Chapter 7

Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation

Delores S. Williams

For many generations African American Christians have appropriated biblical personalities and events to identify models of faith, courage, and hope as a promise that God participates in the human struggle for freedom. Two African American traditions of biblical appropriation support this idea. One of these traditions, the liberation tradition, has gotten considerable development from black male theologians. They use liberation passages in Exodus 1–15 and Luke 4 to validate their theological positions. The other African American tradition of biblical appropriation, the survival, quality-of-life tradition, is getting its development from black female scholars known as womanist theologians. Considerably younger in its evolutionary process than male work in the liberation vein, the survival, quality-of-life tradition builds on the story of a biblical female figure whom the African American community has appropriated from the time of slavery to the present day. The appropriation lifts up the slave woman Hagar and her story as it appears in the Bible.

The aim of this essay is to contribute to further development of this Hagar-centered tradition of appropriation by exploring its significance for the construction of womanist theology. At the onset I identify several assumptions that guide my effort. First, a womanist theological reflection assumes a theological

task committed to the survival of a whole people: women, men, and children. Second, the primary audience for womanist theological work is the African American community. But like the poets who believed the artist should leave enough space in his or her work so that different ideas can thunder in, the womanist theologian invites nonblack audiences into dialogue. After all, womanists are not separatists, except when women's health is at stake. Third, womanist theologians search for the African American community's understanding of womanhood and God's relation to it. Thus the womanist theologian assumes that she has the license to create new language and new categories and to develop analytical tools appropriate for conveying the results of her research to the community.

This is not a new practice in the development of the Christian theological tradition. Paul Tillich—convinced of the present ineffectiveness of conventional religious language—had to devise a new vocabulary. And this new vocabulary helped him speak with a theological voice that made a powerful impact upon intellectuals and Christian laypersons. In our own time we know of the great contribution some feminists have made in this area of creating new vocabulary and new meaning. Some of the work of Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, and Letty Russell comes to mind. Womanists are, indeed, in good company when they take the license to create fresh language and ideas in order to convey the meanings their research has yielded. That said, I can advance to the major concern of this essay.

ENTER HAGAR

For more than two hundred years, African Americans have appropriated the biblical figure Hagar. She has appeared in many different contexts, supporting a variety of meanings. In literary, social scientific, historical, anthropological, and theological sources Hagar appears. The wide range of this appropriation catalogues easily. Edmonia Lewis, a nineteenth-century African American sculpter, who finally lived in Italy, carved a famous statue she named "Hagar in the Wilderness." Ex-slave woman Susie King Taylor, in her narrative, tells of her grandmother who named one of her children Hagar Ann. In her novel *Iola Leroy,* first published in 1892, Frances Harper describes an ex-slave mother who "like Hagar of old, went out into the wide world to seek a living for herself and her child." The poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, whose writing career extended from 1898 to 1906, wrote about "the members of the Afro-American Sons of Hagar Social Club." Novelist Richard Wright referred to the African American family as Hagar's children. When he wrote *The Negro Family in the United States*, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier titled one chapter "Hagar and Her Children." Francis P. Reid's book of poetry *Given to Time* contains a long poem entitled "Hagar."[1] African American anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney dedicated his collection of urban narratives, *Drylongso*, to "Lucy and all the other flowers in Aunt Hagar's garden." In the glossary to this book Gwaltney describes Aunt Hagar as a "mythical apical figure of the core black American nation."[2]

Maya Angelou's poem "The Mothering Blackness" alludes to the woman as "black yet as Hagar's daughters." Nobel Prize novelist Toni Morrison named a female character Hagar in her novel *Song of Solomon*.[3] Black preachers have also participated in the community's tradition of appropriating Hagar and therefore her story in the Bible. At a conference on black women in ministry held at Princeton Theological Seminary in the 1980s the Reverend Arlene Churn preached a sermon entitled "Hagar, What Ailest Thee?"[4]

The stories in the biblical book of Genesis seem to be the context from which these African American appropriations of Hagar have derived. Many of the themes from these Genesis stories course through the range of the catalogue listed above. There is the theme of sexual exploitation. In Genesis 16:1–16, Hagar is a sexual victim exploited by members of a family more prominent and more powerful than she. Toni Morrison's novel features a character named Hagar who is also sexually exploited by a member of a family more prominent and powerful than she.[5] There is the theme of destitution and single parentage. In the Genesis 21:9–21 story Hagar and her child Ishmael are cast out into the world alone and destitute. Hagar, now a single parent, must make a way for herself and her child. In Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy,* Iola is cast out into the world following the Civil War, and she too, as a single parent, must make a way for herself and her child. Harper refers to Iola as "like Hagar of Old."[6]

The theme of survival struggle involving children or family appears in the two Genesis passages featuring Hagar. Survival struggle is also suggested in some of the African American sources in which Hagar appears. Novelist Richard Wright and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier portray the black family as a female-guided structure with the black mother, like Hagar, focusing on the survival needs of children or family.[7]

There is also the theme in the stories of a poor, oppressed woman having an encounter with God. In Genesis 16:7–13, Hagar meets the angel of the Lord (interpreted as a face-to-face encounter with God) in the wilderness. In Genesis 21:17–19 Hagar communicates with God, who again gives attention to her and her child's situation. The sermon of the Reverend Arlene Churn ("Hagar, What Ailest Thee?") makes parallels between Hagar's meetings with God and African American women's understanding of their encounters with God.[8] Just as African American anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney recognized "Aunt Hagar as the mythical apical figure of the core black American nation," the Genesis 16 and 21 stories contain God's promise that Hagar, through her son, would be the mother of a great nation.[9] Thus the theme of women's agency in the development of nation building presents itself in both Hagar's and African American women's experience.[10] Just as the biblical Hagar (Genesis 16:1, 15) was a slave when her child was named Ishmael, Susie King's grandmother was a slave when her child was named Hagar Ann. Thus the theme of naming under duress appears in both women's situations. The theme of dark skin translates from Hagar's African heritage in Egypt to African American women's heritage from West Africa. Therefore Maya Angelou can refer to African American women as "black yet as Hagar's daughter."

A talented black female student at Union Theological Seminary has carried the interpretation of the Hagar appropriation a bit further. Valerie Ellis calls attention to the significance of African American people's appropriation of Hagar's child Ishmael. According to Ellis, the correlation here is between Ishmael and African American youth. Ishmael is an abandoned child. He is abandoned by the home context in which he was born and raised. He is abandoned by Abraham his father. He is briefly abandoned by Hagar, who turns her back on the child. She could not bear to see him die. However, in Ellis's formulation we get from Hagar and Ishmael to Jesus on the basis of the abandoned son Jesus on the cross crying to his father-God: "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" Ellis's point is that many African American children have been abandoned in all the ways Ishmael was abandoned. She concludes that the church can communicate better with African American youth today through a theological understanding of the many dimensions of this historic experience of abandonment.[11]

The appropriation of Hagar by African Americans and the presence of her themes in black people's sources raise the question of the significance of the appropriation for the construction of womanist theology. I identify and explicate what I see to be three areas of theological import. First, the Hagar appropriation establishes *a continuity of tradition about God* significant for the African American Christian community's understanding of its faith. Second, for the explication of its meaning in the deposits of African American culture, the Hagar appropriation spawns *a new methodological level of interpretation* complementary to (but different from) traditional exegetical methods employed in the interpretation of biblical texts. By traditional methods I mean those historical-critical ways of extracting meaning from a biblical text through analysis of language and the use of methods that give attention to the origin and form of the text as well as to redactional problems.

The third area of theological import associated with the African American appropriation of Hagar is the connection of *faith and politics*. When viewed through the lens of African American women's experience, Hagar's actions yield a certain politic also present in African American women's history. In both Hagar's story and African American women's stories, this politic results in confessions of faith. And these confessions of faith testify to God's involvement in women's struggle for life and well-being.

Later in this essay, I provide support for the claim of the third area of theological import associated with the African American appropriation of the biblical Hagar. Suffice it to say at this point that all three areas of theological import indicate the significance of the Bible for the formation of some African American cultural deposits (e.g., poems, novels, narrative literature, art, socio-scientific works, etc.). And these biblically informed cultural deposits communicate important messages about the community's understanding of its faith and its response to black womanhood.

It is important to indicate what I *am not* declaring here. I am not declaring that traditional historical-critical methods are obsolete. I am suggesting, however, that,

for a theological interpretation of what this Hagar appropriation can mean for the African American Christian community, a level of interpretation is needed prior to historical-critical analysis. This essay does not demonstrate how a traditional exegesis of the biblical texts follows and functions in relation to this *prior level of cultural interpretation*. If this study were to be extended, a thorough discussion about the connection between this cultural level and the historical-critical level would be provided. In that case, I would assume that the results of the work of cultural interpretation and those of historical-critical analysis of the Hagar texts would yield insights that can be brought into dialogue. From this dialogue exciting views could emerge, expanding the community's historic understanding of God's relation to its life. This essay, however, explicates only the three areas of theological import identified above: continuity of tradition about God, methodological level of interpretation, and connection of faith and politics.

ESTABLISHING A CONTINUITY OF TRADITION

Establishing a continuity of tradition about God means examining the patterns of a community's culture and faith so that the community can understand what and how it has passed along (from generation to generation) its beliefs about God's relation to its life. For the womanist theologian, establishing a continuity of tradition about God involves uncovering female-centered traditions buried beneath the layers of androcentric cultural traditions. Once uncovered by the theologian, this buried tradition gets its name and provides tools for theological interpretation of data. The newly exposed tradition enters into dialogue with the prevailing and prominent androcentric cultural patterns or traditions and becomes a source for enlarging the community's understanding of the many ways God does and has related to the world—including the many ways God relates to the particular community itself.

At this point, additional reflection upon the Hagar-centered appropriation in the African American context can demonstrate how the womanist theologian uncovers buried tradition and helps to establish the community's continuity of tradition about God. Two analytical moments are involved: the moment of memory and scholarly intention and the moment of reasoning and naming. Memory (of some past situation) dimly recognizes a partially visible pattern and/or practice on the surface of the culture that seems to have roots buried beneath the cultural soil. As the result of what memory has intuited, scholarly intention crafts certain queries it brings to the examination of data. From this relation of memory, scholarly intention, and data, discovery happens.

Let me illustrate this first moment on the basis of my own experience. As a child growing up in the segregated southern United States, I heard Hagar's name mentioned many times in the black community. I had a dim recollection that this name had something to do with black American women, but I had forgotten the name as I traveled through the ranks of academia. Then one day, at a

meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I was walking down a corridor in the hotel. Suddenly I heard a resonant male voice behind me belt out the words "Ma Hagar!" Instantly I whirled around. I felt the voice was calling me, and it was. A family friend, Professor Riggins Earl, and I were facing each other. At that moment he had called something deep in my cultural memory that recognized the name Hagar was associated with African American women. This cultural memory was the first step in the birth of a scholarly intention associated with Hagar. The next step came when, upon my expressing dismay at black women's absence from black and feminist liberation theologies, one of my professors advised me to reread African American sources from many disciplines. As I read, I was to keep in the forefront of my mind this sentence: "I am a black WOMAN!" I followed his advice and I discovered, in African American sources, this vast, vast appropriation of the biblical figure Hagar!

The second analytical moment in this process of uncovering buried tradition and establishing continuity of tradition about God involves reasoning and naming. Let me again provide an example from my own scholarly experience. On the basis of such widespread and long-term appropriation of Hagar by African Americans and on the basis of the parallels between Hagar's experience recorded in the Bible and African American women's experience portrayed in the black sources, I did some reasoning. I reasoned that Hagar was not a random, disconnected pattern floating in the fluidity of the African American cultural stream. Rather this appropriation of Hagar and intimations of her story were a tradition trying to deliver an important message to the community. Since her name and story had been passed to so many generations of black Americans, I also reasoned that Hagar was an analogue for African American womanhood. Inasmuch as this Hagar appropriation was rooted in biblical story, I further reasoned that it must have religious significance for the black community. Unlike the liberation tradition of African American biblical appropriation, the Hagar tradition was unnamed and its meaning for the community was not clear.

However, as a womanist theologian with some intellectual roots in feminist presuppositions, I concluded that my theological task was to name this Hagar-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation. If what I reasoned about Hagar being an analogue for black womanhood was true, then the appropriation, as a tradition, must be given a visible and viable place in the community's understanding of its experience and God's relation to it.

Though the concept of naming came from feminist presuppositions, insights about the process of naming came from a traditional way in which many African American Christians used the Bible. They interpreted God's relationship to their lives on the basis of the way God was reported in the Bible to deal with situations like theirs. Especially during slavery, they did not accommodate themselves to the Bible. They accommodated the Bible to the urgent necessities of their lives. God's deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery indicated that God would liberate African American slaves. I knew that in their way of appropriating from the Bible, the black American religious community had not traditionally put final

emphasis upon the hopelessness of the painful aspects of black history. Rather, they used the Bible to put primary emphasis upon God's response to the community's situation of pain and bondage.

A careful reading of Genesis 16:1–16 and Genesis 21:9–21 reveals that Hagar's predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, single parenting, and radical encounters with God. African American women's historic predicament in society resembles Hagar's in the biblical stories. By appropriating Hagar, I concluded that black Americans wanted to keep this female experience alive in the memory of the community. But what about God in this Hagar-black-American-woman scenario? Was there something about God's response to Hagar's situation that correlated with African American people's understanding of God's response to the historic situation of black American women?

It was obvious to me that God's response to Hagar in Genesis was not liberation. Rather, God participated in Hagar and her child's survival on many occasions. When she was a runaway slave, God met her in the wilderness and told her to return to Sarai and Abram's domicile. Then, when Hagar and her child were finally cast out of the home of their oppressors and were not given proper resources for survival, God provided Hagar with a resource. She received new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before. Thus it seemed to me that God's response to Hagar's (and her child's) situation was survival and involvement in their development of a quality of life appropriate to their situation and their heritage (e.g., Gen. 21:20).

Many black women have testified that "God helped them make a way out of no way." They believe God is involved not only in their survival struggle, but also that God supports their struggle for quality of life, which making a way suggests. I concluded that this female-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation could be named the survival, quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation. In black consciousness, God's survival and quality of life response to Hagar is God's response of survival and quality of life to African American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God's help.

It is reasonable, then, to conclude that this survival, quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation involving Hagar expands the community's knowledge of God's activity in the world. While the androcentric dominance in African American culture has, for generations, passed along faith in a liberator God, the Hagar-centered survival tradition of African American biblical appropriation passes along a God involved in the daily survival and quality-of-life struggle of black American women. The emergence of this cultural interpretation helps to establish a continuity of tradition about God that the community can see as open and extending rather than as petrified into a single liberation emphasis.

My point is not to suggest that the liberation tradition of African American biblical interpretation lacks relevance and meaning in the context of Afro-Christian experience. The liberation appropriation of biblical events and persons

is consistent with some aspects of that experience and has brought the theological voice of the black Christian community into wider areas of theological discourse. But the point here is that the survival, quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation strengthens the black theological voice and affirms God's freedom to act in many different ways in response to a community's life and faith.

To reiterate, establishing a continuity of tradition about God involves two analytical moments: the moment of memory and scholarly intention leading to discovery and the moment of reasoning and naming leading to broader visions of God's action in the world. Of course, it is the survival, quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation that has resulted from the work of the two analytical moments.

A NEW METHODOLOGICAL LEVEL OF INTERPRETATION

Following continuity of tradition about God, the second area of theological import is a new methodological level of interpretation. Coming before traditional historical-critical methodologies used in the interpretation of the biblical texts, this new womanist method is informed by some of the theological work of JoAnne Terrell. In her book *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience*, Terrell coins the term "proto-womanist" to indicate perspectives and interpretations earlier than today's womanism but definitely contributing to womanist meanings in our time.[12]

Like Terrell, I point to a level of interpretation (with regard to Hagar's appearance in African American culture) that can be applied to black American culture and can influence the historical-critical exegesis of the text. In womanist terminology this type of interpretation is named *proto-gesis*. It employs methodologies that analyze all the African American deposits of culture in which the Hagar references appear from slave-time to the present day. Proto-gesis is a womanist theologian's way of leading the community into cultural self-study. The study not only focuses on the significance of the biblical appropriation for revealing issues and questions vital to the community's daily life and sustenance; it also provides issues and questions from the culture that the theologian can use in the dialogue between the results of both proto-getical analysis and historical-critical exegesis of the Hagar text.

Conceptually, proto-gesis is loosely informed by some of the insights from discussions about meaning in the area of Cultural Studies. I use the term "loosely informed" to indicate similarities between proto-gesis and Cultural Studies, despite the differences. As one way of defining Cultural Studies, Richard Jones has provided a help for understanding what proto-gesis involves. He advocates that Cultural Studies "be seen as . . . an alchemy for producing useful knowledge

about the broad domain of human culture"[13] For purposes of this essay, I would add something more specific to what Jones offers. Proto-gesis produces useful knowledge about the broad range of meanings projected in African American culture when biblical imagery is also used to shape cultural deposits reflecting the faith, life, and gender issues in the community.

Stuart Hall's understanding of the goal of Cultural Studies resonates, in part, with the aim of proto-gesis. He writes that a central goal of Cultural Studies is to "provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival and resources for resistance."[14] But proto-gesis must also go beyond this goal to assert that while survival and resistance are primary womanist concerns, meaning must be extracted from the culture unencumbered by the ideologies to which the interpreter might want the meaning to conform. However, there is no denying that meaning will be partly influenced by the nature of the questions the interpreter asks.

Proto-getical analysis in the work of cultural self-study must be done by using interpretative strategies appropriate to the genre of the cultural deposit in which the biblical appropriation is lodged. If the appropriation appears in a poem, novel, or play, the tools of literary criticism must also be employed. Thus the theologian-interpreter might ask how the biblical appropriation affects the resolution of the plot. If the biblical appropriation is used in character development, she might explore how this characterization advances the themes that the author uses to structure the novel. Or the womanist theologian-interpreter might seek to discover the message about community, identity, religion, God, and worldview the artist is trying to communicate through his or her method of characterization, through the juxtaposition of themes, through the nature of the language, through the use of figures of speech (metaphor, simile, etc.), and through processes of symbolization. These are only a few of the literary-critical theological questions the womanist theologian might ask of the cultural deposit featuring biblical appropriations.

As far as the Hagar appropriation is concerned, the object of proto-gesis is not only to discover how the formation of culture has contributed to the development of ideas about religion and gender in the community, but it also gives attention to the way the appropriation of Hagar's story contributes to changing the cultural deposit in which Hagar is located. Whether Hagar in the African American context appears in a novel, poem, social-scientific treatise, sculptured art, or sermon, we can assume that she brings religious or spiritual connotations to whatever meanings the cultural deposit communicates to the community.

As an example of the way proto-gesis works, Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* makes an apt subject. All the major female characters have names derived from the Bible. Thus Pilate, Hagar, Magdalene, Ruth, and First Corinthians appear in the text. The women are kin and have the surname "Dead" derived from the family patriarch Macon Dead. A proto-getical analysis, using literary-critical strategies, would explore such questions as follow: Do these biblically derived female names (all with the surname Dead) have symbolic value in the

text? If so, how does this symbolism freight the themes through which the author conveys meanings? What do the relationships between these women (as well as their names) tell us about the worldview of the community in the novel? Does the characterization of these biblically appropriated females suggest issues peculiar to black women's culture? If so, what? What are the religious and gender issues for black women and for the black community that emerge from Morrison's portrayal of the life world of Pilate, Hagar, Ruth, and First Corinthians?

However, an examination of Morrison's work does not complete the proto-getical task related to African American "cultural self-study." Before definite statements can be made about the religious and gender issues emerging from African American culture, there must be a proto-getical analysis of all the cultural deposits in which the Hagar appropriation is contained. And methodological strategies must be used that are appropriate to the genre containing the appropriation. For instance, the social-scientific treatise by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier entitled "Hagar and Her Children" must be interpreted with strategies appropriate for sociology. One of the questions of proto-getical analysis would be this: in the use of Hagar, what is Frazier communicating about the African American understanding of the place and role of women in the black family? Are religious innuendoes threaded throughout Frazier's sociological analysis that suggest a connection between religion and gender in his work? Certainly many more questions can be posed to Frazier's work.[15]

The point here is that a proto-getical analysis of all these cultural deposits, using the methdological strategies appropriate to the genre of the deposit, will unearth issues and questions from African American culture about religion and gender. Also, the work of proto-gesis can bring womanist theologians into dialogue with scholars from other disciplines. For instance, conversation with literary critics can help the womanist theologian discern what can be reasonably concluded from her analysis of literary texts. Some of the issues resulting from this dialogue can be used to shape the questions the womanist theologian brings to the historical-critical analysis of the biblical texts in which Hagar appears.

In summary, then, womanist theologians engaging the interdisciplinary methods of proto-gesis arrive at a more scientific way of determining some of the ideas and beliefs about women and religion that African American culture has carried in its stream over time. When a biblical figure like Hagar becomes a cultural icon (cf. Gwaltney's declaration: Aunt Hagar as a "mythical apical figure of the core black American nation"), something is being insinuated about veneration related to the African American female figure. And this veneration has gained momentum as women like Hagar passed through many stages of African American culture. One of the tasks of womanist theology, then, is to uncover the meaning of this veneration in terms of the connection between African American people's religious beliefs and what might be their cultural understanding of the characteristics and roles of "the ideal" black woman. Thus the dialogue between the results of proto-gesis and the results of the historical-critical interpretation of the Hagar texts can provide a firm foundation upon which womanist theologians can

construct their proposals about the community's faith regarding God's relation to women.

FAITH AND POLITICS

The third area of theological import associated with the African American appropriation of Hagar is the connection of faith and politics. Historians Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson surveyed African American women's history and concluded that "it is more than a story of oppression and struggle . . . it is a story of hope."[16] My own research has shown that this hope is supported by a connection between black women's religious faith and their political ways of acting in the world. This action has involved endurance. It has involved resistance that is sometimes aggressive, sometimes subtle. And it has involved the verbal expression of a triumphant faith grounded in the belief that God is a coworker with black women in their life struggle.

Hagar's story also shows this connection between faith and her political way of acting in the world. Thus it is not difficult to understand why the faith and political dimension of Hagar's story can be so attractive to African American women. Hagar endured when endurance yields suffering and sacrifice. Obeying God's command for her to return to slavery after escaping, Hagar again endures bondage at the cruel hands of her owner Sarai. Inasmuch as resistance can be expressed by a hostile countenance, Hagar subtly looked with contempt upon Sarai when she (Hagar) discovers she is pregnant by Sarai's husband Abram. Like African American slave women, Hagar did not have the resources to win in an attack on the law that allowed her owner Sarai to use her (Hagar's) body to gain a child. Nuzi law in ancient Mesopotamia, which the Hebrews may have followed, allowed barren upper-class women to gain children by commanding their slave women to cohabit with a man the slave owner selected. Sarai was barren. Hagar could not say "no" when Sarai demanded that Abram, Sarai's husband, cohabit with Hagar so that a child could be produced. But in the midst of her defiance Hagar met God in the wilderness and received God's promise: "I [God] will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude." Then, in response, Hagar makes a triumphant faith statement: "Thou art a God of seeing" (Gen. 16:13, RSV).

Like Hagar, some African American slave women experienced upper-class white women taking their children away from them. The slave Sarah Debro said, "I was kept at the Big House to wait on Miss Polly, to tote her basket of keys and such as that. The day she took me my mammy cried, 'cause she knew I would never be allowed to live at the cabin with her no more."[17] Also like the slave Hagar, African American slaves experienced violence at the hands of their owners. Historians Hine and Thompson claim that on these American slave plantations "discipline was swift and often cruel . . . southern plantations had their share of outright sadists. Without constraints of law or social disapproval, these people

[i.e., the slave owners] women and men, were free to commit extremes of physical violence on even the youngest slaves. . . ."[18]

Theologically, the significance of the union of faith and politics is that it gave birth to triumphant confessions of faith uttered by black women, as indeed by Hagar. Many African American women have expressed the belief that "God helped them make a way out of no way." This confession of faith has been passed along in the African American oral tradition for many generations. It is impossible to determine precisely when black women's words actually crystallized into this faith statement supported by their ways of acting in the world. The story of a nineteenth-century black woman named Nancy Prince contains ideas that suggest such a confession of faith and related politics.[19]

Incorporated in her naming of God is Hagar's confession of faith: "Thou art a God of seeing" (Gen. 16:13). Then in amazement she asks, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Gen. 16:13). Rather than an expression of doubt, this question registers Hagar's awe that God could pay attention to a lowly slave like herself. Obviously this faith of Hagar, told in the biblical story, has passed through many generations of readers. It is no wonder that black women can declare from generation to generation, "God helped us make a way out of no way." And they can easily resonate with Hagar's faith statement—i.e., "Thou art a God of seeing."

We cannot deny that the Bible, Christian religion, Euro-centric American culture, and African American culture have played a large role in shaping African American women's faith and politics. But it is also true that strands of non-Christian religions and culture have threaded through this faith and these politics from the seventeenth century to the present day. Hagar and African American women have a heritage rooted in Africa. It is not far-fetched, then, to view their faith, politics, and confessions of faith through the lens of an imagination informed by African culture. However, such a task is beyond the scope of what this essay can accomplish. It is enough at this point to emphasize that, in a Christian context, African American women have found in Scripture and culture a point of connection and a point of departure from which an authentic womanist theology can be launched.

THEOLOGICAL DESIGN UNDER CONSTRUCTION

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that new interpretative tools are needed to open wider the gates of African American culture, and these will help the Christian community obtain a realistic view of God and "woman-related" themes that the culture has carried over time. The process of uncovering androcentric biases and naming different possibilities (e.g., establishing a continuity of tradition about God) direct attention to new visions of the many ways God has acted and does act in human history. Relational experience in a sociohistorical context (e.g., faith and politics) yields insight about God and female agency working

together, ultimately yielding confessions of faith that affirm women's beliefs about God's care in their daily lives.

Many theological designs can be constructed on the basis of the African American appropriation of the biblical Hagar story. The birth of the *survival, quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation* provides new interpretative possibilities. When survival and quality of life function hermeneutically, the theologian is directed to other biblical stories and traditions beyond Hagar and beyond liberation, traditions that have meaning for a variety of Christians. For instance, the theme of survival brings the biblical covenant tradition into focus and with it the association of an economic motif related to the promises of God. Quality-of-life themes, associated with survival, point to the wilderness tradition and yield insights about the kind of life and religious orientation God ordains for God's people. They show what is involved in the making of a people, a message significant for the African American effort to hold a black peoplehood together. Further, this molding of survival and quality-of-life issues can help the theologian to interpret divine insights and divine participation in diasporic situations similar to the Babylonian captivity. Such interpretation would be important for those Christians in the African diaspora in the West trying to live a Christian life.

Womanist theologians will no doubt continue to take seriously the role African American biblical appropriation has had in shaping the black community's consciousness about God and ethnic women. This kind of focus will perhaps urge black theologians, male and female, not to fixate on one hermeneutical possibility but to interpret God's changing Word in the context of an inquiring faith. In such an endeavor, the story of Hagar and her children plays no small role.

Notes

1. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 245.
2. John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso* (New York: Random House, 1980), glossary.
3. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).
4. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 245.
5. Morrison, *Song of Solomon*.
6. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Garrignes Brothers, 1893).
7. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).
8. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 245.
9. Gwaltney, *Drylongso*.
10. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 245.
11. Presentation in a seminar conducted by Delores Williams on "Women's Experience as a Resource for Worship," by Valerie Ellis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 2001.
12. JoAnne Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in the African-American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).
13. Richard Jones, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Social Texts* 16 (1986/7): 38f.

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