Article

A Case for a Polyphonic Anthropology: Giving Voice to Experiences of Women of Color †

SimonMary Asese Aihiokhai 🆔

Department of Theology, University of Portland, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203, USA;
aihiokha@up.edu
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Abstract: Discourses in theological anthropology ought to begin by centering the human condition in all its multiple expressions. Experiences of marginalized women of color do not always make it to the forefront of such discourses. What does it mean to be a woman of color in God's imagination? How can we speak of the human person as a rainbow reality of diverse narratives and experiences? This work attempts to address these questions by appropriating a critical hermeneutic that allows for a polyphonic discourse on what it means to be human. In doing this, this work articulates arguments for a polyphonic anthropology. It critiques the traditional understanding of human as *imago Dei*. It opens up a new horizon for conceiving of the human person through the multiple experiences of humans, especially women of color, who, traditionally, have not always been acknowledged to be truly human in a world defined by narratives of erasure.

Keywords: Black women; Cartesian self; *imago Dei*; inclusive anthropology; polyphonic anthropology; voices from the margin; women of color

1. Introduction

To speak of the human person is to give voice to a polyphonic being, one that embodies the ability to fantasize. In the words of Judith Butler, "fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home" (Butler 2004, p. 29). This ability of the human person to fantasize allows for "new modes of reality to be instituted through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone" (p. 29).

In this work, I will give voice to a more inclusive theological vision of the human person by appropriating the perspectives of women, especially women of color (Black women) in the global south and north. In doing this, I will consciously resist the temptation to write a monologic script. In my engagement with the topic of being human from the two worlds, north and south, I will appropriate insights from religious and cultural traditions within and outside of Christianity, mainly from African Traditional Religions and cultures. Methodologically, I will showcase a constructive and analytical style that preferences a Levinasian bias for ethics as first philosophy and a Bakhtinian dialogic. I will retell our human stories from the loci of Black women, while also giving voice briefly to the experiences of Asian women. Retelling our stories allows for the possibility of hearing what has been silenced and of silencing that which has the power to negatively manipulate the cognitive abilities of the listener. Grounding this work in the philosophical allows for the possibility to be critical without attempting to flee to the comfort of dogmatism

or habits that have been defined by narratives of power. Why a bias for a polyphonic anthropology in this work? The heteronormative narratives on the human person playing out in our world, especially in a world radically shaped by the vestiges of imperialism, colonialism and the enduring legacies of structural racism, have tended to validate solely the experiences of White persons, especially White heterosexual men. A turn to a polyphonic anthropology is an attempt to decenter such hegemonic narratives and, by so doing, allow for an appreciation of diversity as a legitimate expression of being human in the world. Furthermore, why a bias toward the experiences of Black women? Historically, Black women have been reduced to the status of invisibility in a racialized world that makes whiteness the legitimate way of being human in the world. A turn to the domain of the invisible, which Black women have been forced into by whiteness, is a deliberate attempt to undo the hegemony of whiteness playing out in discourses on the human person. It is also an attempt to embrace the diverse experiences of Black women as a tool for helping to resist the trappings of a single narrative on the human person.

2. Rereading the Biblical Motif of *imago Dei*

The duty of a theologian is to constantly reflect on the signs of the times and to work intentionally to shed light on oppressive structures originating from a people's social, cultural, intellectual and religious loci. This was the task that James H. Cone set out to accomplish when he wrote:

> The weakness of most 'Christian' approaches to anthropology stems from a preoccupation with (and distortion of) the God-problem, leaving concrete, oppressed human beings unrecognized and degraded. This is evident, for instance, in fundamentalist and orthodox theologies when they view the infallibility of the Bible as the sole ground of religious authority and fail to ask about the relevance of the inerrancy of scripture to the wretched of the earth. If the basic truth of the gospel is that the Bible is the infallible word of God, then it is inevitable that more emphasis will be placed upon 'true' propositions about God than upon God as active in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. (Cone 1990, pp. 82–83)

Cone's critique of dominant theological anthropologies has legitimacy when one looks closely at how Christian theologians have historically interpreted the motif of *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26). In addition, although Cone does not explore the role of culture in shaping such anthropologies, it is important to state clearly that all anthropologies are themselves shaped within the context of culture. Even the theological renditions of the motif of *imago Dei* are couched within the dynamics playing out in culture. Historically, Christianity, whether Western or Eastern, has expressed its theological insights and ritual practices within patriarchal biases that preference the experiences of heterosexual men. This bias towards heterosexual men's experiences is further reduced to that of White heterosexual men in racialized western societies. The following examples showcase a clear bias for men as the locus of authentic anthropological expression of the motif of *imago Dei*; John Chrysostom argued that the *imago Dei* pertains only to men because "man dominates all while woman serves man" (Chrysostom n.d., #4). Others like Peter Abelard, the notable feminist of his time, argued that man possessed more fully the likeness of God in "power, wisdom and love" (cited in Newman 1998, p. 91). Furthermore, Christian theological thought has been held captive, as noted by Barbara Newman, by the "Augustinian locus of the image (of God) in the rational mind" (p. 91). Cone's corrective insight to this biased anthropology that does not acknowledge the place of concrete human experiences is worth repeating: "The question about the human person is not answered by enumerating a list of properties; a person is not a collection of properties that can be scientifically analyzed. Rather to speak of the human being is to speak about its being-in-the-world-human-oppression" (Cone 1990, p. 87). Cone's centering of concrete human experiences in the theological discourses on the human person as the image of God forces theologians to take seriously all human experiences, especially the experiences of those humans who are marginalized in a racialized and/or patriarchal world. Cone's argument not only makes room for victims of

racism and patriarchy, but also opens up a legitimate space to embrace Black women who traditionally have been at the bottom of socially constructed racial hierarchies. I would add briefly that it opens up a legitimate space for Black trans-women who today suffer all the indignities playing out in our world.

Again, by calling attention to human experiences as the loci for articulating a theology of *imago Dei*, Cone is insisting that Christian theology ought to take seriously those experiences that define human lives in the world. In other words, Christian theological anthropology must begin with the question: what experiences are shaping the lives of humans in the world we live in and how do these experiences enhance or diminish the lives of humans in the world, especially the lives of those directly affected by these experiences? This question thus links Christian theological anthropology to a liberational theological framework and response. Too often, Christian theological anthropology does not go beyond making grandiose statements on the human person that do not engage the very structures shaping the lives of humans in the world. It omits the liberational response to systems of evil and erasure playing out in our world. This missing aspect in traditional Christian theological anthropology has helped to instantiate oppressive structures playing out in our world.

Cone is not the first to seek an alternative anthropological vision that intentionally rejects the strong bias toward concepts devoid of references to concrete humans in the world, whose humanity is mediated through their lived experiences. Hildegard of Bingen was a trailblazer who chose to speak of the incarnation as fully realized through the body of a woman. As noted by Newman, for Hildegard, a "woman's role as vessel of the incarnation was the very seal of her creation in the image of God" (Newman 1998, p. 93). The choice of the word, vessel, by Hildegard is intended to locate the discourse of the human person as the image of God within the context of experiences that define women's lives, especially in a historical era when women were neither regarded as rational beings nor worthy of embodying the high intellectualism that men were accorded. All humans have experiences. Consequently, by appropriating the imagery of the vessel, Hildegard is expanding the theological vision of the human person as the image of God to include women also. When one looks closely at Hildegard's life and works, one finds a woman struggling to make sense of her relegation to an inferior status relative to that of men. Hildegard struggled during her life to overcome the cultural and theological narratives that presented women as inferior to men (p. 26). Her ability to overcome such a poor understanding of the feminine was aided by two aspects of her life; one had to do with her dogged determination to embrace her "feminine frailty" as a theological reconciliation with a God who takes the side of the weak (p. 26), understanding that God, as taught in the Christian theological traditions, identifies with and perfects the weak in ways in which divine alterity becomes the source for meaning and identity construction. Hildegard is being intentional here by moving the theological discourse on the motif of the image of God from the locus of patriarchal power that preferences men to the domain where those who have been erased from such a patriarchal world exist. In her time, women were among those living in that world of erasure. Consequently, for Hildegard, even when culture and religion have relegated women to a second-class status, the one who restores what has been denied is the divine. In this case, an embodiment of the image of God is not a right but a gift that comes from the other. In this case, the other is God. And if God is the source of this gift, God's freedom ought to be acknowledged because God also desires women to be an embodiment of God's own image in the world. This appeal to alterity as the source of authentic identity shaped the spiritual wisdom that Hildegard passed on to her spiritual protegee, Elisabeth of the monastery at Shoanau. Furthermore, Hildegard uses the motif of the "trumpet" to demonstrate how identity is inherently a gift that comes from alterity. In this case, a woman derives her dignity from the God of surplus. Elisabeth is "to be like a trumpet, which resounds not by its own effort but by the breath of another" (p. 27). The other whose breath gives sound to the trumpet is God. Consequently, the authentic meaning-giver in one's life, especially those of women, is God and not men or

the patriarchal church. This understanding is tied closely to the second aspect of her life experiences. Hildegard's visions of the divine as having feminine attributes calls for a new Christological story, one that upends the preference for a divine incarnation that is male through and through. If Christ is reduced to maleness, then the ritual of soteriology that God has brought about through Christ is deficient and cannot be said to address all of creation. The description of God as male is only a tool which does not exhaust the content it signifies. Thus, just as God can be described using the attributes of maleness, so also can God be spoken of using female attributes. None of them exhaust the meaning of God.

Again, Hildegard rereads the creation story that locates the dignity of humans in the *imago Dei* by intentionally linking it to the incarnation event effected through the role of the woman, Mary. Standing on a rich Christological platform that speaks of humans being made in the image of Christ, Hildegard concludes that the fullness of the link between the creator and the created is expressed through the feminine attributes of God, which she referred to as Sapientia (Holy Wisdom) and Caritas (Love). This link is realized through the medium of the consent and participation of a woman. Thus, to speak of the *imago Dei*, one ought to intentionally begin with an acknowledgement of the feminine as the means for realizing that image which God fully gives and receives in love (caritas). In other words, "where the feminine presides, God stoops to humanity and humanity aspires to God" (p. 53). Again, in her rereading of the creation story, Hildegard is making a case for human experiences, actualized in the world, as the locus for any reasonable discourse on the motif of *imago Dei*. Hildegard is offering a response, in an astute manner, to the cultural and religious argument that links rationality to maleness and experiential knowledge to femaleness—if experience, as she has argued, is the locus for envisioning the expression of the *imago Dei*, then women are the rightful ones who can be said to embody truly this divine image. If men disagree with her conclusion, then they also ought to reject their biased argument of making maleness the domain of rationality.

Furthermore, for Hildegard, God's interactions with the cosmos are always mediated through the feminine side of God. Her anthropological vision is also cosmo-centric through the creative feminine "Knowledge of God" in the world. In one of her visions, Hildegard gives an account of the "Knowledge of God." She writes:

> The image denotes Knowledge of God, for she watches over all people and all things in heaven and on earth, being of such radiance and brightness that, for the measureless splendor that shines in her, you cannot gaze on her face or on the garments she wears. For she is awesome in terror as the Thunder's lightning and gentle in goodness as the sunshine. Hence, in her terror and her gentleness, she is incomprehensible to mortals, because of the dread radiance of divinity in her face and the brightness that dwells in her as the robe of her beauty. She is like the sun, which none can contemplate in its blazing face or in the glorious garment of its rays. For she is with all and in all and of beauty so great in her mystery that no one could know sweetly she bears with people and with what unfathomable mercy she spares them. (p. 54)

Though Hildegard was writing in response to the structures of erasure affecting women in her time, her arguments are also relevant to ours. Contemporary society is radically shaped by systems of erasure that directly affect the lives of women. The Roman Catholic Church continues to embrace the argument that women do not embody in their beings an ontological orientation towards the maleness of Christ and as such, they cannot be said to be an alter Christus (another Christ) as the symbolic representation needed to serve in the role of ministerial priesthood. Culturally, women are still not allowed to work in certain professions in some parts of our world. A quick leap to the argument that God designed it to be that way is used to back up such practices of exclusion. An appropriation of Hildegard's argument opens up a legitimate space for centering the experiences of women as legitimate means for embracing a surplus anthropology that is radically inclusive of all persons. Black women and other women of color have human experiences; consequently, they can be said to embody the image of God. Their experiences are "trumpets" that

announce God's encounters with creation. In a world where marginality is at play, their experiences serve as a prophetic call to repentance for all who benefit from the perpetuation of such marginalities at play in the world.

A question arises that demands an answer. Even with the rich inclusive images of God found in the Wisdom Literatures, why did the early church choose to embrace "the Greek philosophical concept of the male Logos to 'explain' their doctrine of the incarnation" (Hopkins 1995, p. 84)? Julie M. Hopkins offers a response to this question. She argues that the need to be integrated into the Greek dominated culture of the times led both Philo of Alexandria and the author of the Johannine Gospel to "replace the Biblical word Hokmah (Sophia in Greek) with the Greek word Logos" (p. 84). Continuing her response, she states that "Philo's Logos is the Archetypal Man who is not only the blueprint for the human race but also the rational principle of the universe who mediates the Mind of God to man through the Mosaic Law and allegorical figures such as the High Priest and Moses" (p. 84). Hopkins aligns her argument with that of Hildegard when she concludes that the way to overcome the erasure of women in the discourses on the theology of the image of God is by "bringing women into the centre of an incarnational Christology (while intentionally making) the traditional categories . . . gender reversible . . . in other words, we may speak of the Divine incarnated in a female body, 'truly God and truly female' . . . we may speak of the female flesh becoming Word/Logos" (p. 85). I will further Hopkins' argument by factoring race and sexuality into the discourse. In contemporary western Christianity, racism is very much alive. It is this defining role of race that holds captive our social imagination of the human person, one which Cone saw the need to offer an elaborate response to. In addition, the construction of Black theological anthropology has not always offered a proper response to this enduring bias toward whiteness and heterosexuality. In the Black Church, for example, the contours of Black theological anthropology have been shaped primarily by replacing the bias toward the experiences of White heterosexual men with those of Black heterosexual men. Black women and Black trans-women continue to experience the systemic erasures at play in the larger society. Hopkins' critique of the dominant bias for maleness allows for an undoing of the Black imagination of the human person to allow for Black women and Black trans-women to be seen as persons embodying the image of God in the concrete expressions of their humanity as Black persons and within their own sexualities.

Another concern demands a response; one that must speak to the existential realities faced by a woman-in-the-world. Yes, Hopkins along with Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly and many more have and continue to argue for an embrace of feminine biblical images to speak of God (Ruether 1983; Daly 1986). Though I am not denying the legitimacy of their claims, the point ought to be made here that women's bodies have not always been accorded the same dignities or mistreatments universally. Some bodies have suffered more than others. Though Black women and other women of color have suffered erasures in our world, Black trans-women continue to suffer multiple social erasures. In the United States, for example, there are many states that have refused to pass laws protecting trans-persons from discrimination even with the rise of violence against trans-women, especially Black trans-women (Forestiere 2020). In many countries in Africa, Nigeria, for example, identifying as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community has been legislated against as a criminal act punishable under the country's penal code (Hicks 2014).

Some women have enjoyed more dignities than others. For example, though the United States passed the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote in the country, that right was not accorded to Black women. It took the civil rights movement of the 1960s to press home the need to accord Black women the rights to vote as citizens of the country. Today, we see a deliberate attempt being made by some states in the Union to strip Blacks and other minorities in the country of their constitutional right to vote. Even the recent reversal of the Supreme Court decision on Roe V. Wade that had accorded women the constitutional right to abortion directly affects Black women more, whose access to healthcare has been defined by structural racism. Butler is correct when she calls attention

to 'cultural contours" defining this reality of inclusion and exclusion when speaking of the human person. "On the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level. This level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture" (Butler 2004, p. 25). Even among marginalized women, there is a hierarchy of marginality. Consequently, the question ought to be rephrased: in the context of liberation theology, whose female bodies ought to be upheld as those that should invite the Christian mind to see how God has come to identify with humanity both in thought and bodily existence? To address this question, let me shed light on Black women's experiences in the context of Africa and the United States. The intent to focus on Black women is primarily shaped by the historical markers defining violence against Black bodies in the world, constructed via the media, of race, patriarchy and sexism.

3. Experiences of Black Women: Seeking an Inclusive Anthropology

Traditional theological anthropology makes ontology its starting point. By speaking of inherent dignity, devoid of existential qualifiers, it reifies cultural preferences in ways by which they are accepted as the will of God without any serious critique. When those cultural preferences are themselves dehumanizing, they are legitimized theologically and with such arguments as: if God wanted something different, God would have made it so. Let me state briefly here that, rather than uphold a rigid ontological view of the dignity of the human person, it is better to embrace a weak ontology, one that affirms alterity as the locus for identity derivation. To speak of ontological dignity, one ought to weigh the statement alongside the conditions of the concrete human of history. How is human dignity to be understood in the era of ethnic cleansing, genocide, sexism and other social phobias shaping human-to-human interactions? These abnormalities demand that theologians re-engage with that which they have taken for granted. Human dignity is not only to be spoken of; rather, it ought to be experienced existentially in all its surplus epiphanies. By experience, I do not mean encountering a rigid Parmenidean idol that reflects back what it receives. No! To experience humans in their dignity as images of God is to encounter infinite possibilities; possibilities that evoke an ethical responsibility for the one being encountered. In other words, "to be in the image of God does not signify being the icon of God, but finding oneself in his trace . . . Going toward him is not following this trace that is not a sign. It is going toward Others who stand in the trace of illeity. It is by that illeity, situated beyond the calculations and reciprocities of the economy of the world, that being has sense. Sense that is not a finality" (Levinas 2003, p. 44).

In Africa, any discourse on the dignity of women must necessarily begin with a critique of religion, colonialism and culture. These continue to give life and legitimacy to patriarchy in contemporary African societies. Prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity to the continent, sub-Saharan societies were known to be deeply matriarchal in social structures, economy and religious worldview. I must quickly state that, by matriarchy, I do not mean a female version of patriarchy. The latter is by its nature exclusive and manipulative as it has played out in human history. Matriarchy is inherently linked to a cosmic understanding of surplus and generosity that allowed for all to find meaning and purpose. For example, "among the Tiv of Northeastern Nigeria, a woman is regarded as both a symbol of communal continuity and as a sacred representation of cosmic harmony. The Tiv believe that God has given them the knowledge of manipulating the Akombo (sacred object that links the community/family/individual with the divine) for personal protection as well as for the protection and survival of the community/tribe/nation" (Lincoln 1975, p. 316; Aihiokhai 2014, p. 263). Furthermore, "women who have reached puberty are seen as the greatest Akombo among the Tiv people. This point is reflected in the tattoos drawn on the body of a pregnant woman. These tattoos are similar to the scarification on the great communal Akombo to protect the community when it is faced with grave danger that might lead to its extinction. The body of the woman becomes both

the symbol of purification and continuity of the tribe. She bears on her body the past, present and future of the tribe. In her body lies the meaning of existence of the Tiv people and becomes a testament for the entire tribe to be virtuous and holy" (Aihiokhai 2014, p. 263).

During colonial rule in Africa, the colonial agents from Europe implemented policies in their African colonies that erased African women from public spaces and their roles in such spaces. For example, the colonial agents implemented policies in their colonies that criminalized the role of African women as agents of international business and growers of cash crops. To boost their own economic interests, African women were only allowed to grow food crops, while African men were mandated to grow cash crops (Sheldon 2017, pp. 9–10). In addition, societies that were themselves matriarchal were reshaped to promote the authority of African men over African women. For example, the practice, prior to colonial rule, of checkmating the power of a despotic ruler by a woman who was the head of the market guild was suppressed in the Yoruba kingdoms by the British, which gave political legitimacy only to men and not to men and women, as was the practice before colonial rule (Okafor 2014, pp. 76–86). In contemporary times, Yoruba women have restarted the conversation in order to reinstate this ancient practice in the respective Yoruba kingdoms. The struggles of African women to reclaim their stolen identities and roles in society are playing out on several fronts. The struggles involve a re-reading of African histories in ways that they are retold as 'her-stories.' They involve a critical evaluation of cultural practices that have been legitimized by appeals to religious heritage; a critical and public denouncement of the vestiges of colonialism that erased the traces of African women and their roles in their African societies from the collective memories of Africans and their descendants; and an intentional pushback at Western feminist imperialism, one that universalizes the interests and concerns of middle-class White women without paying much attention to the particularities defining the very existence of African women. In fact, these struggles are best described by Ifi Amadiume who argues that "Third World women can ignore historical and cultural differences only at their own peril in view of the damage done already by colonialism and still being inflicted by neo-colonialism and Western feminist imperialism" (Amadiume 1987, p. 8). Teresia Mbari Hinga paints a vivid picture of what confronts African women as they attempt to reclaim their place in society. In her words, "African women's struggle is against the imperialism implicit in the efforts of others, particularly Westerners, to represent them, a struggle that they share with male theologians. For African women, however, their critique of Western paternalism includes the critique of Western women insofar as they, too, may presume to speak on their behalf. African women insist that the right to speak for themselves is a necessary condition for their emancipation and must be respected by all" (Hinga 2017, p. 5). The need to deconstruct the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the psyche of women transcends the context of Africa. On that note, let me briefly explore the context of Asia before returning to the context of African American women in the United States and, by extension, the Americas.

In the context of Asia, any serious theological discourse on the dignity of women as bearers of the image of God must necessarily deconstruct the effects of religion, colonialism, class, caste and culture on how women experience their lives in Asian societies. Asia has a unique experience in the sense that it is faced with internal and external sources of oppression. On the religious front, it must not only deconstruct the oppressive narratives silencing the voices of Asian women from without, but also from the religions from within. For example, Chinese women are faced with the double silencing originating from Confucian and Christian paradigms on the dignity of women. As noted by Meng Yanling, "the [Confucian] Book of Rites says that 'women are subservient. As children they obey their fathers and brothers. When married, they obey their husbands. As widows, they obey their sons.' These special rules built a human wall around women, excluding them from acting as social subjects outside the home" (Meng 2010, p. 230). Furthermore, "as a Christian woman, one lives, on the one hand, within Chinese culture, while at the same time one is influenced by biblical culture. A Christian woman stresses understanding marriage and

family from a biblical standpoint and her views on this are frequently taken from those of her preachers and pastors (who are men)" (p. 232).

In the context of India, to speak of the dignity or oppression of women, one must ask further, which Indian woman? In her work, *Dalit Women and the Bible*, Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon gives voice to the plight of India's Dalit women by appropriating the poem of Theresamma:

> The lives of Dalit women
> Are tales of woe and agony
> The darkness of unjust fate
> Clothes their shame and misery . . .
> Did God ordain our faith?
> Will men decide our lives?
> Are we faggots for burning in the funeral pyre?
> No we will rise and free ourselves! (Theresamma 1988, pp. 166–67;
> Melanchthon 2010, pp. 105–6)

Continuing her reflection on the web of oppression faced by India's Dalit women, Melanchthon states that these women are erased from the memories of the nation and are barred from having access to "education, occupation, social interactions and social mobility" (Melanchthon 2010, p. 107). Religion and culture are constantly being used to legitimate the erasure of India's Dalit women from public spaces. The attempt by India's political elites to embrace policies of discrimination against the Dalit community has produced further erasures of Dalit women from public spaces (Human Rights Watch 2007). To address the enduring erasures of Dalit women from India's public spaces, one has to insist that any theological anthropology that speaks of the dignity of women in India must necessarily begin with what it means to be a woman living in the world of exclusion and oppression. In a society where identity is intricately tied to land ownership, not to be allowed to own land is itself a denial and erasure of one's existence. To give legitimacy to God-talk, it must begin with woman-talk. In India, it must thus begin with Dalit-woman-talk.

Looking closely at the context of African American women in the United States and the Americas in general, Ruether writes, "in the liberation struggles of the black community and of women, black women find themselves the double minority, or triple minority, if the fact that most black women are poor is taken into account. Poor black women are the group on which the triple jeopardy of oppression by race, class and gender converge" (Ruether 1990, p. 175). I should add religion here. It is thus a quadruple "jeopardy" that confronts African American women. Frances M. Beal, in her work, *Black Women's Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, sheds light on the structural system of fragmentation encoded in the economic, social and cultural systems at play in the United States that pit Black women and men against each other in such a manner that they are unable to understand fully "the forces working against them" (Beal 1969). Such enduring trauma that the Black community faces leads to an acceptance of the narrative intended to portray them as "shiftless and lazy" (Beal 1969). As a corrective approach to the structural systems of fragmentation defining the lives of the members of the Black community, Beal advocates for a rejection of a competitive model of progress which seeks to diminish Black women while advancing the success of Black men. In her words, "It must also be pointed out at this time, that black women are not resentful of the rise to power of black men. We welcome it. We see in it the eventual liberation of all black people from this corrupt system under which we suffer. Nevertheless, this does not mean that you have to negate one for the other. This kind of thinking is a product of miseducation; that it's either X or it's Y. It is fallacious reasoning that in order the black man to be strong, the black woman has to be weak" (Beal 1969). Appropriating the logical argument of Beal, Renita J. Weems has called for a reading of the Bible by African American women in ways that allow for them to intentionally deconstruct the veils of race, gender and class that tend to be used to justify their oppression and erasure from the history of their communities (Weems 1991, pp. 57–77). This is what I call a triple-consciousness; one that calls for a critical 're-re-reading' of the

text to allow for the tri-silenced voices of African American women to be heard in the texts. An embrace of a critical engagement with historical markers that have been used to silence and/or erase women from public spaces, especially in the western world, cannot be complete unless one engages critically with the Cartesian hermeneutic bias for dualistic ways of perceiving reality, including the human person. On that note, the next section of this work is an attempt to critique the vestiges of Cartesian dualism that has shaped the Western vision of the human person, at least since the era of modernity.

4. Critiquing of the Cartesian Model of the Human

Looking critically at the western notions of self, one notices the radical influence of the Cartesian primacy of the individual. The ideology that presents the individual as a being capable of attaining self-realization without the assistance of the community is a false myth. This false myth presents hard work as the ability to go it alone, rather than working with others. Jean-Luc Marion states it clearly when he writes, "before the cogito exists, the ego would be well and truly already established in its unconditioned existence as corpus et sensus . . . The *ego* gives itself as flesh, even if one wants to hide it" (Marion 2002, pp. 86–87). As Emmanuel Levinas has argued, the other is the bearer of the gift of identity for the self. Levinas offers a relevant critique of ontology as it pertains to identity construction, one that is relevant to this work. In his words, "When I speak of first philosophy, I am referring to a philosophy of dialogue that cannot not be an ethics. Even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so on the basis of the encounter with the other" (Levinas 1999, p. 97). Levinas argues that at the core of identity is vulnerability. In "vulnerability lies a relation to the other . . . From the moment of sensibility, the subject is *for the other*: substitution, responsibility, expiation" (Levinas 2003, p. 64). By moving away from identity as static to identity as constituted within the realm of encounter, Levinas gives voice to the prophetic by calling into question identities that do not birth-forth life for others.

Why this critique of Cartesian ontology that has defined Western approaches to identity construction? I will offer two responses; one from Molefi Kete Asante and another from Homi K. Bhabha. Asante's focus is on the existential realities defining Black existence in the United States of America that eventually led to the "Back-to-Africa Movement of the early twentieth century" (Asante 1998, p. 60). As he notes, this "was African Americans' radical critique of the American Dream . . . The language, scope and arguments of the Back-to-Africa Movement were tantamount to crusades for freedom and sanity, underscoring the African's essential search for dignity and cultural renewal in a strange land" (p. 60). Furthering the discourse on identity construction that challenges the Eurocentric (Cartesian) model, Asante argues that "Afrocentric interpretation introduces a new, critical perspective into the nature of human discourse, especially when that discourse emerges from the cutting edges of rejection and resistance" (p. 161). Critiquing Eurocentric thought process further, Asante calls into question notions of objectivity in the hermeneutic discourse. This, he argues, has "often protected social and literary theory from the scrutiny that would reveal how theory has often served the interests of the ruling classes . . . More damaging still has been the inability of European thinkers, particularly of the neopositivist or empiricist traditions, to see that human actions (and identities) cannot be understood apart from the emotions, attitudes and cultural definitions of a given context" (pp. 179–80).

Furthering the critique of identity construction as inherited from the Cartesian world-view, Bhabha engages Franz Fanon as his interlocutor in a chapter of his work he titled, *Interrogating Identity*. In it he concludes as follows:

> The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of 'Man', but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. For the very nature of humanity

becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that 'naked declivity' it emerges, not as an assertion of will not as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning. With a question that echoes Freud's *'What does woman want?'* ... (Bhabha 1994, pp. 59–60)

Bhabha's engagement with the colonial reality as it has played out in the world, particularly in Asia and most of Africa, calls into question notions of universal personhood or, in the theological context, *imago Dei*. Stated differently, the unfolding realities of human histories have shown that many humans have not been accorded the dignity that befits one made in God's image. On that note, one has to ask, who comes to mind when the words *imago Dei* are uttered? African women, Blacks in America, especially African American women, the women of Asia, members of the LGBTQIA+ community worldwide and some migrant communities in contemporary societies, find themselves constantly being denied that dignity. Asante has posited a question, one worth repeating here; "how can the oppressed use the same theories as the oppressors" (Asante 1998, p. 181)? It is on that note that I now attempt to articulate a more inclusive understanding of human dignity that affirms insights from women, especially Black women.

5. Towards an Inclusive Anthropology: Voices from the Margins

At the heart of African anthropological vision is personalism. This Asante describes as "an ideal ideological commitment to harmony and the fundamental Afrocentric response to phenomena" (p. 202). Refuting the bias for the spirit over matter, or the preference for the real as found in the positivist tradition, Asante insists that " ... personalism, in the African and African American sense, is neither spiritualism nor materialism, but the activating energy contained in the person ... Each person contains these energies; some cultivate them more than others, but they inhere in all of us" (pp. 202–203). The beauty of personalism is that it evokes relationality in a saturated manner. Thus, Asante concludes that "there is no 'great tradition' of withdrawal in the African or African American tradition; ours is preeminently a tradition of remarkable encountering with others" (p. 203). Bénézet Bujo attests to this notion of personalism by speaking of an African identity that is at its core relational and communal. Critiquing the Cartesian view of insular self-identity that has prevailed in the Western world for centuries and is traceable back to the philosophical propositional claim "I think therefore I am," Bujo argues that "In the African conception, there is no separation between "being" and "doing"; consequently, one may say that the human person is what he does" (Bujo 2001, p. 124). He goes further by stressing the communal in shaping African notions of identity by showing how identity points to the concept of belonging. One does not exist alone. Rather, one always belongs to a community. The community defines itself by its link to the ancestors (Bujo 1997, pp. 15–16).

In light of the insight into encounter as radically defining an African sense of identity, one has to ask the question, how does encounter naturally play out? Encounters between persons allow for the exchange of stories of life and these exchanges naturally lead to a building of community that allow for an exchange and awareness of deeper levels of identity awareness. On that note, it is relevant here to explore the motif of storytelling in African cultural and intellectual contexts. The art of storytelling is closely linked to an African sense of belonging. Historically, it is the responsibility of African women to pass on the narratives that validate African sense of belonging. They are the storytellers. However, the colonial matrix that was introduced by the colonizers pushed African women out of public spaces and, by so doing, African women were denied their cultural rights to be the media for telling Africa's stories that birth-forth life for Africans and the link between generations of Africans. To address this erasure of African women from Africa's public spaces, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has called for the need for African women to reclaim their roles as storytellers and retell the stories that have been silenced by the patriarchal stories handed down to Africans by religious and secular agents from Europe and the Arab world. In her groundbreaking work, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, Oduyoye seeks to deconstruct traits of oppression in African cultures and religions. She engages head

on with the narratives of subjugation that African women have been taught to embrace for centuries as the only valid stories defining their roles in society. She insists on telling the older story that speaks of the roles of African women as leaders of their communities. Prior to the advent of Islam, Christianity and colonial rule, women's roles in the political, economic, religious and cultural spheres were highly regarded. In post-colonial Africa, African women have become the social donkeys whose only purpose is to be the beast of burden for the beneficiaries of patriarchy. Oduyoye's work forces Africans to pause and ask themselves: what type of identity does the nostalgic memories of Africa's pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial pasts seek to create? Does it affirm the dignity of African women (Oduyoye 1995)? Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro stresses the relevance of this question as she shows the challenges African women experience in their attempt to retell Africa's stories in ways that seek to change the oppressive structures inherent in the colonized narratives currently present in the continent. For Kanyoro, these challenges are tri-faced: westernized, indigenous and religious (Kanyoro 2010, p. 21).

Hinga joins Oduyoye in her call for African women to empower themselves and thus tell their cultural stories in ways that give voice to their experiences, wisdom and virtues. Hinga does this by remembering the prophetic witness of Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatrice), who, prior to her conversion to Christianity, was a *Nganga* (a medium between the physical and spiritual worlds). Though Kimpa Vita fell victim to the religious and political intrigues of the Capuchins present in the then Kingdom of Kongo, who accused her of heresy and had her burned at the stake for witchcraft and heresy, her prophetic vision and the agency of connection between the indigenous religion of her people and Christianity along with her vocation to be a conduit between the material world and the spiritual world serve as a reminder of what it means to be a woman in Africa (Hinga 2017, pp. xiii–xxv). African womanhood is the source of life, knowledge, memory, tradition and transformative change for African people. For Hinga, any discourse within African notions of identity must necessarily involve the experiences of African women and their roles in all the spheres of life. This means that the stories of Africa must also be told by African 'her-storians.' To deny African women the opportunity to tell Africa's stories is to tell an incomplete story, one that cannot give life and freedom both to the storytellers and the audience.

What are the stories being told by African women in contemporary times? A new generation of African women have embraced their role as Africa's storytellers by using the tools inherent in literary genres in contemporary times. As a result of this embrace of their historical roles as Africa's cultural storytellers, the female voices that have been long silenced by the oppressive agenda of patriarchy in the continent are being heard not only in Africa but in the global community. Again, African women within the continent and in the diaspora carry on the legacy of defining what it means to be human. I am conscious of persons like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who deliberately explores issues related to culturally pluralistic and migrant identities. In one of her novels, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie, as it were, sees it as her rightful place to give the female perspective on Africa's stories. In this novel, Adichie explores the theme of African face of Christianity through the fictional character, Father Amadi. This young Nigerian priest embraces the vibrancy of life that characterizes what Asante describes as African personalism (Adichie 2003). Adichie's work can comfortably be juxtaposed with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In Achebe's work, the indigenous worldview of African people prior to colonial rule has been shattered by the colonizing agenda of the British colonial presence and the introduction of Christianity (Achebe 1958). Where Achebe sees hopelessness, Adichie sees hope. Where Achebe sees discontinuity, Adichie sees a new form of continuity, a hybridity characterized by the creativity of the indigenous people of Africa who, faced with the new colonial order, must make sense of it in ways that the pragmatic openness to reality, inherent in the African worldview, is allowed to take form.

From the context of Southern Africa, NoViolet Bulawayo reflects on what it means to be a Zimbabwean in her novel, *We Need New Names* (Bulawayo 2013). Bulawayo's work is best described by Margaret Busby's words, "Bulawayo immerses us in the world of

10-year-old Darling and her friends Sbho and Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Stina—a child's-eye view of a world where there is talk of elections and democracy but where chaos and degradation become everyday reality, where death and sickness and the threat of violence lurk" (Busby 2013). Bulawayo showcases the excellent storytelling skills of African women by giving voice to the perspective of those patriarchy have judged to be irrelevant. Children see everything. They speak the unredacted truth that adults have learned to sanitize. For Bulawayo, if Zimbabwe is again to be the home of all Zimbabweans, the stories of the country ought to be told exactly as they are. Violence occurs in society when only partial stories are told of how reality unfolds before the faces of all.

From Eastern Africa, an African story is being told by an African woman. In her case, she is a theologian who refuses to be silenced by the life-denying stories told by some ordained members of her faith tradition. Her name is Haregewoin Cherinet, a theologian of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. She has called for a critical reading of the Bible within this church. She argues that this can become the strategic approach to deconstructing cultural patriarchy that has held Ethiopian societies hostage (Cherinet 2015). As she once said in 2013, during a meeting we were both attending in Nairobi, Kenya; "In Ethiopia, women are called donkeys. But Ethiopians forget that the most prominent animal in the salvific narratives in the scriptures is the donkey itself. If we women are donkeys, then we are the favorite of God's creatures." She has given dignity to those that society has denied their legitimate dignity, just as Jesus did to the Samaritans; one he called good (Lk. 10:25–37) and the other he shared his true identity with, while she gladly bore witness to what she heard and who she encountered at the well (Jn. 4:4–26). Her witnessing has historically been attested to by the name that tradition has come to identify her with, Saint Photina, or the luminous one.

From the context of the African Diaspora, Petina Gappah has chosen to reflect in her collection of short stories titled *An Elegy for Easterly* on the resilience of fellow Zimbabweans who have chosen to remain behind and find ways of identifying with a country in chaos. Gappah wants to show not only how current political, cultural, economic and social conditions play out in independent Zimbabwe, but also an aspect of what it means to be an African within the geopolitical space called Zimbabwe (Gappah 2009). Gappah stands at the intersection of two worlds, Germany, her current home, and Zimbabwe, the land where her umbilical cord is buried, and from that location reflects on what ought to be in her beloved Zimbabwe. In Africa, stories are not just told. They are the pathways of discovering and claiming one's identity(ies). When African women tell Africa's stories, they are passing on to their audience the gifts of African identities.

When one looks closely through the lenses by which African women see the world they live in and the ways they give voice to their visions, one notices the following characteristic—they are visions and stories of unity. They give voice to all who in the past have been made voiceless. They make known all that has been hidden. They decenter the centers of power. They shed light on new horizons and new possibilities. Conscious of African notions of the human person as a social being, I want to make a very bold claim. It is my conviction that if the human person is constitutive of webs of relationships, all identities derived from those relationships, be they related to economic status, social status, cultural status, philosophical and/or religious status, must be open at their core to the grace of generosity. By grace of generosity, I mean a radical orientation to otherness that welcomes difference and is comfortable with being with the other who represents the possibility for the fullness of life to be experienced through the matrix of encounter and relationality. This grace of generosity is captured by the insight of Anna Julia Cooper as she reflects on the contributions of women to human progress. She writes, "'Woman's influence on social progress'—who in Christendom doubts or questions it? One may as well be called on to prove that the sun is the source of light and heat and energy to this many-sided little world" (Cooper 2016, p. 8). For Cooper, the role of women in Christianity and in society, in opening up new ways of being human that is inclusive of all, challenges the hegemony of exclusion inherent in present day societies shaped by European Medieval

Christianity. Affirming the role of African women in enriching African theology, Oduyoye uses the imagery of a "double winged" approach to the practice of theology in Africa that refutes the scarce imagination that plays out in male dominated theological discourses in the continent, which excludes the voices and experiences of African women. For her, the role of African women theologians is to create an all-inclusive approach to theology that rejects exclusionary practices (Hinga 2017, pp. 12–17).

Again, the grace of generosity is articulated in the African ethical praxis of *Ubuntu* that defines personhood in African thought. As noted by Michael Battle, "the concept of Ubuntu of necessity poses a challenge to persons accustomed to thinking of themselves as individuals" (Battle 2009, p. 1). In simple terms, *Ubuntu* means personhood. For those familiar with the Trinitarian discourses of the early church, personhood is constitutive of relationality. "It is by opening up completely to one another that the hypostases are able to share *hoousios* (one nature or substance) without restriction, without being divided" (p. 125). Applying this understanding of personhood to the African understanding of *Ubuntu*, personhood is always relational. Stressing the intended end-result of this concept, Battle argues that "Ubuntu is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development and fulfillment of their potential to be both individuals and community" (p. 3). Desmond Tutu gives a broader explanation of this praxis of Ubuntu when he writes the following:

> A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed or treated as if they were less than who they are. (Tutu 1999, p. 31)

African women's theological anthropology calls into question the fixation on maleness as representative of the fullness of the *imago Dei*, especially as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, whose bias toward the maleness of Christ has led to an anthropology crafted to align itself with a male biased Christology. A witty response to this bias toward the maleness of Christ as symbolic of our true humanity comes in the form of a rhetorical question: are we saved by the genitalia of the incarnate Christ? I do not think any theologian would want to respond in the affirmative. If that is the case, why then are we hesitant to see women as fully representing the *imago Dei*? The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is a group of African women theologians who came together when summoned by Oduyoye in 1989. By choice, they called themselves a Circle because it depicts fully an African sense of the human that is grounded in personalism. A circle is inclusive. A circle allows for growth. A circle calls for equity and justice for all. It rejects false notions of hierarchy. In their quest for holistic anthropology, the members of the Circle have "identified four themes to guide and nuance their research. They are women in the context of religious and cultural pluralism; the history and agency of African women in religion; biblical and cultural hermeneutics; and issues in the theological and ministerial formation of African women" (Hinga 2017, pp. 15–16).

Turning to the global north context, African American women, reflecting on their endless experiences of violence from the larger racialized communities, their own Black community that reifies the oppressive structures inherent in the larger society and the Black Church where they ought to find a sense of belonging, sought to articulate a response to what it meant to be a Black woman and a human made in the dignity of God. As Kelly Brown Douglas notes, "Black women enlisted such terms as 'slave of a slave,' or 'double jeopardy' to point to what it meant to be an oppressed member of an already oppressed group. With the emerging 'womanist consciousness,' Black women began to openly discuss their experiences as Black women and to search for ways in which to gain their freedom without becoming alienated from the Black community as a whole—particularly Black men" (Douglas 1994, p. 92). Womanist anthropology is at its core an anthropology of surplus. It seeks to welcome all voices who are excluded while also highlighting their uniqueness. Alice Walker writes, "womanism gives us a word of our own" (Mankiller et al. 2013). Less one thinks that Walker is advocating for a separatist ideology, womanism is

a theory of bridge-building that intentionally aims to seek moments of intersectionality between African American women's perspectives and other feminist perspectives in their effort to critique the oppressive structures of race, gender and class (Floyd-Thomas 2006).

Attesting to the notion of surplus inherent in womanist anthropology, Douglas, among others, continues to give voice to the experiences of members of the LGBTQIA+ community in the Black Church. What womanist theology is doing to the anthropological discourse in theology that previously favored maleness can be said to be what queer theology aims to do for those who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community. Previously, maleness/masculinity and heterosexuality were considered to be the full expressions of God's vision for humans. All that is changing. In the words of Patrick S. Cheng, " . . . queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories such as 'homosexual' vs. 'heterosexual' or 'female' vs. 'male.' As such, this third definition . . . refers to the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender" (Cheng 2011, p. 6). Because of Butler's insights, scholars are beginning to understand that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures, or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (Butler 1990, pp. 13–14). Speaking of gender, "in other words, rather than being expressions of an innate (gender) identity, acts and gestures which are learned and are repeated over time create the illusion of an innate and stable (gender) core" (Sullivan 2003, p. 82). Her view is in line with the African and African American worldview that speaks of identity as actively expressed through performative relationality.

A polyphonic anthropology is an attempt to reclaim the third definition that Cheng articulates. While dualistic definitions of the human person are themselves erasing and instantiate scarce imagination of what it means to be human, a polyphonic anthropology insists on the claim that there are always many legitimate media for speaking of the human person, insofar as their human experiences. The experiences of members of the LGBTQIA+ community are human experiences and demand to be factored into our collective understanding of what it means to be human. They are also expressions of a Trinitarian anthropology that is witnessed to and given to humanity through the Christological witness of Christ. To behold Christ is to thus behold all of the experiences that define the human condition in the world. Again, a polyphonic anthropology is rooted in Christian theological discourses of the human person as constitutive of relationality modeled according to the trinitarian relationality that defines the inner life of God as Trinity. Just as God's Trinitarian relationality speaks to an enduring possibility of how God reveals Godself in the world, the human person as an embodiment of the divine is never reduced to one way of being in the world. The human person is defined by many experiences that reveal a surplus of identities and is revealed through her/his relational connectedness to others in the world.

6. Highlights of an Inclusive Theological Anthropology

Perhaps, to speak of the human person through the eyes of Black (African and African American) women, one has to borrow insights from Mikhail Bakhtin. For many, the bias towards dialectic is strong. They long for an erasure of difference and seek to settle for a synthesis of the predictable (Emerson 1984, p. xxxii). On the other hand, Bakhtin reminds us of the realities that constitute the human condition, be they linguistic expressions or life encounters:

> We come into consciousness speaking a language already permeated with many voices—a social, not a private language. From the beginning, we are 'polyglot,' already in process of mastering a variety of social dialects derived from parents, clan, class, religion, country . . . Finally we achieve, if we are lucky, a kind of individuality, but it is never a private or autonomous individuality in the western sense; except when we maim ourselves arbitrarily to monologue, we always speak a chorus of languages. Anyone who has not been maimed by some imposed

'ideology in the narrow sense,' anyone who is not an 'ideologue,' respects the fact that each of us is a 'we,' not an 'I.' Polyphony, the miracle of our 'dialogical' lives together, is thus both a fact of life and, in its higher reaches, a value to be pursued endlessly. (Booth 1984, p. xxi)

This polyphonic existence as constitutive of the human condition speaks truly to an *imago Dei* that is Trinitarian and personal. To be a person is to be a being radically open to communion with others. It is on the basis of this understanding that the early church articulated in its theologies the relationships in God as defined by personhood. The Godhead is radically open to the only Begotten One who is also radically open to the Spirit. Consequently, at the heart of any understanding of God and God's economy in the world is radical openness to otherness—*koinonia*. To be in communion (*koinonia*) is to be open to endless possibilities—an orientation towards vulnerability. *Koinonia*, understood as radical communion or openness, is not only a defining quality of God, but also how God relates with and manifests Godself to creation. This radical openness to otherness is at the heart of the gift of the incarnation. The Second Person of the Trinity embraced a *kenotic* (self-emptying) openness to otherness in such a manner that it allows for creation to be gifted with a new orientation that allows it to respond adequately to the gift given to it through and in the Second Person (Phil. 2:5–11). In this case, a Trinitarian anthropology is of itself always Christological because the God–creation reality that plays out in the hypostasis of Christ is a statement and a witness to the new orientation that the Trinity desires and wants creation to embrace radically. Stated simply, Christology is a witness to the Trinitarian life of God. A cautionary note ought to be made here, especially for those who would want to appeal quickly to an ontological argument as the means for expressing this new orientation without the medium of relationality. God, becoming one with creation, is not an act but a process. What is the implication of this statement? It is in the relationship with creation that the mission of Christ is realized. Thus, the Second Person has to experience all that creation has experienced in the fallen world in order to demonstrate the radical embrace of creation by God through an embrace of vulnerability. Saint Paul got this right when he argued that God "emptied himself taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness . . . " (pp. 6–8). The verb, to empty, evokes relationality that allows for authentic encounters grounded in being present with and to the other. In this case, other refers to all of creation. Emptying evokes commitment to a journey with the other without reserve. Emptying also evokes the prophetic that allows for a new way of being in the world. Prophetic is being used here intentionally to refer to a new way that can only be possible when one allows oneself to hear a new message that also orients one towards a new way of being in the world that goes against the old way that leads to staleness and death). The destiny of fallen creation is death. But the prophetic gift enacted in the new orientation birthed-forth in the gift of the hypostatic union (God-creation) allows for a life beyond the captivity of death. Again, all of the content of this hypostatic union is enacted only through the existential encounter God has embraced through God's entrance into our fallen world. Why a bias toward the existential? It is because "existence precedes essence" as clearly stated by Jean-Paul Sartre. In summary, the orientation towards a new humanity in Christ that the Second Person of the Trinity brought about was realized through the life of the Incarnate Christ in the concrete world inhabited by fallen creation. On creation's part, an embrace of and the actualization of this new identity can only be fulfilled through concrete encounters in the world that creation inhabits. Though Butler was not thinking theologically when she called out the inadequacy of reducing the human person to a "gender ontology," she is correct to conclude that "the viability of *man* and *woman* as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility" (Butler 1990, p. 33).

Again, a polyphonic anthropology allows for Butler's performative identities (Butler 2011, pp. 184–85), or what Amadiume has called attention to in the context of the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, where the social roles of husband and wife become fluid and can be assumed by a woman. In her words, "the flexibility of Igbo gender construction meant that

gender was separate from biological sex. Daughters could become sons and consequently male. Daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and consequently male. Daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and consequently males in relation to their wives, etc." (Amadiume p. 15). During the years I worked amongst some Igbo communities in Eastern Nigeria, I came across this practice that the Igbos of Ezinifite, Nnewi of Anambra State, Nigeria refer to in Igbo language as *nwanyi ahahara*. Colloquially, this means a woman with many tricks. But on a serious note, this is existential mimesis at its best. The ability to transcend social expectations and thus be able to mediate a new existential meaning surrounds what it means to be woman in Igbo society.

Appropriating Bakhtin's insight into polyphonic existence, it is proper to conclude that the Western feminists' insistence on notions of autonomy, choice, the rights of the woman as an individual, the communal visions inherent in womanism and African expressions of *Ujamaa* (familyhood) are not in themselves contradictory (Beck-Gernsheim 1998, pp. 53–70). However, they are not to be synthesized in a Hegelian manner. Rather, their existence, with all their tensions, serve to show the multiple meanings derived from the discourse on what it means to be human when women's insights are given voice. When *Ujamaa* is fully embraced, it naturally leads to *Ubuntu*. "Ubuntu is the interdependence of persons for the exercise, development and fulfillment of their potential to be both individuals and community" (Battle 3). *Ujamaa*, understood as familyhood, allows for the concrete expression of solidarity and communion among persons, who, by nature, are interdependent in the expressions of their existence. African women theologians call attention to the intentional forgetfulness of Africans of their rich cultural heritage that has been replaced by patriarchal cultural and social systems that validate individualism that is expressed through the erasure of others—in this case, the erasure of women in African societies.

Based on the above, I want to offer the following insights that ought to define a polyphonic anthropology; first, if human dignity is ontological, then one ought to ask the following questions: How has this ontology been understood in the day-to-day lived experiences of women of color? How has human ontology been affirmed when women and children die in the thousands from negligence due to social systems designed to deprive them of any access to basic resources needed for their survival? I conclude that rigid ontology that is not grounded in the concrete existence of the human person in the here-and-now ought to be rejected by theologians interested in articulating healthy theological anthropologies. Ontology ought to be defined by the ethical. As Levinas rightly states, "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: 'We are all responsible for all, for all men before all and I more than all the others'" (Levinas 1985, p. 101). Thus, the ontological dignity of women of color ought to be defined by the inherent responsibility for women in both men and other women. This ought to be judged by how all women are treated as embodied beings of history and not as an idea or a thought. God did not make humans to be an idea, but to be persons with bodies living in historical epochs.

Second, if the hermeneutics of suspicion applied by women in Africa, in the Americas and in Asia is leading to healthier understanding of biblical texts, what then should one do with the theological notion of biblical inerrancy that has sometimes been used to defend such oppressive structures that invalidate the dignities of women? I conclude that all biblical texts should be read within the broader historical and cultural contexts from which they originate. This means that, when problematic texts that silence the voices of women are being read, they ought to be read as texts that evoke dangerous memories. They must not be glossed over. As M. Shawn Copeland rightly points out, "once the humanity and realities of poor women, particularly poor women of color, are moved to the foreground, a new question orients Christian reflection on anthropology: What might it mean for poor women of color to grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom? This new anthropological question seeks to understand and articulate authentic meanings of human flourishing and liberation, progress and salvation"

([Copeland 2010](), p. 88). This realization ought to lead women to bring their own questions and not the questions of the power holders to the texts. In other words, the existential concerns of women are a legitimate starting place for carrying out biblical exegesis. The Bible, as the Word of God, ought to speak to us where we are in our lives and not to issues that have no bearing on our social locations. Furthermore, the Bible is both the Word of God and the work of a people living at a particular era with their own socio-cultural and political agenda. To deny these is to make the Bible a compendium of *The Satanic Verses*, if I may use the title of Salmon Rushdie's 1988 novel.

Third, do human experiences have any role to play in defining human dignity? I conclude that the mere fact that God became human and lived amongst us legitimizes the claim that, to speak of our human dignity, we must also explore how our experiences define how we come to understand ourselves. The incarnate Christ realized his humanity not as a moment or thought but as a process through time. Thus, existence has primacy over essence. Furthermore, any discourse on the reclaiming of the dignity of women, especially women of color, must not be limited to the text. As rightly pointed out by Tamura Lomax in her critique of womanists' fetishization of texts written by Black women, "black women and girls simultaneously live outside of texts. Though they are textualized and often texts themselves, they are living, breathing and walking subjects with complex lives, much of which has yet to be recorded" ([Lomax 2018](), p. 88). In the United States, Lomax's claim is valid when she concludes that some Black women's lived experiences are "recorded via film, television, music, social media, iPhones, cameras, laptops and other tools for our viewing" (pp. 88–89). But among the poor women of Africa and other parts of the global south, these lives can only be spoken of when one enters into a face-to-face encounter with them. Thus, the demand for an inclusive anthropology ought to lead theologians to always begin their discourse on the dignity of humans with the most marginalized, the "trice-silenced" ones amongst us. During my time working as a missionary in Nigeria, I met many women whose dignity as humans had been reduced to levels not even worthy of those of slaves. These women are married off at very young ages to much older men. Their plights are justified by religion and culture by the beneficiaries of such a dehumanizing system. These women labor everyday just to be able to feed their families. They know not what it means to have time for relaxation. When one encounters them, one sees persons who have only known the long nights of tears and sorrow. They are deprived of the right to tell their stories because religion and culture have been used to teach them that they are nobody. They live and die always in the shadows. They are the nameless ones whose experiences must necessarily be the starting place for speaking of theologies that affirm the dignity of humans as creatures who embody the image of God. Their experiences ought to be accounted for and their conditions remedied. If not, then the venture of theology is fruitless.

Fourth, is the dignity of humans as the image of God a given or something that unfolds over time? Let me engage Levinas as I attempt to address this question. Levinas writes:

> The God who passed by is not the model of which the face would be the image. To be in the image of God does not signify being the icon of God, but finding oneself in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian Spirituality preserves all the infinity of his absence which is the personal 'order'. He shows himself only in his trace, as in chapter 33 of Exodus. Going toward him is not following this trace that is not a sign. It is going toward Others who stand in the trace of illeity. It is by that illeity, situated beyond the calculations and reciprocities of the economy of the world, that being has sense. Sense that is not a finality. ([Levinas 2003](), p. 44)

Here, Levinas has turned the question on its head. For centuries, theologians simply understood Gen. 1:26 as referring to an ontological constitution of the human person. Question four of the *Penny Catechism* states: "Is this likeness to God in your body or in your soul?" The response is: This likeness to God is chiefly in my soul" ([Archbishops and Bishops of England and Wales 1982](), p. 1). Question seven and its corresponding answer focused on a bias towards the soul as the part of the human person that should be cared

for. To buttress this point, a Biblical text is cited (Matt. 16:26). These texts, along with a lengthy theological and ecclesial tradition and spirituality have been used to justify an understanding of ontology as the correct way to understand the biblical motif of *imago Dei*. Through the insights of Levinas, a different way of conceiving the motif of *imago Dei* is possible. One never encounters "a trace." One only experiences "a trace." Levinas speaks of one 'finding oneself in his (god's) trace," which implies that it is always through a process of encounter that one finds oneself.

Furthermore, by introducing the following: "It is going toward Others who stand in the trace of illeity" that one comes to the appreciation of what one is called to become. That person (illeity) that one is fundamentally drawn to in an ethical commitment as though one were held hostage existentially, is the one that bears the gift of the "trace of the image of God." That person is not any particular person only. It refers to each and all persons that one encounters in life's unfolding journey. Consequently, if the dignity of humans as images of God is a given, it absolutely means nothing until it has been experienced through every encounter each human has with others who bear that gift. Our dignity as "traces of God's image" comes to us always through others we encounter. If this is the case, then, theologians must reimagine how the human condition that manifests itself in and through history becomes the possibility for the realization of the gift the God-human promised when they said, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). If Jesus Christ is the full expression of what it means to be a "trace of the image of God," and if they understood themself through their mission of being the medium of life for all, then humans cannot but understand their identity as "traces of the image of God" only through the ethical commitment towards "others." By others, I am including the entire creation. The life of God that Jesus Christ mediates is not exclusive to humans. Rather, it is a gift given to all of creation. It is cosmo-centric in its totality. With this understanding, when any woman or girl, or anyone or thing, has not experienced the fullness of life due to the structures of death that we have put in place to benefit the few, no one can truly speak of themselves as being the "trace of the image of God." Again, being a "trace of the image of God" is what we become when we actively embrace that which constitutes the very core of our existence—caring for others. As noted by Bujo, in African cultural praxis and perspectives on the human person, " . . . people of Africa are able to avoid both the ethnocentric and ontological fallacies, since they are not confined to the little world of their clan community—ultimately, they understand community as a *world community* in which they can encounter every single human person" (Bujo 2001, p. 86). Again, though Bujo speaks mainly of human care for each other, African cultural thought and praxis goes beyond an anthropocentric focus. Care for others implies care for all that exists in the cosmos.

7. Conclusions

No one theology can exhaust the visions of what it means to be human, especially when the experiences of women of color and/or Black women are factored into the discourse. This point is well stated by Isabel Apawo Phiri when she gives a response to the question, "Why theologies and not just theology?" In her words, "the word 'theologies' is used in its plural form because African women theologians want to acknowledge the fact that even within Africa, there is diversity of women's experiences due to differences in race, culture, politics, economy and religions" (Phiri 2010, p. 220). Just as Bakhtin speaks of "coexistence and interaction as the greatest strength of Dostoevsky's artistic capacity," so also can it be said that both womanist and African women's theological views of the human expose and reveal the many contours shaping human existence as relational in multiple ways (Bakhtin 1984, p. 30). Again, Phiri states this clearly, "despite the differences in terminology, all women would like to see the end of sexism in their lives and the establishment of a more just society of men and women who seek the well-being of the other" (Phiri 2010, p. 220).

Women's, especially Black women's, theological visions of the human person insist on speaking of the embodied human. The temptation to want to speak ideally of ontological

realities that are at best realities of the imagination that are devoid of the existential must always be resisted. In fact, Black women's theologies arise from a refusal to be relegated to the realm of the mythical where unfounded notions have been given the power to dominate their lives by social structures put in place by those at the center of power, whether in the religious, social, cultural, political, or economic contexts. To speak of the human is to speak of the existential. To speak of the dignity of women as persons made in the image of God is to give voice also to "the bodies that suffer" in our world. In Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, many of these "bodies that suffer" are women, especially women of color. The solutions to these histories and memories of subjugation ought to begin with an embrace of the "hermeneutical subjects or bodies for these are bodies that resist. In breaking the silence on sexuality, these hermeneutical bodies (of women) generate new ways of seeing that are grounded, specific and critical" (Bong 2010, p. 189). The demand for inclusivity is not the monopoly of Black women theologians. Walker's definition of womanist states that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually" (Walker 1983, p. xi). As noted earlier, African women theologies are loudly silent on the issues dealing with sexuality outside of the boundaries of heterosexuality. Butler's insight also must not be forgotten, if oppressive structures are to be overcome. In her words, "to counter oppression requires that one understand that lives are supported and maintained differentially, that there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" (Butler 2004, p. 24). Douglas speaks of "a spirituality of resistance" as the vital force that continues to be passed on by Black women to their children (Douglas 1994, p. 105). It is important to state the following: that this "spirituality of resistance" ought to be inclusive of all persons. It ought to give voice to all women who are oppressed, whether heterosexual, homosexual, White, Black, Latina, Asian, rich, poor, able-bodied, handicapped, educated formally or informally, old, young and whatever characteristics may define their lives. This is what it means to speak of being made in God's image. God became one with us through all our lived experiences to help liberate us from structures of marginality.

Again, a polyphonic anthropology is a bias towards an affirmation of the diverse experiences of humanity, especially of the experiences of those who have not historically been factored into such discourses on the human person. Women of color, especially Black women and Black trans-women, have been erased most from such discourses, considering the way genderism and racism have played out in our racialized world. A polyphonic anthropology is a stance for and an attempt towards inclusion of the experiences of women of color when we speak of the human person as a creature made in God's image.

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