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Unavoidable Presence: A Look At Feminist Liberation Theology As Liberative Praxis During Apartheid-Era South Africa

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

*UNAVOIDABLE PRESENCE: A LOOK AT FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS
LIBERATIVE PRAXIS DURING APARTHEID-ERA SOUTH AFRICA*

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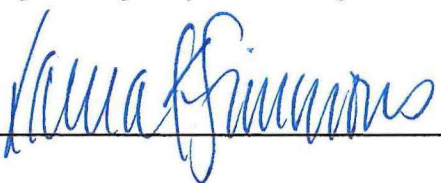
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Title: UNAVOIDABLE PRESENCE: A LOOK AT FEMINIST
LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS LIBERATIVE PRAXIS DURING
APARTHEID-ERA SOUTH AFRICA


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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



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To Denise Ackermann:

A woman I feel I know so well, and yet we have never met.

The theology presented forth in this writing reflects the theology of South African feminist liberation theologian Denise Ackermann. It is this lens that inspired me to dig deep into this work and to reflect back to world what I found there. This work is an integration of her theology and mine and I must acknowledge her for her work and scholarship, which this paper sets as the contextual theological example.

Denise – thank you for your work, your courage, and your inspiration. Your life has empowered women world-wide to obtain the impossible. Your work has truly changed me forever.

To The Women of South Africa:

To my sisters in which I do not know but stand with in solidarity.

Your stories were pushed to the background during the years of apartheid, thank you for never remaining quiet. Your struggle is my struggle –thank you for your courage and your voice. May women everywhere look at your organizing efforts and be inspired. Thank you for your witness.

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To my soon-to-be step-daughter who is joy, life, love, and light to me.

You are an inspiration to me. Thank you for your energy, your spirit, your love, and for your desire to take life by the tail. Knowing you changes me and I am so grateful to have you in my life.

May your generation continue to defy the odds, break glass ceilings, prove wrong ignorant stereotypes, and blaze trails for those to come – like those reflected in this writing. Remember that all things are possible.....

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
PART 1: FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS LIBERATIVE PRAXIS	1
Chapter 1: Introduction to Denise Ackermann and Feminist Liberation Theology	2
Chapter 2: Race, Gender, and Liberation Theologies for South Africa	26
Chapter 3: Liberative Praxis and Markers of Feminist Liberation Theology	42
PART 2: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS LIBERATIVE PRAXIS IN APARTHEID-ERA SOUTH AFRICA	62
Chapter 4: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist Liberation Theology: <i>The Black Sash</i>	63
Chapter 5: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist Liberation Theology: <i>The SACC and the Boldest Meal</i>	79
Chapter 6: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist Liberation Theology: <i>The Woman's Commission, CALS Document, and Lament</i>	98
CONCLUSION	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY	120

**PART 1: FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS LIBERATIVE PRAXIS
THROUGH THE LENS OF DENISE ACKERMANN**

Chapter 1: Introduction to Denise Ackermann and Feminist Liberation Theology

Denise Ackermann and Feminist Theology

Years before South African feminist liberation theologian Denise Ackermann understood abstract theological concepts such as ‘preferential option’ or ‘woman’s experience,’ Ackermann had stared injustice in the face and had been changed by it forever. In her memoir *After the Locusts*, Ackermann retells her maturing journey from childhood to adult life in the midst of apartheid-era South Africa.

In her reflection on her childhood, Ackermann admits that her experience was one of isolation and ignorance in relation to the plight of suffering black and colored South Africans.¹ She recounts a moment of clarity in her early teens in 1947 where, on a trip to Germany with her father who was a diplomat for South Africa at the time, she came to an awareness of her privileged status in postwar Germany.² She writes of her rebellion against her parents’ orders to stay inside so that she might see for herself the streets of Hamburg that lay in bombed ruin. Ackermann recalls that as she passed the heaped rubble of bombed housing structures, a small, emaciated child emerged. Having only a banana, Ackermann offered it to the child, who immediately grabbed it from her hand and “devoured it skin and all.”³ She writes of the experience, “Shame, guilt, and an unarticulated anger overwhelmed me. I ran home.”⁴ For Ackermann this was only the beginning.

¹ Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 5.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Ibid.

In her writings to her mother,⁵ Ackermann notes that her journey into feminist theology was never clearly marked or foreshadowed. For Ackermann, feminist theology was something that in many respects she had stumbled upon. Her experience as a youth in Germany was only one moment of many in which Ackermann found herself surrounded by injustice and felt compelled to act in response.

Despite growing up on three different continents because of her father's work, most of Ackermann's socialization came into fruition during her eleven years in South Africa as a teenager and young woman.⁶ In the midst of poverty, racism, and injustice, Ackermann grew to maturity in both physicality and thought. In 1956, fresh out of university in South Africa, Ackermann confronted the injustice of racism head-on. After the South African Nationalist party enacted the Separate Representation of Voters Act, removing black and colored people from the common voter's roll, Ackermann attended a political meeting at the Stellenbosch town hall in which the issue was raised. The local Nationalist official expressed that this move of the party was a positive move toward the future. Upon this statement, Ackermann publicly spoke out against the bill and the party. Later that night, a brick was thrown through the window of her room.⁷ This moment moved her deeply and she began to see with clarity the reality of racism and oppression that surrounded her. She writes of her experience, "I knew that something irrevocable had

⁵ See chapter 2 of *After the Locusts* entitled "To My Mother: *On Being a Theologian and Not a Dominee*," 23-63. Note that the Afrikaans word *Dominee* in this context is in reference to the title of a minister in the reformed tradition in South Africa, not to be mistaken for one who dominates or is dominated by. The irony of the word within this setting and within the dialogue of feminism, however, is very interesting.

⁶ Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

happened. Not only had the history of our country been changed, but the course of my life had been affected.”⁸

Unlike the other streams of injustice that Ackermann gradually confronted as she became aware of them, patriarchy was a concept with which she was all too familiar. Ackermann had known patriarchy and its powers since birth as her father Stewie, “the unrepentant patriarch,”⁹ was a shrewd, charismatic, and powerful man. Growing up as his only daughter, Ackermann struggled to find her place within the family, feeling “at best as an onlooker, at worst (experiencing) painful discrimination.”¹⁰ Patriarchy was a lived oppression within Ackermann’s family structure that affected her deeply.

Her discovery of faith and theology mirrored the way she happened upon the injustices that would distinguish her work. Growing up without any firm foundation in Christianity or religion, Ackermann was surprised to find herself involved in a women’s bible study that took questioning and critique very seriously. It was within this communal work of studying and wrestling over scripture together that Ackermann came into relationship with the God of scripture.¹¹ After years of intentional bible study, Ackermann eventually went on to write bible-study curriculum for women’s study groups in southern Africa.¹² After she was married and with her youngest child enrolled in school, Ackermann made the decision to pursue course work in theology which led not

⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Bastienne Klein, “On Becoming and Being a Woman Theologian in South Africa: In Conversation with Denise Ackermann,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118 (March 2004): 40.

¹² Ibid.

only to the University of South Africa, but also to the writings of Gutierrez, Boff, Segundo, and Cone.¹³

It was the impulses Ackermann surmised from early liberation theology and the movement of feminism in the West that led her to encounter feminist theology.¹⁴ Ackermann read liberation theologies before she was aware of feminist theology and, as a white South African woman set in a revolutionary context such as apartheid-era South Africa, what Ackermann read in the early liberation theologies made political and theological sense in light of her context.¹⁵ Within liberation theology, Ackermann found reconciliation for the expressions of injustice she had encountered. Within liberation theology, Ackermann read of a God who had particular concern for the poor, marginalized, and outcast. In the physical form this God was Jesus, who stood with those who experienced the harshest discrimination and suffering of the time. For Ackermann, her interactions with liberation theology only served to solidify her own understanding of theology as something that must be ‘acted’ and not simply considered. Through her personal study Ackermann came to understand that a theology that was not accountable to the suffering of the poor and marginalized was in danger of losing its firm foundation and credibility.¹⁶ The more Ackermann read, the further it brought her to Western female theologians on the brink of new theological work considered feminist theology: Mary Daly, Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Beverly Harrison.¹⁷ In her reflection

¹³ Klein, “On Becoming,” 41.

¹⁴ Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

on her interactions with the writings of these authors, Ackermann writes, “As my reading progressed, I knew where I wanted to go. I wanted, *from my place*, to ‘do’ feminist theology that had women’s experience of oppression and women’s desire for justice and liberation at its core.”¹⁸ Ackermann’s life experiences of injustice engaged in politics, race, and gender found their end roads in a theology Ackermann would commit her life to.

After extensive research in feminist theology, Ackermann began to apply what she had read to her own context of apartheid-era South Africa. In the early 1980s she began to write and, in 1984, presented a paper on women’s ordination at the University of South Africa’s theological conference on women’s ministries.¹⁹ In Ackermann’s estimation this was most likely the first paper presented, if not written, on women’s liberation theology in South Africa.²⁰ After her academic work in theology, Ackermann went on to teach practical and contextual theology at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Throughout her years as a professor, however, she never wavered in her advocacy for gender justice and universal empowerment for women. Ackermann has become the leading face of feminist liberation theology in South Africa, as well as a symbol of hope for the women of South Africa.

Denise Ackermann is a feminist liberation theologian, accepted this title, and has committed herself to a feminist theology of (liberative) praxis.²¹ The characteristics of

¹⁸ Ibid. Emphasis mine. *My place* in this quote refers to her desire to do practical feminist theology within her own context, apartheid-era South Africa, as a white privileged female South African. As will be noted later, understanding ones own position in relation to the oppressed is key in understanding *woman’s experience* and doing theology in light of it.

¹⁹ Klein, “On Becoming,” 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

feminist liberation theology are unique to the work of liberation and it is important to distinguish the differences between feminist liberation theology, feminist theology, and liberation theology in order to clearly see the manifestation of 'liberative praxis' at work. I will outline these important distinctions in the following section.

A Trinity of Liberation: Feminist Theology, Feminist Liberation Theology, and Liberation Theology

Feminist theology was birthed out of the 'new feminist movement' of the sixties, principally in Western European countries and the United States.²² This new arm of progressive feminism gave way to formulated thought and study in the areas of feminist theory and theology. Feminist theology arose out of the awareness of the historical reality of sexism located within human society.²³ As the women's movement advocated in the secular sphere to bring this reality to light, the need for a theological response to this historical reality arose within the academy and the Church. While Women's Studies, an example of the construction of feminist theory in an academic discipline, became the arm of the woman's liberation movement in the secular academy, feminist theology began to challenge the Church's historical hierarchical structure and patriarchal hermeneutic.²⁴ In her writings on feminist theology and the Church, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford

²¹ *Praxis*, a common word referenced in liberation theology, is to be defined in this context later in Chapter 3.

²² Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 89.

²³ Denise Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology: A Contextual Option," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (March 1988): 15.

²⁴ Feminist theory will not be considered in depth within this work. Broadly stated however, feminist theory "aims to create a deeper understanding of women's situation and begins with women's experience of oppression and argues that women's subordination extends from private circumstances to political conditions." For further thoughts see Humm reference in Elina Vuola's work, *Limits of Liberation* page 90. See also Vuola, 89.

Ruether writes, “[Feminist theology] endeavors to challenge the Church to recognize the distortion of the Christian message created by the Church’s patriarchal socialization, and to reconstruct its social patterns, language, and theology to affirm the full humanity of both women and men.”²⁵

Ruether suggests that the origins of sexism found within the Christian tradition stem from the dualistic and Neoplatonic worldview Christianity was born into. In this context, mind and spirit transcend body and world, setting the stage for models of domination and subjugation of women by identifying them with the body and the earth in its rejected form.²⁶ This understanding of women’s oppression, rooted within the dualistic and patriarchal foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Western patriarchalism, is a presupposition that most feminist theologians accept in their writings.²⁷ Sexism, then, is a strain of oppression lodged within the bedrock of a faith that claims ultimate liberation. While Ruether considered sexism to be “gender privilege of males over females,” Ackermann, in light of her context, understands sexism as gender apartheid.²⁸ Regardless of definition, whenever sexism is understood as oppression, and the private, public, and corporate pain of this oppression is reflected on critically and systematically in light of faith, feminist theology is born.²⁹

²⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Mother Earth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic, and Ecological Perspective,” *Christianity and Crisis* 31 (1971): 263-73.

²⁶ Denise Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology: A Feminist Perspective on Ministry,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52 (September 1985): 33.

²⁷ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Claiming the Center: A Critical Feminist Theology of Liberation,” in *Women’s Spirit Binding*, edited by Janet Kalven and Mary L. Buckley (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 296.

²⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 165. See also Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 14.

²⁹ Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 33.

It is important to note, however, that there is no single feminist theology. As is the case for all theologies, context as well as social, religious, and cultural traditions and norms affect the manifestation of theology within a people group. Two distinct approaches to feminist theology emerge out of western feminist theology that should be considered for the sake of this work. It is important to note that common ground for feminist theology can be found in the fact that most feminist theologians agree that “the patriarchal model for doing theology, developed and maintained over almost two thousand years, can no longer be tolerated.”³⁰ It is the strategy of how to deal with this model that places these two distinct aspects of feminist theology on differing sides of the spectrum. In addition, most feminist theologians agree on the central role of woman’s experience in their theology.³¹ It is the central role of woman’s experience that informs the feminist theological hermeneutical lens in which woman’s experience is understood as experiential truth, joining scripture and tradition as basis for theological reflection.³² Feminist theologians like Ruther and Ackermann claim that this aspect of experience, specifically woman’s experience, has been almost completely shut out of theological reflection in the past by a prevailing dominant patriarchal hermeneutic and theology.³³

³⁰ Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 152.

³¹ Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology,” 15.

³² It is important to note that the use of scripture in feminist theology is a controversy among different aspects of feminist theology. Scripture is understood as a possible tool to perpetuate violence and oppression within both revolutionary and reformist theologies. What is key, however, is how one responds to scripture in light of this understanding; do we throw it out or seek to find reconciliation?

³³ Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology,” 16.

Revolutionary Feminist Theology

Out of western feminist theology two main strains emerge, having been described as *inclusive* and *exclusive* forms of feminist theology.³⁴ While the *inclusive* form of feminist theology views sexism as one of the numerous forms of oppression inextricable from other forms such as classism and racism, *exclusive* feminist theology claims that sexism dwells at the core of all oppression.³⁵

This exclusive understanding of sexism as ultimate oppression has been termed *revolutionary feminist theology*, an expression of feminism addressed within academic arenas of feminist studies and within the greater secular feminist-theory dialogue. Using this lens the revolutionary feminist theologian insists that the Judeo-Christian tradition is so hopelessly laced with hierarchy and patriarchy, inherently sexist and thus oppressive structures, that it must be abandoned for the sake of women and their self-concept.³⁶

Revolutionary feminist thought understands the language, symbolism, and paradigms associated with Christianity and Christianity itself as being ‘created for men by men’ and ultimately androcentric seeking the engagement and participation of men alone.³⁷

Christianity, then, stands in contradiction as a faith that purports to speak of the human experience of God, when in fact it speaks only of the male experience of God. This concept of faith is damaging to women and as an active form of oppression should be heavily critiqued and ultimately abandoned in the view of revolutionary feminist theologians.

³⁴ Ibid., 13-17.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 35.

³⁷ Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology,” 16.

Unlike inclusive feminist theology that seeks to work within the biblical tradition to offer liberation from the oppression inherent in Christianity's patriarchal heritage, revolutionary feminist theology seeks to use theological reflections rooted in the secular sphere or the woman's movement. The concept of the 'divine,' then, or the over-arching divine principle, is symbolized in female terms only becoming the divine feminine and is the desired future outcome and vision for the impact of this theological strain.³⁸

In her reflection on revolutionary feminist theology, Ackermann notes a unique aspect of the form known as 'goddess religion,' which feminist theologian and ethicist Mary Daly advocates. Agrarian in nature, goddess religion thrived in cultures prior to urban development and, some contend, male dominance throughout society. The North American Reimagining God conference of 1993 was criticized for its worship of Sophia, goddess of wisdom, and is considered in some circles as the practice of 'goddess religion.' In this regard, "The female deity or divine principle is necessary if woman's experience is to be included in a religious world view."³⁹ A critique offered by Ackermann of revolutionary feminist theology locates tension within its feminine centrism and possible tendency to support oppression in the form of reverse-role sexism and male repression. Additionally, goddess religion is anachronistic, as its practice has become less frequent in modern male-dominated urban societies.⁴⁰

Ackermann notes that despite provocative strains of revolutionary feminist theology like 'goddess religion,' theologians working within this field have produced

³⁸ Ackermann, "Liberation and Practical Theology," 36.

³⁹ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 140-152.

⁴⁰ Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology," 16.

highly creative and imaginative work in order to present new thought patterns in language and understanding. An example of this work is Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism*, which seeks to reveal how male scholarship and language have 'erased' women from consciousness.⁴¹

Reformist Feminist Theology

Whereas revolutionary feminist theology is known for its exclusivity, *reformist feminist theology* seeks inclusivity at its core. For these theologians sexism is only one of the numerous oppressive structures that hold humanity and creation in bondage. Furthermore within this theological understanding, sexism cannot be divorced from the other oppressive structures and when one is considered, the others must be considered as well. In this regard Denise Ackermann, a feminist liberation theologian whose theological roots are found within the reformist feminist theological tradition, examines sexism in South Africa in light of the other interwoven oppressions of classism and racism. Therefore Ackermann cannot consider sexism *unless* she considers classism, which is heavily affected by racism in the South African context.⁴²

Unlike revolutionary feminist theology, reformist feminist theology supports that liberation for women is possible within the Christian tradition. These theologians claim that human liberation, not patriarchy, is rooted in the heart of the Christian narrative.⁴³ Ackermann claims that within this reformed theology Christian women are given the opportunity to affirm their faith heritage. Ackermann and other reformist feminist

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² This is true both of pre-and post-apartheid-era South Africa.

⁴³ Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 140-152.

theologians propose that although scripture, and the Church through the ages, has reflected the patriarchal and hierarchal tendencies of the society in which it was written and constructed, the core of its radical agenda and message, the Gospel, is essentially incompatible with structures of oppression.⁴⁴ Known feminist scholars and theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Sallie McFague, and Letty Russell claim the title of ‘reformist feminist theologian’ and are also women who have influenced Denise Ackermann greatly throughout the years and have contributed to her own theological framework.⁴⁵

Reformist feminist theologians acknowledge that a feminist hermeneutic must be offered to scripture in order for ultimate liberation to occur. This feminist hermeneutic, located within the reformist tradition, “shares in the critical methods of historical scholarship on the one hand and the theological goal of liberation theologies on the other.”⁴⁶ A feminist hermeneutic, then, critically analyzes patriarchal and androcentric texts and sources in order to *reject* everything that, in the name of God, does violence, alienates, subjugates, and eradicates women from historical-theological consciousness.⁴⁷ Simultaneously, the feminist hermeneutic seeks to *recover* the elements within the faith tradition, biblical and otherwise, that support liberation for all of humanity under God, including women.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 35.

⁴⁵ Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology,” 16.

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983), 29.

⁴⁷ Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 35.

⁴⁸ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 33.

While revolutionary feminist theologians claim a future vision of an ultimate female divine principle inherent in a religious worldview, reformist feminist theologians work towards ultimate liberation for all of humanity. Working within the Christian tradition, although not exclusively, these theologians seek the equality of both women and men where both are liberated from the oppressive structure of sexism in addition to racism and classism. Therefore within reformist liberation theology both women and men are liberated from the patriarchy, hierarchy, and androcentrism the Church and the faith tradition have perpetuated throughout the years.⁴⁹ This understanding of reformist feminist thought is a natural lead-in to feminist liberation theology.

Feminist Liberation Theology

Liberation theology was birthed out of the global economic, historical, cultural, ecclesiastical, and social-political climate of the 1960s.⁵⁰ These global shifts deeply affected theological thought within the Church and the academy, and in the day-to-day life of the average parishioner. One cannot consider the development of Latin American liberation theology, or classic liberation theology, without taking into consideration the boiling social-political atmosphere of the South American continent in the 30s and 40s.⁵¹ Differing liberation theologies emerged, more or less, around the same time. While not totally developed independently of each other, it should be noted that not all liberation theologies are derived from Latin American liberation theology or classic liberation

⁴⁹ Ackermann, "Liberation and Practical Theology," 36.

⁵⁰ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 94.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

theology, either.⁵² Whereas the socio-political realities of the South American context helped develop a Latin American liberation theology, the struggle of the North American civil rights movement led to the development of black theology. Similarly, the women's movement and its push for equality led towards reformist feminist theology in which feminist liberation theology is embedded. Finnish feminist-liberation researcher Elina Vuola suggests that liberation theologies can be seen as social movements because of their tendency to develop effective relationships with grassroots groups and movements for social change.⁵³

As all liberation theologies are rooted in a similar understanding of the emancipatory nature of God, feminist and classic liberation theology share in the same concerns and goals, despite their distinct differences. Both strains of theological thought seek ultimate freedom of both women and men, seek to promote new symbols, myths, and life-styles within the biblical tradition that promote justice and equality, and raise new questions that lead to new beginnings in both thought and action.⁵⁴ Additionally, both camps understand the necessity that theology abandon its so-called "objectivity" in order to become partisan.⁵⁵ In the words of reformist feminist theologian Elisabeth

⁵² Ibid., 94.

⁵³ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁴ It should be noted here that this work would be done with extreme caution as a feminist hermeneutic greatly questions the use of the bible because of its androcentric, male-dominated text. This is the main critique of liberation theology and liberation theologians by feminist theologians. See also Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as Critical Theology of Liberation," in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in America*, ed. William K. Tabb (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 53.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 52. There is an assumed aspect of neutrality we offer to God and theology at times in our hermeneutic. Liberation theologians would suggest that God is not neutral, but sides with the poor and oppressed. There is, they would purport, a bias on the behalf of the divine, trumping all objectivity humanity might desire to impose on God.

Schussler Fiorenza, “Only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as was Jesus, can it become incarnational and Christian.”⁵⁶ This theological understanding lies at the heart of liberation theology. Therefore overarching Christian theology, in which feminist liberation finds a home, must be rooted in emancipatory praxis and solidarity.⁵⁷ Feminist liberation theology, then, gains its legitimization from the eschatological vision of freedom and salvation made accessible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Gospels and offered to all, supported by the actions and words of Christ.⁵⁸

A Short Note On Praxis

At its core, liberation theology considers life situations, through the lens of individual and corporate suffering, as its starting point.⁵⁹ For the liberation theologian understanding the reality of suffering, the players involved in this suffering, both the oppressed and the oppressor, and the context in which such suffering takes place are crucial. Whereas throughout the differing liberation theologies this multifaceted experience of suffering takes on a variety of differing terms, feminist theologians use the term *women's experience* to describe the context of suffering in which a theology of feminist liberation is needed.⁶⁰ Using the work of theologian and professor Stephan Bevans, Vuola notes that theology is never done only for the sake of relevant expression of the Christian faith,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁹ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 94.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

but with a commitment to Christian action.⁶¹ It is out of this understanding that the role of praxis enters as a response to the experience of suffering, the woman's experience of suffering specifically, for sake of this writing.

Praxis itself is the ongoing partnership between reflection, action, and intentional dialogue. When reflection is done on the suffering experience of women, and action and intentional dialogue emerge from this experience, instead of stale apathy and denial, praxis has been enacted. For the purpose of praxis within the theological realm, liberation theologians engage praxis as reflection on the suffering of the poor and oppressed in light of scripture as their standard for responsive action and intentional dialogue. Because of the patriarchal emphasis of scripture, this is a difficult standard for feminist theologians to hold to.⁶² For Denise Ackermann and other reformist feminist liberation theologians who hold to Jesus and the bible despite its bias and patriarchal marginalization, praxis is considered to be the consistent and committed dialogue between faith and action, the two main aspects of the Christian life. This use of committed action, reflected upon faith, dwells at the core of feminist liberation theology and praxis for Denise Ackermann.

Although there are many differences between classic liberation theology and feminist liberation theology, the issue of praxis is still centralized. Therefore, liberation theology claims to start from praxis, the instances of human suffering, and return to this praxis by being pragmatic in its application.⁶³ Theology in this sense functions as a verb and not merely as a noun. In the instance of the oppression of women, feminist liberation

⁶¹ Ibid., 41. See also Stephan Bevans' *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁶² This issue will be addressed in further chapters.

⁶³ Ibid., 38-39.

theology, like classic liberation theology, starts from the position of the women's experience and ends also with women's experience, having as a theology engaged women's experience in the hopes of ending oppression and gaining true liberation. Similar to the feminist hermeneutic offered by reformist feminist theologians, the point of women's experience, is both the beginning and the end, with transformation in between.

Ultimate Liberation

It is important to note here the importance of ultimate liberation that feminist liberation theology seeks. Unlike classic liberation theology that has been slow to acknowledge the suffering of women as an oppressed and marginalized section of the poor in society, feminist liberation theology seeks to liberate all: women and men regardless of ethnicity, class, or religion. Feminist liberation theology then starts and ends with women's experience, acknowledging that this work encapsulates liberation for all starting from, ending in, and working towards full reflection, action, and dialogue held to the standard of acceptance of the equal human worth of all in a just society.⁶⁴ The liberation of women cannot happen without the additional liberation of men. It is only when the ultimate liberation of women, the most marginalized in society, occurs that all of humanity can *then* become liberated.

Even within this full liberation there is no hierarchy. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that in rejecting androcentrism (males as norms of humanity), feminist liberation theology must also criticize all other forms of bias. Ruether insists that these other biases include making white Westerners the norm of humanity, Christians the norm of humanity, privileged classes the norm of humanity, and even challenging

⁶⁴ Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology," 17.

humanocentrism, making humans the crown of creation in a way that diminishes the other beings in the community of creation.⁶⁵ This heavy emphasis on full and inclusive liberation remains the unique distinction between feminist liberation theology and other liberation theologies.

For Ackermann, this suggests that once the most marginalized and oppressed people group in South Africa, black African women, becomes liberated, then the rest of society can be liberated from their chains of sexism, racism, and classism. This is a concept that stood in opposition to many of the anti-apartheid movements headed by black African males. South African black feminist theologian Roxanne Jordaan supports that although black African women fought side by side with their men in the streets waging war against apartheid, in both the public and private spheres black women were still oppressed, left out of the decision making bodies of the liberation struggle and subjugated and oppressed in the home.⁶⁶ Jordaan notes the importance of ultimate liberation for all reflecting on the thoughts of black theologian James Cone in light of the acknowledgement of his own theological weakness in not witnessing to the cause of women's experience: "He realized that any form of liberation that does not address itself to the emancipation of the whole person should be seriously challenged for misrepresenting the concept of liberation. For no person can be free when part of that which gives you your humanity is in chains."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 20.

⁶⁶ Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Woman's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa," in *Feminist Theology: Third World Reader*, 2nd ed, ed. Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 151.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 152.

Key Ideas and Markers of Feminist Liberation Theology

Feminist liberation theology, functioning as a praxis of liberation referred to as *liberative praxis*, has at its core has five key ideas and characteristics.⁶⁸ Both Ackermann and Vuola, in reflection on the work of North American womanist Katie Cannon, espouse these key ideas with some variation in terminology. Ackermann's vision of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis lived out in her own South African context is described as *critical, committed, constructive, collaborative, and accountable reflection on the theories and praxis of struggle and hope for the mending of creation based on the stories and experiences of women and marginalized and oppressed people*.⁶⁹ Ackermann suggests that these notions are markers for the task of enacting a feminist practical theology of emancipatory engagement.⁷⁰

Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical and Committed

A theology that is critical and committed must stem from a self-awareness and consciousness of one's own story. In relation to feminist liberation theology and women's experience, we must consider where our own story has had connection or engagement with the marginalization and oppression of others in order to realize its full emancipatory potential. If we are rational beings, we cannot deny our own experience, be it ours or that of others we know, and its encounters with injustice, marginalization, or suffering. When we begin with our own story, we make an ontological claim that cannot

⁶⁸ *Liberative praxis* will be discussed further in chapter three.

⁶⁹ Denise Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94 (March 1996): 43.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

be self-denied; I have known suffering and have, to a degree, been affected by it or have been the root of it.⁷¹ A critical self-awareness, awareness of being both the oppressed and the oppressor, and a self-critical consciousness occur when we are aware of the contradictions present in our lives and society, and out of this self-awareness commit to work for change.⁷² In this regard **critical** reflection on *experience* and, in the case of feminist liberation theology, *women's experience*, moves to **committed** action. Self-awareness and critical self-consciousness of one's own story is key, however feminist liberation theology does not stay in this place of self-awareness but pushes toward committed emancipatory work. Feminist ethicist Beverly Harrison writes, "Awareness of contradictions is never the result of isolated intellectual striving. It comes from a process of concrete engagement, an entering into struggle against oppressive conditions that also involve being drawn into collective effort to overcome these conditions."⁷³

Ackermann notes that the moral outrage and anger that fueled much of the committed opposition to apartheid came from a deep commitment to passion, self-reflection, and critical self-consciousness.⁷⁴

Feminist Liberation Theology as Collaborative and Constructive

As a white South African with a mixed heritage of French and English blood, Ackermann acknowledges that in order to truly engage in emancipatory work for the marginalized

⁷¹ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 98.

⁷² Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 43.

⁷³ Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 240.

⁷⁴ Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 44.

and oppressed in South Africa, collaboration with those outside her immediate context was necessary. The same principle is true in the work of feminist liberation theology, a characteristic that distinguishes feminist theologians from the classic model of theologians as isolated researchers.⁷⁵ Theology and theories are then not only confirmed or critiqued by others, but also conceived in the work of collaborated praxis.⁷⁶ This is the communal and collaborative engagement of praxis as reflection, action, and intentional dialogue in light of woman's experience. Feminist liberation theology needs strategic and intentional **constructive collaboration** with varying forms of diversity and with women from different cultures, religious traditions, and social locations in order to construct accurate theological discourse that is informed by those who experience oppression.⁷⁷ Feminist liberation theology, like the other liberation theologies, cannot be divorced from the people while being constructed in an ivory tower. On the contrary, feminist liberation theology is constructed in the midst of the woman's daily experience.

Ackermann notes at least three areas in which constructive collaboration takes place within feminist liberation theology: first through the stories and experiences of women and other marginalized and oppressed people both inside and outside the faith community; secondly with the collaborative effort of other woman scholars; and thirdly in dialogue with the social sciences of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and social anthropology.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 98.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 44.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Feminist Liberation Theology as Accountable

“From a feminist theological perspective, relationality and mutuality are words that are central concepts which describe human relationships with God, others, and the created world. These relationships are by nature reciprocal and reciprocity calls for accountability.”⁷⁹ This quotation from Ackermann highlights the aspect of accountability feminist liberation theology seeks to obtain through the awareness of injustice and responsibility on the behalf of the theologian. For a feminist liberation theologian, the process of reflection upon injustice, action in response, and intentional dialogue in light of this work is not enough; there must be a willingness to be held accountable to those in whom the theology and liberative praxis affects. In most instances these are the women who have experienced the suffering or oppression and marginalization, however, it can also be all of society that has been affected by racism, classism, and sexism. Feminist liberation theology cannot be done in a vacuum because of its connection to collaborative reflection and action connected to it. Because of this possibility of liberative praxis enacted in order to bring about the mending of society, accountability must be in place: for the suffering, for the marginalized, and for Ackermann’s view of God.

Accountability implies acute awareness of injustice and requires action to end injustice. Feminist liberation theology is then enacted within specific communities of the marginalized and oppressed, both inside and outside the faith community, and **held accountable** by those it seeks to liberate. For the feminist liberation theologian, being held accountable to a community means expressing faith in the capability and role of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 45.

one's theology to transform lives and structures.⁸⁰ In the words of Ackermann, "[Accountability] requires a hearing of and identifying with the voices from the outer circles and a resolve to live in such a way that the common good is advanced."⁸¹

Accountability, Ackermann acknowledges, is ultimately tested in the reality of the well-being of all. It is through feminist analysis that such well-being is discerned, in addition to well-being's grounding in our relationships with God, creation, and each other.⁸² During the 1990s, mutual accountability contributed to the healing of South Africa with the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its hearings that allowed the experiences and stories of apartheid's victims and perpetrators to be heard. To allow the truth to be told and heard, even in its limited forms, was an act of mutual accountability that allowed healing to take place. I will examine the implications of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis in relation to the TRC in a later chapter.

These five core ideas of feminist liberation theology are markers for emancipatory work. It is this understanding of feminist liberation theology, its roots and markings, which enables me to consider feminist liberation theology's presence within emancipatory work in South Africa. In the following sections I will consider the roles of these markers in efforts to advance the liberation of marginalized women in South Africa during the revolutionary context of the apartheid era.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

The Lens of Denise Ackermann

As the leading feminist liberation theologian from South Africa, Denise Ackermann is an appropriate lens to guide us on the journey of considering feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis during apartheid-era South Africa. For Ackermann the South African context is her context, the fight for liberation against gender, race, and class oppression is her fight, and ultimately the accountability feminist liberation theology seeks will be hers to be held responsible and accountable for. As sojourners on this journey, it is our privilege to have such an intimate view, lest we forget that feminist liberation theology seeks our own collaborative engagement along the way.

In many respects it seems incongruous to claim a white, middle-class, educated, and privileged woman to lead the way theologically in the issue of gender, race, and class oppression in South Africa. However in the following section I will note the role of race and gender in addition to critiques on liberation theologies, including African black theology, that might give us an appreciation for Ackermann's viewpoint. Ackermann, in addition to feminist liberation theology, ultimately stands in solidarity with all who are oppressed regardless of gender, race, or class.

Chapter 2: Race, Gender, and Liberation Theologies for South Africa

Seedbeds for Revolutionary Theology

In his writings and reflections on the rise of Latin American liberation theology, theologian Jose Miguez Bonino notes the relationship between one's context and one's theology.¹ For Bonino and other liberation theologians, revolutionary seedbeds bloom revolutionary ideas, thoughts, and theologies. Latin American liberation theology sprouted from its hostile socio-economic seedbed and need for radical political, social, ecclesiastical, and economical transformation. During the 60s and 70s when hostile environments like El Salvador found the majority of their citizens, the indigenous poor, oppressed by the wealthy minority, a handful of resistant Catholic priests refused to support the government sanctioned oppression and violence. Upon reflection and in reaction to these realities, social movements began to emerge across the South American continent seeking to bring equity, equality, and radical transformation to Latin America.² In like manner the political, cultural, social, and economic turmoil of apartheid offered a rich soil fertile for the sprouting of resistance philosophies, reconstructed epistemologies, and theologies of liberation.

For much of South Africa's history, 1500s onward, black South Africans and their land had been ruled through the oppressive force of imperialistic colonialism. With the victory of the dominant white Afrikaans National Party in 1948, political shifts towards the further legislated second-class citizenship of black South Africans and the segregation

¹ Jose Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

² Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 13.

of ethnic groups through acts such as the Population Registration Act of 1950, the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, and the Immorality Act of 1950 sought to contain and oppress the large population of black South Africans to prevent them from overtaking the minority population of white South Africans. Apartheid, meaning “separateness” in Afrikaans, was enacted creating government-sanctioned laws that restricted blacks from any authoritative political voice, claimed African land and relocated black South Africans; to slum settlements, offered very little state support or assistance to black South Africans, carrying out systematic slaughter, terror, rape, and harassment; and restricted job opportunities for black South Africans while creating an economy based on cheap labor at the expense of the exploited black South African community. State-governed education known as the Bantu system offered black South Africans the minimal education needed for labor jobs under the white community, furthering the visions and goals of the National Party and apartheid-a pure Afrikaanerdom and a subjugated, beat-down, pliable work force-of second-class Africans.³

While anti-apartheid and resistance movements bubbled in the late 1950s, state-sanctioned massacres like the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 became more frequent to stifle movements towards black South African independence and freedom.⁴ The world’s attention was finally brought to the plight of South Africans in 1976 after police opened fire on 10,000 students protesting a state-sanctioned policy to enforce education in Afrikaans instead of English. Over 500 people died in the Soweto uprising. It was within this seedbed of injustice, oppression, chaos, and turmoil that seeds of revolutionary ideas and theologies of liberation were planted.

³ Robert Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 114-163.

⁴ Ibid.

The Role of an Authentic Christian Theology

In his foreword to Bonino's writing *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, William H. Lazareth, editor of *Confrontation Books*, notes the effects radical 20th and 21st -century challenges offer to an at-times pliable Christian theology.⁵ These challenges, Lazareth suggests, force Christian theology and ideology to stand firm and authenticate itself. Lazareth notes that the only way Christian theology can stand authentic and true in light of the horrors and atrocities present in the world is by responding humanely and consistently to these revolutionary situations. He suggests that true theology cannot run away from the injustice or messiness of the world, but must confront it while holding fast to the witness of Christ and the reality of the resurrection event; victory out of conflict. With this understanding then Christian theology, Lazareth suggests, must engage worldly confrontation for the sake of the authentic Gospel message of Christ.⁶ Christians must not be afraid to stand face to face with injustice, but be willing to engage injustice as the first step in the struggle of ending it.

Similar to the classic liberation theology of Bonino and Lazareth, the feminist liberation theology of Denise Ackermann seeks to present an authentic Christian theology of action and liberation in response to the revolutionary situation and context of apartheid-era South Africa. In order to use Ackermann's theology as a credible lens through which to understand liberative praxis towards gender equity during the apartheid era it is important to note the obvious critiques offered in using the theology of a

⁵ *Confrontation Books* is a series of books and writings offered by differing authors seeking out new ways of doing theology by confronting real and concrete problems while challenging the reader with questions, implications, and alternate lines of action.

⁶ William H. Lazareth, Foreword to *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, written by Jose Miguez Bonino (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) ix-x.

privileged, educated, white half-Afrikaner woman to advocate for marginalized black South African women. This section attempts to answer the question, “How can a theology offered by a woman from the dominant oppressing culture effectively be more authentic to the cause of liberation in South Africa than contextual liberation theologies offered by other marginalized people groups?” At the end of this section we will find that despite her position in society and her socialized background, Denise Ackermann and her lens of feminist liberation theology offers an avenue of liberation theology that is vitally needed not only by black South African woman in the context of apartheid, but by all in need of a theology of liberation. In order to answer this question, issues of race, gender, and contextual liberation theologies must be first considered and critiqued.

The Role of Race and Gender

As previously mentioned at the end of the first section, it may seem incongruous to claim the work of a white, privileged, educated, middle class woman as the lens in which to understand a theology of liberation in light of apartheid-era South Africa. In many respects, some might challenge that if any figure should be the lens through which to understand an ultimate theology of liberation in South Africa, a black feminist theologian would be appropriate. In this regard it would be understandable that the most oppressed people group should set the standard for their liberation. Black African female theologians have voiced a similar understanding throughout the years.

Black South African feminist theologian Bernadette L. Mosala notes the silence of black African theology on the issue of the oppression of black women. Because of this silence emanating from a theology that claims to be a tool of liberation for all black

peoples, Mosala believes that the only means towards ultimate liberation for black African women must be accomplished through the hands of these women themselves. She writes,

In its opposition to oppressive structures of the church, Black Theology does not include among such structures patriarchalism. The lesson is very clear for black women: the liberation of black women is the responsibility of black women. Neither the church, nor black male theologians, nor white women can be expected to be sensitive to the human needs of black women. This is so because 'liberation does not fall into one's lap. It must be claimed and protected. You cannot give me my liberty and I cannot give you yours.'⁷

In like manner, Roxanne Jordaan notes the double oppression black African women face, oftentimes alone. While within the paternal culture of apartheid-era South Africa both black and white women shared in gender discrimination and oppression through the denial of independence, denial of dignity, and denial of open leadership, black women *en masse* suffered under the weight of racial oppression, discrimination, and violence, in addition to gender apartheid.⁸ Jordaan notes, "Black women in South Africa have an added burden caused by the effects of exploitation and oppression."⁹ During the apartheid era, black women in South Africa were the lowest-paid workforce in the country and accounted for 70% of the unemployed community. With the rise of political violence enhanced by unjust apartheid laws, more black women became the victims of rape and sexual assault by troops in the townships and along the roadsides than

⁷ Itumeleng J. Mosala, and Buti Tlhagale, ed. *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Black Theology from South Africa* (New York: Orbis, 1986), 129.

⁸ Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Woman's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa," in *Feminist Theology: Third World Reader*, 2nd ed, edited by Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 151.

⁹ Ibid.

ever before.¹⁰ In the context of the home women continued to cook, clean, and take care of children while fighting alongside their husbands in the streets, only to be treated as “the weaker, subordinate, non-thinking gender by their male counterparts.”¹¹ Black men make up one quarter of the double oppression that black women experience. These facts only highlight the reality of race-and gender-based discrepancies among South Africans both then and now.

Thus black African women faced the oppressions of both sexism and racism simultaneously within their context. Although over ten years have passed since the ending of apartheid, the oppression of black women continues to this day through the lingering shadow effects of racism and classism, and the current of sexism that is found within the patriarchy of African culture. Subjects of this type of disregard, brutality, and dishonoring treatment not only from dominant white South African culture but also from the black males who claim to be brothers, husbands, lovers, and friends, black women are truly the most marginalized and oppressed people group within their country if not the world.

An Offered Critique: Black Consciousness, Black Theology, Black Feminist Theology, and Liberation Theology

The limits to the oppression of black women and women in general do not stop at the doors of contextual theology, but in contrast continue to creep under these doorways silently and unnoticed. In both black theology and the Black Consciousness movement

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 151-152.

birthed in reaction to the oppression of apartheid, an underlying current that silently ignores the liberation of black women is present and consistent.

Both Mosala and theologian Jacquelyn Grant note the invisibility of black women in black theology.¹² This fact holds true not only for black theology practiced in the context of South Africa, but also in the United States. As previously noted, upon reflection, North American black theologian James Cone re-examined his claim of liberation, noting the lack of focus and attention given to the liberation of black women within black theology. Cone's response to his own error is ultimately the mandate of every oppressed people group: "No person can be free when that which gave you your humanity is in chains."¹³ There is urgency in Cone's remarks to remember that all of humanity is tied together and that when even one is still bound, all are still in bondage together. Because feminist liberation theologians believe this ideology to be true, a critique must be offered to the competing contextual theologies present during apartheid-era South Africa in order to advocate for full liberation of women and men, both white and black.

Black Consciousness and Black Theology in South Africa

A form of liberation theology contextually relevant to black Africans during apartheid-era South Africa emerged in light of their continued struggle for political representation.

¹² Itumeleng J Mosala, and Buti Tlhaagale, *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Black Theology from South Africa*, 119.

¹³ Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Woman's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa," 151. This is a quotation noted by Mosala of James Cone. I have unsuccessfully been able to find this quote amongst Cone's published writings. Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are known to have a quote connected to them that is very similar.

By the 1970s both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress (PAC) had been banned, leaving national black South Africans without a political voice.¹⁴ To fill this political void, the Black Consciousness (BC) movement grew from grassroots black African anti-apartheid action. Despite the fact that at its core the Black Consciousness movement reflected the heart of black theology being developed in South Africa at the time, numerous political and non-religious activists committed to the doctrine of BC.

South African Islamic theologian Farid Esack notes that within this period of South African history a number of black theologians emerged advocating for black theology.¹⁵ Both black theology and the ideology behind the Black Consciousness movement were intended to be, according to their advocates, “Theoretical weapons of struggle in the hands of the exploited black masses and a theology of praxis which emerges in the heat of the historical struggles of Black Christian workers and peasants.”¹⁶ Despite all things, the movement played vital roles in advancing the struggle for self-respect and dignity among the oppressed. Political action of the BC movement led to countrywide uprisings in June of 1976. From 1973-1977 the South African government suppressed the BC movement leading up to the murder of Steve Biko, the movement’s most prominent and charismatic leader and advocate.¹⁷

¹⁴ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 1997), 32.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Although the movements of black theology and BC worked to unify black South Africans around the common goals of reform, advocacy, and solidarity, both movements were patriarchal and rejected any role for women and whites in the struggle for liberation.¹⁸ Amongst other anti-apartheid movements, BC began to be known as a movement that was not open to collaboration. Black women found their voice underrepresented within both movements and sought to make a theological road of their own.

Black Feminist Theology in South Africa

In 1982 black feminist theology in South Africa emerged out of the shared political oppression that birthed black theology and out of a need to address African women's issues in light of faith, the Church, and society.¹⁹ Furthermore, black feminist theology sought to give a theological voice and place of authority and worth to black women at a time when voice and authority were scarce. With the creation of black feminist theology in South Africa, a new strain of black theology was birthed. The women who formed the thoughts and ideas around black feminist theology in South Africa did not want to create a counter-movement to black theology, but instead offered a theology that would serve the black women of South Africa.²⁰ Ultimately, Jordaan notes these theologians were not highly trained but were sharing the ideas of a God who cares for the poor and oppressed black African women during apartheid and beyond, in the bush, in the streets, in refugee

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Roxanne Jordaan, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Theology in South Africa," in *Women Hold Up Half The Sky*, ed. Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper, and Emma Mashinini (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), 126-127.

²⁰ Ibid.

camp, and shack throughout South Africa. Through this means black women gave their voice to black theology, acknowledging a partnership with black theology despite its silent voice on the oppression of women.

Black feminist theology finds its home in liberation theology as an offshoot to black and feminist theologies. Jordaan notes that not only is God not a neutral God, but a God of the poor and oppressed. In these instances of suffering God hears the cry of the black woman and fights for her in her oppressed and marginalized state.²¹ Furthermore Jordaan notes that God is that which God chooses to fight for; God is then, in fact, a black woman.²² Black feminist theology in the context of South Africa is concerned for the soteriology of those who God fights for. This in turn does not seek to “disqualify oppressed men from the saving grace of Jesus Christ, but rather seeks to instill in them a commitment to view the struggle of liberation in a holistic way.”²³ Despite the holistic rhetoric of black feminist theology, a critique is needed.

Although black feminist theology developed in South Africa has allowed space and room for the voices of South African black women, its theological understanding of liberation does not fully embrace liberation for all of humanity. Whereas black feminist theology in the context of South Africa is concerned for the soteriology of black women, it does not seek total liberation for both men and women in regards to the realities of sexism, racism, and classism. Within this theology there is no acknowledgement of the systemic and institutional bondage of racist and sexist ideals that bind not only black men, but also both white men and women. A full, holistic, and true liberation is needed to

²¹ Ibid., 125.

²² Jordaan, “Two Voices,” 152-153.

²³ Jordaan, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Theology,” 127.

break humanity free from its interconnecting chains of bondage. A need for true liberation is needed if contextual liberation ideology is to take its theology to its fullest and farthest extent. This differing point between black feminist theology and feminist liberation theology is crucial and makes all the difference in choosing which lens to understand theological and structural liberation.

Liberation Theology

In similar manner, the classic liberation theology born out of the *barrios* of South America to Jesuit priests has failed to acknowledge the suffering and oppression of its sisters. For years, conflict has existed between stated ideals and rhetoric over the inclusion of gender perspectives in the liberation theological agenda of the global liberation movement.²⁴ Male liberation theologians have been reluctant to redefine their “preferential option for the poor” so as to include the problems and needs of poor women. Vuola notes the research conducted by Latin American feminist-liberation theologian Maria P. Aquino on this topic, “Not only are most male liberation theologians not acquainted with feminist theological analysis, but there has also been active resistance to the acceptance of Latin American liberation feminist theology as liberation theology.”²⁵ Leonardo Boff and Enrique Dussell are the only known male liberation theologians that have written extensively on the experience of poor women.²⁶ As is found in response to black theology, critiquing feminist liberation theologians claim that liberation theology

²⁴ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 96.

²⁵ Maria P. Aquino, “Teologia Feminista Latinoamericana: Evaluacion y Desafios,” *Temas* 7 (Spring 1995): 117.

²⁶ Vuola, *Limits of Liberation*, 157.

has yet to take seriously sexism as a fundamental political and theological issue. This prevailing attitude of classic liberation theology creates limits to the theology of liberation they purport.

The role of scripture complicates the work of liberation theology as a fully liberative ideology for some feminist liberation theologians. Gustavo Gutierrez, prominent South American liberation theologian and the face of classic liberation theology, has offered the long functioning definition of liberation theology as, “The critical reflection of praxis in light of the Word of God accepted in faith.” Although this definition is true for both the feminist and classic liberation theologian, the use of scripture in this way raises questions for feminist liberation theologians, specifically revolutionary feminist theologians. This concern stems from the androcentrism, hierarchy and patriarchy they find in scripture and the effects distorted interpretations of certain key passages can have in relation to oppressed people groups. Vuola notes that Gutierrez’s definition of liberation theology as the critical reflection on praxis in *light of the Word of God* accepted in faith is much easier to accept for liberation theologians than feminist theologians because of the differing scriptural interpretations and epistemological foundations.

It is important to note that classic liberation theology stems from Catholicism and bears the marks and characteristics of hierarchy. Despite this fact, liberation theology within South American contexts appears to have shed much of its hierarchical structure for the sake of true solidarity amongst the poor. It is the voice of the female poor and the unique needs of this underrepresented group that seem absent from the agenda of classic liberation theology. For liberation theologians in the South American context, the “poor”

are the center of these oppressed and marginalized. From this standpoint, these theologians neither seek nor claim time or space to differentiate among this group of “poor.”²⁷ It is the poor who must be advocated for and served and those who stand against the poor resisted. Despite its advocacy on behalf of the poor *en masse*, liberation theology does not seek the width, depth, definition, and fullness of liberation that feminist liberation theologians seek to encounter for all of humanity—including, but not limited to, poor women.

Something More

The array of liberation theologies that have permeated the world have served as key catalysts for liberation and equity while advocating for the poorest of the poor, most oppressed, and underrepresented. This progressive work on behalf of the poor should in no way be considered any small occurrence as they seek to impact the world. At the same time however, these theologies did not offer the fullness of liberation black South African women were seeking during apartheid-era South Africa. At a time when deep racial oppression mediated South African life, black women were the most vulnerable, most in need, and had the most to lose.

At a time of anti-apartheid movements and empowerment, black South African women needed avenues and voices that spoke out not only against the sanctioned racism of the state, but also against the prevailing paternalism, sexism, hierarchy, and abuse that extended from the white state to the black brothers, fathers, husbands, and lovers surrounding them. Feminist liberation theology set in motion as ‘liberative praxis,’ woven within anti-apartheid movements and progressive church action, created these avenues for liberation and gender equity that the other expressions of liberation theology

²⁷ Ibid.

could not. It is this understanding of feminist liberation theology as ‘liberative praxis’ that Denise Ackermann offers for our consideration.

A Lens of Humility

As a feminist liberation theologian engaged in restorative anti-apartheid work in South Africa during the apartheid era, Ackermann was fully aware of the advantage, and disadvantage, of being a white half-Afrikaner. At the same time, Ackermann followed her strong inner sense of conviction that led her to engage in liberative theological discourse that would eventually manifest throughout the ending years of the apartheid creating avenues towards gender equity. Understanding the difficulty of her situation, fighting against her own culture to stand with the oppressed peoples her culture sought to oppress, Ackermann reflects:

In my own life I’ve had to face how hard it is to be on the side of the oppressors. I did not in my heart ever believe in apartheid, I never belonged to a racist political party or voted for one; nonetheless, I bear a responsibility for apartheid. Most of life has been spent living under white minority rule perpetrated by my own people- I am half Afrikaner. Members of my family supported apartheid policies. I know something of the cost of standing up against one’s own people while also being accountable to those people in the white community who felt like I did. As a member of the perpetrating group, I also had to be accountable to those communities who suffered.²⁸

It is with humility and a deep sense of awareness that Ackermann writes a theology for the oppressed in South Africa. Although Ackermann has always felt led to write out of her own personal context, she does not apologize for it but on the contrary seeks to be open to dialogue with those whose views differ from hers.²⁹

²⁸ Bastienne, Klein, “On Becoming and Being a Woman Theologian in South Africa: In Conversation with Denise Ackermann,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118 (March 2004): 43.

²⁹ Ibid.

For Ackermann the concept of solidarity is key to total and full liberation. Despite her privileged status as a white educated South African; Ackermann chooses to side in solidarity with oppressed black women in order to offer a theology that sets both Ackermann and black South African women free. Ackermann writes, “I do not want to fear change and I must always be alert to the experiences of those communities to whom my work is accountable.”³⁰ Ackermann offers an internal and external solidarity, knowing that her own humanity is wrapped in the humanity of her oppressed black sisters as well as her white brothers. In this solidarity, Ackermann seeks to offer a feminist liberation theology that espouses ultimate liberation for all and not just a partial liberation for a select gender, economic group, or racial group; unlike the aforementioned liberation and feminist theologies. This is key to understanding the theology Ackermann offers to the oppressed women of South Africa and is key to understanding the importance of its manifestation as liberative praxis at the end of apartheid. A more in-depth look at the use of Ackermann’s feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis will be considered in the next chapter.

A Unique Lens

The uniqueness of reformist feminist liberation theology is that it seeks the total liberation of all. In this total liberation, white men are liberated from the sexist, elitist, and racist ideologies that have been ingrained in them through nurturing culture or the influence of society. White women are empowered by liberation from the structures and mindsets that perpetuate hierarchical, paternal, and sexist ideologies; while similarly being freed from their own racist and elitist ideologies their cultures project. Black men are liberated from the racist oppression that has held them in bondage for years while at

³⁰ Ibid.

the same time being freed from the sexist ideologies that have been rooted in the hierarchical structure of their African culture. Black women are freed from their double oppression of sexism and racism while seeking peace and freedom in becoming “the freed,” while in the same breath relinquishing hatred and bitterness that has the potential to drive the oppressed to become the oppressor. In contrast to other liberation theologies, feminist liberation theology seeks total liberation for all through its redemptive praxis.

This is the theology of Denise Ackermann. It is with her unique lens that I will suggest that expressions and markers of feminist liberation theology as ‘liberative’ praxis existed during apartheid-era South Africa leading towards avenues and expressions of gender equity and equality. It is a humble lens of full liberation that transcends race and gender seeking to empower all including Ackermann and the oppressive culture she brings with her into solidarity with her oppressed sisters and brothers.

Chapter 3: Liberative Praxis and Key Markers of Feminist Liberation Theology

During apartheid-era South Africa a theology of feminist liberation was revealed through means of liberative praxis, placing women one step closer to gender equity. In Chapters 4-6 I will examine some of these markers in apartheid's history and their impact on South African society, particularly women. To grasp the significance of this impact of praxis on South African culture and society I will examine the concept of *liberative praxis* in this section. To begin, I will consider the use of liberative praxis within the context of classic liberation theology as presented by Gustavo Gutierrez. Despite the critique feminist liberation theology offers to liberation theology, liberation theology's use and understanding of liberative praxis is similar to that of feminist liberation theology.

Liberative Praxis, Gutierrez, and Soteriology

The term *liberative praxis* is a key concept of liberation theology. For Gutierrez and other Latin American liberation theologians, liberation theology is defined as a process summarized as a *critical reflection on praxis*. In defining liberation theology as, "The critical reflection of praxis in light of the Word of God accepted in faith," Gutierrez implies that three things are necessary for liberation theology to become a practical theology or a theology with feet. First, critical reflection is needed to focus on the reality of life experiences, specifically of the poor and suffering. Secondly, action as response to critical reflection is needed. Third, this response of action after critical reflection is done in light of a standard, which Gutierrez claims as the *Word of God accepted in faith*. These three pieces in movement and constant cyclical rotation make up the process of liberative praxis. Praxis itself is the ongoing partnership between reflection, action, and intentional

dialogue around the suffering experience. Praxis as a verb is the ongoing process of liberative work through reflection, action, and dialogue and is described by the adjective *liberative* because the cycle of reflection on suffering, response to this reflection as action and intentional engagement, leading to further reflection is a liberating experience for those involved.

The standard in which the process of liberative praxis is enacted is critical as it focuses the action and response. For Gutierrez, a Catholic priest, this process must be held to a biblical standard, the Word of God accepted in faith. A theology of liberation, that functions in liberative praxis cannot be divorced from action and justice reflected in God, the liberating role of Jesus Christ, and noted in God's Word. Gutierrez asserts that liberation must follow reflection on suffering if one is to accept and believe the Gospels which speaks not only of Christ the son of God as liberator, but also of a just Kingdom of God in which all Christ-followers are called to participate. For liberation theology, liberative praxis is the natural response and outflow of being a Christ-follower and accepting the Word of God by faith.

For Gutierrez, sin is located within the oppression that causes most of the suffering experience that is reflected upon in the praxis of liberation theology. Sin is more than a personal reality that leads to a need for personal salvation; sin is also a communal, historical, and social reality that is characterized by the absence of love and has deeply fractured relationships not only between humanity and God, but also between humanity and each other. When sin is understood in this way, Gutierrez suggests, the multifaceted dimensions of sin are uncovered and must be addressed.¹ The systemic and

¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Maryknoll, 1988), 102-103.

the ultimate manifestations of sin are found in the oppression and marginalization of ‘the least of these.’ Racism, poverty, economic oppression, elitism, exploitation, and class struggle are manifestations of sin in life practices that have not yet been transformed or healed by God through Christ. Sin then ultimately emerges as the root of injustice, misery, and exploitation manifested in the suffering experience. It is in response to these suffering experiences and this manifestation of sin that liberative praxis is called forth.

For Gutierrez, soteriology is intimately bound to liberation. Such radical implications of sin that is historical, personal, and communal require radical liberation from radical at all levels.² It is this gift of radical liberation through radical means-a brutal execution fit only for accused radical subversives-that has been given to humanity by God through Jesus Christ. By his death and resurrection, Christ redeems all of humanity from sin and all of its consequences and manifestations. The ultimate goal of salvation and liberation for Gutierrez is communion with God made possible by Christ in the healing of relational fractures. This healing of relationships for the allowance of communion with God is liberation from bondage and brokenness and the definition of salvation. Gutierrez writes,

This is why the Christian life is a Passover, a transition from sin to grace, from death to life, from injustice to justice, from the subhuman to the human. Christ introduces us by the gift of his Spirit into communion with God and with all human beings. More precisely, it is because he introduces us into this communion, in a continuous search for its fullness, that he conquers sin-which is the negation of love-and all its consequences.”³

Salvation for Gutierrez is liberation through Jesus Christ. This work of liberation does not end with the work of Christ, but only begins.

² Ibid., 103.

³ Ibid.

Intertwined in this concept of liberation is also the understanding of the utopian reign and Kingdom of God in which Jesus is engaged. Gutierrez notes that the fundamental obstacle to the Kingdom of God is both sin manifested in our personal fractures with humanity and God and the ongoing oppression and marginalization of society these fractures continues to perpetuate.⁴ To be about this Kingdom and to usher in the reign of God is to struggle against exploitation and alienation. Kingdom work is not simply temporal progress towards a just society, but is liberating and salvific work, although it is not *all* of salvation. Temporal progress, simply human liberation, and the growth of the Kingdom have the same goal but are not one in the same. As liberation for Gutierrez is a means of greater human fulfillment, the growth of and work toward the Kingdom is a process implemented through liberating historical events. Gutierrez claims that without liberating historical events, of which God's work of salvation was the first, there would be no growth of the Kingdom.⁵ Examples of this reality are seen in the Exodus encounter, the end of the Holocaust, Civil Rights in America, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and eventually the end of apartheid in South Africa. It can be noted, Gutierrez claims, that liberating events support the growth of the Kingdom and are salvific events with eschatological implications, though they are not the coming of the Kingdom and not *all* of salvation.⁶ The growth of the Kingdom, Gutierrez suggests, is the ultimate precondition for a just society and a new humanity. This precondition,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I would suggest that most liberation theologians including Gutierrez would note that this salvific work of Salvation started with the Exodus, was echoed in the Prophets, and was fulfilled through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

⁶ Gutierrez notes that these events are political, historical, liberating events and the public and political aspect of these events cannot be divorced from ultimate liberation or salvation. See pg. 104.

however, is made available through acceptance of the liberating gift of Jesus Christ.⁷ In relation to South Africa, the ending of apartheid (a major historical event of liberation) is understood as growth of the Kingdom.

This work of growing the Kingdom with its eschatological implications is the intersecting point of liberative praxis in the lives of those who accept the liberating gift of Jesus Christ and choose to answer His call to follow him. Liberative praxis continues the liberation from personal, historic, communal, systemic, institutional, and societal sin that began its eternal liberation with Christ, calling people into healing and right communion with God and each other.

Feminist Theology and Liberative Praxis

Whereas praxis for liberation theologians is in relation to unjust life experience and suffering, centering its theology on the unjust life experiences that brought about suffering for the marginalized and poor within their Latin American context, praxis for feminist theologians is understood as the process-reflection, action, and dialogue-of critical reflection on the *woman's suffering experience* and action and dialogue in response to this reflection. Ruether supports that this concept of "experience" includes women's experience of the divine, of oneself, of community, and of the world in an ongoing interactive dialogue.⁸ It is important to note here that in liberation theologies, in which feminist liberation theology is included, *experience* as the norm for theology does not mean simply reducing theology to experience *per se*, but in contrast experience

⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12.

becomes the critical tool for critique and reconstruction of personal and societal reality.⁹

Feminist liberation theology like liberation theology is then understood as the liberating process of praxis engaging a critical reflection of woman's suffering experience, taking into account the historical, concrete, and physical human experiences of all women, especially the oppressed and suffering, and placing them in the center of theology. When the suffering experience is reflected upon opportunity is created to create a liberative or liberating praxis to heal and restore this experience for the sake of women everywhere.¹⁰

Whereas the context of praxis, the ongoing partnership between reflection, action, and intentional dialogue, for liberation theologians, is Latin American society, the context of praxis for feminist theology is the historical, cultural, and biological reality of women. Unlike liberation theology's lumping of the poor together, which does not offer oppressed women any rightful distinction, feminist theologians seek to acknowledge that women are oppressed in numerous ways in differing societies, cultures, and historical contexts, and by focusing on the historical and cultural relativity instead of a shared biology, these woman can be offered a plurality of feminist theologies and options. Women are then offered choices in hopes of alignment with their historical and cultural reality instead of a theology that is simply based on the mass term 'female biology' or 'gender,' ultimately addressing the diversity that is the female population around the globe.¹¹

⁹ Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 114.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Ruether notes that although the concept of ‘experience’ is not unique to feminist theology, the uniqueness of feminist theology lies in the use of ‘women’s experience’ as a critical tool that has been “entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past.”¹² Ruether suggests that in using women’s experience as a critical tool for critique, feminist theology will expose classical theology as a tradition based on male experience instead of the universal experience that Christ lived and died for.¹³ This also is a common thread in liberation theology’s critique of ‘European Theology’ that is biased towards the white, male, and upper-class experience throughout history.

Both the goal and presumption of feminist theology is emancipatory and liberative praxis for society, the Church, and theological study. Feminist theology not only seeks to join conversations that have been traditionally male-dominated and immersed in patriarchal and hierarchal institutions, but in contrast feminist theology seeks the radical change and transformation of these institutions and structures through liberative praxis and liberating means.¹⁴ This work is done not only to seek equity and equality on the behalf of women, but also because feminist theology is convinced that society, theology, and the Church must be liberated from social and communal sin if they are to serve people and not oppress them.¹⁵ This concept of liberative praxis is a marker of the growth of the Kingdom.

¹² Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology,” in *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America*, ed. William K. Tabb (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 49-50.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50.

For reformist feminist liberation theologies rooted in the Christian faith and supporting a Christology that understands Christ as liberator, the idea of an academic theology that suggests a God who is neutral towards a dominant oppressive culture is rejected. On the contrary, the role of Jesus Christ in these reformist feminist liberation theologies is no neutral God, but a God who was born into poverty and faced oppression, advocated for the 'least of these,' liberated the oppressed of the past, and liberates the outcast and the marginalized today. From this theological framework the marginalized and oppressed women are aware of a God who sides with them, suffers with them, and seeks to liberate them.

In her article, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," Ruether relays the story of a female student who, after having been raped, experienced a vision of Christ as a crucified woman. The student commented, "I would not have to explain to a male God that I had been raped. God knew what it was like to be a woman who had been raped."¹⁶

Only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as Jesus was, Fiorenza suggests, can theology become incarnational and released to follow its intended course to liberate humanity from the bondage of personal and communal sin that oppresses, exploits, and marginalizes. Christian theology must therefore be rooted in emancipatory and liberative praxis and solidarity.¹⁷ These acts of liberative praxis within feminist liberation theology seek to transform broken structures and institutions and heal broken relationships between humanity while calling forth healing community and

¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53: 707-711.

¹⁷ Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as Critical Theology," 52.

communion with each other and with God. Feminist liberation theology is rooted in conversion, transformation, and a new vision as it seeks to name the realities of sin and grace while leading to new mission, community, and communion. The eschatological vision of freedom and salvation, formulated with the hope of the Kingdom of God, offered by God through the liberative work of Jesus Christ, is the foundation of mission and hope feminist liberation theologies rooted in Christology derive its legitimization from.¹⁸ For Christ-centered feminist liberation theologians, like Denise Ackermann, liberative praxis is interwoven with this reign, growth of the Kingdom, and liberating Savior.

Feminist Liberation Theology, The Word of God, and Liberative Praxis

As mentioned previously, feminist theology brings its praxis, or woman's experience, as a critical tool for critique to scripture. Whereas liberation theology accepts scripture as the acceptable and universal standard for liberation and liberative praxis, feminist theology struggles with scripture as a male-dominated text that has been used to perpetuate the oppression of women and to marginalize people. Unlike liberation theology, feminist theology will bring a much more critical attitude to scripture because of the silent and oppressed voice of women located within it. Whereas revolutionary feminist theologians reject interaction with scripture, as they see it as hopeless, patriarchal, and oppressive, reformist and feminist liberation theologians understand scripture as both sexist and liberative.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Vuola, *Limits of liberation*, 117.

Whereas liberation theology defines theology in light of the *Word of God accepted in faith*, feminist theology in general does not define its standard apart from anything that is less than the *full humanity* for women. This principle of *full humanity* claims that whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is not and cannot be redemptive. Theologically, whatever then denies or diminishes the full humanity of women must be presumed to not reflect the Divine or be in right and authentic relationship to the Divine. These things that deny and diminish, the principle of *full humanity* claims, are not the work of authentic redemption or the works of communities of redemption. Simultaneously, whatever does promote the *full humanity* of women is of the Holy and Divine and reflects true relationship with the Divine.²⁰ This work is the growing of the Kingdom and reflects the heart of a liberating God.

For both reformist feminist theologians and revolutionary feminist theologians this concept of *full humanity* transcends the sacred field intersecting with the secular field to acknowledge *full humanity* and the Divine located outside the Church and outside Christianity. This is supported through the historical reality of both the Church and Christianity at times reflecting patriarchal, hierarchical, classist, racist, and sexist attitudes, interpretations, and ideas. The Divine, feminist liberation theology claims, can be both inside and outside the institution of the Church and Christianity. This reality is true for Denise Ackermann as she noted liberative praxis within the racist, sexist, classist, and paternal culture of apartheid-era South Africa. She found the Divine working within the process of liberative praxis both outside and inside the Church; an institution that in many ways was guilty of perpetuating oppression.

²⁰ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18-19.

Within the principle of *full humanity* feminist theology seeks to hold as its standard, reformist feminist liberation theology engages scripture, understanding it as both sexist and liberative, in order to claim the authentic prophetic message of the liberating God found in both Testaments. Ruether points out that there can be no doubt that patriarchy is the social context for both the Old and New Testament and despite the fact that this understanding has been incorporated into religious ideologies, both Testaments contain resources for the critique of patriarchy.²¹ These sources of critique are found within the prophetic-liberating tradition located throughout scripture and reformist feminist liberation theology does not use these prophetic principles to dismiss patriarchal and oppressive ideology, but claims the prophetic-liberating traditions as normative principles of biblical faith. The work of God as redeemer, liberator, Savior, the raising and empowering of the prophets, the merciful responses to the cries of Israel for justice, liberation, and mercy, to God's ultimate liberative work of Jesus on the cross represent the meta-narrative of the prophetic-liberating tradition found throughout scripture, located in our biblical history.

This prophetic-liberating tradition of scripture rejects patriarchal ideology that then diminishes its normative position and character as an essential part of biblical faith.²² Oppression and marginalization is seen as less than Holy and Divine in light of a prophetic-liberating tradition woven throughout scripture. The process of the prophetic-liberating tradition found in scripture is the process of liberative praxis reflected in feminist liberation theology. In reflecting on the experience of the oppressed and

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Ibid., 22-23.

suffering, specifically the oppressed women's experience, in relation to biblical norms with the standard of *full humanity* found within the prophetic- liberating tradition that finds its fullness located in Jesus Christ, responsive action can take place to alter future oppression, and intentional dialogue and engagement can take place. We see this in the life of Jesus Christ who spoke to oppressive cultural barriers to women, set women free, transformed these communities, and in breaking these barriers encouraged others to do likewise.²³ Through the liberative work of Jesus Christ, reflected in prophetic-liberating tradition woven through scripture, reformist feminist liberation theologians can understand scripture as liberative instead of oppressive. Through this understanding scripture can be set free from its bondage of sexism and paternalism and scripture can then be rightly understood as liberative because of its interwoven prophetic-liberating tradition. The process of liberating praxis, in this instance, is then used as a tool and mirror for the critical critique of the essence of scripture.

Feminist Hermeneutics, Praxis, and The Prophetic-Liberating Tradition

Reformist feminist liberation theology can draw on biblical principles if and only if they are prophetic principles, namely principles that reject oppression, marginalization, and the use of God to justify domination and subjugation. The fact that the prophetic-liberating tradition is woven throughout scripture is important in this regard as it decreases the need to pick and choose from scripture, yet clearly many passages are subject to oppressive interpretation and this reality must be confronted early on as oppressive.

²³ See the Gospel texts for barrier breaking encounters between Jesus and women: woman caught in adultery (John 8), woman at the well (John 4), Jesus driving out those who were selling animals for sacrifice—specifically for sacrifices needed to be offered by poor women (Matthew 21:12), woman with the history of bleeding (Matthew 9), and the treatment of Mary (John 19 and Act 1-2).

According to Ruether, the prophetic-liberating tradition of biblical faith is characterized by God's defense and vindication of the oppressed, the critique of dominant powers, the shared vision of a new, just, and equitable world to come in which current structures of injustice are replaced with God's reign and the Kingdom, and a critique of ideology and religion, namely the use of these concepts to justify an unjust social order. The prophetic-liberating tradition revealed in scripture has markers of liberative praxis: collaboration in reflection, committed action in response to the suffering woman's experience, and historic transformation of individuals and society. These actions are central to the journey of the prophets and the mission of Jesus.²⁴

For feminist liberation theologians, not only do the prophets Amos and Isaiah bring forth liberative rhetoric for the manifestation of liberative praxis, but Yahweh is also presented as a God who advocates for the liberation of the oppressed and seeks vindication on their behalf. This Divine advocacy for the oppressed is central to Jesus' preaching and ministry. Jesus' presence in the unjust order turns everything on its head as he liberates and loves breaking social and cultural barriers to heal the hearts of the oppressed, marginalized, poor, and forgotten which include the marginalized women of Jesus' community. Here feminist liberation theology goes beyond the prophetic-liberation tradition to assert this principle for women, namely liberation must start with the most marginalized and most oppressed in order to liberate all of humanity. Thus Jesus' liberation must start with oppressed women, the most marginalized in society.

Jesus' critique and intent to undo the unjust power structures such as the paternal and hierarchical status of the Pharisees and Sadducees was central to Jesus' radical

²⁴ Ibid.

interpretation of the prophetic-messianic tradition. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is combating the effects of unjust social, religious, and political orders, seeking to liberate those caught under the weight of this oppression.²⁵ Ruether notes that even the language and rhetoric of the Gospels is laced with the characterization of the prophetic tradition, criticizing existing oppressive power structures and revealing a God who sides with the oppressed.²⁶

Key to Jesus' ministry was the fact that his criticism of the unjust social order did not simply end with his critique, but that Jesus offered a new vision, new hope, and a new Kingdom -a radical revolutionary transformative process- that would invite all to healing and restorative relationship with each other and with God.²⁷ Jesus' prophetic-liberating ministry was the growing of the Kingdom and an invitation to communion and healing relationship, marks of liberative praxis. It is important to note here, however, that Jesus not only rejects the use of religion to perpetuate oppression, hierarchy, and hardship for the marginalized, but also rejects the temptation to use prophetic language to justify the revenge of the oppressed, seeking to challenge, the notion of the oppressed becoming the oppressor.

Ruether contends that prophetic-liberation tradition and content, considered and rediscovered in light of a feminist hermeneutic engaging woman's experience, is precisely what scripture considers the *Word of God*. "This, in other words," claims Ruether, "is the critical principle that Biblical faith applies to itself. It is the

²⁵ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

²⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

hermeneutical principle for discerning prophetic faith with scripture as well as for the ongoing interpretation of scripture as critique of tradition.”²⁸ Reformist feminist liberation theology rooted in the Christian story does not assert anything new in this regard, but seeks a biblical tradition that is defined by the prophetic-liberating tradition and centered on the liberative and salvific praxis of Jesus Christ as normative. The prophetic-liberation tradition as norm for biblical faith, as understood as the *Word of God* then encourages and empowers Christ followers to engage in the natural outflow of liberative praxis. When considering the prophetic-liberating tradition located in scripture and applying it to the liberation of women and the critique of sexism, the far-reaching consequences and ramifications of social and communal sin are felt and the magnitude of grace and love of a liberating God with an expanded vision of messianic expectation is realized.

Ackermann, Liberative Praxis, and a Hermeneutic of Healing for South Africa

Ackermann finds her work of feminist liberation theology residing in the greater discipline of practical theology. Ackermann’s early interests in theology resided in clarifying what personal and communal praxis communicates in terms of faith. During the 1980s in South Africa, as apartheid oppression became more violent, Ackermann sought groups of Christian woman from her own community of accountability who were resisting discrimination and an unjust and unloving system in which humanity was being desecrated.²⁹ What Ackermann found was shocking. Within her community she was

²⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁹ Bastienne Klein, “On Becoming and Being a Woman Theologian in South Africa: In Conversation with Denise Ackermann,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118 (March 2004): 43.

unable to find an organized group of Christian women who were fighting against apartheid.³⁰ This began the start of her work considering the role of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis-*the liberating process of reflection on the suffering experience, action as response to reflection leading to further intentional dialogue, reflection and action for the ultimate sake of healing for humanity*-within South African society, seeking to both communicate liberative praxis to the Church, in South Africa and beyond, and bearing witness within the Church as expressions of liberative praxis were slowly opening avenues for women.

Reflecting on woman's experience and the ability to struggle on in hope in South Africa, for Ackerman liberating praxis was more than spiritual and political liberation, but was a powerful tool for healing within society. Additionally, feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis critiques other theological models in South Africa and calls for a reform of the theological task itself.³¹ Liberative praxis for Ackermann is collaborative, sustained action for justice, liberation, and healing in both the spiritual and political layers, empowered by continuous struggle, hope, and passion while seeking to bring about the hope of healing for all in society.³² It is important to reiterate that Ackermann understands the work of liberative praxis not to only engage and liberate the most marginalized within community, black African women, but also understanding that the role of liberative praxis extends to the white community with liberation from fear and indoctrinated ideologies leading towards healing, with an end means of full communal

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Denise Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94 (March 1996): 34.

³² Ibid.

healing. These interconnections of liberation, healing, and reform through liberative praxis are signs of Kingdom growth.

Within the revolutionary context of apartheid in South Africa, Ackermann offers to the conversation of liberative praxis a hermeneutic of healing placing healing at the center of liberative praxis. For Ackermann this is best reflected in the liberative praxis of participation in the Eucharist where healing is the source of the responsive action. Healing is a necessary component of the work of liberation theology as personal, spiritual, and political liberation cannot be separated from healing. Even more so, the lament and healing that comes in the wake of liberation must not be separated from the personal, political, and communal. Ackermann notes the vital importance of healing at every level of life. Thus the oppressed and the oppressors as well as the surrounding communities must engage in the healing that is offered through liberative praxis. Additionally, the most vulnerable of South African society, black African women and children, are at the center of this healing.

This healing which lies at the core of Ackermann's liberative praxis is an example of practical theology lived out. It is rooted in the daily understanding that living is not separate from the life of faith. Ackermann notes, "The cry for healing is inseparable from the need for justice. A theology concerned with healing praxis in South Africa seeks economic sustainability and fosters a culture of human rights as a means to find the wholeness intended by God for a healed world."³³ Simultaneously, within liberative

³³ Denise Ackermann, "'A Voice was Heard in Ramah:' A Feminist Theology of Praxis for Healing in South Africa," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Reit Bons-Storm and Denise Ackermann (Lueven: Peeters, 1998), 83.

praxis, healing is a personal and spiritual matter that engages and invites the greater community to participate at these levels.

For the Christian community, liberation and healing starts with a self-awareness, mindfulness, and self-consciousness that brings forth a willingness to hear, see, and feel the reality of one's own pain and the pain of others. Healing within liberative praxis also calls for an acceptance of accountability that combines the claimed responsibility of all communities and offenses, including the connected histories, and then seeks collaboration for healing.³⁴ Finally, healing within liberative praxis calls for forgiveness. While the concept of forgiveness is not foreign to the Christian community, forgiveness within this context, Ackermann suggests, is too often seen primarily as absolution from private guilt, neglecting the communal aspect of forgiveness and healing. It is important, Ackermann suggests, that communities refrain from watering down forgiveness to *cheap* forgiveness. Here cheap forgiveness is likened to cheap grace.³⁵ Forgiveness then cannot be demanded but hoped for, in an attempt to restore communion with one another and with God.³⁶ This is the ultimate understanding of soteriology for liberation theologies.

Finally Ackermann suggests that the ultimate place of healing within liberative praxis is located within participation in the Eucharist. For liberation theologians, the power of liberation found in the radical act of communion, a common cup and common sacred meal, has massive implications for an oppressed society. Ackermann writes of her own experience of this power noting while apartheid laws kept the full community apart with racial laws, the Eucharist rite of sharing one cup took on revolutionary

³⁴ Ibid., 90-91.

³⁵ Ibid., 92.

³⁶ Ibid.

significance.³⁷ She writes, “At some altar rails there was no apartheid.”³⁸ In the union of God and others, through the life, death, resurrection, body and blood of Jesus Christ, apartheid is banished in this simple ritual of communal engagement, acknowledgement, awareness, and remembrance. It is within this sacred moment that healing is offered through Christ, permeating society, reaching both the oppressed and the oppressors. Ackermann calls for liberative praxis that seeks to expand the meaning and act of the Eucharist so that its power for healing and transforming is realized more fully. For some theologians, this theory then leads to conversation about an open table, where all might come and receive freely the healing bread and cup of Christ. Where political healing is not a realized reality for South Africa, a personal, communal, and social healing and restoration is made possible always by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This reality is the ultimate power located within the healing of liberative praxis.

Conclusion of Part 1

Liberative praxis is the tool, process, in which feminist liberation theology seeks to free the oppressed. This process is the critical reflection on the suffering woman’s experience, responsive action in light of reflection, and intentional dialogue and engagement for the healing of humanity and mending of creation. Markers of this liberative praxis are *critical self-awareness combined with committed action as response, constructive collaboration engaged in the reflection of the woman’s suffering experience, and accountability for the process in light of those who have suffered.*

³⁷ Ibid., 97.

³⁸ Ibid.

Healing must lie at the center of liberative praxis if this process is to have the effects of Kingdom growth and a mending of creation. It is within this understanding of healing that ultimate and full liberation is understood for all. This understanding of full holistic healing is the mission of feminist liberation theology; when healing the most marginalized in society, oppressed women, the rest of society can then be set free.

Throughout the later years of apartheid-era South Africa, there were manifestations of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis leading towards gender equity and healing. These manifestations and expressions were marked by the characteristics of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis: critical, committed, constructive, collaborative, and accountable in the struggle and hope for the healing of creation through the liberation of marginalized and oppressed women.³⁹ It is within this understanding of reformist feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis, locating healing at the center of this praxis, within the revolutionary context of apartheid-era South Africa that the next section will examine the markers of feminist liberative praxis and their impact on gender equity and healing for both black African woman and the greater society at large. Specifically, I will examine three specific liberative expressions: anti-apartheid movements, the push for female leadership within the South African Church, and the surprising liberative elements connected to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

³⁹ Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 43.

Part 2: Liberation Theology as Liberative Praxis in Apartheid-Era South Africa

Chapter 4: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist Liberation Theology: *The Black Sash*

Early Black Resistance

As early as 1652 when European settlements created a refueling station for Dutch vessels in Capetown, conflict and tension has existed between the indigenous people of South Africa and the European settlers.¹ The establishment of European settlements would begin years of dominant white control and the struggle of black resistance movements to regain and reclaim land, governing power, and dignity. Throughout the next two centuries, African tribal resistance sought to stand up to the ruling white minority that had expanded the colonial boundary and had coerced impoverished tribal members to work on white farms and assimilate into legal systems. The South African tribes of the Khoisan and the Bantu chose to resist European settlement despite their obvious lack of defensive power in order to defend their land, water, and pasture as tribal life had been based on these precious elements alone. African tribes would not fully regain these elements of tribal life until 300 years later after years of oppression, suffering, and perseverance.

Intentional organized black African resistance against European expansion and apartheid did not truly surface in South Africa until the 20th century with the rise of black African nationalism and the creation of African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Both of these bodies emerged from the desire of the black African community to regain power through either inclusive racial means (integration of sympathetic whites) or exclusive racial means (exclusively black organizations). Out of

¹ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Enculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 20.

both of these socio-political understandings of resistance would be birthed avenues and roadblocks for the liberation of black African women.

When the 1960 massacre of PAC protestors in Sharpeville led to the banning of the PAC and ANC, black Africans sought to regain political and social energy leaning into black unity and the movement of Black Consciousness. This movement sought to espouse African cultural values and political aspiration for the black African community in South Africa. The Black Consciousness Movement, an exclusively black African organization, sought to rediscover and reinterpret black history, empowering and uniting both black intellectuals and the masses while bridging the multi-ethnic groups within the South African community.² While the ways of Black Consciousness insisted on a new awareness for the black community to see themselves as independent and complete in themselves, affirming their humanity rooted in their *blackness*, and using black African values to critique apartheid, the plight of black women was never adequately advocated for or prioritized.³

As the BCM, claiming to uphold African cultural values, challenged the black African community to question the common faith they shared with their oppressors black theology began to emerge. In the 1970s black theology emerged as the BCM took on a theological understanding of resistance and liberation. This concentrated work was concerned with the nature of the struggle of black Africans under the oppression of apartheid and the struggle to bring about total liberation. While black theology increased in popularity amongst BCM members and black Christian males, black theology lacked integral roles for women and was hesitant in its resistance against gender-based

² Ibid., 22-23.

³ Ibid., 24.

discrimination.⁴ Acknowledging this reality and need, black African women began their own theological work in what would become black African feminist theology.

While the black community sought outlets of resistance and liberation that included both the secular and sacred fields, a group of white women who had met for tea in 1955 and vowed to change South Africa regardless of the context or cost, had begun their work of liberative praxis focusing on women and the black African community.

Black Sash

In the South African Spring of 1955 it was the governmental proposition of the Senate Act that resulted in the creation of the Women's Defense of the Constitution League (WDCL), later to be renamed the Black Sash. Engaged in 150 years of politics and history between the English, Dutch, and Afrikaner South Africans, the Senate Act was a bold step by the government to enlarge the Senate under the Nationalist party. This act of manipulation would alter the composition of the senate and the election of its members. Simultaneously the Senate Act would remove all colored people from the common voter's roll. In essence, the proposition of the Senate Act would be a move to take away power from the electorate, leaving South Africa as a democratic state vulnerable and open to tyranny and dictatorship while allowing the "white vote" to dominate South African governance.⁵ A desire to see justice, the constitution upheld and voting rights for colored South Africans intact was the initial inspiration for the founding of the Black

⁴Roxanne Jordaan, "Two Voices on Woman's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa," in *Feminist Theology: Third World Reader*, 2nd ed, edited by Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 150-155.

⁵Bastienne Klein, "On Becoming and Being a Woman Theologian in South Africa: In Conversation with Denise Ackermann," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 118, (March 2004): 41-44.

Sash. On May 19th, 1955, six feisty white English-speaking Johannesburg women met for tea with the intention to “do something” about the Senate Act.⁶

Right away the WDCL set out to defend the rights of South Africans and to support the perceived intentions of the original South African constitution. Their immediate goals were aimed at leveraging power at the local level and by May 25th, six days after their first meeting, the WDCL had acquired 500 signatures while leading a protest to the Johannesburg City Hall of 18,000 citizens seeking to protest the Senate Act.⁷ The majority of signatures and protestors from this first campaign were women as the WDCL early on saw the validity in empowering an underrepresented voice in the political process. This mandate, calling all women to be united in the defense of the Constitution, soon made both local and international headlines. With the news of the Johannesburg women’s protest spreading throughout the country, readers in any village with access to the English-language newspapers were becoming informed of this new radical protesting communion made of women representing women.⁸

What started out as a movement of women seeking to defend constitutional and voting rights turned into a public protest against the unjust systems of sexism and racism. From what started out in 1955 as marches and protests turned into a mass movement of response to injustice through the means of protest, advocacy, solidarity, and empowerment. Over the years the Sash would grow both in vision and in membership. Women from across the country would gather and respond to the Sash’s call to fight

⁶ Cherry Michelman, *The Black Sash of South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 24.

⁷ Michelman, *The Black Sash*, 33.

⁸ Ibid., 35.

against the injustice of apartheid for the sake of the oppressed and marginalized, for women, and for the black African community.

Within 40 years the Black Sash became a symbol of justice throughout South Africa at a time when justice was sparse for black South Africans. Eventually, after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela claimed the Black Sash to be the “conscience of the white nation” within South Africa.⁹ Through the actions of the Black Sash, white South African women were using their power to empower black South African women and men. The vision and methods through which these women sought to gain power for those who did not have power are characterized by the markers of a liberative praxis of a feminist liberation theology.

Obstacles to Empowerment

The revolutionary context of South Africa created a seedbed of tension for those being oppressed and for those seeking liberation for the oppressed. The Black Sash, throughout their developing years, experienced these tensions. While the struggle to end apartheid opened the door for women, especially white women, to fight for their rights, the door was still closed for black African women. Although black feminist theology arose alongside the Black Consciousness Movement, the opportunities black feminist theology offered were limited only to the black African community and black women who had limited access to power themselves. If black African women were going to gain freedom from oppression, they would need the partnership of their white counterparts to *help leverage* the door to freedom completely open in South Africa. One obstacle that slowed this work was the tension created by working towards liberation specifically in terms of

⁹ Klein, “On Becoming A Woman Theologian,” 46.

gender while placing race as a secondary issue.¹⁰ While many efforts were made by the Black Sash on the behalf of black women and their communities prior to 1985, the organization's work became much more racially integrated later, sharing both the importance of the gender and race issues in their work for liberation as they entered the later part of the 20th century.

Combined with this early tension between gender and race, black African women in the 70s and 80s struggled with the concept of feminism the Black Sash exemplified. This feminist theory was often dismissed as Western bourgeois thought, separate from the black feminist theology connected to the BCM, making it difficult to advance throughout the country at a time when Western bourgeois thought was associated with either apartheid itself or with busy progressives who were spending their time and energy already fighting against apartheid.¹¹ The feminism the Black Sash engaged sought women's empowerment and the liberation of the oppressed, including women. This feminism was not engaged for the purpose of isolating men or the white community; on the contrary, the Sash sought allies within both communities, but for the purpose of including all -men and women- white and black in their work of support, advocacy, and liberative action within the process of praxis.¹²

This aspect of feminist theory was foreign to the culture of tribal custom and early on African women did not feel that it was the right time to challenge their male counters,

¹⁰ Kathryn Spink, *The Black Sash: The Beginning of a Bridge in South Africa* (London: Methuen London, 1991), 233.

¹¹ Ibid., 246.

¹² Christopher S. Wren, "White South African Women Step off Their Pedestals to Fight Apartheid," *New York Times*, Dec 25, 1988. See also Denise Ackermann's thoughts on the Black Sash and male liberation in Klein's, "Becoming a Woman Theologian," 43-44.

or the African male ego.¹³ In 1987 however, when the hopes of a liberated Africa and the end of apartheid were fading, black African women in solidarity with the white sisters of the Black Sash began to organize against the oppressions of both race and gender.¹⁴ The Black Sash offered a liberative praxis, a process of critical reflection, action, and intentional dialogue in light of the women's suffering experience, that sought to free the oppressed and leverage power against an unfair and unjust political and socio-economic climate. This liberative praxis worked for the white women who had felt the discrimination of gender themselves, the black African males who were trapped in the chains of racism and within their own understandings of imbalanced gender roles, hierarchy, and patriarchy, and black African women who had access to the least amount of power, feeling the weight of sexism, racism, and classism all in one oppressive system.

Black Sash as Critical and Committed

As a feminist theory alone, feminism would not have found a strong enough footing in African culture to open the door to liberation for black African women and furthermore South African society. The efforts and vision of the Black Sash, however, contained undercurrents of liberative praxis located within feminist liberation theology.

The Black Sash was founded on the elements of critical self-awareness, consciousness, and committed action in light of experience. Having experienced their own marginalization as women, experiencing the injustice of the women's experience in South Africa, the women of the Black Sash sought to organize against the prevailing unjust actions of the South African government. Because the women of Black Sash had

¹³ Spink, *The Black Sash*, 246.

¹⁴ Ibid., 247.

experienced their own stories of prejudice and marginalization over their sex and the radical work that came along with being Black Sash members, they were able to stand in solidarity with those who were also experiencing forced oppression.

While this progression from experiencing oppression to resisting oppression and standing with others in solidarity against oppression had been the choice of the women of Black Sash, the glaring reality of white privilege, however, could not be denied. While the white women of Black Sash were the oppressed within the hierarchy of society, in secondary position to that of the white South African male, these women had privilege and power connected to their race. It was this power and privilege that the women of the Black Sash used to advocate for justice for marginalized South Africans, specifically black African women, and for South Africa. Through action and protest the Black Sash sought to use power and privilege for the healing and restoration of the oppressed through committed action instead of furthering oppression and injustice. In the *New York Times* article published in 1988 highlighting the Black Sash's efforts, writer Christopher S. Wren notes that while engagement within the Black Sash offered a reinforcement of self-esteem to many women involved, others noted their own personal realization of oppression, imbalance of power, and present responsibility in light of the revolutionary context. Then Black Sash president Mary Burton commented, "It's hard to claim you're oppressed when you see all around you people who are so much worse off."¹⁵

In this committed action of bearing witness, protest, and advocacy, the women of the Black Sash used the power of their community, the women of South Africa, as leverage against the dominant power structure of the South African government

¹⁵ Wren, "White South African Women Step off Their Pedestals," 3.

providing empowerment, encouragement, support, and liberation step by step for those who were marginalized and oppressed.

Actions of Praxis and the Advice Offices

The liberating praxis of the Black Sash took on various forms. The first act of advocacy was the founding act of the organization. By protesting and petitioning the unjust laws proposed between the years of 1952-1955, the women of the Black Sash made a public statement that they would stand in solidarity with those who were being oppressed while standing against the dominant culture of which they were a part of.¹⁶ Through this act, the Black Sash claimed relationship with the most marginalized and oppressed within society, fighting for their rights on a legislative level. Although the Sash's initial political act was focused on unjust governing laws enacted between 1955-1958, the women sought to engage the issues of black South African women as the pass laws continued to oppress the ways in which they lived, how they lived, and where they lived.¹⁷ The women of the Black Sash marched, camped, held vigil, stood silent in the rain, held posters, and chanted songs as a sign of protest seeking solidarity with those the laws sought to oppress.¹⁸

¹⁶ These laws included the Pass Laws Act of 1952 that forced all non-white South Africans to carry passbooks relegating them to specific areas of the country where they could live, work, and socialize. This act was one of forced segregation. Families were torn apart and the interior structure of economics for the black South African community was decimated. The Senate Act of 1955 sought to remove all colored, non-white, voters from the voter registry leaving the future of the state in the hands of the "white" South African vote already steeped in apartheid actions.

¹⁷ Black Sash Trustees, "Reflections on 50 years of the Black Sash," Black Sash 2007-2009,, http://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=163&Itemid=117 (accessed July 10, 2009).

¹⁸ Klein, "On Becoming a Woman Theologian," 44. See also Spink, *The Black Sash*, 244-246.

In 1958, choosing to assist those suffering from the Pass Laws Act and the Senate Act, the Black Sash started a bail fund that would assist black South African women who were arrested in relation to the pass laws.¹⁹ Later that year the Capetown Black Sash advice office was opened, the first of its kind. The advice offices became the Sash's greatest contribution to their network of liberative praxis. These offices offered free paralegal service, information, and support to black South Africans, both men and women. The offices provided financial support in the form of money loans, pensions and child support in addition to personal support that included caring for the families of prisoners and meeting the needs of returned prisoners.²⁰ Black South African women were offered positions of power and employment within the offices as assistants, interpreters, and support staff.²¹ Advice offices supported black South Africans and families dealing with job loss, homelessness, advocacy, representation in courts of law, and solidarity as black South African women and men battled the injustice of apartheid.²²

Between 1959-1964 the number of advice offices grew and a regional presence of the Black Sash was established. It was through the daily work of the advice offices that the women of Black Sash began to truly see the devastating effects of apartheid. In their reflection on the first 50 years of the organization, the Trustees of the Black Sash noted,

“The Black Sash, too, might have given up-as its numbers dwindled-some of its regions were forced to close in the face of severe intimidation, and hopes faded for peaceful change through a political process. Yet, day after day, its advice

¹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰ Klein, “On Becoming a Woman Theologian,” 44.

²¹ Black Sash Trustees, “Reflections on 50 years of the Black Sash,” Black Sash 2007-2009,, http://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=163&Itemid=117 (accessed July 10, 2009).

²² Wren, “White South African Women Step off Their Pedestals,” 3.

offices were filled with people needing help and attention. It was impossible to turn away from the people whose daily lives demonstrated the inhumanity of a system that broke up families, neighborhoods and communities.”²³

The desire to find solutions to the great issues they encountered continued to move the Sash to further action over the next 20 years in the areas of research, further study of governing laws and systems that held apartheid in place, grant writing, advocacy, representation, empowerment of black South Africans, especially women and governmental lobbying. The Sash continued to protest discriminatory legislation, stood in public places holding signs for protest, and challenged the system of apartheid openly through their magazine *SASH* that reported the repression occurring throughout those years. In her reflection on the Sash, Ackermann notes that through their involvement with the daily struggle of apartheid, these privileged middle-class white women developed a profound understanding of how apartheid affected the lives of black women. She writes, “The Sash understood solidarity as commitment to actions for human rights and liberation. Their praxis communicated to me that they cared about human rights and the inherent worth of people. This suggested an underlying anthropology that values people’s dignity, people’s rights and freedoms.”²⁴

Black Sash as Constructive Collaboration

As mentioned in section A, feminist liberation theology needs strategic and intentional constructive collaboration with varying forms of diversity and with women from different

²³ Black Sash Trustees, “Reflections on 50 years of the Black Sash,” Black Sash 2007-2009,, http://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=163&Itemid=117 (accessed July 10, 2009).

²⁴ Klein, “On Becoming a Woman Theologian,” 44.

cultures, religious traditions, and social locations in order to construct accurate theological discourse that is informed by those who experience oppression.²⁵

By the mid 1980s the Black Sash began the intentional work of constructive collaboration with black South African communities by training community members how to start, facilitate, and sustain advice offices within their own townships. This collaboration engaged black South Africans in localized advocacy positions, empowering townships in the fight against apartheid. While these communities were diverse in age and gender, welcomed by the Black Sash, the organization continued to lift up the issue of women's rights. When communities would send only black men for training from the townships, the Black Sash re-engaged conversations over the issue of women and the important role of black South African women within society and the job force associated with the advice offices. Black Sash members re-emphasized the fact that black South African women had made better advice office workers, tending to remain in the job for longer periods of time than their male counterparts.²⁶ This type of advocacy on the behalf of black South African women, in collaboration with black South African men and their approach to women in leadership, was crucial to the organization's liberative efforts.

The vision, actions, and liberative praxis of the advice offices were crucial for the Black Sash on their quest towards a new, just, and equal society for South Africa. For over 50 years the Black Sash remained committed to empowering the powerless. While the Black Sash supported the black South African family in addition to black South African men, the Sash worked hard to empower the black South African woman on her

²⁵ Denise Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 94 (March 1996): 44.

²⁶ Spink, *The Black Sash*, 246.

quest for liberation from the systems of sexism, racism, and classism that dominated her culture. From 1987 onward, the Sash made critical advances in the advocacy of the role of black South African women. In constructive collaboration with other South African anti-apartheid and women's groups, the Black Sash took on a new fervor for the issue of women while focusing on those with the least power and voice in society. Through these efforts the Sash believed that once equality and dignity were offered to the most oppressed within South African society, a new society could be formulated and emerge.²⁷

These collaborative advances included united efforts and the formation of alliances with other organs of civil society opposed to apartheid and with numerous women's groups in South Africa, in addition to the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) an organization that had been in hibernation until its re-launch in 1987, seeking rights for all women, especially the most vulnerable and powerless black South African women.²⁸ During exploratory discussions in 1987 between the numerous groups and the Black Sash, a draft constitution that outlined the aims and objectives of the new vision emerged:

“We, the women of South Africa, recognize that we are racially oppressed, sexually discriminated against and economically exploited, and that apartheid holds us in chains. We therefore undertake to work towards the dismantling of apartheid and work towards establishing a non-racial, united, democratic South Africa.”²⁹

In addition to this collaborative effort, the Black Sash engaged in circulating a paper formulated by the Sash and FEDSAW known as the Charter of Women, claiming rights

²⁷ Ibid., 240-246.

²⁸ Ibid., 244-245. See also Klein, “On Becoming a Woman Theologian,” 44.

²⁹ Spink, *The Black Sash*, 244-245.

on the behalf of all women in South Africa. These rights stood in direct opposition of the pass laws act and the greater system of apartheid nation-wide.³⁰

With these acts of boldness and in collaboration with others seeking to advocate for a new society through the empowerment and liberation of the most oppressed, the Black Sash of the later 20th century participated in the process of liberative praxis reflected in a feminist theology of liberation. With reflection, action, and intentional response the Black Sash notified the power structures of South Africa that, “The liberation of women from all forms of oppression was seen as an integral part of the transformation of South African society.”³¹ Through the means of liberative praxis, the Black Sash was fighting for a new society where the chains of racism, sexism, and classism would be put to an end.

Theology Within the Black Sash

As mentioned in the previous chapter, liberative praxis located in a prophetic historical moment does not need to dwell within the church to be considered sacred or Divine for feminist liberation theology. In the 1987 New York Times article highlighting the Black Sash, president Mary Burton noted that then, in 1987, half of the Sash members engaged in liberative praxis through the organization were “religious” while the others were not.³² In her reflections Ackermann notes that the Sash was a totally secular organization that would never have considered itself religious, yet from many of the Sash members she interviewed there emerged a common vision and dedication to actions for a new and just

³⁰ Ibid., 251.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Wren, “White South African Women Step off Their Pedestals,” 3.

society based on human rights. These women were working for the mending of creation outside the walls of the church while the Christian women within Ackermann's own community were not engaged in the struggle against racism, sexism, and classism at all.³³

Ackermann had come across the Black Sash while searching for groups of Christian women who were resisting the injustice and inhumanity of apartheid from a theological and communal standpoint associated with the Church and Christian community. When she could not find a group of women doing this work in her community, women of faith standing up against discrimination from a theological standpoint, Ackermann engaged an anti-apartheid women's group that had never ceased seeking justice for those seeking help, specifically black South African women.

Ackermann's vital claim of the Black Sash is that at a time when the Church and other theologically Christian mediating institutions were not engaged in the justice issue for black South Africans and black African women and children, the Black Sash stood in its stead with its vision and praxis of liberation through empowerment, support, advocacy, and solidarity. Ackermann suggests that the praxis communicated by the Sash was of a valuing and honoring of the *Imago Dei* and worth of all people, what in Ackermann's opinion reflects the Christ story within the Christian faith. Theology without praxis, Ackermann suggests, lacks power and meaning if it cannot translate into transformative engagement and work by people of faith.³⁴

For Ackermann, the liberating praxis of the Black Sash was not devoid of crucial theological meaning because it was not Christ-centered in its foundation; on the contrary the Black Sash sought liberative praxis in the hopes of transforming South Africa into a

³³ Klein, "On Being a Woman Theologian," 45.

³⁴ Ibid., 44-45.

new and just society that reflected the heart of God. Furthermore, Ackermann suggests that it was the Black Sash that was communicating a practical feminist liberation theology *to* the Church, a message the South African Church needed to hear in order to wake up, remember its story, and re-engage the core of its Christi-centered theology to adequately serve those around them-especially the oppressed and marginalized. In the following section I will address the role of feminist liberation theology and liberative praxis in engaging this sleeping Church in South Africa.

Chapter 5: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist liberation Theology: *The SACC and the Boldest Meal*

While secular anti-apartheid efforts like those of the Black Sash were making advances for the country's most vulnerable and oppressed, the Church stood divided in the face of oppression. At a time when the actions of a people called by a God of justice were needed the most, the Church in many respects was still stuttering or silent. Between the years of 1948 and 1970 the Church endured congregational and denominational tension as the faces and attitudes of congregations began to change.¹ Increased violence and oppression in addition to the secular advances of the anti-apartheid movement, eventually drove a majority in South Africa's sleeping Church to change and action by the mid to late 70s.² While Churches began to engage openly and in unity over the issue of race and separation, the issue of gender was left for the back burner. Despite this disregard, efforts to engage in liberative praxis on the behalf of marginalized women for the betterment of humanity took place in pockets throughout the South African Church and in the halls of the academy.

The State of the South African Church

The DRC and the Segregated Church

By the turn of the century, black South Africans had three main choices in relation to church membership and attendance: mission churches, multiracial denominations, or

¹ John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 39-53.

² Ibid, 53-57. See also Margaret Nash, ed., *Women – A Power for Change: Report of the Seventeenth Annual National Conference of the South African Council of Churches held at St. Barnabas School, Johannesburg June 24-27, 1985* (Johannesburg: The South African Council of Churches, 1985).

independent black congregations termed native churches.³ Mission churches and multi-racial churches, mirroring South Africa's colonial history, were churches with black or multi-racial membership while under the control of white missionaries, white boards, white leadership, and or British and European customs. By 1906 white missionary churches were reporting "the problem" of the rise of native churches as it affected their own congregations' dwindling numbers. Issues of autonomy, race, and independence from white control and manipulation were at the core of the native church's growth.⁴

Mirroring the national struggle, throughout the apartheid years churches chose sides, either aligning themselves with the National Party and the governmental mandates of apartheid, or joining in solidarity with the church of the oppressed and marginalized, apartheid's victims. As divided as the issue was in the secular sphere, the issue of apartheid was equally divided within the church. Similarly, as much as individuals and the state justified apartheid under the guise of loyalty to the government and the arranged order of life, the church equally sought to justify apartheid with a claimed biblical hermeneutic which centered around love as regulation.⁵

In 1974 the Dutch Reformed Church, the dominant church structure of white South Africa, offered its first proposition for a theology of racial separation. In their policy document, *Human Relations and the South African Scene in Light of Scripture*, a theological justification of apartheid is offered suggesting a relationship between

³ De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 41.

⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

⁵ Ibid., 72.

apartheid and the Christian faith mirroring Christ-centered reconciliation.⁶ A portion of the document summarizes the DRC position accurately;

In specific circumstances and under specific conditions the New Testament makes provision for the regulation on the basis of separate development of the co-existence of various peoples in one country. Having said this, the synod makes it clear that the role of the church is to ensure that diversity does not lead to estrangement; that love for the neighbor 'is the ethical norm for the regulation of relationships among peoples'.⁷

Because of the power church-and-state alignment can exude, and the reality that most members of South African Parliament, council members, governing officials, police, and military were members of the million-and-a-half white-member church, the DRC not only represented the dominant face of the church in South Africa, but the dominant theological position of the State.⁸ The DRC had the greatest theological influence on South Africa for over a century.⁹

Churches in opposition

Despite the power and influence the DRC had, its theological position could not be accepted church-wide in South Africa. From the birth of native churches in response to imperial colonialism, pockets of the South African church, represented by all colors and sexes, had been fighting the oppression of the state and of their sister church the DRC and its followers for years. Although these churches held differing theological stances

⁶ Van Vugt, William E. and G. Daan Cloete, ed., *Race and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2000), 107.

⁷ De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 72.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ Ibid., 60-72.

when considering orthodox doctrine, unity and solidarity were common threads among the churches that engaged apartheid head-on in the later part of 20th century.

It would ultimately be the massacre at Sharpeville, a small township of the Transvaal region that would force the South African Church to react to the growing violence around them. On March 21, 1960 69 black South Africans, mostly women, were shot and killed by police while protesting the discriminatory pass laws, and 180 others were wounded in the process. While there were many conflicting facts on who started the violence, the evidence revealed that most of the victims were shot in the back of the head, pointing to an unmerciful act of violence against class, race, and gender.¹⁰ The response to the Sharpeville massacre set off a wave of reactions, some which stemmed from the Church with an understanding that an anti-apartheid stance needed to be taken. The violence connected to the oppression and subjugation of black South Africans had peaked with violence against the innocent and most marginalized. It seemed as if this act of violence is what, in many dimensions, “broke the camel’s back.” Out of Sharpeville would come the *Cottesloe Consultation*, one of the first official documents offered by the Church taking a stance in opposition to the injustice of apartheid.¹¹

Various denominations that participated in anti-apartheid work contributed much to the work of racial reconciliation. From Quakers to Catholics to differing sub-denominations within the Presbyterian Church, from 1975 to the end of apartheid, numerous Christian denominations made stances on both scripture in relation to apartheid and apartheid itself.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62-63.

¹¹ Ibid., 62-68.

“Apartheid is Heresy!”

It was this phrase, “Apartheid is heresy!” that would define the intentional stance of anti-apartheid South African Christian communities in the mid to late 80s. With the launching of the Kairos Document, a statement that challenged the churches’ lack of engaged response to apartheid and its manifested oppression and violence, the Church in South Africa took a doctrinal stance against a perceived enemy of Christianity which permeated the government and other fragmented aspects of the South African Church. Over 150 anonymously recorded South African theologians signed the document that claimed a united stance against the sin of apartheid and the oppression it had manifested.¹²

In addition, 1986, a year after the South African Kairos Document went public, in an act inspired by the Barman Declaration, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches issued the Belhar Confession in reaction to the issue of apartheid in South Africa. The Belhar Confession was a public stance as an institution to speak out against apartheid claiming that it was in full contradiction to the fundamental beliefs of Christianity.¹³ Furthermore, in the confession apartheid was not just a societal or political issue, but should be understood as direct and blatant sin in addition to ultimately heresy.¹⁴ The DRC soon rejected the Belhar Confession under the stance that it was considered “liberation theology.”¹⁵ With the Kairos Document, Belhar Confession, and similar

¹²South Africa History Online, *Challenge to the Church: Kairos Document*, South Africa History, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/articles-docs.htm>; (accessed 10 October 2009).

¹³ World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Declaration by German churches in 1934 Inspires Reformed Churches Today*, WARC, http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=1899&part_id=0&navi=6; (accessed 8 October 2009).

¹⁴ Reformed Church in America, *The Belhar Confession*, RCA, <http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?&pid=304&srcid=2552>; (accessed 10 October 2009).

¹⁵ Ibid.

prominent stances taken in the 80s, anti-apartheid churches in South Africa launched a confessing movement that claimed racial and ethnic apartheid and its dealings as heresy.

What About Gender?

Despite the engagement in anti-apartheid work by opposing denominations and independent churches, and the cry of “Apartheid as heresy” being launched from various churches throughout South Africa, the issue of women and their treatment in light of apartheid was, for the most part, ignored by the church until the mid 1980s. It is important to note here that while cultural, theological, and denominational factors may have come into play with this issue, there begs the question of why the church-engaged in the fight against national prejudice-would not consider this fight as a multifaceted problem including racism, sexism, and classism and engage in it as such. *Would there come a voice from the South African church or a theological response from her that would engage in this multi-faceted fight?*

As previously mentioned, this voice would not come from Black theology or the Black Consciousness movement. Although both efforts sought to tackle apartheid as racism, the issue of women and liberation was left as a secondary issue until black feminist theology engaged it as an equal effort alongside, but not in cooperation with, the masculine lens of Black theology rooted in South African culture.¹⁶

This voice would not come from the Kairos Document or the Belhar Confession. While both documents claimed to be rooted in scriptural truth and liberation theology, revealing the heart of a God that sides with the poor, marginalized, and the oppressed, no

¹⁶Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana, “Two Voices on Woman’s Oppression and Struggle in South Africa,” in *Feminist Theology: Third World Reader*, 2nd ed, edited by Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 150-170.

specific reference to the treatment of women is offered in either document nor were there proposed action steps in relation to this issue offered by the numerous churches that aligned with or signed these statements.¹⁷

Ultimately this voice would not be noted in many of the first documents offered by anti-apartheid denominations. Despite the efforts of anti-apartheid denominations to set their own doctrinal statements about the sin of apartheid, the words of these documents did not include a stance on the plight of women and in some cases were not gender-inclusive, continuing to perpetuate the male-centeredness of these mid-20th century denominations and their either intentional or unintentional ignorance of the plight of women.¹⁸ The *Cottesloe Constitution*, one of the first major documents of the Church's stance against apartheid written at the end of 1960, notes that all men are worthy of the gifts and life offered by God. While this is empowering for the black South African community, it fails to honor with inclusion the most marginalized in society and the main victims of the massacre that moved the church to write the document in the first place.¹⁹

Furthermore, inclusive language was added in the early 1990s to open the Belhar Confession to interpretation in relation to all the peoples of God, both women and men, a reality that was not transcribed in the penning of the original document.²⁰ While anti-

¹⁷ South African History Online, *Kairos Document*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/official%20docs/kairos-document.htm>.

¹⁸ De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 53-103.

¹⁹ Ibid., 66.

²⁰ Reformed Church in America, *The Belhar Confession*, <http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?&pid=304&srcid=2552>.

apartheid faith communities were standing against apartheid in the form of nationalism and racism, there was no mention on the grander scale of apartheid as sexism, or anti-apartheid efforts focusing energy on women.

Despite the dominant silence of the Church in the fight against apartheid for the cause of women, there were movements and individuals that engaged a feminist theology of liberation in numerous forms in order to speak boldly in the absence of the Church's voice. These responses were key to the empowerment of black South African women, a section of the Church that had not yet been empowered or considered as a valuable voice.

Liberative Feminist Engagement

It would be those who supported the feminist effort as a liberatory venture who would, in the end, advocate on the behalf of marginalized women. In small and large ways, steps were made to bridge the divide in the Church of South Africa for black and white women. These steps were marked with characteristics of a feminist liberative praxis seeking to release all of society by intentionally seeking to liberate and empower the least in society.

Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

The circle was birthed from the collaborative efforts of ten theologically engaged African women throughout the continent. The cause was clear; apartheid was not only dominating in the public spheres of corporation and government, but was influencing the private spheres as well in the form of racism and sexism. While many conversations within the church walls centered around ending the prejudice or racism there was little effort made

on the behalf of women to defeat the monster of sexism in order to engage in a holistic understanding of justice.

By 1987, seven years after the first pan-African women's theological conference offered in Ibadaan, Nigeria arranged by feminist theologian Mercy Oduyoye, ten African Christian women began to meet and dream about an African network that would support and empower African women in theological work and research, seminary enrollment and studies, theological publishing, and church leading. Taking the lead for these efforts were South African feminist theologians that included Elizabeth Amoah, Bettie E. Ekeya, Rosemary Edet, and Teresa Okure.²¹ The vision of these women was to raise a voice that had been long gone unheard in Christian circles and elsewhere. Oduyoye writes about the Circle's power to engage and awaken African women for theological dialogue and conversation:

Our story is one of letting it be known that African women are awake. They have heard Jesus say "Talitha cum" (Mark 5:41). Cultural expectations that kept us 'behind the curtain' are being exposed. Disempowering religious teachings are being challenged. We are awake to our responsibility as creative beings made in the image of God. The Circle has motivated African theologians to pay more attention to what culture and religion do in women's lives.²²

From Oduyoye's position, the Circle has challenged theologians from dominant culture to listen and engage with black African women. When men are challenged to read the writings put forth by these women, or listen to them lecture on the unity found in Christ, or meet them at the altar for the common cup and loaf, these men face the reality of their

²¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Story of a Circle: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *The Ecumenical Review*, January 2001, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

own prejudices of sexism, racism, and classism. It is the hope that in facing these realities those of dominant culture will also find their liberation.

Despite heightened violence rising out of the apartheid struggle, between 1991 and 2001 four South African chapters of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians were birthed: Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and Pretoria. From its inception the Cape Town chapter was led by feminist theologians Denise Ackermann and Nokuzola Mndende, who were encouraging local South African women theologians to write papers on the topics of apartheid violence and HIV/AIDS, and to conduct research projects involving women.²³

The Durban chapter focused its efforts on diversifying membership to involve those desiring to be active laity, from the theologically trained to the generally concerned woman who sought to be a part of the group. Other efforts on behalf of the Durban chapter included encouraging those who could to write and publish their stories through the *Journal of Contextual Theology*, encouraging those at the 1996 meeting to write papers for possible publishing, fundraising for scholarships for women, and lobbying to include the study of women, religion and culture at the university.²⁴

The Pietermaritzburg chapter, which was established much later, was comprised of female staff and students from the local seminary working on writing a book together and having dialogue around HIV/AIDS and the social awareness of the church.²⁵ Unlike the other groups, the Pretoria chapter was comprised of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews

²³ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Library archive: *Annual Report 2001*, http://www.thecirclecawt.org/annual_reportaf17.html?mode=content&id=17391&ref=2638; (accessed 14 October 2009).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

working together to collect and publish sermons written by women, some sermons that never had the chance to be preached because of their authorship. Today the South African chapters of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians are still active and alive.

South African Council of Churches and the Power for Change Movement

While many roads were being paved discreetly for women in select denominations, women were gathering in the SACC to offer a thought-provoking change to the way women were understood and treated in the Church. This proposal was as radical as the SACC itself. Formed out of ecumenical cooperation in the earlier years of the 20th century in South Africa, the SACC had become a united front against racism, prejudice and discrimination. The SACC had been created to become a living witness of the Gospel in South Africa and a prophetic voice to the churches that remained in its bondage. Throughout the later part of the 20th century in South Africa, the SACC became known as the confessing arm of the Church in South Africa. In the pages retelling the history of the SACC from its birth in 1968, Rev. Bernard Spong writes,

It is in many ways a dramatic story filled with deep emotions, much pain, lots of celebration, and very human beings. At the same time, there is an inexorable pattern of movement throughout, a natural progression of words and actions as this co-operative of Churches seeks to be faithful to the gospel in a time of trial and tribulation in the land.²⁶

The SACC was a symbol of hope for many in South Africa, championing love and peace for all of God's created beings regardless of race or ethnicity. In the mid 1980s, sections of the SACC began to bring to light issues that surrounded women in

²⁶ South African Council of Churches, *Chapter 1: Come Celebrate SACC* by Rev. Bernard Spong, available from <http://www.sacc.org.za/about/celebrate0.html>; Internet, accessed October 16, 2009.

South Africa, both inside and outside the church. In a historic first for the SACC, in June of 1985 the SACC held its 17th annual national conference in which conference workshops and lectures were offered that lifted up the issue of women and liberative feminist theological work centering around the theme *Women: A Power for Change*.

The conference emphasis was a monumental step for the Church towards confronting the oppressive system of apartheid as a multifaceted issue that challenged both race and gender. Numerous topics were raised that challenged the conference to consider the theological implications of an egalitarian liberative female/male God and how this might manifest itself in the Church and the fight against apartheid. Those who presented on “A Power for Change” challenged the Church to consider the feminist theological understanding of tension between Christian vision and Christian praxis, challenging the Church to engage in both holistically to fight against both racism and sexism as biblical justice issues.²⁷

Outcomes of the three-day conference on the behalf of women were historic. For the first time at a SACC conference women, many black South African women were offered the opportunity to tell the greater council of their oppressive experiences based on their sex and/or ethnicity. In one section, *Let Me Speak*, women offered first-hand accounts on issues that drastically effected South African women-unemployment, mistreatment in the townships, domestic work, taxation, reproductive issues from contraceptives to maternity to child care, sexual harassment and assault, war, and working in male-dominated industry.²⁸

²⁷Nash, *Women -A Power for Change*, 14-16.

²⁸ Ibid., 27-34.

Workshops were offered to educate men and empower women on the reality of the *woman's experience*. These workshops included dialogue around feminist liberation theology, the historical perspective of South African women; feminist perspectives on theological education and major theological topics; difference in power structures; covering fundamental feminism to reformist feminism; justice peace, and dialogue around re-arranging church structures in order to create space for the equal role of women. Each workshop offered recommendations to the council that challenged the SACC to advocate for women in the church and in the greater society, especially black South African women.²⁹

Finally the plenary speaker, Sheena Duncan, the national president of Black Sash at the time, offered a challenging reflection on the state of the Church in South Africa in relation to the issue of women. She asked the council to consider its treatment, empowerment, and lack of empowerment of women and act upon the reality of this second apartheid. In her words,

I think the problem lies mainly with the concept of power. The church reflects too closely the structures of society and the struggle of power in society, which is what political conflict is all about.... One of the tragedies of our present situation is the way in which the church is often a block to the empowering of the powerless to change their own situations.... It is the women who are the most oppressed in this way.³⁰

After the three days of dialogue over the plight of women in the church and society in apartheid-era South Africa, great steps were made that not only sought to raise awareness for the plight of women to the church representatives gathered, but to encourage the church not only to reflect, but to act-pushing for feminist liberative actions.

²⁹ Ibid., 45-50.

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

At the end of the three-day conference numerous radical recommendations were made to the council; the following are only a representative of these requests:

-The local church should develop conversation and space around women's status and role, giving them the opportunity to become aware of their gifts, talents, and "taking a fuller part in church life through repeal of whatever laws and regulations stifle and exclude them."³¹

-The local church should encourage recruitment of woman candidates for ordained ministry and women should be elected to positions at the local parish level despite their participation in women's groups that have limited influence on church structure. This will allow women to gain access to the higher courts of the church.³²

-Theological seminaries need to incorporate feminist theology into their syllabi and reflect it in sermon content, engaging both women and men in these studies. Youth and Church leaders need to encourage women to study theology. Sexist liturgical and biblical language needs to be changed to include women and the church needs to encourage men to get involved in Sunday school teaching.³³

These recommendations are only a section of what was offered out of the *Women:*

A Power for Change conference, a part of the 17th annual SACC meeting. While some of this work and recommendations are still in the process of coming to fruition, key recommendations offered by those advocating for women were voted upon as resolutions. In June of 1985 the SACC voted on three resolutions that championed the movement to end the apartheid of sexism.

These three resolutions, encouraging all regional offices to co-operate in the re-structure, were referred to the state president and the national executive board of the SACC: to lift the ban on Winnie Mandela and return her to her home in Soweto, to

³¹ Ibid., 37.

³² Ibid., 45-46.

³³ Ibid.,

change the constitution of the SACC to allow for the compulsory and adequate representation of woman and youth at all levels of the SACC, and to create a Woman's Desk. The Woman's Desk offered support, advice, referrals for service, empowerment, education, and advocacy for women in need, separate from the Division of Home and Family Life with the Department of Development and Service.³⁴ Out of the resolutions made that week, these were vital for the future of women and women's promotion in the church. These resolutions were marks of solidarity and marks of the liberative process of praxis.

The Boldest Meal: Eucharist as Liberation

Finally it is important to note the power of a common practice of the Church that has been in existence since history's engagement with the use of the common meal. While women and men fought hard to advocate for the role and liberation of women during apartheid-era South Africa, the ritual of the Eucharist was offering a liberative space in Churches throughout the country. Despite selected parish's structure of offering communion to black South Africans after white South Africans had already received the wine and host, all were still offered communion in many parishes.³⁵ It is through this act and engagement of humanity gathering around the common sacred meal that humanity finds its liberation. Next to the acts of advocacy and empowerment on the behalf of the oppressed in society, including the most marginalized black South African women, the greatest engagement of liberative praxis the Church can offer is the sacrament of communion. In this act of coming to the common table, one engages in an act of

³⁴ Ibid., 82, 84, 87.

³⁵ De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle*, 15-30.

liberation that reflects a feminist theology of liberation.

Is partaking in the communion meal enough to find liberation? Are the oppressions of the world and their systemic impact truly held at bay while we eat and drink in the remembrance of the Christ? Can this one act truly change anything? I believe that feminist liberation theologian Denise Ackermann would say “yes.” For Ackermann, it is in the participation of the Eucharist, the common meal of the Lord, which brings full healing and liberation.³⁶ This meal offers to all the carpenter’s cup, the cup that has gathered generations of tears poured out from oppression.³⁷ It is only through this shared means of bread and wine that unity is found throughout all of humanity, transcending the oppressed, the oppressor, and the witnesses gathered to partake.

In this sacred meal release is found for the black African woman who for generations has been victim to genocide, rape, and subjugation. She, her mothers gone before her and her children to come, are liberated from the oppression imposed on her because of her color, ethnicity, class, tribal relation, and gender. Free from the chains of racism and sexism, the entirety of society is liberated along with her. The black African male finds freedom from ingrained sexism and paternal hierarchy and the subjugation he projects onto his sisters, daughters, and wives. The white woman is liberated from the sexism imposed by her brothers and husbands and from her own ignorance, failing to

³⁶ Melissa Marley, “The Boldest Meal: A Reflection on the Eucharist Theology of Denise Ackermann” in *Rag Bag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann, Feminist Theologian of Praxis*, eds. Sarojini Nadar, M. Pillay, and Clint Le Bruyns (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University and University of the Western Cape, 2009).

³⁷ Denise M Ackermann, “ ‘A Voice Was Heard In Ramah’: A Feminist Theology of Praxis and Healing in South Africa,” in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, edited by Reit Bons-Storm and Denise Ackermann, (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 75-102.

realize the power of her privileged status based on the color of her skin. Finally the white male is freed from his ignorant, sexist, classist, and racist indoctrination that have led him either to unjust action or to unjust apathy.

All those who are victims of their environment and socialization are called to the bread and the wine for recognition, liberation, healing, and grace. Both the weak and needy, powerful and strong find their commonality in the shared cup of tears and blood-void of disparity and hierarchy. Those who have suffered are called to the remembrance act of the suffering God. Within this act of solidarity unity and understanding can be found. In this unifying moment humanity is no longer bound within the broken systems of systemic oppression, but are liberated to oneness and wholeness in the sacred remembrance. Humanity is reminded of its relationship and interconnectedness to each other regardless of differences or governing laws of race and gender apartheid, reconciling all to each other and God. In this moment there is liberation, unity, understanding, mutuality, and seeds of redemption birthing reconciliation. No longer do oppressed and oppressor stand alone in the shadows of unequal power structures, but at the common meal all stand in mutuality and equal stance as the community acknowledges shared power and sacrifice. In the darkest corners of oppressive contexts, and in the darkest corners of our hearts, this ritual of gathering to partake in the Lord's meal releases humanity's chains of oppression and isolation in order that we might ask and receive forgiveness from others. Humanity finds that it is no longer the victim or the assailant, but the joined community that has both inflicted violence and carried its wounds.³⁸

³⁸ Marley, "The Boldest Meal."

In this work of healing found within the shared cup, Ackermann calls us to an imaginative praxis that engages lament and ritual. It is only through a private and public outcry of shared experience and story of oppression, victim or assailant, that healing can begin with lament. It is the interconnectedness of ritual and relationship that create space for lament to give birth to healing. For Ackermann the act of communal lament finds its cementation in the act of the shared cup in order to affirm this process of healing.³⁹ These cries of lament for healing, forgiveness, and hope are poured out like tears into the shared cup of the common meal fused with the suffering of God, the crucified Christ, the memory of resurrection, and the transforming power of God's love.⁴⁰ This, of all, is the boldest of meals, a reality Ackermann welcomes as a source of hope, healing, and redemption despite the chaos and devastation inflicted by apartheid.⁴¹ While the church in South Africa struggled to find its voice in the fight against race and gender apartheid, it was offering ultimate liberation, offered to all and setting all free, daily.

Critical, Committed, Constructive, Collaborative, and Accountable

These three examples of engagement on behalf of South African women and the Church are marked with liberative feminist markings. In relation to both those who began the *Concerned Circles* and those who stood up for the plight of women within the SACC, these movements were not just random acts by kind-hearted people, but intentional actions in light or reflection on the *woman's experience*. These actions are committed engagements with justice in light of their critical reflection on the experience of those

³⁹ Ackermann, "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah," 99-100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 101-102.

⁴¹ Marley, "The Boldest Meal."

seeking representation and equal voice in the day-to-day reality of the church and theological arena as those suffering from the triple-oppression of being women caught in two wars of apartheid.

In relation to constructive collaboration, this is most reflected in the efforts of the pan-African women to promote theological writing and study among black African women coming from varying backgrounds, places in life, countries, and bringing with them varying stories and experiences. This multi-national engagement that brought together hundreds of women was an example of the solidarity found amongst women in the plight for voice and recognition in addition to an intentional constructive collaboration to the empowerment of the under-represented theological voice in the church and within the conversations of academia. This constructive collaboration continues today across six countries, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon, varying in ethnicity, class, religion, and experience.

Finally, the most accountable example of feminist liberation theology within the church lies within the liberative act of partaking in the Eucharist meal; the boldest meal. In this liberative act that frees all by offering an equal space for all who gather regardless of class, gender, or race, the Triune God is held accountable as the one offering liberation. In the act of communion the oppressed awaits the freedom only found in the liberating God while simultaneously the liberating God proves God's self to be all that God has promised to be—ultimate love, sacrifice, joy, and freedom. In this one act the oppressed are set free from their status as they are enveloped in the unity and sanctity of God, challenging God to be this God of love, impartiality, and justice bearer. In the end it will be God who is held accountable for the freedom and liberation offered in this

moment, accountable to the freedom found within God's self and within communing with the perfect God of love.

**Chapter 6: Markers of Liberative Praxis in Feminist liberation Theology:
*The Woman's Commission, CALS Document, and Lament***

Where do they come from, tell me, tell me,
Tales so brave, so strong, tell me, where do they come from,
Some are so funny, so crazy, so unbelievable,
The come from the bones of memory.
Watch my eyes, hear my voice, I tell you true.
These tales are from the bones of memory,
Of memory, of memory, of memory, from the bones of memory
From the bones of memory.

-Gcina Mhlophe, HRVC Women's Hearings, 28 July 1997¹

It was only after apartheid had breathed its last breath that the true horror stories of the apartheid era emerged. From the ashes of years of violence, racism, classism, and oppression came voices of survivors and mourners. While these voices and stories had been previously shared behind closed doors and in the township shadows late at night, in 1995 they were called forward to the center stage for all to hear. This was the vision behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) called into existence in July of 1995. Born through negotiations between the African National Congress and the National Party, the TRC had a mandate to create as complete and concise a picture of all possible causes and the extent of the gross human rights violations committed between March 1960 and May 1994 in apartheid-era South Africa.² Many hearings for the TRC were publicized allowing all of South Africa to enter together into this communal remembrance of South Africa's previous 35 years marked by the dark cloud of apartheid.

¹ Analisa Oboe, "The TRC Women's Hearings as Performance and Protest in the New South Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 3, (Fall 2007): 1, paraphrase.

² Ibid., 72.

It was suggested that this work of offering a public space for victims might birth additional opportunities of healing and reparation for past wrongs.³ Years after the dismissal of the commission there has been debate about the overall success of the TRC and how it affected those who participated. This question is important as it relates to the women's experience in South Africa during and after the apartheid era and the support they received from the commission. The woman's experience of the TRC offered both liberation and oppression, empowerment and discouragement. In this final chapter I will consider the unassuming position of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis within the greater framework of the TRC.

Lament as Liberative Praxis of Feminist Liberation Theology

For the victims of apartheid, especially for women, lament became the outlet for voicing the suffering inflicted by the oppression of apartheid. Lament, as a theology of action and accountability, is the cry for understanding from individuals and communities claiming a new world and a new society liberated from pain, death, hate, fear, sexism, racism, and bigotry. When a community offers lament, it becomes the collaborative effort to share in the painful experience of each other. In this collaboration, God and others are invited into the reflection of suffering in hopes for action that will move humanity closer towards a liberated, fair, and just society.⁴

In her writings on lament, Denise Ackermann notes that lament is both communal and individual, both public and private, and is the language of both the oppressed as

³ Ibid.

⁴ Denise Ackermann, "The Language of Lament," *The Other Side: Strength for the Journey* 39, no. 4, (July-Aug 2003), 1-5.

suffering victims as well as the oppressors in seeking forgiveness for the suffering they have caused.⁵ Lament is not only limited to women, although in many respects the TRC offered this as a gift to the women of South Africa, but covers all of society, starting with those in the most pain and echoing the cries of the rest-white black, male, and female-all calling out for justice.

South Africans experienced lament in numerous ways throughout the end of the apartheid era. In many instances this act of lament was a private instance, experienced and offered within the home and family and even in the most private and secluded forms locked within the hearts and souls of those in suffering. The church provided a private and public space for lament to be experienced. In the Eucharist and in the participation of the sacrament, those suffering joined their brothers and sisters as well as their God at the table to express mourning, concern, and despair. Finally, the TRC became a place where, for the first time, black South African women would have the opportunity and space to voice their lament in the public arena, televised and thus experienced by thousands. Lament as experienced by women participating in the TRC bore the markers of liberative praxis of a feminist liberation theology: critical reflection on the women's experience, committed action, constructive collaboration, and accountable to others and its cause.

With the creation of the TRC, lament became a critical reflection on the women's suffering experience with intent for committed action related to the reality of the black women's historic, societal, and apartheid experience. Lament became a public and shared experience of reflection upon the black South African woman's suffering experience and was a critical reflection that invited the public into the suffering of the black women's

⁵ Ackermann, "The Language of Lament," 26.

experience in order that a critical self-awareness, awareness of being both the oppressed and the oppressor, and a self-critical consciousness could occur.⁶

Publicized lament offered an opportunity and shared space for others to realize their own place within the apartheid experience of suffering or solidarity in lament. The publicized lament of black South African women launched the issues of gender and African society, the marginalized women's experience of oppression, and the black African experience onto the main stage for consideration, the public presence of these issues demanding reflected critical and committed action. It was with the promise of internal liberation and the emancipatory transformation of society, the goal of critical and committed reflection and action integral to feminist liberation theology, offered by the TRC through the sharing of their stories, that allowed women to step forward and out of the shadows to retell the oppression and atrocities publicly for all to hear.

From the diverse corners of South Africa women came to tell their stories in hopes of liberation, lament, and committed action. This constructive collaboration of female voices reflected the myriad oppressive experiences that measured the horror of apartheid and spoke of the marginalization of women, especially black African women, in South African society.⁷ These women came from diverse backgrounds, religious expressions, and social locations carrying a diversity of stories in order to participate in

⁶ Denise Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94, (March 1996): 43.

⁷ Beth Goldblatt and Shiela Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Johannesburg, TRC (May 1996).

the sharing of their history as individuals and as a community of women who survived apartheid.⁸ These women and their stories created a shared lament, diverse yet universal.

Finally, within lament there is a demand for accountability, the final marker of feminist liberation theology, and with public lament a demand for both public and private accountability. In her writings on lament, Ackermann notes that lament is a call for justice and a refusal to settle for the way things are. Those who are reflecting and acting in response to their suffering are pushing the boundaries of their relationship with one another and with God, reminding God that things are not as they should be and that as our partner in the relational covenant, God must act.⁹ Those who lament are calling God to accountability. With each cry of lament publicly or privately, there is an assumption of call and response, “If God hears, God will act.” Furthermore, by offering lament within the process and framework of the TRC, there is an assumption on behalf of the victimized communities not only that God will hear and respond with action because of the lamented outcry, but also that society will hear and then act accordingly. It is this assumption that locates lament as a call for accountability from the suffering and the oppressed of both God and society.¹⁰

As liberative praxis, lament gave those oppressed the opportunity to find healing and liberation while inviting others into their experience for self-realization and action. In many ways the women who stepped forward to testify before the TRC and specifically to participate in the Women’s Commissions had this opportunity to share their story and

⁸ Lyn Graybill, “The Contribution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Toward the Promotion of Women’s Rights in South Africa,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24, no.1 (2001).

⁹ Ackermann, “Language of Lament,” 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

participate in public collaborative lament that was shared with thousands of people, both men and women, holding many accountable for their actions of injustice and calling forth a new world and society that reflects liberation of the most oppressed and with that all of society.

Additionally, this private-public experience of lament with the Woman's Commissions offered an opportunity for empowerment. In reflecting on the transcripts from the Woman's Commissions as literary pieces of protest and performance, Italian Literature Professor Analisa Oboe notes the disempowerment reflected in the stories told, yet also points to the re-negotiation of power enacted as the women, through their testimonies and performance, denounce the denial of the relationship between the apartheid state and the denigration of women and seek to reclaim women's rights as once silenced voices now go voiced and public. For these reasons, the TRC's general offering of a space for public lament for the most oppressed can be understood as an outlet for feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis.¹¹

It is important to note, however, that the experience of private and public liberation and liberative action in response to the outcry of public lament should have been the shared experience of all those who participated in the commission hearings. In the end, however, this was not the experience of the women who participated in the TRC, specifically in the first years of the commission, as the process reflected more of the hierarchy, paternalism, racism, sexism, classism, and ingrained bias of gender and marginalization the ending of apartheid sought to dismantle.

¹¹ Oboe, "The TRC Women's Hearings as Performance and Protest," 62-64.

A History of Horror Unveiled at the TRC and the Creation of the Woman's Commission

The horror stories that had once only been considered rumors and often-invalidated testimonies found their voice in the TRC. Many stories immediately emerged of the common apartheid experiences of men. Throughout the first weeks of the Commission the stories of the men's suffering experience was retold over and over again. The immediate issue in 1995, the year the TRC began, was obvious-there was a growing realization that women's testimony and voices were being unevenly represented and the nation was getting a skewed look at the nature of the human-rights violations that had been committed.¹² While it was important to voice the male experience of torture and violence, the woman's experience brought a new light to the reality of apartheid and the atrocities it created and perpetuated.¹³

In light of the uneven representation of women in the early years of the Commission, in March of 1996 a workshop was held at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa on "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission." The workshop was sponsored by the University's advocacy chapter, the Center for Applied Legal Studies (CALS), in hopes to further develop a process of thought about the gender issues facing the commission.¹⁴ The workshop brought together a diverse group of collaborative voices from the legal arena, NGOs, governmental officials, and members of

¹² Dina Al-Kassim, "Archiving Resistance: Woman's Testimony at the Threshold of the State," *Cultural Dynamics* 20, no. 167 (2008): 175.

¹³ Lyn, Graybill. "The Contribution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Toward the Promotion of Women's Rights in South Africa," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, 1 (2001): 1.

¹⁴ Goldblatt and Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 1. From what I can tell from my research, CALS was and remains a very progressive humanitarian research and action oriented legal center connected to the University in Johannesburg. In one article it was noted as having influence as a feminist critique to the TRC (see Dina Al Kassim).

the greater commission, and set out about the task to research women's experience in South Africa during the apartheid era.¹⁵ What they found was horrifying and shocking.

From testimonies of apartheid victims, mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, and resisters, stories were collected that told of gender apartheid, genderized political violence, sexual assault, battery, and torture all used as gender-specific violations of the human rights of women.¹⁶ It was out of these horrific discoveries that a research document was formulated and submitted by CALS and the workshop team to the TRC with proposals for drastic ideological and physical changes to the TRC model that would include and support the lament of black African women. One proposition was to create a separate forum, the Women's Commission, that would support the female victims in their lament and suffering as they re-told their story of oppression, holding perpetrators and the society that allowed such oppression to happen accountable. It was this act of genderized advocacy, research, dialogue, and committed work on the behalf of black South African women within the greater framework of the TRC that reflected the process of liberative praxis of feminist liberation theology.

In order to understand fully the impact of the "Gender and TRC" submission and the creation of the Woman's Commission as acts of liberative praxis, there must be a revelation of the reality of the woman's experience of genderized violence and why the general forum of the TRC was not effective in reflecting an accurate understanding of the woman's experience of oppression during apartheid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1-33.

Genderized political violence

While 60% of the 204 witnesses involved in the hearings during the first five weeks of the TRC were women, 75% of the testimonies from these women were about abuses or oppression done to the men in their lives—dads, sons, husbands, and brothers. Only 17% of women's testimonies and 5% of men's testimonies discussed abuses and oppression inflicted on women, referencing mostly daughters or mothers. Additionally there were no recorded testimonies of men speaking about their wives or sisters experiencing abuse or oppression.¹⁷ It was clear that within the first few weeks of the TRC women were not speaking out for themselves. Goldblatt and Meintjes suggest two reasons for this. First, the black South African woman's location in society.

Because of the hierarchical reality of a paternal society, black African women were affected the most by political, social, and economic oppression. Opportunities for work and education, especially in rural areas, limited the opportunities afforded women. In essence, black African women were seen only as mothers and wives and relegated to that aspect of society. These roles would offer these women status and, without these connections to defining male figures, a woman would be seen as an outcast and incredibly vulnerable, a prime target for oppression.¹⁸ Up through the 20th century, black African women in many respects were seen as inferior and complementarian figures, caught up in both the label and the belief that their lives were secondary to that of the men they were connected to. In their research on gender as political violence Goldblatt

¹⁷ Graybill, "The Contribution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 5. See also writings of Ross noted in this work.

¹⁸ Jordaan, Roxanne and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Woman's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa," in *Feminist Theology: Third World Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Ursula King (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 150-170.

and Meintjes discuss the reality of the black South African woman's experience of oppression connected to gender identity during apartheid:

Women's identities, whether as mothers, as wives, as sexual partners, or as independent beings were systematically abused. Women were abused by laws that blocked mobility, or prevented their acquiring land or houses in their own right, or were treated as minors. Women were abused by societal norms which treated them as sexual objects, empowering men to treat them without respect and to degrade their sexual integrity.¹⁹

From much of what has been revealed through women's testimonies this aspect of "the place of a black African woman" was not only used as a tactic of psychological torture and manipulation by both white and black men, but as an opportunity for the already oppressed black South African men to take out their trapped feelings of oppression. This understanding is seen within the example of the South African Rapist Association (SARA), a group of black African men who, after internalizing their oppression and feeling limited in their outlet to resist and fight back, sought to oppress women through sexual violence. One perpetrator from the Sebokeng township in South Africa reveals,

"I felt that we [men in the resistance movement] have been used by these senior comrades because I do not understand why they dumped us like this.... That is why we formed S.A.R.A. We rape women who need to be disciplined, (those women who behave like snobs), they just do not want to talk to most people they think they know better than most of us when we struggle, they simply do not want join us [in our struggle]."²⁰

Goldblatt and Meintjes suggest that because of the continued emphasis of South African society that casts black South African women as inferior beings relegated to a secondary oppressive place in society, this role of inferior status that was internalized kept women back from testifying or bearing witness of their own story of oppression and

¹⁹ Goldblatt, and Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 11.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

suffering during apartheid. Furthermore, possible personal attacks and status change were common consequences for sharing the reality of sexual abuse. This is interwoven with the way women are seen in African society. If a woman were to reveal that she was raped or sexually assaulted the implications would range from being seen as weak and possibly become a target as a victim again, to being seen as one who sold out to the system in one way or another, to loss of status, to being understood as “a woman who asked for it anyway.”²¹

While many women testified in the first year of the TRC, many testified on the behalf of men in their lives-their connection to worth and status. Because of the fear and shame secondary status injects into the lives of those limited psychologically, socially, and politically as secondary citizens, these women dared not reveal their stories. This connection between gender and social status was integral to the reason many women did not come forward to testify openly *en masse* during the first, and subsequent years of the TRC.

The second reason women did not come forward, Goldblatt and Meintjes claim, is because of the harsh genderized nature of their experience as victims of apartheid. From sexual assault, rape, and battery to forced miscarriages, murdered spouses, and physiological torture, women experienced oppression in many differing and additional ways then men.²² The political violence experienced by the women’s suffering experience under apartheid was genderized, pushing women, at times, in places and with means that most men could not fathom or physically experience.²³ This harsh reality and

²¹ Ibid., 41.

²² Ibid.

the connection to these intimate and intensely gendered violations, and thus deeply vulnerable areas, within the framework of an already sexist patriarchal society that pits women as second-class citizens, exacerbated the fear of coming forward for many women.

Goldblatt and Meintjes note in their research the numerous areas of human-rights violations perpetrated upon South African women. Women were both direct and indirect victims of apartheid, experiencing economic loss, cultural loss, dealing with children and family life while experiencing oppression. Women were tortured in numerous ways that included physical assault, rape and the threat of rape, withholding medical care, targeting women's identity, and treating women as sexual objects.²⁴ Black women were not only oppressed by the white men controlling apartheid, but by the black men who were resisting their own oppression. Women were sexually exploited and assaulted by men of their own race, own resistance, religion, background, and social setting, being subjected to societal norms by husbands, lovers, brothers, and sons that treated them as sexual objects.²⁵ The triple oppression of women -sexism, classism, racism-found its full manifestation in the most marginalized through apartheid.²⁶

The reality of these atrocities and the fear of speaking them before the TRC commission, an experience that was male dominated, televised for all to see, with hundreds in the room ranging from spectators to the oppressors and perpetrators to the

²³ It is important to note that men experienced genderized violence under the oppression of apartheid, in addition to women. With each gender, however, this type of violence has systemic consequences that vary between the sexes in areas of psychology, biology, reproduction, status, role, and self-esteem.

²⁴ Goldblatt and Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 20-31.

²⁵ Graybill, "The Contribution the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 3.

²⁶ Goldblatt and Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 35.

media who offered biased gendered opinions to the public referring to the TRC as the “Kleenex Commission,” was a paralyzing and disempowering opportunity, not a welcoming experience for lament and liberation.²⁷ This experience, Goldblatt and Meintjes contended, was one that led to isolation, depression, oppression, and imprisonment when it had the potential to be used for freedom, healing, and communal lament.²⁸

CALS, Goldblatt, Meintjes, and the Women’s Commission as Liberative Praxis

The vision of the “Gender and TRC” workshop and the collaborative, engaged, intentional work of the Center for Applied Legal Studies was historic. Out of these collaborative measures came a proposal for action that reflected markers of a feminist liberation theology with the goal of liberative praxis in order to bring about a new equitable society and world.²⁹

The research gathered by Goldblatt and Meintjes and submitted to the TRC as a proposal was not only priceless in recording and verifying the varying atrocities enacted upon women as gendered victims of apartheid, but was compiled into one of the most important substantial and collaborative post-apartheid documents birthed out of the process of the TRC. It was through the efforts of CAL, the workshop, and Goldblatt and Meintjes’ work that the TRC created the Women’s Commission, a space for women to come, share their story in relative safety, and lament openly.

²⁷ Oboe, “The TRC Women’s Hearings as Performance and Protest,” 73.

²⁸ Goldblatt and Meintjes, “Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” 1-5.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

Liberative praxis

As a diverse group of women and men, coming from varying locations in status, backgrounds, power structures, vocations, genders, and races, the CALS workshop reflected an intentional work of collaboration that would seek to reveal the reality of the woman's experience as a gendered victim of apartheid. The Gender and TRC document recounts over and over the reality of the exploited and oppressed experience of the gendered woman's experience, not only recording the reality to be stored away in history, but became a public lament to be shared with all who read it, inviting the reader to experience the oppression of the women's experience, and thus the readers self-awareness of their identity as the oppressed or the oppressor, through critical reflection for themselves.³⁰

For the researchers and writers of the document, action in light of reflection upon the woman's suffering experience was critical. As was presented in the Gender and TRC document, it is in stepping into the experience of the most marginalized and locating one's self in this greater story that motivated liberative praxis and action rises to the surface. Through presenting months of research from diverse and credible sources, the document requested and proposed numerous accommodations to the TRC process that in the end came to fruition. These propositions included a more intentional and engaged consideration of human-rights violations in relation to gendered violence and reparations for women. This work of reflection was not only for reflection in itself, but to motivate

³⁰ Ibid.

within the process of praxis, action leading toward liberation and equality, and the beginning movements toward a new society.³¹

The work of the workshop, CALS, and the final collaborative work of the document boldly advocated for the most marginalized in society and sought to hold not only their oppressors and perpetrators accountable, but also the TRC. The TRC had been found guilty by the workshop of holding a gender-neutral stance to the hearing and disregarding the reality and difference in oppression and violence experienced by women compared to that of men. The document suggested that if the Commission were to continue down this path, the TRC would not only reveal homogenous experiences of apartheid and ignore horrific human rights violations that do not affect men, it would continue to perpetuate an understanding that society should be hierarchical, sexist, classist, racist, and unequal, keeping women as the most marginalized in society and thus holding South Africa back from welcoming in a new order or new society of peace and equality. By calling for both physical changes in the TRC process and a more gender-inclusive understanding of society and its effects on political violence and experience of oppression, the *Gender and TRC* document called for an accountability on behalf of the marginalized female victims, silent and speaking.

Finally, the work on behalf of CALS and the workshop reflected a longing for a new order and society where all were liberated from oppression. For Goldblatt and Meintjes, this reality starts with the most oppressed, black African women, and carries through all of society to liberate all. This work, they suggest, is movement towards a new society and a new world beyond that of enslaved South Africa. The writers suggest,

³¹ Ibid., 40.

In South Africa race, class, and gender have together, but in different ways, structured social relationships. In this conceptualization, women's experience cannot be understood in isolation from men's, but as a consequence of the interrelationship of women and men's roles and statuses in society generally. In the past and the present women have been and are subordinated to men. This constrains the full development of men as well as women. To transform this imbalance will require measures directed at restructuring all social relationship in all spheres of society. It is with this understanding that we may better able to construct a new society based on a human-rights culture that allows people, women, and men, to contribute fully to society and develop to their full human potential.³²

The committed action of the workshop was not ideally to lift the woman's experience of oppression above that of man's experience; on the contrary, the document addresses the reality of women as perpetrators and seeks accountability for these oppressors. The action of the workshop was to inform, educate, advocate, and propose a new order of things that would have liberative and equitable implications for all of South Africa -women and men alike. This, however, must start with consideration of the woman's experience in order to gain a full and complete picture of what South Africa endured socially, physiologically, and physically during the apartheid era, and where they desire to be in the post-apartheid future.

Lament and the Gender and TRC Document

The intention of the TRC was both to gain knowledge of the horrors of apartheid and to create a space where everyone could be heard and their stories experienced and validated. The intentions of the Commission were valid and honoring and in many instances, throughout both the TRC and the Woman's Commission, these experiences took place.³³ True works of liberation, however, did not come to fruition through a state-sanctioned act

³² Ibid., 1.

³³ Oboe, "The TRC Women's Hearings as Performance and Protest," 68-72.

of forced public disclosure, but from private lament that was shared publicly and through advocacy and accountability that sought to empower women in the struggle for healing and freedom.

The TRC was an example of a process that was created in hopes to offer freedom in some unique way but to many women, asked to testify and reveal their most intimate and private violations to men and the public, this was terrifying, belittling, and demeaning. For those who gathered on March 19th 1996 to recount the stories of the suffering women of South Africa, honoring the pain within these stories, researching, compiling, and moving towards action as accountability, was the way in which they hoped to offer freedom to the oppressed women of South Africa. For this group this experience was private lament opened for public engagement and involvement. In the promotion of this liberative work and this cry to God and society over injustice in hopes for a new society, freedom and liberation was perhaps brought closer to these women than was experienced in the Women's Commission.

Those who gathered at CALS in 1996 believed that a new world was possible, one in which all stories and laments were heard by both God and humanity, ushering in a newly reconciled, healed, and transformed society to rid the world of racism, sexism, and classism. They conclude the *Gender and TRC* document in this way:

This world is not ours
We will build a new one
Where we wake in comfort and ease
And strive to create a world of love and peace³⁴

³⁴Goldblatt and Meintjes, "Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," 41. This untitled poem is by Dorothy Mfaco sent to Jenny Schreiner while in prison being detained for resistance work.

In offering advocacy, calling for accountability, and joining in the lament of those suffering in society this work moved their community one step closer to this world of love and peace.

Does truth have a gender?

-Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*¹

Conclusion

Denise Ackermann was born into a context of violence and oppression and was transformed by what she experienced. When her community, peers, family, and friends encouraged her to leave her revolutionary work as a fighter of equal rights for women and black Africans, she refused.² Throughout the years she stood against apartheid and the secondary class of women while developing a heart for feminist and practical theology.

Later, as a feminist liberation theologian, Ackermann offered a theology that stated full liberation of an oppressed society was possible when the most marginalized were liberated. For Ackerman this liberation was possible through theology that engaged liberative praxis affecting the most marginalized in society: for her, black African women. Through liberative praxis, the woman's suffering experience was revealed, reflected upon, and out of this reflection intentional action and dialogue emerged. For Ackermann, this process becomes the intentional steps to mending and healing Creation. It was because of this understanding of theology, and this process of liberation and restoration, that I chose Denise Ackermann and her theology as the appropriate lens to consider feminist liberation theology and its participation in the work of liberating women during apartheid.

¹ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).

² Denise Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 4-17.

Despite the fact that throughout apartheid's reign there were numerous anti-apartheid movements that engaged liberative practices, there were very few that sought to empower the most marginalized through committed, critical, collaborative, constructive, and accountable liberative praxis. Three examples of liberative praxis leading towards the liberation of women from this small group have been discussed in this work and are examples of a theology that acts, liberates, seeks healing, and remains biased in favor of the marginalized and most oppressed in society.

Through these historic liberative actions, creation is being mended. With each engagement of liberative praxis, humanity lives out its lament and births liberative action through the process. Humanity calls forth God and others to be held accountable for their actions while enveloping them into the liberative praxis of reflection, action, dialogue, and healing. God, through the Eucharist ritual, is calling humanity to find its healing and mending in the liberating act of the open table, common cup, and common loaf. All are involved in the liberative process affecting both the oppressed and oppressor alike, healing both their wounds and their woundedness.

In South Africa today, the work continues. Numerous groups have formed around the work of empowering the black African community. Much of this work is focused on the healing and empowerment of women in all areas of life. The Black Sash, the Concerned Circle for African Women Theologians, and the work of CALS continue progressive, informative, and liberative work on behalf of black African women and other marginalized people groups in South Africa. Additionally, the ritual of the Eucharist since its first enactment, has, and always will be, a ritual open to all who seek healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, and liberation.

Currently in 2009 we are in the midst of our own revolutionary context. The political, social, economic, and environmental climate throughout the world is begging for a mending of Creation. The power structures that are catalysts for class struggle, race discrimination, oppression, violence, poverty, gender polarization, unknown futures, the undermining of families, war, and the failing global economy are in need of a re-creation. Consumerism is destroying the earth and eroding both the biological and moral fabric of our global village. Within our own revolutionary context, we, humanity has the choice to enter into this mending of creation with those who are leading the way through current theological, social, economical, and environmental liberative actions, stand by while others sew our wounds backs together for us, or die bleeding. For Ackermann and those engaged in the works of liberative praxis stemming from feminist liberation theology, there was no choice-they chose to work for liberation and the healing of the world through small steps of praxis in the midst of an oppression system.

The most marginalized and oppressed in South African society needed another apart from what they were offered; they needed a voice and a presence of their own and a mending of society and Creation on their behalf. Ackermann's theology, aligned with the liberating God, was based off of this need and sought to bring theological response to living action. Through the works of historic liberative actions like those of the Black Sash, the CALS committee, and the liberating theology of Denise Ackermann, creation is being mended one woman, one action, one theology at a time. In light of our present reality, the history and theology presented throughout these pages, and the model of feminist liberation theology as liberative praxis working towards the liberation of women in an oppressive society, perhaps three questions remain in response:

21st century Christians/ theologians:
What need does our theology reflect?
Who does our theology reflect?
Does truth have a face, a gender?

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