

Moving Heaven and Earth: A Womanist Dogmatics of Black Dance as *Basileia*

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I got shoes.

You got shoes.

All God's chil'ren got travelin shoes.¹

The decisive thing is to make clear with what concept of reality, of being, and events, we really operate in theology, and how this relates to the concepts in which not only other people think and speak of reality, being, and events, but in which we theologians also think and speak in our everyday lives.²

Womanist spirituality holds all these...realities in a rigorous hermeneutical circle that moves beyond the known to the unknown and pushes for a rock-steady testament of the faithful who refuse to accept a world as interpreted through the eyes of those who are the key masters and mistresses of hegemony.³

What difference does heaven make for black women? What does it mean for black women to consider heaven? Does an announcement of *the difference heaven makes* or the assertion even that *heaven makes a difference* at all, matter for black women when the hellish truth of life too often scars the everydayness of their social and spiritual realities? These are decisive questions, especially for black women in the Black church—those preaching women, “mothers” of the church, Sunday school teachers, powder room attendants, choir soloists, ladies’ ushers, daytime receptionists, pastor’s aides, and pew warmers—all who count themselves

1 The Negro spiritual of protest, “Heav’n, Heav’n,” also known as “All God’s Chillun Got Shoes.” For further treatment of the Negro Spirituals see, “Black Sacred Music/Negro Spirituals/Slave Songs: List of Songbooks and Representative Titles,” accessed Monday September 15, <http://www.troutlily.net/freedom-songs/BlackSacredMusic-ListOfTitles.htm>.

2 Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 50.

3 Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze A Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 121.

as ebony heiresses of a tradition of resistance born invisible at the interstices of American abolition and slavocracy. With this inheritance, black churchwomen have also been accorded what womanist Christian ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs identifies as the moral failure of sexual-gender discrimination in the black church that limits black women’s servant-leadership to roles deemed appropriate for them by patriarchy and its arbiters of the status quo.⁴ Sexism, the systematic devaluation and unfavorable prejudicial treatment of women based on the belief that men are intrinsically superior to women, and afro-misogyny, or the hatred and/or utter disdain for black women and black girls that produces and sustains sexist practices and violence against black women, too often guides the theological imagination, ecclesial machinations, and everyday practices of the black church tradition. In light of sexual-gender discrimination as an ecclesial reality within a context that paradoxically emerged in resistance to body injustice, more specifically in light of sexism in the black church, and the routine afro-ecclesial pronouncement that we, the church, are nevertheless “marching to Zion,” yearning, that is, to “walk in Jerusalem just like John,” a black womanist eschatology boldly considers, “what difference does heaven *really* make for black churchwomen?”

A black womanist attempt to “test the spirit” and to faithfully respond to Christopher Morse’s provocative 21st century exhortation to rehear heaven as news, turns first to James H. Cone’s ingenious engagement of black art in his investigation of the Negro spirituals in order to assert the transcendent present as the primary eschatological criterion of black and womanist theologies, and to demonstrate how the black church has historically heard heaven. In tandem with Morse’s constructive eschatology, this essay quickly moves to identify sexism in the black church as demonstrative of Karl Barth’s *das Nichtige*, or as that evil which opposes heaven. Sexual-gender discrimination defies the promise of God’s reign—the promise that the last will be first (Matt. 19:30), that the lamb will lay down with the lion (Is. 65:25), that our swords will be beaten into plowshares (Is. 2:4)—insofar as it presently coerces, bullies, and terrorizes black women, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.⁵ Sexism in the black church, therefore, poten-

4 Raphael G. Warnock explains that utilizing “the Black Church” as a descriptor for the “complex and heterogeneous character of black ecclesial groupings” in North America has proven to be limiting and deeply contested terrain. Nevertheless, in referring to the “Black Church” and the “Black Church tradition” I intend to pick up on Warnock’s definition that points toward “varied ecclesial groupings of Christians of African descent...imbued with the memory of a suffering Jesus and informed by the legacy” of American slavery and Jim Crow. For further treatment see Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 8–10. Marcia Y. Riggs discusses the moral failure of sexual-gender discrimination in African American churches in *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Wipf & Stock, 2008).

5 Some examples of sexism in the black church include the exploitation of black women’s labor through volunteerism that sustains the ministry of the church. Black male preachers are typically the recipients of regular compensation while black women, who with their children number amongst the disproportionately poor, regularly work for free. The practice of preaching afro-misogyny demonizes black women who are single, single mothers, and who generally live in ways that defy black male heteronormativity. Likewise the practice of gender tokenism in Black churches visibly positions one, maybe two, black women as associate or assistant ministers to refute the charge of

tially thwarts Morse's ecclesial appeal to rehear the good news as "now," precisely because the very real consequences of sexual-gender discrimination contravene the assertion of the "now-ness" of heaven. Nevertheless, black womanist eschatology props itself up on the black eschatological vision that emanates from black churchwomen's enduring assertion which affirms that although the kingdom may not come *when you want it*, as in the kingdom may not be proximate, the kingdom is always coming *right on time*, as in it is yet approximating, to affirm the viability of the transcendent present as the primary eschatological criterion for a trustworthy black womanist eschatology. In light of the incongruent reality of sexism in the black church and black women's disproportionate presence and active participation in the church, a brief consideration of the usefulness of Jürgen Moltmann's claims of promissory significance and Morse's engagement of Karl Barth's appeal to divinatory imagination and faithful disbelief as prerequisites for rehearing heaven, precede my reimagining of black womanist eschatology in light of Christopher Morse's considerable contributions.

Echoing James Cone, the essay positions black art through the lens of dance, black women's un-choreographed but liturgically performed movement in the black church, as incarnate evidence of the significance of heaven for black churchwomen. The essay finally concludes with an abbreviated exploration of Emilie M. Townes' concept of womanist apocalyptic vision to stretch and push beyond Morse's appeal to rehear heaven, insofar as rehearing heaven, in and of itself, is insufficient as a faithful response to black women's lives. Taken alone, rehearing heaven does not correspond with their flesh and blood realities. Instead, a black womanist eschatology builds upon black theology's consideration of black art by theorizing black dance, more specifically, the *reach*, the *stand* and the *sway* of black women in the black church, as evidence of the difference heaven makes for black women.⁶ Black churchwomen's embodied movement reveals a radical *plerosis* as the primary criterion for black womanist eschatology. Black women's *plerotic* act in the black church insists upon *putting heaven on* their bodies, in spite of the ecclesial circumstances that would oppose it. In other words, a black womanist eschatology situates black dance as evidence of black women wearing heaven, when hearing and even rehearing heaven is just not enuf.⁷

gender discrimination. While visible, these clergywomen typically have little to no power as it relates to leadership and decision-making. For further treatment on sexist practices in African American churches see Eboni Marshall Turman, "Black and Blue: Uncovering the Ecclesial Cover-up of Black Women's Bodies through a Womanist Reimagining of the Doctrine of the Incarnation" in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Jenny Daggars, eds., *Reimagining with Christian Doctrines: Responding to Global Gender Injustices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 71–89.

6 For a choreographic deconstruction of black women's movement in African American churches, see Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 167–171.

7 Black feminist literary genius Ntozake Shange discusses the "enuf" that haunts black women's lives and life chances in her classic choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

INTRODUCTION

Womanist eschatology resonates deeply with the heaven-as-myth ruminations of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, both of which resist the univocal literalism that posits heaven as merely a cosmological occurrence. Hearing of heaven as myth compels Tillich to take an ontic turn toward "symbolic descriptions of the being of God and creation," while Bultmann attends more exclusively to the primacy of personal encounter with divine activity.⁸ Although methodologically distinct, both Bultmann and Tillich advocate demythologization and deliteralization toward the end of the existential redescription of the significance of the Gospel. This move toward anthropological re-depiction exempts the import and significance of heaven from the limits of antiquity that identify it as an "exact historical happening," insofar as it redescriptively positions the gospel to fit the "true to life conditions" of human existence. For both Bultmann and Tillich, heavenly news or any news of the Gospel is dreadfully impotent unless it addresses the existential circumstances and historical contexts of its hearers as living subjects.⁹

James H. Cone's late 20th century consideration of eschatology as it relates to black life in America reverberates with Bultmannian and Tillichian claims of heaven's existential significance. Turning to black art, namely, the spirituals and the blues or what Cone identifies as the secular spirituals, black theology similarly resists the positivistic historicism of eschatological literalism and privileges the significance of black historicity as it considers heaven. In his assertion of the eschatological precision of black music, Cone readily admits that, "the concept of heaven is the dominant idea...expressed in the black spirituals."¹⁰ To be sure, black scholars like W.E.B. Dubois and Benjamin Elijah Mays among others, have appropriated their observation of the redundancy of "heaven" in the "sorrow songs" as evidence of the otherworldly, mythically objectified, and thus ultimately inept character of the Negro spiritual; the spiritual that "amidst the wilderness and lonesome valley of black suffering," merely points toward "Eternal Good" and the ultimate justice of things.¹¹ In concert with thinkers like Howard Thurman, John Lovell, Miles Fisher, and Anna Julia Cooper, however, black theology contends to the contrary.

When Marian Anderson, the great black contralto, for example, reminds us in her rendition of *Heav'n Heav'n* that: "I got shoes; you got shoes; all God's chil'ren got travelin shoes," the correlation of "heav'n" with "shoes" indicates, for Cone at least, an eschatological claim about heaven that is not otherworldly. In other words, "heaven" is not removed from the reality of the material deprivation of black life in history; rather, heaven, God's future which is always approximating, is also ineludibly related to *what is*, as in concrete black impoverishment in

8 Morse, 37–40.

9 Ibid., 34–38.

10 James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis, 1972), 78.

11 W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 154–164. See also Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (Wipf & Stock, 2010).

the historical world. Indeed, black art as constituted by the spirituals reveals that the “kingdom of God is at hand,” so much so that when the Negro spiritual speaks of “de promised land...on de oder side of Jordan,” or “when black slaves sang, ‘I looked over Jordan and what did I see,’” they were in most instances employing transcendentally coded language to identify and convey their present realities. In fact, within the context of the black spirituals “Jordan” functioned as a signifier for the “Ohio River” and “Canaan” was oft employed as synonym for the “North.”¹² This indicates, over and again, a black eschatological vision irrevocably tied to earthly liberation; a vision that holds black historicity and God’s future together in a fusion dialectic, a tense synthesis, that consistently yields a transcendent present.¹³

Black womanist eschatology has heretofore been similarly situated insofar as it embraces news of heaven as an existential happening and aims to reach beyond extricate and disinterested assertions of literalist Christian eschatologies that presume normative significance for black women. Accordingly, womanist systematic theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher regards the transcendent present of black liberation theology as that which rightly locates heaven within the context of a fusion criterion, as she explicitly emphasizes that God “is not only in and with creation,” but exists beyond history and thus transcends worldly material realities.¹⁴ Baker-Fletcher’s consideration of heaven from the perspective of a womanist eschatological gaze engages black liberation theology, the social gospel, traditional African religions, and Native American belief systems to assert the transcendent and immanent simultaneity of God’s “not yet.”¹⁵ Baker-Fletcher’s womanist eschatology asserts that “the hereafter is in the here and now,” even as it transcends creation and exists beyond history:

Not only is it [eternity] now and not yet; it is past and present.
The “hereafter” or eternity is not only in the future but in the past...
It is indeed a fullness of time in which past, present, and future
coexist together.¹⁶

The tense synthesis or fusion criterion of black and womanist eschatology that is constituted by the interconnection of past, present, and future asserts that the black past, its present, and the “not yet” future of God, though distinct, are never mutually exclusive. Instead, both Cone’s engagement of heaven within the Negro spirituals, and Baker-Fletcher’s examination of heaven in proto-womanist social gospel theology and praxis, reveal that the “future is not simply a reality to come,” but it is also and equally a “reality that has already happened... and is pres-

12 Cone, 80.

13 Ibid., 78–81.

14 Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1997), 286.

15 Ibid., 287.

16 Ibid., 286–287.

ent now in the midst of the black struggle for liberation,” to which we are primarily accountable in the here and now.¹⁷

To be sure, black eschatology contends that the concept of heaven is not exhausted by present existence.¹⁸ In other words, the black spirituals reveal that heaven also functioned as hope in the ultimate future of God, a hope constituted by a new black humanity that defied the malevolence of white supremacy, slavocracy, and Jim Crow. The *transcendent present*, however, as black and womanist eschatological principle reveals that, although distinct as mentioned above, the past and the future are inseparable from the present, precisely because the scandal of the gospel reveals a God “our help of ages past,” who breaks into the present on the side of the oppressed, liberating them now to live into and for God’s future as pre-disclosed in the lifespan of Jesus Christ.

The eschatological reciprocity inherent in black and womanist eschatologies—the inseparability of the past, present, and future as revealed in the lifespan of Jesus Christ—similarly guides Christopher Morse’s groundbreaking eschatological investigation, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*, and allows for striking parallels to be drawn between black and womanist eschatologies and Morse’s liberal theological project. In fact, Morse makes explicit claims throughout the text about heaven’s implications for the *on* hand and the *at* hand, that is, for the aggregate of the present moment, asserting even that, “‘the last day’ is the day ‘at hand.’”¹⁹ Interestingly enough, however, it appears that it is the logic of eschatological reciprocity, not its mere application, that distinguishes Morse’s heaven and that displaces the compulsion to privilege the present as the primary determinant of the “end.” As noted above, while black and womanist eschatologies clearly articulate that the past, the present, and God’s future are not mutually exclusive, they both contend that eschatological reciprocity is dependent on the prioritization of the *present* which necessarily determines the scope and moralscape of the transcendent present and transcendent future. In other words, present historical realities necessarily regulate the contours and substance of God’s in-breaking future for the world. While likewise embracing the inseparability of past, present, and future, however, Morse alternatively engages Jürgen Moltmann’s assertion of heaven as promise to propose an eschatological logic that prioritizes God’s *future* as that which, literally, “makes all the difference in the world;” a future that is not relegated to some “pie in the sky, sweet by and by” phantasm, but rather that unqualifiedly determines “this day.”²⁰

Morse seizes Moltmann’s distinction between *futurum* and *adventus* to undergird his radical contention about the difference heaven makes, especially as it relates to those who might contend that heaven makes no difference at all. For Moltmann, *futurum* refers to the historically factual character of “a becoming that emerges from the potentialities of the past,” while *adventus* connotes the active coming of God’s “promised future that ultimately determines what becomes of the

17 Cone, 84.

18 Cone, 87.

19 Morse, 117.

20 Morse, 121–122.

past *and* the present.”²¹ The intricacy of these eschatological categories, although revisited with precision in Morse’s most recent work, is first examined in his *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* where he delineates and interweaves the Pauline categories of *kata sarka*, or that which is “according to the flesh,” and *en sarki*, or that which is “in the flesh.”²² Moltmann’s *futurum* corresponds with the *kata sarka* insofar as it apparently confines God’s reign to the limits of historicity and trivializes that which is not readily apparent based on subjective interpretations of past and present human circumstances. *Futurum* thus implies that the social historical realities of “what was and is” essentially neutralize “what is to come.” As related to the black spiritual for instance, the oppressed gain shoes (“I got shoes, you got shoes, all God’s chil’ren got travelin shoes”), or basic textile matter (“When you hear me cryin’, I’m buildin’ me a home”) in the eschaton, whether transcendent present or future, based on the historical reality of their material deprivation on earth. To be sure, eschatological reparation or a future vision that compensates for one’s past in the present is significant; however, left alone it is sorely insufficient precisely because, as Morse argues, that which *is to come* is as significant as that which has been taken in the past and/or withheld in the present. In other words, God’s *basileia* as news affirms that the shoeless will certainly get shoes, but the promise of God forecasts that much more than shoes—whether Payless or Prada—are coming to them.

Because sexual-gender discrimination is a stronghold of a past racialized and gender mythology that continues to haunt the present, it is precisely this *what is to come* that is as significant as *what was* (past) and *what is* (present) for black women in the black church. If past and present *kata sarka* realities determine the future per the gaze of Moltmann’s *futurum*, or if God’s reign is limited to a future reversal of the present (*kata sarka*) order of things per the black liberationist gaze then the integration of women in spaces that previously prohibited their participation is situated as the ultimate redemptive possibility for the black church.²³ This is a faulty fix, however, because contemporary history reveals that integration alone is severely inadequate in terms of presently redeeming human communities from the consequences of its tortured past. While the inclusion of women in positions of religious leadership in the black church is a non-negotiable imperative in the work of dismantling sexual-gender injustice and approximating the kingdom on earth, even their radical inclusion defies God’s promise to do a “new thing” (Isa. 43:19) insofar as it, in many instances, merely pours “new wine into old wine skins.” The stronghold of patriarchy often paralyzes black women to the extent that they participate in and reproduce the circularity of the very gender oppressions they

21 Ibid., 46 (italics mine).

22 For further treatment, see Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd edition (New York: Continuum, 2009).

23 For full treatment on the logic of incarnation see Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 39–49.

formerly sought to escape by oppressing others who defy the embodied normativity agreed upon by the typically male arbiters of ecclesial power.²⁴

To the contrary, Moltmann’s *adventus* connotes a new reality; a “new thing” that comes into the present and “is not accounted for as an extrapolation from any available residue of what has gone before.” It mirrors Morse’s *en sarki* insofar as the *adventus*, that is, heaven’s coming, is not readily visible and is independent of human historicity.²⁵ Morse further asserts Moltmann’s *adventus* as the “promised future that ultimately determines what becomes of the past and the present, and not the other way around.”²⁶ Lest the charge of recondite otherworldliness be ascribed to Morse’s claims, he readily concedes that hearing heaven as a promised future necessarily accounts for the “sufferings of this present time” (Rom. 8:18). In fact, for Morse authentically perceiving heaven requires radical engagement with *kata sarka* social historical realities, precisely because heaven is coming into human realities. The catch here is that a Morsian eschatology presupposes that while heaven is coming on earth, the reality of heaven is never limited by an earthly struggle with the “cosmic powers of this present darkness.” In other words, the *kata sarka* historicity which constitutes the injustices of the “real world” in which we live, and move, and have our being, which oppose heaven on every side, do not constrain the “glory about to be revealed” to what is visibly apparent; rather, the *en sarki*, or that which is coming, is real and really stronger than the inequities that threaten our bodies and our souls.

SEXISM IN THE BLACK CHURCH AS BARTHIAN *DAS NICHTIGE*

Sexism in the black church is the antichrist. It is “the nothingness” that opposes (not prevents) heaven’s inbreaking insofar as it seeks to “usurp rule and authority in the place of heaven itself” (Eph. 6:12).²⁷ Sexism in the church attempts to control women according to a deadly and delusional patriarchal norm that defies the eschatological prerequisite that radically prefers “whosoever.” It identifies heteronormative maleness “in public” as superior to all else, while regularly, even if implicitly at times, casting aspersion on women, children (especially black girls) and sexual minorities who defy black male heteronormativity. To be sure, the sexist realities of the black church are not contemporary phenomena merely exacerbated in this millennial moment of woman empowerment frenzy. It can be traced back to the first hand testimony of black women preacher pioneers like Jarana Lee, Julia Foote, and Zilpha Elaw among others. As noted in the scholarship of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham on the history of black Baptist women and the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., religious historian Anthea Butler’s work

24 This is evident in black women’s participation in sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. In the black church, black women’s sexism is often demonstrated in their stated resistance to female pastors.

25 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 46.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 64.

on black women and the Church of God in Christ, Marla Fredericks's anthropological inquiry on Southern black women's spirituality lived out *Between Sundays*, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes groundbreaking sociological study of black women's roles in church and community, the creative agency of African American churchwomen across ecumenical, class, and regional boundaries has historically and quite compellingly navigated dual-sex polity and other restrictive gendered frameworks in the black church through preaching, teaching, community organizing, and the development and cultivation of Mother's Boards and other women's spaces for women's work.

Womanist ethicist Keri Day broadens these trailblazing analyses of women and the black church by rebelling against the traditional framing of the black church as a "surrogate world" as in the imagination of ethicist Peter Paris on the one hand, and the black church as a "wilderness experience" as womanist theologian Delores S. Williams concedes on the other. Day instead asserts that for black women the black church has historically functioned as a community of transcendence. Day appropriates Victor Anderson's concept of transcendence theologically to contend that for poor black women in particular the black church serves as a sort of entryway. It is an access point to ultimate value that enables black women to "...act as agents and to make meaning despite debilitating, inhumane socio-economic conditions."²⁸ Pushing past the insufficiency of prophetic/priestly and radical/accommodationist binary dualisms that have been classically affixed to the image of black churches in America, Day posits a black church for black women that is also somewhere in between, or more accurately, that more often than not supersedes these binary designations insofar as the black church has sometimes performed prophetically, and sometimes not, but undoubtedly has functioned as the place where poor black women have found meaning for their bruised lives, and gained spiritual courage and hope amidst trouble and despair. Day's move to articulate a transcendent black church tradition in which women's spaces of social agency, meaning making, and hope have emerged is insightful for sure, and takes on a conciliatory tone between black women who would choose one side or the other. However, the ultimate positive value inferred on the existence of women's spaces in the church is disingenuous, especially when acknowledged in relationship to the psychic and material consequences of gender discrimination as it is meted out through the sacralization of afro-misogyny and, more dangerously, as it is embodied by black women themselves as a peculiar form of self-loathing.

James H. Cone's probe that doubts the value of saving souls without saving bodies is especially resonant when considering the usefulness of transcendent hope and women's spaces in black churches, particularly because the very articulation and/or construction of such hope and spaces is dependent upon the primary hopelessness and displacement of black women's bodies that is connected to racialized gender discrimination. Although not altogether mistaken in the effort to understand the multiplicity of black church identities, especially in light of the fact that

some black churches, although not nearly enough, do affirm women as pastors, preachers, and religious leaders, any move to assert that the black church as a tradition is *for* black women or that it even possesses the ability in its current expression to address the needs of black women based on individual gains is duplicitous—period. It tells a half-truth, and thus suggests that half-baked is good enough for black women without seriously accounting for the fact that although justice-making is always incremental, God's justice never is. Resolving to feign blindness, ignorance, or even worse, to appeal to the comfortable virtue of some malformed sister trinity of black women's surrogacy, black women's moral crucifixion, and its redemptive value, or even to point toward an otherworldly eschatological hope in the face of gender inequity in the pulpit, sanctuary, and community house, all while humming "we'll understand it better by and by," does nothing to erase or amend the insidious nature of sexism in the black church right now.

Black churchmen and black churchwomen's perpetual rehearsal of articulating the redemptive value of the black church in spite of its continued exploitation of black women is tiring, defeatist, and unjust. It repels potential for resurrecting the black church in the 21st century insofar as it ignores or, even worse, co-signs vile language, liturgy, and practices of patriarchy—like preaching afro-misogyny, demonizing containment ethics that require that black women's bodies be "covered up" in very specific ways to dilute and contain their organic inner Jezebel, and gender tokenism that suggests that one black woman is enough to approximate gender equity in the pulpit—that have historically sustained the black church; all for a spattering of Sunday morning or Wednesday night hope that is negated every time a woman is told that she cannot vote in a church meeting because according to the church bylaws she does not exist, or every time a little girl who says "I want to do be a pastor" is told that she cannot, according to some bastardized Pauline hermeneutic that projects human bias onto God.²⁹

The fact of the matter is that black women disproportionately comprise the black church constituency and labor force as in Townsend Gilkes' exhortation that "if it wasn't for the women there wouldn't be a church," (quite literally according to the gospel since the first preachers were the women who had gone to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body and found that he was not there). Yet, black women are disproportionately underrepresented as formally recognized preachers and pastoral leaders. Beyond the veil of color, in the gendered nuances of the black church, this reality of empowered men divinely and disproportionately appointed to proclaim the word of the Lord to disempowered black women paradoxically replicates the satanic antebellum system of control of black bodies, which demanded that slave masters preach to the slaves lest social chaos and rebellion ensue.³⁰ In the same way, in the contemporary black church men disproportionately preach to women except for the intermittent women's conferences and occasional women's day sermons where women are sometimes allowed space to proclaim to and for themselves.

29 See Riggs, *Plenty Good Room*, 27.

30 For detailed treatment of white Christianity and Black religion, see Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis, 1998).

28 Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (New York: Orbis, 2012), 28.

There is no doubt that sexism in the black church is a psychic and behavioral doppelganger of sorts. To echo emilie m. townes' consideration of the cultural production of evil, gender discrimination in the black church not only reveals that African American churches participate in the reproduction of white supremacy in black face, but eschatologically speaking, the sexist black church is a counterfeit reality that privileges past *kata sarka* racial-gender mythologies to oppose the *en sarki* authority and advent of heaven. Nowhere else is this more apparent than in the lie that is typically fashioned along the lines of, "God does not call women to preach" or more generously, "God does not call women to be pastors," both of which are claims that continue to be asserted in the new millennium, and many black women, young, old, and in-between actually believe and endorse this defective assessment.

Americanist Saidiya Hartman identifies the act of believing the lie that has been told to you about yourself as the "ethic of perfect submission."³¹ Hartman essentially argues that persistent oppression generates an optimal environment for psychic degeneration in which the marginalized come to believe, accept, and embrace the lie given to them by the arbiters of power. It is evident that this ethic is at work in black churches as it relates to black women's labor that is far too often exploited in the name of Jesus and for the sake of black men. The ethic of perfect submission essentially concedes that black women can run the church; they just cannot lead it. It bars black women from the senior pulpit based on superficial presumption of unsuitable genitalia. In light of this, black women have sought to engage their calls and spiritual yearnings in alternative spaces that have historically been deemed appropriate for women—among children, in classrooms, in kitchens, as caregivers, and more generally as helpmeet to black men. In the church, black women disproportionately embody the aforementioned capacities as volunteer Sunday school and nursery teachers directly responsible for disciple-ing the next generation of believers; as volunteer hospitality managers who supervise the physical nourishment of the pastor, congregation, and wider community through food service; as volunteer ministry leaders who advance the cause of Christ by clothing the naked, visiting the sick and shut-in, praying for those in need, and fundraising among themselves in order to sustain the ministry; in addition to answering phones, making photocopies, opening the church doors, cleaning pews and bathrooms, and singing in the choir.

This manner of volunteerism should never be denigrated as such, especially given the significance it holds within the life of black churches. To be sure, somebody ought to teach the children and somebody ought to answer the church phones. However, what must be problematized over and over again has more to do with how black women's labor has been largely restricted to volunteer roles that enmesh the actual value of the church and simultaneously pad the preacher's pockets, all while contributing to black women's socioeconomic impoverishment, although presumably enhancing their spiritual wealth. A Marxist analysis of

31 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90–94.

sexism in black churches is a circuitous exercise in estrangement and exploitation not only because black women's unpaid labor is the ultimate material source of preacher profit, but also because male pastors, as the moral managers of subaltern sacred space, singularly control the profit and the church. The irony is that black women's labor disproportionately produces the capital and the goods, namely, the money and ministry of the church, but due to their perfect submission to the lie concerning the *oughtness* of male pastoral leadership, black women are unable to claim authority within the asset itself, that is, moral authority within the church.³²

As the hands and feet of the black body of Christ on the ground, it is troubling that the predominant roles of women have been *accurately* typified in common parlance as the "backbone" of the church. Black women's work is central to the functioning of the entire church yet women continue to be severely underrepresented or categorically invisible in churches as it pertains to pastoral leadership at the highest levels. Clearly, their underrepresentation is not due to black women's lack of capacity for ministry, which is clearly and fully lived out in their doing of ministry that substantiates the life of the church, but because of their bodies—because they are women. This means that no matter how hard black women hope or pray, cook or clean, sing, teach, preach, or perform, the black church functions as a social negative that says "no" to the full *isness* of black women based on the sum of past and present estimations of the value and virtue of black womanhood. As such, sexism in the black church is irrevocably linked to the past and present, or as I have contended elsewhere, to *kata sarka* social historical realities that oppose God while exercising "a pseudo-agency that is distinctly other from...God's good creation in the biblical drama of creation and redemption."³³ Sexism in the black church is Barthian *das Nichtige* insofar as it seeks to impose hell with deadly resistance on black women and thus nullify heaven's coming to black women's *real* world.

Sexism in the black church as Barthian *das Nichtige* demands eschatological vision; a vision of a "coming" future that stimulates an "at hand" pro-clitoral/pro-woman revolt that functions as the epistemological and ontological threat to afro-ecclesial gender discrimination. This eschatological vision cannot be fully determined by present realities that merely beget a reversal of the present order as it rides the slippery slope of solipsism that refuses to believe that there really can be a new way—a way that defies the contours of what has hitherto fore been done. Instead, eschatological vision that is accountable to black women's experience of gender discrimination in the black church, that is, the experience of Barthian *das Nichtige*, must nullify all that opposes heaven's coming by demanding that the church as it is presently constituted, pass away. As noted in Matthew 10:39, whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake, will find it; thus, inducing sexism in black churches to pass away allows room for a *new ecclesial thing* to come to pass, a new black church that resists the sacralization

32 See Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (New York: Penguin, 1992). See also Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

33 Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 64.

of theosocial violence against black women, and against any body that defies the arbiters of the sexist status quo.

REHEARING HEAVEN: A MORSIAN INTERLUDE

Womanist eschatology affirms that out of nothing, even the nothingness of Barth's *das Nichtige* as evidenced in the reality of gender discrimination in the black church, God can still make something. God is able, period; and this affirmative assumption is the theological substance that undergirds black womanist theoethical postures that insist on *making a way out of no way*.³⁴ Christopher Morse echoes this expectant womanist theological imagination in his engagement of the Barthian categories of 'divinatory imagination' (*divinatorischen Phantasie*) and 'faithful disbelief' (*ain Akt des im Glauben begründeten Unglaubens sein*) as primary mechanisms of resistance against the invasion of *das Nichtige*. Morse concedes that even amidst hell, God is coming; that is, God makes a way in the world out of its apparent 'no way'.³⁵ His tag-team deployment of Barth's 'divinatory imagination' and 'faithful disbelief' makes this way palpable, or rather, permits a rehearing of heaven in spite of heaven's opposition in the real world. This opportunity to rehear the gospel as news, as that which God is doing "this day" beyond the present line of human vision, thus facilitates a relevant rehearing of heaven for black women, even as the usurpation of heaven's coming manifests as the existing reality of sexism in the black church.³⁶ Morse concedes that despite "real world" evidence, it is *how* one hears and rehears the reality of heaven as news that determines the quality and intensity of the difference heaven makes in life.³⁷ He posits divinatory imagination and faithful disbelief as the requisite components of faithful rehearing that begets trustworthy eschatological inquiry.

To assert that rehearing heaven requires disbelief might initially present as theologically suspect; but Morse concedes that faithful disbelief implies a refusal to believe in anything that is hostile to heaven's coming no matter the dominance of its sound vibration in the world. In other words, to believe and actively participate in heaven's counterfeit opposition, namely and for our purposes here, sexism in the black church, or any prevailing though death-dealing practice in the real world, is

34 For further treatment on womanist perspectives on how God presents a way forward for black women despite the impossibility of present circumstances, see Monica Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

35 Christopher Morse exposes the significance of Holy Saturday in his discussion of the Good Friday/Easter dialectic. Too often, inquirers are eager to jump from the suffering of Good Friday to the Easter celebration. Morse suggests the critical importance of God in Christ's descent beyond suffering, even into the depths of hell, out of which God "makes a way" toward resurrection.

36 Morse, 63.

37 *Ibid.*, 1–50. The significance of the *how* is made evident by the comprehensive attention Morse gives to various theologies of heaven before asserting his intersection of the reality and hope of heaven.

in fact the apex of unfaithfulness, even as these practices are often characterized as God-ordained by the arbiters of the status quo. Faithful disbelief, however, is the:

active disbelief of noncompliance and refusal of allegiance toward what the Gospel exposes as countervailing opposition to heaven's coming; that is, the enmity biblically characterized as evil and demonic.³⁸

Consequently, as opposed to Bultmann's turn to demythologization as it relates to biblical cosmological imagery, Morse exposes Barth's faithful disbelief (*Unglaubens*) as not so much concerned with meandering cosmic literalisms, but with evil in the real world. Hearing of heaven as a faithful disbeliever does not merely mean unraveling those "gates strung with pearls" or demolishing those "streets paved with gold" which so often constitute the visions of heaven that arrest the Christian imagination of one's first hearing. Instead, to rehear heaven through the auspices of faithful disbelief has everything to do with actively resisting evil; that is, resisting any and everything in the world that defies the veracity of the Good News. Rehearing heaven in ways that "overpower and disentrall" heaven's opposition casts divinatory imagination as the bedrock of the theological exorcism that faithful disbelief engenders.³⁹ At its core, it definitively expels heaven's opposition in the world; however, it is important to note that faithful disbelief cannot be fully actuated unless it is solidly rooted in a "third" way. Said differently, one cannot faithfully disbelieve heaven's opposition in the 'real world' unless there is a 'real' heaven in which to believe in the first place.

The substance of this sort of heavenly vision is especially complex given that, as Morse concedes, "heaven is distinctive" and "its cosmic reality does not conform to any general metaphysics or generic ontology premised upon" an ambiguity of being.⁴⁰ Although heaven is biblically likened *parabolically* to the "real world," (as in, "the kingdom of God is like unto...") because of its "now" implications, the reality of heaven is that it does not correspond *actually* with any form of worldly univocity. For the womanist theologian this is especially intriguing because it begs the question: how, then, might black women see and hear heaven in light of the fact that, as gospelsed, its sight and sound defy the impulses of binary hierarchical human epistemologies that insist that heaven is "this" and not "that." In other words, how might black women rehear heaven as it necessarily disrupts sexism as *das Nichtige*, especially when heaven's possibilities are, literally, infinite, that is, not circumscribed by the boundaries of normative eschatological respectability; or more succinctly, what does it mean to rehear heaven based on the reality of black women's present realities in African American churches?

As noted above, the dynamism of the Negro spirituals' that James Cone attends to in his treatment of the spirituals and the blues concedes an epistemological privilege of the oppressed which asserts that heaven for black people does not readily correspond with the eschatological vision of the arbiters of moral power.

38 *Ibid.*, 62.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 60.

Basic continuity of language notwithstanding, the vision, import, significance, and even proclamation of heaven, namely, crossing that “chilly Jordan” or awakening on that “great gettin’ up morning,” manifests distinctly across boundaries of Christian difference, and yet “comes from thence,” all the same.

Black womanist eschatology contends that something of heaven is known to black women that escapes the gaze of male normative eschatological vision as it manifests in the black church. The experience of sexism and the subjugation of black women in African American churches as it relates to male power compels a hearing of heaven “at hand” that is accountable to black women’s experience of heaven’s opposition in church and society “this day.” Heaven cannot be confined by sexist realities precisely because the coming *basileia* as gospels disrupts its “would-be nullifying opponents,” *das Nichtige*, and transforms *what is* in order to establish *what ought to be*. For black women *what was* and *what is* sexism in the black church opposes but does not impede *what is coming*, that is, heaven’s inbreaking. In fact, the “at hand-ness” of God’s *basileia* has concrete implications for the present and affirms Morse’s claim that heaven and earth are inseparable. While inseparable, however, it should be noted that heaven and earth are unconfused. This means that God’s reign is always accountable to social historical realities or what is taking place, but not limited to the boundaries of the “real” world. Because heaven is paradoxically that which is “on hand ‘this day’ for ‘the glory forever’” it comes into the world with the intensity of a “new” earth, processing from the *en sarki* Christ event that, on all accounts, surpasses present human understanding.⁴¹

To realize the fullness of heaven’s *en sarki* reality that interrupts the normativity of *das Nichtige* in the world, that is, those death-dealing *kata sarka* social historical realities that demonize and dehumanize the oppressed, one must rehear heaven in a way that stretches beyond eschatological literalism and promissory significance. Heaven matters. For Morse, its import is not to be found in its signification as an otherworldly place to which the faithful will ascend when “this old life is over;” nor the simple assumption of material gain that contravenes the present social deprivation of the oppressed. To hear heaven one must acknowledge that, “eyes have not seen and ears have not heard;” that is, that what is coming to pass “this day” is not determined by the historicity of *what was* or *what is*.

Interestingly enough, present realities that resist God’s *basileia* are not limited to the world outside the church but include even those who cry out, “Lord, Lord.” Morse’s eschatology essentially co-signs an enduring African-American wisdom tradition that undergirds black womanist eschatological vision in its assertion that, “everybody *talking about heaven* ain’t going there.” Hearing heaven through the auspices of “faithful disbelief,” that is beyond normative and presumptuous assertions of its graspable univocity is only approximated by way of divinatory imagination, which applies parabolic significance to reality through poetic sensibilities, or what Barth refers to as “the freer observation and speech of poetry.”⁴² Divinatory imagination is not make-believe or fantasy, but rather is an

41 Ibid., 121.

42 Ibid., 60.

uncharted riff of what is coming but not yet; what Morse would identify as “an almost jazz-like resonance for improvisations of a subject that is:”⁴³

Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –⁴⁴

Rehearing heaven is thus constituted not only by what has been explicitly said about it, but by the poetic; that is, by that which is seen, heard, and felt emerging between and, in many instances, in spite of the sounds of the “real world.” Rehearing the coming to pass (the “invisible, as music”), yet this day (the “positive as sound”) reality of heaven can be actualized through poetic sensibilities that are commensurate with, though distinct from, the good news inasmuch as its expressed lyricism parabolically relays the essence of God’s *basileia*.

Morse subsequently appeals to Emily Dickinson’s, “This World is Not Conclusion,” to demonstrate, most powerfully, that the parabolic significance of heaven is not confined to biblical texts. Such confinement to historical reports or scribal inscription would, in fact, negate the *basileia* “at hand.”⁴⁵ His Barthian impulse instead highlights the significance of secularism of life in the world (*der Profanität des Weltlebens*) toward the end of encountering heaven’s reality, or a real heaven with worldly significance. Consequently, the parabolic import of heaven is found in the poetic sensibilities that transpire outside of the temple. Pro-fanum (“outside the temple”) poetry and artistic impulses affirm the relationship between heaven’s reality and the “real” world. Eavesdropping outside of the temple or inquiring of those people, places, and things that are not explicitly religious, and perhaps are even irreverent and contemptuous of sacred claims, gives birth to divinatory imagination that further informs the temple, empowering the “church’s talk of a heavenly kingdom” to acquire parabolic significance that extends into the life of the world, and thus mirrors the reality of heaven’s “coming” even to the precincts of the profane, those places we least expect God to show up.⁴⁶

THIS IS THE REMIX: DANCING REVELATION WITH WITHERED HANDS

Black womanist eschatology delights in Morse’s treatment of Barth’s exhortation to locate eschatological significance in the strange interruptions of the world by first appealing to Alice Walker’s “loves dance” as definitive evidence of womanist identity in order to decidedly assert black dance as the *pro-fanum* divinatory imagination that mirrors the “parabolic truth of the *basileia* of heaven’s reality” for black women in the black church.⁴⁷

43 Ibid., 61.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 65.

46 Ibid., 66.

47 Ibid., 65–66. See also Alice Walker’s definition of womanist in her classic *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983), xii.

Charles H. Long's classic treatment of signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion is instructive for black womanist eschatology insofar as it wrestles with the irony of that which is not explicitly said, but emerges symbolically, or as Morse might concede, with parabolic significance. Like Toni Morrison's much later assertion of *unspeakability* as it relates to the horrors of black women's realities, Long contends that non-Western peoples and cultures that were forced to "undergo the creativity of the Western world...were present not as voices speaking but as the silence which is necessary for all speech." While asserting that the philological terrain of Western cultural creativity, that is, imagination (that was not so divine), was not the exclusive language of humankind, Long further maintains that those subjugated by Western creativity or as a townesian ethic might suggest, those whose lives were dominated by the spectacular authority of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, "existed as the pauses between words," or the vibrations between sounds.⁴⁸ Not only were those pauses necessary for approximating the speech act, but even more, Long proposes that it was in the silence that dispossessed peoples and cultures spoke in ways that did *not merely* speak, but signified, pointing to something beyond the *what is*. Accordingly, Long makes sense of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by insisting that the phonological creativity of the oppressed is found in the silence that is *present* between words.⁴⁹ Embodied presence engenders a silent counter-language of sorts that articulates not primarily as "speech-act," but rather through presence in the pause. In other words, the existential substance of the dispossessed black body within the context of Western cultural creativity has historically articulated between words, in silence beyond language that has been exhausted by the forms of the "real" world.

As both the sophisticated vocabulary of professional black performance and the improvisational social movement that emerges from within communities of African American descent, black dance is an embodied and "in-body" lexicon that functions as a primary source for the task of womanist theological reflection. Black dance as the phenomenological there-ness of a black body that silently articulates within the creative matrices of dominant forms, namely, *das Nichtige*, is divinatory imagination at its best. Forasmuch as black dance shows itself by way of choreographed and/or improvisational symbol—in the long lines, for instance, of [Judith] Jamison, the rounded shapes of Dudley [Williams], the gentle pulse of [Katherine] Dunham, the new jill swing of Rhapsody, and [Talley] Beatty's odd time—black dance itself cannot be *said*. Instead, it disbelieves "real world" historical claims of black bodily subordination and imagines and enfleshes a black bodily reality that is approximating, though not proximate. Black dance is thus parabolic insofar as it points to a not yet reality that is only known through the veracity of "real world" flesh and blood. Black dance offers a precise, though often overlooked, corporeal language of images that transgresses the hegemony of texts

48 See Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 1995), 65. For further treatment of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan,).

49 Long, 65–69.

and lingual idiom all while speaking the unspeakable. Cultural formation in the loud silences of the black community situated beyond the gaze of white creativity where the dancing black body functioned as primary signifier (i.e. the soul train line) reveals a fundamental ontology of the *articulating body*, the body that does not speak but signifies.

Long argues that the interrelation of language with the silence of those who have "undergone" the creativity of the Western world functions as "the basis for a new ontology" that is inclusive of a range of experiences including poetic sensibilities expressed through symbol, idea, image, or alternative materiality; an expression of existence that according to womanist incarnation ethics extends even to the line, shape, time, and pulse of the body.⁵⁰ Hearing the silences in the poetic through the inaudible body that moves—the very act of which is mostly antithetical to metanarratives of theological inquiry and method—moves us toward what Long concedes as that which inevitably constitutes black experience in the Western world. The silent presence of the black body as it *moves* to and fro, in and through, the interstices of dominant hegemonies parabolically speaks. The shape, line, pulse, gait, and timing of the black body even in the context of white and/or male meta-choreography, theological and otherwise, articulates something about ebony realities that gesture beyond the *kata sarka*, those normative hegemonic cultural creativities that Long would attest to, toward a "new thing" that Morse argues is coming although "not yet."

To be sure, black dance is not an exclusively *pro-fanum* act. Elsewhere I have explored at length the embodied movement of black women in the black church through a choreographic deconstruction of three primary movements—the reach, the stand, and the sway—that can be observed in many African American churches across denominational affiliation.⁵¹ Black women's embodied movement is sacralized in the church insofar as it typically emerges within the context of devotion and worship at the behest of the Spirit, and in response to the proclaimed and/or intoned Word. Black women's sacred dance employs socially subjugated bodies—black women—as parabolic signifiers that use the potency of the present to signal the supremacy of the transcendent, which *is to come* this day for the glory forevermore. Beyond the hegemony of text, black sacred dance reveals a future that is "not yet" through the bodies of black women who enflesh the reversal of the present order. In the poetic sensibility of sacred dance one observes the reconstitution of black women's bodies that are normatively counted as "last" in relationship to the "first" place of black men in the church.

To reach one's arms up while spiritually cast down, to stand while emotionally bowed over, and to sway back and forth in the attempt to rock steady while mentally shaken by the turbulence of the multiple practices of gender discrimination in the black church is black women's embodied act of faithful disbelief that affirms that there is another way; a way whereby every valley *really* is exalted and the crooked places *really* are made straight (Is. 40:4); a way that is not yet but is

50 For full treatment of womanist incarnation ethics see, Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

51 *Ibid.*, 167–171.

coming in defiance of the present *das Nichtige* of black women's "real world" in the church. Black women's dancing bodies defy their own *kata sarka* historicity, *what was* and *what is*, in the very act of embodying *adventus*. In other words, the act of black women's *coming* into the church in spite of its afro-heteropatriarchal opposition to black womanhood that nullifies their full humanity unveils the radical and redemptive capacity of bodies that have been broken under the weight of sexism in the black church, and that move or better yet that still dance a revelation of coming justice, even with withered hands. It is only through the broken body that is reconstituted that humanity approximates the glory forevermore. The assertion of the physical and moral integrity of black women's bodies amidst countervailing forces in church and society is "like unto" the *en sarki* event of Christ that yields the advent of the kingdom. Black womanist eschatology, thus, concludes that in the black church sacred dance is the *basileia* at hand that makes a difference for black women who are subjected to gender discrimination. It is the dance that demands that the black church *move*—at least beyond its present moral failure as it relates to black women.

CONCLUDING PLEROSIS: "PUTTING ON" THE *BASILEIA*

Forasmuch as black womanist eschatology embraces Christopher Morse's provocative exhortation to rehear the gospel as news, in her consideration of womanist spirituality as social witness, theoethicist Emilie M. Townes posits that womanist eschatological hope must always be partnered with apocalyptic vision.⁵² This sort of vision affirms the reality of "God accomplishing [God's own] divine plans within the context of human history," that is, of God's coming to do God's work, while also insisting that God's coming is actualized "by means of human agents" who actively participate in particular social actions that have universal implications.⁵³ In other words, womanist eschatology is incomplete if it replaces human *doing* with a rehearing of God's *coming*, or merely being "on hand" for what is "at hand." Black sacred dance reveals black women's compulsion to do—to utilize embodied agency to "make a way out of no way;" that is, to put their bodies on the land in demonstratively showing a God at-hand even amidst *das Nichtige*. In the sacred dance we observe that black women are not limited to only rehearing heaven, especially in light of who is disproportionately privileged to speak and be heard in the context of the afro-ecclesia. Black women's bodies instead reveal a womanist plerosis that shows them "putting on" the *basileia*—the embodied reach toward what is *not yet* defies the cast down reality of *what is*. Womanist eschatological *plerosis* thus contends that black women not only rehear heaven. They are not only being "on hand" to rehear what is "at hand" in the coming of the *basileia* that disrupts and destroys the countervailing forces of God in the world, but through sacred dance black women *wear* heaven on their bodies even as they are

subject to heaven's opposition. It is a Pauline contention that "when this corruptible shall have *put on* incorruption and this mortal shall have *put on* immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'death is swallowed up in victory' (I Cor. 15:54). Black women's sacred movement is hope embodied. It is the plerotic act that yields a reversal of black women's social brokenness and the performance of a wholeness that is coming in defiance of what is heard in the "real world." Black sacred dance is the embodied imagination of a coming future that *will be* that, which determines *what is*. It is in the sacred dance—the reaching, the standing, and the swaying that black women *wear* Sunday after Sunday—that one might glimpse the real difference that heaven makes.

52 Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 121.

53 Ibid., 122.