"You Have No Right To Do As You Like With Me": Womanist Discourses on Theological Retrieval

Abstract: M. Shawn Copeland recounts a story of resistance within Harriet Jacob’s autobiography about her life in slavery. In response to claims of ownership by others, she responds, “You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me.” Copeland describes that act as a fundamental and profound self-affirmation against those who would seek to claim other’s bodies or minds, especially those of women (“Wading Through Many Sorrows,” 122).

In response to such moments in Copeland’s work, including her book Enfleshing Freedom, this paper seeks to examine methodological tensions in recapitulating history in certain theologies (an issue raised by Womanist scholars). This paper begins by highlighting how memory and history relate in Copeland’s work as well as how Medieval and Historical theologians have emphasized them, such as in the works of Burcht Pranger and Willemien Otten. Furthermore, one can distinguish several different sub-genres of constructive theology that have placed an explicit focus on history and reintegration of this matter into the present, including the mid-20th century Catholic movement of Nouvelle Théologie and the more recent Protestant movement of “Theology of Retrieval.” This essay offers that Womanist Theology also seeks to determine how contemporary scholars adjudicate and retrieve history. In such cases, remembering in Womanist theology becomes an act of ethical importance and ultimately resistance when opposing any effort to obscure the past or reify previous structures. It concludes by proposing that Womanism and other Liberationist theologies can productively participate in, and even further, the aims of Medieval and Early Modern Christian studies within theological discourses.
Introduction:

There is a profound ambivalence in Christian theology to history itself. Regardless of particular use of historiographic data, such as disputes over the age of the Earth, Christianity as a whole has constructed, used, and responded the concept of the past in differing or even countervailing ways. Church Historian Alan Kreider diagnosis the problem as he remarks, “Christians have not always found their faith’s big story to be helpful. At times they have found it embarrassing, constricting, and violent, filled with abuse and hypocrisy. Not surprisingly, Christians have often dismissed the past as ‘dead tradition.’”\(^1\) History becomes an inconvenience, in this regard; it becomes antithetical to the efforts of certain Christians. John Webster’s discussion of “Theology of Retrieval” provides an example of such a concern. “Theology of Retrieval” is a recent approach that intervenes in theology as a field, the notion of Christian, and the possibilities in constructing both of those.\(^2\) The significant features of this recent mode of theology are its three-fold epistemological claims of transcending constrains of modernity, relying more fully on authentic Christianity, and reclaiming the past.\(^3\) Here there is the use of sources from the past to muster a response to the seeming predominant modern, theological hegemony (as variably defined).\(^4\) In this approach, there is a sense that one must overcome certain, unhelpful aspects of the past in order to construe something productive and authentic. However, M. Shawn Copeland refutes such an effort in her book, *Enfleshing Freedom.* For her, human beings are caught up in a vast web of interconnections that reach back into history. She further specifies that the past haunts the United

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\(^1\) Alan Kreider, “Ressourcement and Mission” in *Anglican Theological Review,* Spring 2014, 239


\(^3\) "Theologies of Retrieval,” 589-590.

\(^4\) This theology shares premises with the Nouvelle Théologie or Ressourcement movement (e.g, de Lubac), “Theologies of Retrieval,” 592.
States, especially as one attempts to avoid the history. The past is not merely a resource to be used or not; rather, it is unwillingly and inextricably connected with humanity. In fact, historical recapitulation of the past is an antidote or countervailing force to the conditions or efforts of historical amnesia. Those wishing to remove suffering or inconvenience have to face the past (such as the physical suffering and death of Jesus against polite sensibilities). There is a sense of historical interdependence, inescapability, and imperatival qualities. It is a fact that one has to wrestle with the complexity and thereby it is an invitation towards personal and communal change, i.e. metanoia. Hence, Womanist theology as represented by Copeland becomes an act of ethical importance and ultimately resistance when opposing any effort (such as Theologies of Retrieval) to obscure the past or reify previous structures, which has significant continuities with the work of historical theology.

**Copeland, Womanism, and History:**

For Copeland and other Womanist theologians, the past is inherently powerful and affecting. Emilie Townes describes that suffering has a persistence over time. Pain that does not dissolve, especially if it is due to systems and principalities that mandate it. There needs to be a permissible metabolizing and reflection for transformation (and even continued existence as well according to Townes). The past needs recognition because it holds the power of life and survival. Therefore, concerned engagement with history becomes part of the divine process towards redemption and wholeness.

Copeland continues this trend and perception of history within Womanist theology. She describes remembering as a drawing back of the veil of delusion. It is a “dangerous memory” against the perceptions, assumptions, or even reifications of the present that stem from a use of the past. It

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6*Enfleshing Freedom*, 3.
7Ibid, 6.
further serves as material for constructing a just present, as it provides a medium for resistance and even healing. Therefore, it is support for freedom and humanity itself.⁹

History in particular for Copeland becomes manifested in human bodies. For her, one’s body and other material conditions are incarnations of one’s experiences. Thus, the human body takes on a sense of transcendent, significant, and further concrete realization of the proximate nature of one’s past. Such a dual role thereby gives one’s physical self an intersubjective, imperatival quality. One carries one’s past and therefore every person one interacts with does so as well. Thus, respect for the past becomes interconnected with one’s respect for other subjects and persons.¹⁰ Hence, Copeland criticizes systems, such as racism, that force a limited horizon on other selves. Racial hierarchy inherently limits expression and interpretation of one’s self, by parameterizing or obfuscating the real past for a falsely imagined one. Copeland describes this process as a crushing objectification.¹¹ In this way, racism represents a system profoundly counter to Christian theological anthropology and creation itself. This tactic of obscuring reality in order to repress, against all sense of respect of selves, is thereby sinful.¹² History cannot and must not be forgotten.

There is a sense in which Copeland envisions, with Christian tradition not just Womanist Theology, the dual responsibility and freedom of history. Copeland in her essay, “Wading Through Many Sorrows: Towards a Theology of Suffering in a Womanist Perspective,” recounts a story of resistance within Harriet Jacob’s autobiography about her life in slavery. In response to claims of ownership by others, she responds, “You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me.” Copeland describes that act as a fundamental and profound self-affirmation against those who would seek to claim other’s bodies or minds, especially those of

⁹Enfleshing Freedom, 3-4.
¹⁰Ibid, 7.
¹¹Ibid, 13-16.
women. History and the act of recounting have a way of re-evaluating here against the falsely perceived rights of some. There is not an immediate release from the oppressive facts of the past, but there is a chance to reclaim or reframe them. It is this dependence on yet interrogation of the past that intersects uniquely with Christian tradition, such as Peter Abelard in the 12th century. Abelard, in this case, shared the understanding that human beings are under the realm of time (infraabitum tempris) but there was still the obligation to ethically interpret and act upon the meaning of the past. There is no escape but there still an imperative. Hence, historical theology there are inherently links and methodologies between the Christian of the past and one of the present. Furthermore, this concern about history is not merely one of constructive theologians but rather a live debate within historical theology. The ambiguity inherent within the Christian present resonates with the Christian past.

**Historical Theology:**

Within a radically different context, this question of the use or significance of time remains a perennial question of Christianity. Burcht Pranger goes so far as to say that temporality and historicity (the awareness of being within history) are fundamental components of Christianity. However, he acknowledges the multivalent qualities of such constructions. Pranger writes of a fragility or uncertainty of the past for Christians. Previous theologians such as St. Augustine of Hippo described the ambiguous nature of time, the past, and history; particularly, he noted that subjectivity and objectivity seem to be difficult to pin down as the main perception of time.

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14. This hypothesis relies upon the assumption that Abelard wrote the *Sic et Non* sometime around the 1120s.


Furthermore, there was a difficulty in retrieving it reliably in the act of remembering.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, Pranger concludes from this data that history is a product of memory. While it has a basis in the factual past, history is a construct. Furthermore, it is liable to become twisted or warped.\textsuperscript{18} Yet in contrast to this epistemic, sensual danger, it is also an epiphanic medium. According to Pranger and Augustine, reality channels epiphany; thereby, it cannot be simply an adjunct phenomena as portrayed by “Theologies of Retrieval.”\textsuperscript{19} For Pranger and Augustuine (like Copeland), language, description, and their antecedents of history within theology function dramatically on a razor’s edge between valuation and description. It has the subjective potential for deception or salvation, as well as objectively disappearing or telescoping into wider imaginings. There is an inherent difficulty. Memory while contested since the 12\textsuperscript{th} century in Christian theology, if not prior, becomes an essential feature. It is by which one reflects and understands one’s own sense of historicity. Furthermore, there is an ethical valence and set of meanings to all of this. Historical fact, history, and narrative are not neutral or even given.\textsuperscript{20}

Hence, history and the past are less objective; rather, they are inter-subjective constructions. In other words, history is made quite literally in its living out and its recapitulation. Furthermore, it is a social phenomenon with an imperatival quality.\textsuperscript{21} Here too in the Scholastic period, as with Copeland compared to Webster, there is both ambivalence yet wrestling with historicity and temporality itself. It is a process of construction and reconstruction. The horizons of history emerge as these scholars and their milieu subvert the feeling of historical rootedness. There is a strange set of intersecting and countervailing horizons of history, in different layers.\textsuperscript{22} One only can notice such

\textsuperscript{17}“Introduction on Religion and Pastness”, 2-3
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid, 6-7
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid, 8
\textsuperscript{20}Hellemans, 46-54
\textsuperscript{21}“Introduction on Religion and Pastness”, 1-14.
\textsuperscript{22}Hellemans, 45, cf. Janet Coleman.
as one accounts for these phenomena in their entirety.\textsuperscript{23} It must be holistic, as Womanist theology claims. There is therefore an available and yet inescapable past, no matter how much traditions or methods try to sideline it.\textsuperscript{24} As much as immediacy within current discourses attempt to reify or highlight the present, there is necessarily a past.\textsuperscript{25} Therefore, reception as historicizing before it is not neutral. In fact, it is in a religious sense, part of a process of transformation. It urges us onwards into the future, in responsibility, possibility, and freedom.\textsuperscript{26}

**Historicism:**

Given the handling of this phenomenon, there must be methods for understanding these layers and uses of history. Historicism discussions in the 1990s have been some of the major posits of such discourses. These analyses excellently engage with the nuance that humans are products of and producers of history.\textsuperscript{27} Alan Kreider writes of the increasing use of retrieval in theology and Sheila Greeve Davaney has written on the paradigms of historicism within Christian thought. Alan Kreider notes there are several trends of historicism. Sheila Greeve Davaney further highlights three forms of recent historicism, including postliberal, revisionist, and pragmatic. Postliberalism, in Davaney’s view, assumes that there is little to be gained from objectivity and thus it must primarily focus on the social constructed nature of one’s culture and reality. One can and ultimately must appropriate the past to determine one’s identity and existence.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, Postliberalism assumes an ability to retrieve materials from the very origin of a tradition as long as one locates one’s self within that specific sphere or community.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, there is a sense in which Postliberalism falls

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Otten} Otten, 65.
\bibitem{Otten2} Otten, 67-69.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 82-85.
\bibitem{Davaney} Davaney, 26-28.
\bibitem{Davaney2} Davaney, 28-29.
\bibitem{Davaney3} Davaney, 30.
\end{thebibliography}
into the categorical mistake of not engaging with cultural studies and culture. Postliberalism further fails to account for historical conditions, other traditions, the non-static nature of human life, material condition, and authority issues. There is a sense in which such an effort is inherently and falsely hegemonic.

Thus, Davaney posits and refutes David Tracy’s methodology as a counter to such efforts. Davaney describes it as a theory of correlation and universality within revisionist hermeneutics. While this method of Tracy solves many of the problems of hegemony and reification that concern Davaney, she notes that this strength is still insufficient to overcome its major weakness. The very focus on the correlative quality of experiences poses the most problems. It assumes the inherent applicability of one experience to a radically separate context, which runs counter to the concern of incomparable human experiences. The theological anthropology of Davaney’s view assumes that human beings are interconnected and dependent (socially and materially). Yet there is an unstable or non-essentialist quality to phenomena over time. They are not static but rather constantly shifting and reconstructing. Hence she posits what she calls a pragmatic hermeneutic. Thus, there is an inherent embedded nature to theology, culture, and practice within the material conditions, thus inseparable from one’s individual experiences.

While this essay concedes the concerns between pragmatic and revisionist, they are much closer when one considers another set of distinctions, i.e. Ressourcement, Theologies of Retrieval, and Womanist Recovery. Ressourcement, or Nouvelle Théologie, is a mid-20th century Roman

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32Davaney, 32-33
33Ibid, 34
34Ibid, 35.
35Ibid 36-40
36Ibid, 34
Catholic approach. It assumes that there is a continuity between one’s tradition and one’s identity in so far as one can claim founding sources as part of one’s life. Such a theology played a significant role within discussions during Vatican II. Monastic communities especially become hopeful for reconnecting with their “primitive” or “original” foundations. There was a diversity of sources that became enveloped in this method, such as Patristic and Medieval.\footnote{Kreider, “240.} While such efforts have had an ambiguous effect on historiography, they were a powerful force within the 20th century.

A more recent development has been the Theologies of Retrieval, as describe by Webster. This movement is synonymous with the movement that Krieder calls “Evangelical Ressourcement.”\footnote{Ibid, 240.} The Evangelical Ressourcement, i.e. Theologies of Retrieval, see modernity and post-modernity as challenges. Such new developments must be circumscribed in order to return to the original material. Thus the goal remains the same as the Ressourcement of 20th century Catholicism. However, this Protestant variety ignores socio-political condition far more. While the political shifts or elisions existed in the earlier Ressourcement, Theologies of Retrieval rely upon culture, specifically continuity of Euro-American culture, as a prerequisite. Particularly, Theologies of Retrieval is a European and American theological trend stemming from theological premises of Karl Barth and the historical analysis of Henri Lubac. The main premise is there is a flaw within modern discourses of theology that rely upon culturally hegemonic traits rather than Christian tradition. The natural offshoot of such thought is post-liberal or neo-orthodox thought that seeks to prioritize particular constructions of Christian history as the main sources for theology (e.g. Hauwerwas and Lindbeck). One can see it as a way of affirm and retrieve earlier structures of Christianity, against dialogue with philosophy or social science, and concerns about pluralism.\footnote{Webster, 585-594}
Post-Christendom as a Post-Colonial and pluralistic reality is not incorporated.\textsuperscript{40} Ironically, Theologies of Retrieval are cultural constrained. In this sense, there is a failure of fluidity and engagement with material conditions inherently.\textsuperscript{41} In order to feel “unharassed” by current anxieties, there is a deployment of history in Theologies of Retrieval to overcome the present.\textsuperscript{42} Ironically then, history becomes a tool of retrieval not of continuity but of almost of anachronism and further obfuscation, as Womanist like Copeland warned.

Therefore, it is warranted to examine Copeland and Womanism as relating to retrieval in contrast to Ressourcement and Theologies of Retrieval. Copeland obliquely critics and calls for further adjudication of postmodern methodologies, without mentioning either. However, when discussing those methods that she criticizes such as uncritical or simplistic, her concern involve many of the features of these two procedures.\textsuperscript{43}

**Womanist Retrieval and M. Shawn Copeland:**

Copeland’s form of retrieval fulfills many of the same efforts of the previous strains while proposing a link between revisionist and pragmatic (specifically certain types of postmodern and liberationist). First, and foremost, Copeland highlights the need for empowering voices, not just speaking for them (through her critique of theologian Cheryl Sanders). Appropriation must be affirmative and supportive of its sources.\textsuperscript{44} Hence, Theologies of Retrieval fail on one account. Furthermore, Copeland sets the requirement that there needs to be a hermeneutical privileging of the oppressed in the study and use of history in Christian theology. In particular, Copeland decries the tendency to universalize or “skip over,” in order to recover at the expense of the experience of some.\textsuperscript{45} In contrast to the assumption of easy or reification in retrieval, Womanist Theology roots

\textsuperscript{40}Kreider, 243-244
\textsuperscript{41}Hopkins, 20
\textsuperscript{42}Webster, 3.
\textsuperscript{43}Enfleshing Freedom, 20.
\textsuperscript{45}Enfleshing Freedom, 25.
itself in engagement with those suffering (especially Black Women), in listening to accounts of pain and anguish, and of highlighting the individual and collective struggle. One should not simply gloss over suffering but participate in and solve it.\textsuperscript{46} Hence, it is not for the strength or consolidation of traditional authority that Womanism looks back but rather for the mutual solidarity amongst women of color along with their allies.

Furthermore, continuity and memory become keys. Memory and history, rather than challenging, become vital and empowering in and of themselves for Copeland. In slavery, remembering gave access to naming, contextualizing, and even signification itself. In this way, there was the possibility for recovering and ultimately reconstituting a sense of identity, culture, as well as self in the midst of oppression. As Copeland summarizes, “Memory, then, was an essential source of resistance.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus, memory and history become sources of power, instead of inconveniences.

Copeland describes how imitation and intergeneration transmission of both strategies and sufferings allow for the continuation of existence for people. Even pain (once properly metabolized) becomes a factor in expanding the horizons of interpretation for Black women.\textsuperscript{48} Here material condition and culture provide fuller and more robust links to the past, compared to the assumed hegemonies of Theologies of Retrieval. Additionally, there are hints of the understanding of the constructed yet potentially transformative nature of memory, as in Medieval historical theologies. In this way, Copeland’s work is both critical of the misuse of memory in certain historicisms while fully engaging with another; thereby, she provides a link and possibility for future theology.

Conclusion:

As Copeland focuses on embodiment and history, there is an enhancement of the horizons for retrieving materials from the past. Furthermore, Womanism further connect the concerns of

\textsuperscript{46}“Wading Through Many Sorrows”, 112.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid, 121
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid, 123-124
contemporary theologians and historians of Christian Theology. The significance and applicability of this finding is wide-ranging, specifically from Post-Colonial Theology to Christian Environmental Ethics.

One such example of nuancing in retrieval would be the case of St. Francis of Assisi in ecological theology. Lutheran theologian Paul Santmire in his pioneering work *Brother Earth* (1970) claims St. Francis is the exemplar for the proper Christian stance on the environment. In *Brother Earth*, Santmire presents St. Francis as paradigmatically emphasizing the profound interconnection in Creation between the divine and physical (in tandem with his critique of modern visions as dispensing with nature).\(^4^9\) Santmire is not alone in his use of St. Francis as a counter-example to environmental exploitation. Historian Lynn White Jr. in 1967 proposed St. Francis as the best alternative to what he called, “orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature” in his article in *Nature*, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” Since then, Christian ecological theology and ethics have included more than just St. Francis, yet there remains a persistent impulse by some to root theology in his example even in Post-modern analyses.\(^5^0\)

However, there are historical complications to this effort. Inga Clendinnen notes one can see an ethically conflicted history in the Franciscan Order itself. While Franciscan Missionaries to New Spain in Central America tirelessly advocated for the rights of the indigenous people of Mexico-Guatemala, they also paradoxically instituted the systemic conversion along with torture of these

\(^{4^9}\)H. Paul Santmire, *Brother Earth: Nature, God and Ecology in Time of Crisis* (Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson, 1970) 16, 132, 187-191. Creation in this project and my general research is a synecdoche for the wider issues of the relationship between divinity and physicality, where the assumption is that the former is the originator of the latter.

\(^{5^0}\)Additional sources have included St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (e.g. 8:22f), St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (e.g. I.Q.46-47), and John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (e.g. 1.5.64 and 1.13.14), cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3-21, Francis, *Laudato Si* [Encyclical Letter On Care For Our Common Home], secs. 83-86, and Daniel P. Horan “The Franciscan Character of ‘Laudato Si’” in *America*, June 18th 2015.
same peoples. The seemingly stable concepts in modern appropriations of Franciscan thought are much more ambiguous (especially around the issues highlighted by Santmire such as the positive view of the physical world and its capacity as a vestige of the divine). Therefore, Copeland’s example of Womanist and Pragmatic retrievals of the past help give resources for these future concerns. Rather than attempt to skip over such difficulties, Copeland and other Womanist remind scholars of the imperative to further engage these challenges of history. Remembering becomes an imperative.

Further Related Womanist Readings:


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