond-self here on Earth”(Schavrien & Holiday, 2010), and (c) is both vernacular and academic. First, a

womanist understands that the transpersonal dimension of human experience existed and was expressed long before it was named by scholars. The serious study of transegoic states, with and without the aid of entheogens, was not a discovery made by Western scholars (Bynum, 1992; Tedlock, 2005). So a womanist conception of transpersonal considers the unacknowledged, unpublished, unconscious body of knowledge that existed before it grew into the current published canon, which has mostly been achieved by borrowing heavily from the forms and customs of Western psychology. I am grateful for and acknowledge the transformative impact of this work while remaining aware of its limitations. While black women's transpersonal experiences have not been widely published, it does not mean those experiences do not exist. A womanist engages in the task of filling in these gaps, working in ways to make sure that the astonishing omission of her presence in the literature does not translate into continued bias.

A womanist perspective is mindful that the *trans* of transpersonal also means across, not only *beyond*, and that reaching across to other—to serve and to learn—is part of our work. This is integrating our “beyond self” wisdom with service that is “beyond-selfish” here on Earth (Schavrien & Holiday, 2010). Transpersonal knowing is irrelevant if limited to discourse, so a womanist stance encourages useful applications in everyday living and curiosity about how the transpersonal affects the vernacular experiences of common people. The transpersonal becomes a worldview that is not limited to a formal, disciplined study of transcendent experience, but one that is useful for personal and social transformation. To be clear, these thoughts are not limited or unique to a womanist perspective. They are dimensions that have been addressed by other scholars (Bynum, 1992; Ferrer, 2000; Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). The intention is to continue to uncover points of resonance and connection. This is particularly important when discussing complex and emotional topics, such as race and power.

My grandmother fought courageous battles every day, none of which were studied by academics or written down in a book. Helen Brooks could visually pass for a white woman and could get work in places darker-skinned black women could not. Determined to be truthful, she never lied when she was confronted with suspicions about her ethnicity. Once, co-workers chided her about the style of hosiery she was wearing, asking her

why she was wearing “Colored women’s stockings.” Fully aware that the truth would cost her the job, she stopped working and put on her coat. “I wear Colored women’s stockings because I’m Colored,” she said, before walking out the door (H. Brooks, personal communication, 1989). Helen did not call herself feminist; she never heard the word womanist. At the same time, she certainly moved through life with a courageous and audacious heart. She was a womanist before the word was spoken.

This womanist way of being in the world did not begin when Walker (1979/2006) finished her final draft of *Coming Apart*. One hundred years separate the activism of Sojourner Truth and that of Fannie Lou Hamer. Imagine the scores of anonymous women who qualified as serious, grown-up, and in charge while navigating the busy intersection of race, gender, and lack of privilege. Most of these women’s stories died with them, excluded from shaping history, much less psychology.

It is a particularly cruel tool of patriarchy to rob women of color of our access to historic and mythic foremothers by acts of erasure and distortion. Yet examples of audacity and courage survived such as with Alice Dunbar, Anna J. Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, and Lydia Cabrera (hooks, 1981). Their work and the stories of their lives deepen my understanding of what it means to be responsible and in charge. These women cleared space for other Black and Latina feminists who followed, including author Audre Lorde (1984/2007), politician Shirley Chisholm (1970/2010), theologian Patricia Hill Collins (2000), culture theorist bell hooks (1981, 1989, 2003), political activist Angela Davis (1983), Chicana and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (2000, 2002, 2007), and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker (1983, 2006).

Anzaldúa (2000) embodied *mujerista* spirit in her work, writing about the unique conditions of women living at the crossroads of racism, sexism, and faith. I recall with clarity the first time I heard someone mention *This Bridge Called my Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*, an anthology Anzaldúa edited with Cherrie Moraga (1981/1983). Just hearing the name of the book evoked a sense of recognition in my soul. The title she penned summed up some unnamed tension in me—an anger, isolation and confusion I was feeling as an undergraduate at an Ivy League university in the early 1990s as well as the first person in my immediate family to go to college. Her articulation of the internal struggle that paralleled my external ones spoke to some deep place in me. Her experience as a Tejana woman, stuck

between worlds, touched what I was feeling as a poor, black-identified woman at an Ivy League school. She wrote: “The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *Mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the border towns and are populated by the same people” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007, p. 109). The border towns she wrote of in this passage are those between Texas and Mexico, but she purposefully relates that literal space to the psychic and spiritual borderlands in which women of color find themselves. In my case, it was the *frontera* (border) between my growing identity as a feminist, my connection to the African American community, and my position as a woman from a poor family living and studying among people of privilege.

Near the end of Anzaldúa’s (2000) life, she was working to expose the concept of race as a social construct and a tool of patriarchy. Labeling all humans with dark skin of African descent “Black” implies a universality that does not exist. African American experience is different from African experience, which is different from a person of African descent living in Jamaica or Brazil. Her writing challenged racial divisions that are very deeply embedded in the North American psyche. Witness, for example, the struggle to apply the “correct” racial label to Barack Obama. I am a light-skinned black-identified woman of mixed parentage and have been routinely questioned about my racial identity, very often by strangers. Anzaldúa (2002) wrote: “Of all the categories we today employ, ‘race’ is the most destructive. ‘Race’ is for sure one of the ‘master’s tools,’ one of the most insidious tools of all” (p. 2). So many terms have been devised to categorize people: black, white, Hispanic, Latina, Asian, indigenous, Third World women, women of color. There are the hyphenations, and there is the supreme frustration with the seeming need of dominant culture to ignore or deny the diversity that exists *within* these categories. Along with several other scholars in the African Diaspora (Asante, 1984; Collins, 2000), I do not capitalize these terms. I use them instead as adjectives, to describe consciousness and connection to culture as opposed to literal skin color or actual ethnicity.

I liken the degree of race consciousness in the United States to a sea of fish who have no idea they are wet. We are trained to classify a person based on racial appearance. This leads to an array of assumptions, generalizations, and openings for distortion. What we miss in this process is the true richness of culture and

the opportunity to approach ethnicity as only one facet of identity (Anzaldúa, 2002). Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) framed race as an historical creation by European men to categorize, define, and control those they viewed as “other.” Keating wrote: “[Our] approach questions the terms ‘white’, and ‘women of color’ by showing that ‘whiteness’ may not be applied to all whites, *as some possess women-of-color consciousness*, just as some women of color bear white consciousness” (p. 2, emphasis added). I connect this consciousness to Anzaldúa’s (2007) liminal borderlands by acknowledging the many sources of suffering that can keep a woman on the sidelines of power and discourse. Border women are those who thrive and grow from in-between forgotten cracks; they are women of multiple identities and live with varied sources of social constraint.

Grounding in the transpersonal makes it possible to look past the literal and consider that women who inhabit these borders are not exclusively women of color. Being a bi-sexual or lesbian woman, an immigrant woman, a woman living with disability, or a woman facing economic or social constraint are all reasons a person (of any ethnicity) may find herself marginalized. Border women know who they are. They do not need academics to tell them about life spent reaching for sun from dry, narrow growing grounds. There is healing to be found in continuing to thoughtfully and carefully unmask race as a social construction. By rejecting rigid categories used to oppress us, we can find more accurate ways of reflecting the fullness and complexity of who we are.

Some of the original womanist scholars might not feel comfortable with the expansions I make here. Karen Baker-Fletcher (2006) wrote:

The definition of womanist is broad and deep, intentionally left open for interpretation within certain limits. For example, a womanist is never a white woman or a white feminist...most simply, a womanist is a black woman or woman of color committed to freedom from gender, racial and economic, planetary and sexual oppression. (p. 221)

Naming and having ownership over what we have created is important in the African American community, and I have deep respect for the black women who are the roots that ground my work. I am not suggesting any radical shift in the way anyone chooses to identify herself. However, I am suggesting womanist values are

“traditionally universal” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Looking at this potential conflict through a transpersonal lens opens up possibility for expansion, not so much about who calls herself womanist, but in the cultivation of womanist mind, irrespective of ethnicity. Developing womanist mind is thinking seriously about the suffering of those “who usually matter least in our society, as symbolized by poverty-stricken black women” (Kirk-Duggan, 2006, p. 142). Comas-Díaz (2007) presented it as the development of a “multicultural brain” (p. 16), one engaged in the promotion of critical consciousness regarding sociopolitical context and works to “transcend a colonized mentality” (p. 16). Cultivating womanist mind can allow for fuller appreciation of the complex intersection of culture, ethnicity, and gender. It offers a path to be fully aware of one’s own privilege in relation to others, locally and globally, and it can create space to swap stereotypes for deep understanding.

A common criticism of womanist thought is the focus on Christianity, which has dominated womanist spiritual writing. Smith (1998) and Harris (2006) have both pointed out that Walker no longer defines herself as Christian; she professes an ecospirituality that encompasses both Pagan and Buddhist practices. Some foremothers in this field have taken great pains to note that the first womanists were black and Christian (Riggs, 1994). The scholarship of these Christian black women shaped this epistemology, and I have profound respect for their work. At the same time, I resist any implication that one must be a Christian woman of African descent to engage in womanist scholarship, as this would silence the multiplicity of marginalized women’s voices, narratives, and wisdom.

Feminism and womanism have been contrasted by scholars (Collins, 2000; Comas-Díaz, 2007; Williams 1986/2006), a discussion I frame as a continuation of the challenge feminism has had to be meaningful for and inclusive of common women. My hope is that the development of what I call womanist mind can be useful for transpersonal feminists interested in engaging in a process of more authentically understanding what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) referred to as the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, and gender. I prefer the term womanist to black feminist because it connotes for me a connection to and concern for the state of women globally, whether they are of African descent or not. At the same time, there are black feminists who do not find it necessary to identify as womanist or have not seen the need for another term (Coleman, 2006).

### **The Word, the Body, and the Kinfolk**

Walker (1983) has clarified that her intent was never to frame womanism as better than feminism. She offered society a new term because the other, black feminist, did not convey the organic fullness of the spirit of black women she wanted to describe. She also sought to find a term that adequately acknowledged a fundamental difference between the patronizing patriarchal narratives white women were confronting, as African descended women in the United States were not historically stereotyped as weak, incapable of hard labor, or in need of male protection. She began her definition by calling a womanist “a black feminist or feminist of color” (p. xi). As such, I do not place them in conflict. They are concentric circles with respect for womanhood at the center, spreading out an infinite number of times, each encompassing, embracing, challenging, and informing the other.

### **Gifts of the Nepantlera**

It is from my unique position as an inhabitant of the borderlands between black and white, loving women and loving men, between the Friend I have in Jesus and the peace I find in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha that I articulate ways marginalized women can engage in the process of emotional healing. Living along these borders is a source of great richness in my life. I also know dwelling in such busy intersections puts a woman at risk for being run down. Anzaldúa (2000) called this in-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-space the *nepantla*, a word from Nahuatl she adapted to mean a psychic and spiritual in-between space that aids in our development and transformation. The *nepantla* is a narrow opening, where life takes root against probability. It represents the “liminal spaces where change occurs” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 571). Nature provides a meaningful example of this concept via the ability of trees and plants to grow through narrow cracks and crevices. Imagine an acorn, hidden in the crevice of a rock by a bird, that manages to take root. As it grows, it pushes against stone instead of earth, and its struggle changes both the nature of the rock and the oak tree it eventually grows into.

This oak holds a wisdom other trees do not possess. To survive it must seek liberation, which it finds as it discovers pliable places among the hardness of the stone. Women who live in spaces like these are *nepantleras*: “in-betweeners, those who facilitate passages between worlds” (Keating, 2006, p. 9). *Nepantleras* are borderlands women who do visionary work by acting as cultural intermediaries between the different worlds they inhabit. They are “threshold people: they move within



and among multiple, often conflicting cultures and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 1).

In a womanist frame, skills born of difficulty are celebrated to the same extent trauma is identified and processed. Comas-Díaz (2007) identified “trauma-derived vicarious empathy” (p. 18) as one of the gifts womanists might find in the rubble of oppression. Resilience is another quality that can grow from a life spent pushing against rock. At the same time, survival at the meeting point of multiple streams of constraint is not a matter of exhausting ourselves by incessantly hammering at the rocks that oppress us; it is about wisely finding and moving toward the sun, getting succor and nurturance where possible, and sending the tap root down as far as it will go, to whatever depth is necessary to survive. It is sensing the presence of light despite having one’s face pressed toward the ground.

### Womanist Mind

Examination of womanist scholarship, prose, and the lived experience of women of color provide us with a theoretical ground for womanist thought. In the following section, I consider three processes that emerge from the literature that further clarify the womanist paradigm: conscientization (critical consciousness), redemptive subjectivity, and engaged spirituality. While I present them in this order, the intention is not to imply a linear progression (i.e., being finished with one process before beginning another). Each informs and fosters development of the other, and as a whole they provide a starting point for engaging womanist mind.

### Conscientization

The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn must come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 109)

A womanist approach for addressing societal suffering recognizes that resistance begins when change is envisioned. Conscientization, a process of awakening to sociospiritual and critical consciousness, helps to develop the focus and scope of this vision. The roots of conscientization are found in the writings of Latin American liberation psychologists. Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), drawing upon the work of Paulo Freire, challenged the ability of mainstream psychological

paradigms to meet the needs of people affected by multiple layers of oppression and trauma. He proposed that sociospiritual awakening was a process that involved “breaking the chains of personal oppression as much as the chains of social oppression” (p. 27), and he saw the connection between the liberation of each individual and the liberation of all people.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas (2006b) believed conscientization began when a black woman experiences “cognitive dissonance in light of what is considered normative in society...while cognitive dissonance may be fleeting, conscientization is a salient experience in which black women realize that what is considered normal negates all that they embody” (p. 83). This is the beginning of the process of identifying the damaging distortions we see when looking in flawed mirrors, then setting out to find reflections that are more attuned with who we know we are.

Anzaldúa (2002) wrote about the related process of *conocimiento*, or deep awareness. It begins with a similar moment of dissonance, which she called *el arretrato*, or rupture. From this fragmentation, one realizes what it means to inhabit the *nepantla*, then experience liberation through resistance and faith. This deep awareness inspires new personal and collective stories of transformation, which embolden one to act out transpersonal vision, resulting in engaged spiritual activism. Conscientization wakes one up to the realm of the sociospiritual, allowing consideration of life “with one foot in older discourses and another at a growing, opening edge, that of the not yet voiced” (Keating, 2002, p. 19).

When a woman follows the path of conscientization from being shook by cultural dissonance through to the development of a kind of emotional flexibility that allows her to dance out our liberated dreams, she performs alchemy between suffering and healing and between spiritual vision and social activism. The faith of womanists is not without works, it is infused with movement. It is not static; it is active, connected, and engaged.

Viewed from within the Soul’s presences, there’s no “me” or “you.” There is just “us.” And yet this “us” has been shattered and fragmented—split into a multiplicity of pieces marked by the many forms our identities take. I believe, with all my heart, that spiritual activism can assist us in creating new ways to move through these boundaries. (Keating, 2002, p. 19)

Awakening to the extent to which border women's lives are distorted by cultural relativism and patriarchy begins with an experience of cultural dissonance that can lead to Anzaldúa's (2002) vision of spiritual activism. However the process of conscientization unfolds, inviting deeper sociospiritual awareness is critical to cultivating womanist mind.

### **No Margin, No Center**

It is a waste of time hating a mirror  
Or its reflection...  
(Lorde, 1997, p. 67)

What Lorde (1997) suggested in her poem is that one confront the glassmaker who turns out "new mirrors that lie" (p. 67) and is thus responsible for perpetuating limited and inaccurate reflections of oneself. I grew up knowing women could write, be heard, speak the truth with hand-on-hip and head-held-high. My identity as a black woman was fortified by my grandmothers, the one who taught me how to make peach cobbler and the other who put Maya Angelou's (1971) poetry in my hands as soon as I could read. When Arzlene gave me those books, it was as if the three of us were colluding in blatantly willful womanist behavior—me by reading them, my grandmother by giving them to me, and Angelou by writing them in the first place. These early reflections by such willful, profound, and honest voices have protected me from many of the faults in the mainstream mirror.

When Grant (1989) called upon black theologians who were challenging sexism in African American spiritual traditions to call their work "womanist theology" (p. 205), she proposed it as a means to release in totality the need to choose between racism and sexism, to identify as feminist or black liberationist, and to "demand the right to think theologically and independently of black men and white women" (p. 209). This is the type of "radical subjectivity" (p. 7) described as a tenet of womanist epistemology by Floyd-Thomas (2006a). This principle practice, which encourages borderlands women to centralize our experience and hold it as a valid reference for understanding ourselves, also emerges from the work of Layli Phillips (2006), who emphasized the power of redemptive self-love. We redeem pieces of ourselves lost, subtly, each time we have been excluded due to an absence of conscientization. We create our own standards for what constitutes an accurate reflection of our values, challenging the grinning glassmaker Lorde (1997) invoked in the end of her poem, who is constantly "turning out new mirrors that lie" (p. 67).

### **The Word, the Body, and the Kinfolk**

The practice of subjectivity also serves to reframe our day-to-day experience, what Phillips (2006) called the "vernacular" (p. xxiv) part of the lives of border women. Womanist thought honors the process of shunning theoretical norms in favor of the lived experiences of women of color. As a result, womanist thought is non-ideological at heart. This point of subjectivity is meant to aid us in our redemption and healing, not to create rigidity around what womanism is or is not. We place ourselves at the center as an act of inclusion and in hope of connection. There are no demarcations, no "lines in the sand," as womanists understand how damaging rigid demarcations can be (Phillips, 2006).

This non-ideological stance resonates with liberation psychology. Martín-Baró (1994) identified the conscious process of de-ideologizing vernacular experience as critical to the formation of a distinctly Latin American psychology liberated from distorted Western knowledge claims. Going beyond a stance that resists rigid ideology, this process counters dominant, inaccurate narratives, especially those that discount the reality of common people by rejecting their validity. "To de-ideologize means to retrieve the original experiences of groups and persons and return it to them as objective data" which they can use to "articulate a consciousness of their own reality" (p. 31). It is a process of redemption via the construction of more accurate reflections of so-called marginal experiences, questioning judgments, assessments, and diagnoses that come from psychological perspectives that were created in a way that assumes dominant culture is "normal."

By re-evaluating our emotional health from a place of redemptive subjectivity, border women reclaim pieces of our psyches lost to scholars who described but did not understand us. This lack of being interpreted in light of our own values created myths and stereotypes that keep us bent over to this day. Engaging in the process of rejecting and countering oppressive ideologies is a way to experience the relief of standing up, stretching out, and moving toward healing.

Womanists do not theorize without evidence but work to expand concepts about what that evidence may consist of. Building on Grant's (1989) original womanist theology that emphasized personal connection to the divine, it makes sense that womanists encourage information that comes from personal experience. Womanists act as our own foundations; "when black women critically inquire, probe, reflect, judge, decide,

challenge and act in service of truth, they constitute themselves as critical knowers and doers” (Copeland, 2006, p. 229).

It is acting in service of truth that we create a psychology that accurately reflects us. “Black women have been so long un-mirrored, we may have forgotten how we look” (O’Grady, 2003, p. 176). Through the practice of audacious subjectivity, we can reject reflections that mine our struggles for evidence of pathology and disorder; we take a stand against the patriarchy that negates our wisdom and ways of knowing.

### **Engaged Spirituality**

Walker (1983) very purposefully included reference to faith when she crafted her definition of womanism. Comas-Díaz (2007), a pioneer in psychology aimed at women of color, introduced the term *Spirita* (engaged and liberated spirituality) as essential to womanist psychological thought. One of a handful of scholars using womanist and *mujerista* perspectives in psychology, she also draws upon the tradition of liberation psychology advanced by writers such as Martin-Baró (1994).

Comas-Díaz (2007) defined *Spirita* as a spirituality defined by “protest, resistance, and r/evolution” (p. 13). It is rooted in the idea that the transpersonal is not divorced from the psychological if women of color are writing the psychology. *Spirita* is a “way of life that celebrates love and spirit and reclaims the sacredness in all” (p. 16). It is a means of connection to generativity and “promotes the gestation of people who liberate themselves and others” (p. 16). By connecting to *Spirita*, women have permission to let their experience stand and not feel the need to repress or revise it in order to fit in with frames that do not resonate or that deny the validity of their lives.

Political action informed by spiritual belief undergirds the work of other feminists of color. Phillips (2006) pointed out that “spiritual intercession and consideration of the transcendental or metaphysical dimension of life enhance and even undergird political action” (p. xxvi). Anzaldúa (2000) believed spirituality was a powerful tool for women in the borderlands, the “only weapon and means of protection oppressed people have” (p. 72). She exemplified the connection between the transpersonal and the political by highlighting the importance of spiritual and ideological flexibility to complement the kind of emotional flexibility Walker (1983) wrote of in her original definition. Anzaldúa (2000) exposed the danger of clinging so closely to

an institution or ideology that one loses enlivened spirituality, audacious faith, and practice of transpersonal resistance—all important to living an engaged spiritual life. She saw activism as a natural extension of imaginal experience and spiritual vision.

Placing an engaged, liberated spirituality at the heart of womanist psychology honors the part of the woman that feels and senses the sun despite having her face cast downward. It stresses the importance of allowing and making room for the transpersonal in transcultural work. Christian womanists frame God in an equally engaged role “as healer, provider, liberator, redeemer, and most often as the way-maker. Black women’s negative life experiences can be transformed by seeing that their relationship with God trumps social conditions” (Townes, 2005, p. 97). Critical consciousness, subjectivity necessary for redemption of womanist soul, and a socially-engaged intention for spiritual practice are three values that can help develop womanist mind, and from there vision womanist psychology.

### **The Word, the Body, and the Kinfolk**

In this section, I look at three conduits to emotional healing that resonate with womanist values: the word, the body, and the kinfolk. These paths acknowledge the importance of using narrative and testimony, engaging the body as an ally, and remembering the individual in the context of her community in the development of more culturally competent therapeutic tools. By looking at how these themes are woven into womanist scholarship and experience, it is possible to move toward a more fully articulated approach to the development of womanist psychological practice.

#### **The Word**

My early experiences with worship were in a traditional African American church. I have danced in the Holy Ghost and cried on the mourner’s bench. I have experienced the particularly African spiritual phenomenon of call and response, a practice meant to join and encourage the person who is speaking or giving testimony. It is an expected part of the service for the congregation to provide immediate feedback about how that message is resonating with them. The sanctuary—whether it be a soaring building complete with stained glass windows or a storefront with folding chairs instead of padded pews—is filled with voices of the congregants: “Amen! Say that, preacher! Tell it!” and “Testify!”

One of my favorite parts of the service was at

the end, when the preacher would “open the doors of the church.” A weeping member of the congregation in need of prayer or a recently converted sinner would stand, walk to the front of the sanctuary, then turn to the assembly to give her testimony. Testimony might include references to how bad things were (or how bad things are), how she was sitting and wondering how she was going to get the light bill or the car note paid. She might speak of some trouble at home or of her struggle with illness or disease. As she shares her burdens, she is encouraged and supported by the voices and the presence of those listening.

From here, the story flows to her direct personal experience of God’s grace and providing. She may quote from scripture, from the book of Matthew, reminding herself and all those who listen that God is aware of every sparrow that falls from the sky. She speaks to the power of a God who “makes a way out of no way,” has blessed her before, and always brought her through. The purpose of testimony is to risk baring it all and having it witnessed. It provides a personal account of faith that is superior to circumstance. The testimony is a path to healing, a soul-witness account of what is possible. The audible response of those listening is a means of building an alliance with the person sharing the story, inviting catharsis, connection, and healing for the church community. Redeeming painful experience through testimony transforms those events “into something valuable, *algo para compartir* [something to]...share with others so they may also be empowered” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540).

Contrast this with what I was taught as a clinician. There is no such thing as “testimony” in psychotherapy, it is called “self-disclosure,” and is discouraged in some therapeutic theoretical orientations (Gehart & Tuttle, 2003; Moursand & Kenny, 2002). In traditional psychoanalysis, there is the extreme of the therapist as blank screen, purposed to invite a patient’s transference (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2004). A clinician I know shared that he was advised to stand in front of a mirror and practice holding his face in a blank, non-reactive way during his early training as a therapist. For *nepantleras*, used to being invisible and unseen, I often wonder about the ways these approaches may do unintended harm. While many mainstream clinicians resonate with Rogerian ideas about the importance of creating a warm and healthy alliance with patients, there is little room for anything akin to testimony. From

womanist consciousness, narrative and testimony are rich sources of healing, employing *nommo*, defined as “the generative quality of the spoken word” (Asante, 1984, p. 171). Clearly, there are many other orientations that value this principle, and I am in no way suggesting that the value placed on vocalized healing narrative is exclusive to a womanist perspective; the intent is to underscore the importance of narrative and testimony to womanist work and to place it in a context specific to our history and spirituality.

Pinkóla Estés (1995) stands in the space between formal psychoanalytic training, the language of archetypal psychology, and the world of the *cantadora* (sacred singer), the *griot* (West African oral historian), and the *cuentista* (story-keeper and teller). She speaks to the fluidity with which women engage in the process of story-telling and narrative. Holding and passing knowledge through stories and oral tradition has deep roots in indigenous culture. These stories have helped women learn to honor our processes, in particular when it comes to emotional and mental well-being. She wrote that the “psyches and souls of women have their own cycles and seasons of doing and solitude, running and staying, being involved and being removed, questing and resting, creating and incubating, being of the world, and returning to the soul place” (p. 256). We learn about these cycles through stories, testimony of other women, and through dreams and meditation; it is these cycles that keep us balanced and are essential to our emotional and spiritual health.

A person who witnesses the testimony and narratives of others comes closer to finding their own guiding myths, which in turn provides what is needed for personal healing and development (Estés, 1995). The process of weaving one’s own story is a way of reclaiming oneself and releasing internal burdens; the process of telling stories is a way of experiencing union with those who witness them. Hooks (1989) framed it as a longing to connect with the past and deconstruct it at the same time, using the wisdom of one’s older self to heal the wounds of the younger one.

*Testimonio* is a witnessing narrative in Latin American literature that is socially and politically conscious. Maier and Dulfano (2004) called it “resistance literature” (p. 5). These narratives are highly personal accounts of oppression by narrators who identify as excluded or disempowered. Testimonios are often written in the third person, with the intention to give

voice to marginalized peoples. These narratives are not written to be received passively. In a parallel to the tradition of testimony in African American Christian contexts, testimonios intend to inspire action and aid in the process of conscientization (Nance, 2002). They are not disinterested, nor are they objective. They contain *los desconocimientos*, knowledge that has been ignored (Anzaldúa, 2000). It is a fluid form of anti-oppression storytelling, which sometimes includes connecting the narrator with mythical or historical figures.

Lorde (1984/2007) called a similar mixture of autobiographical fact and myth *autobiomythography*. By weaving a narrative this way, one un-weaves oppressive or harmful narratives at the same time. Floyd-Thomas (2006b) wrote that:

[Autobiomythography] allows for the transformation of something that is initially crippling to become something empowering...the biomythographical narrative is a purposeful form of call and response from one unique black woman's voice to a larger community of women who are invited to resonate with her voice and become a part of it. These women, when coming together into this new mythic community, become transformed. (p. 22)

### The Body

The broken mirror she used to decorate her face  
made her forehead tilt backwards  
her cheeks appear sunken  
her sassy chin only large enuf  
to keep her full lower lip  
from growin into her neck  
Sechita  
had learned to make allowances  
for the distortions

(Shange, 1977, p. 24)

Womanist writers have made a place for the body in academic discourse, so I make a place for reclaiming the body in identifying womanist pathways to emotional healing. Again, I do not claim this stance is unique to womanists. Using the body as an ally in emotional healing appears across many cultures. My aim is to underscore the importance and put that importance in historical context. In this section, my focus is on the black woman's body in particular—a terrain that has been heavily dominated by patriarchy, and at the same time holds the means to heal that domination (Razak,

2008). Womanists position “the body as a hermeneutic, as a modality of interpretation useful in deconstructing (and re-constructing) life in the Americas” (Pinn, 2007, p. 404).

There is a grief I feel about the abuse of black women's bodies that is in my DNA. Among my ancestors is an unnamed slave woman who bore a girl child by her owner. When this girl was still in her early teens, this same owner, her father, started raping her. He impregnated her twice before she turned eighteen. I take the time to root the need for somatic redemption in historical context in order to give some idea of the depth and scope of healing work to be done.

Women's bodies are often battlegrounds for great political and cultural wars, from the fight for reproductive rights to the untold number of African women who have experienced mutilation of their genitals (Roberts, 1997). There is hardly any quarter on this globe where one would not find women's ownership of their bodies being challenged, whether it is by over sexualized objectification or total denial that our sexuality exists. Given the extent to which it has historically been under scrutiny, attack, and objectification, making space for any woman to reclaim her body is an act of courageous *mujerismo*. By writing through and in the presence of grief in my own body at this moment, I turn my heart toward and acknowledge the robbery and lack of control women, and, in particular, poor female children of color, have over their bodies.

During the era of legal slavery in the United States, the abuse of African American women's bodies was particularly atrocious. Sojourner Truth delivered the following speech in 1853. When she finished, she bared her breasts to prove to the audience she was, indeed, a woman, after being challenged by a member of the audience:

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places... and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman? (Stanton, Anthony, Gage, & Harper, 1889, p. 116).

Truth's famous speech barely hints at what slave women's bodies endured: an unimaginable amount of work; routine infliction of emotional trauma; lack of access to education, medical care, or proper food; and the recurrent, horrific physical abuse and sexual exploitation of their bodies. Slave women were often stripped naked when they were being physically beaten by owners or overseers, creating an objectified, sexual layer on top of horrible physical pain. Black women were bred like animals to bear offspring for their owners, many times seeing those children sold away from them. Their bodies existed for the profit and pleasure of the men who owned them (hooks, 1981).

Another example of the extent to which black women's bodies were made objects is found in the life of Saartjie Baartmann. She was a woman from what is now South Africa who was put on display in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Her features were considered exotic, in particular her breasts and buttocks. Patrons could pay extra to touch and examine these parts of her body. When she died, her remains, including her genitalia, were put on display in a museum in Paris until the mid 1970s. Known as the Hottentot Venus, these remains were eventually returned at the request of Nelson Mandela (Collins, 2000).

One of the outcomes of the stereotype of the strong black woman has been to dismiss or diminish the traumatic nature of the abuse our bodies have endured (hooks, 2003). While a womanist approach to healing draws upon the power of *nommo* and faith, it is not with the intention to invite spiritual bypass. A. Elaine Brown Crawford (2002) addressed this in *Hope in the Holler*, noting that many black women move immediately to demonstrating strength as the primary response to trauma. Part of reclaiming our bodies is creating safe spaces for us to grieve the historic lack of control, abuse, and objectification of them. Engaging the grief is a means to finding wholeness.

Consider that the spiritual practices of communities of color are often physical, engaged, kinetic, and active. If womanist spiritual practice is infused with movement, so then are womanist approaches to reclaiming and healing the body. Anzaldúa (2000) stated: "to reclaim body consciousness *tienes que moverte* [you must move your body]—go for walks, *salir a conocer mundo*, engage with the world" (p. 97).

Liturgical dance and other ways of honoring the body as a vessel of Spirit and a tool for worship hold

great potency for releasing women from oppression that has come from religious repression. Hooks (2003) noted that Christian scriptures were often put in a context that "perpetuated the notion that the body was inherently unclean, evil, corrupt, that sexuality was bad" (p. 110). A womanist liberation from those doctrines could offer African Americans a way of thinking of their bodies that resists these ideas and offers healing from messages that hold the body with disdain.

Womanist writers such as Walker (1983), Cannon (2007), and Williams (2005) have a "tenacious regard for the dynamics of the black woman's body" (Pinn, 2007, p. 404), especially in the context of reclaiming it from oppressive theology. Consider this passage from *Beloved*. Baby Suggs, holy, shared this message with those assembled to hear her preach:

She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. . . . "Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. . . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved." (Morrison, 1987, p. 88)

This sermon unlocks the most essential element of any intervention designed to rectify somatic damage—that is to move and love our flesh. To reclaim the body is to love the body, to fill it up with ourselves, to invite entry of the Spirit, to be real about the feelings we have about it, to know the history of it, and to confront the ways in which it is used, claimed, controlled, and shamed by others.

### **The Kinfolk**

The therapist encouraged me to take eight to ten deep breaths. I was feeling agitated, anxious, and sad. The clinician was sensitive and attuned. Yet something still felt missing from our work. I closed my eyes. Before I had taken ten breaths, the image of a woman holding a child in her arms came into my awareness, and I immediately identified her as my aforementioned ancestor, who bore

two children by her owner-father. It was in that moment I was more at ease about the time and resources I was putting into healing myself because I became aware it was also in service of healing my ancestors, both the slave and the man who raped her.

The work became more meaningful to me culturally and spiritually, taking on a depth and importance it had not had before. The therapy was about more than just my healing, my growing up, the ways in which I was or was not nurtured. By putting my journey into a transpersonal communal context, therapy was no longer confined to traditional psychodynamic theories about family of origin. In that moment, it became connected to my family of Origin, with a capital "O," my kinfolk. The importance of our kinfolk, a term I use here to signify both the immediate and extended circle of family and community to which a woman belongs, emerges as an important consideration in womanist paradigms, which make room for an expanded notion of community to include the ancestors, both literal and mythical.

What happened in this experience was a shift from work that was oriented toward what Roland (1988) called the "individualized self" (p. 8) to a connection with my communal self. His work, which has made distinctions between the concept of self in Japan and the concept of self in India, clearly demonstrates that not all cultures view the healing of emotional pain as an individual endeavor. Womanists "pluralize their concept of self" (Comas-Díaz, 2007, p. 18), holding and honoring the connection between communal healing and individual healing. Following frameworks in community psychology, womanists understand it is not a matter of privileging the communal over the individual, but seeking balance between the two. "If all we do is therapy while neglecting poor people's circumstances, our practice is out of balance. If all we do is try to restructure communities without attending to people's inner struggles and feelings, we are equally off balance" (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005, p. 213). This pathway to emotional healing seeks balance between the individual and her community and is informed by African American spirituality, the secret of which is the recognition of the need for individuals to take responsibility for themselves while at the same time recognizing this is impossible without other people (Asante, 1984).

In a womanist paradigm, emotional healing is a process that involves both individuation and development

of a communal self. Tending to this communal self is not always a pathology (sometimes mistakenly framed as enmeshment). It is a necessary component of emotional balance. There is an understanding of the connection between individuals and their communal contexts. As my wounds heal, so can those of my family and my kinfolk. As my community is liberated, my possibility for freedom from suffering increases.

The presence of the word, the body, and the kinfolk are themes that run through womanist scholarship, lived experiences, and literature. Foregrounding them here is a step toward making connections to how they might be enlisted in the practice of womanist psychotherapy. Points of resonance between these frameworks and postmodern/narrative therapy, somatic psychotherapy, modalities that include dance or movement, group therapy, and community psychology provide exciting possibility for bringing womanist ideology to praxis.

### Conclusion

When feminists of color create frameworks anchored in their unique values and experiences, we reclaim parts of ourselves lost to distortions and objectifications. Sociospiritual awareness and redemptive subjectivity give us tools to shape mirrors that truly reflect who we are. This frees us to reinterpret theoretical canons in ways that uncover what has been buried, the voice that is "deep speaking into deep" (Cannon, 2007, p. 133), "*el río abajo río* [the river beneath the river]" (Estés, 1995, p. 29), which contains lost wisdom we need to reclaim ourselves. Embracing Spirit, the active and engaged spirituality articulated by Comas-Díaz (2007), clears up any dissonance from dominant narratives about the practice of linking our spiritual struggles to our political ones. The scale of our engagement is unimportant. It is the continual, determined resistance to being silenced that leads to freedom and wholeness. This spiritual empowerment gives us insight into the ways our trials in the borderlands can create a "quickenning space" (Floyd-Thomas, 2006b, p. 97), a courageous embracing of the gifts inherent to life in the nepantla. "When Spirit enters these rituals of restoration, a kind of cultural alchemy can temporarily cook what's raw, unite what's divided, give meaning to what's chaotic, and thereby enchant, refresh, and reanimate all participants" (Lorenz, 2002, p. 497).

The reflective surfaces I have invoked in the poems of Lorde (1997), Shange (1977), and Westfield

(2006) demonstrate the most basic reason for the need to continue to develop womanist thought: to offer undistorted, accurate reflections of the experiences of women of color. Lorde (1984/2007) famously stated “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112). Liberated by a transpersonal womanist point of view, broad and deep enough to contain redemption, forgiveness, and all manner of contradiction, my focus shifts beyond the master’s house to a dwelling of my own design.

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