

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM THROUGH STORYTELLING: DERRICK BELL AND  
WOMANISM

A THESIS

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BY

STEPHANIE VASTINE, B.A.

DENTON, TEXAS

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TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY  
DENTON, TEXAS

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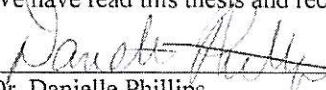
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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Stephanie Vastine entitled "Spiritual Activism Through Storytelling: Derrick Bell and Womanism". I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Women's Studies.



Mark Kessler, Ph. D., Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:



Dr. Danielle Phillips



Interim Department Chair

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Dean of the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

STEPHANIE VASTINE

### SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM THROUGH STORYTELLING: DERRICK BELL AND WOMANISM

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The purpose of this thesis is to address the connections between Derrick Bell's critical race theory and the theory of womanism as articulated by Layli Maparyan. I will examine the impact of storytelling in addressing issues of social oppression, specifically race, class, and gender. Through this examination, I will explore the fictional legal storytelling of Derrick Bell for evidence of womanist influence. I will construct an argument that builds on both critical race theory and womanist theory to propose new directions for social justice scholarship in both women's studies fields and critical race theory, and the application of these disciplines to everyday people. When these theories are put into conversation with one another, Bell's CRT and Maparyan's womanism may be consolidated for new ways of writing and theorizing that will advance the theoretical goals of critical race theory, womanism, and women's studies scholarship more generally. My methodology will be a comparative literary analysis of Bell and Maparyan. The connections and themes that emerge will investigate the potential of both spirituality and storytelling for the examination of new methods of social justice writing and activism.



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## PREFACE

The writing of Derrick Bell served as the major inspiration for this project<sup>1</sup>. Bell's legal storytelling works to communicate complicated legal theories and concerns about racism in the United States in a way that is accessible to scholars and to everyday people who are located outside of the ivory tower of academia. The power of Bell's narrative and storytelling explore the implications of race, gender, and class inequality. As a tribute to Bell's legal storytelling, I have written a short story or "Chronicle" of my own, a section of which precedes each full chapter. Similarly to Bell's works, this short narrative aims to pull the reader into this work in multiple ways, and gives two distinct voices to this thesis: an academic tone and a tone of storytelling.

In addition to serving as a homage to the narrative works of Bell, the story also incorporates aspects of womanism in an attempt to tie the major theoretical strands of this work together, and to inspire the reader to think about the implications of womanist theory. Spirituality is one of the main focuses of this story as well, as the theme of transcendent spiritual awakening serves as a major connection between the works of Bell's critical race theory and Maparyan's articulation of womanism<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> And We Are Not Saved, Faces At the Bottom of the Well, Confronting Authority, and Gospel Choirs (see works cited for full citations)

<sup>2</sup> Specifically in The Womanist Reader and The Womanist Idea (see works cited page)

Through a close literary analysis, or interpretive analysis<sup>3</sup>, of these two theorists, it is my hope that new connections can be made between two seemingly distant fields of academic thought-- critical race theory and women's studies. My analysis aims to show that, through careful analysis of authors such as Bell, important ideas concerning social justice can be unearthed and used in fields such as women's studies. The main questions that informed the development of this project were: How might Derrick Bell's works reflect womanism? How can women's studies scholars incorporate authors and theories that have been previously overlooked through the use of womanism as an interpretive lens? What does womanism provide to an analysis that traditionally "feminist" theories may not? Through exploring these questions, it is my goal to push women's studies scholarship to become more transformative, inclusive, and insightful.

Through transdisciplinary research, women's studies can more fully contribute to, and be similarly impacted by, a wider range of theorists and fields whose work also address understandings of social inequality and oppression. Women's studies can be strengthened by these connections and conversations with other fields of study, such as critical race theory and establish the usefulness of women's studies outside of its respective departments and schools. Women's studies, and the theories it explores, have a lot to say about oppression, equality, and justice. A widening of their theoretical lens might allow scholars within this field to explore new ideas and come up with theories for

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<sup>3</sup> Defined as an analysis that moves beyond description to examine or compare works for a specific reason (see Maimon 121)

social change that may reach outside the bounds of the strictly “feminist” camp. Such a move is sorely needed at a time when the usefulness of feminism is being put into question in many fields of study, and in everyday culture<sup>4</sup>. Only through an expansion of insight and collaboration with diverse scholars and fields can women’s studies confidently claim its importance and applicability within the academy.

This thesis has four chapters. In chapter one, I will introduce Derrick Bell and his texts, give an overview of his main theories that are relevant for this analysis, and examine the development of his narrative voice. In chapter two, I will situate womanism as a theory and lens, giving background on various womanist scholars and texts before focusing on Maparyan’s view on womanism. In chapter three, I will give an in-depth analysis of Derrick Bell’s character Geneva Crenshaw, and examine how she expresses Bell’s womanist standpoint. In chapter four, I will make more connections between critical race theory and womanism, and show the importance of interdisciplinary research and exploration of interconnected themes between various disciplines to expand current feminist/womanist theories.

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<sup>4</sup> This is discussed in *Transforming Feminist Practice* by Leela Fernandes, among many other feminist texts such as *Visible Identities* by Linda Martin Alcoff and *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies* by Orr, Braithwaite, and Lichtenstein (see works cited for full citations)

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCING DERRICK BELL

*It began on a Sunday afternoon. All over the world, at the same time, a beautiful melody began to play. It was unlike any sound the earthly realm had ever produced, and it emanated from the sky. Some said it sounded like a chorus made up of many distinct voices, harmonized perfectly together, vibrating the whole earth. It lasted exactly nine minutes. When it was over, a voice echoed from the heavens. "I will reveal myself in nine days." For nine days the haunting hymn continued echoing throughout the sky once a day. People realized that its fluctuating rhythms were impossible to record or to even remember, as there was no verse or hook that repeated. Each sound was unique, and yet contributed to the whole. Every day the sound was one minute shorter in its duration, so that it seemed to be counting down to some unknowable event. Some people began to worship, some to panic. News outlets named it the "Song from the Sky", but could not agree on much else. Experts and leaders from all religions and denominations attempted to attribute the message to their chosen gods, and debates raged about its meaning. As the ninth day approached, the world held its collective breath, waiting.~*

Derrick Bell was a civil rights lawyer in the 1960s, working most notably on the *Brown v. Board of Education* school de-segregation case. Later, he became the first tenured African-American professor at Harvard University's law school. Bell then resigned from his position at Harvard to protest their refusal to hire a woman of color (*Confronting Authority*). Bell was a social justice activist and scholar, and his writings on race relations in the United States championed the field of critical race theory (CRT), a branch of critical legal studies. His powerful method of legal storytelling, articulated in fictional "chronicles", interrogate the real-world impact of civil rights litigation dealing with race, such as segregation, affirmative action, and white supremacy. Bell's use of legal storytelling as a narrative device communicates complicated legal theories and their

effects to a diverse audience of readers who may or may not be located in the academy. By translating legal theories into narrative form, he connects high theory with daily practices. Through these theories and stories, Bell works to form a critical articulation of the fight for justice and the utility of law in social struggles for equality.

#### INFLUENCES ON DERRICK BELL

James R. Hackney Jr. examines the influence of earlier theories posited by W.E.B. Du Bois on Bell's methodological use of narrative and storytelling. He claims that, "Du Bois was at the center of an American modernist milieu in which intellectuals had begun to question Enlightenment ideals that sustained belief in social progress", and that Bell's theories were similarly "drawn into a way of theorizing that highlights existentialist themes" (Hackney 146). Recognizing the impact Du Bois had on Bell's way of writing and theorizing can illuminate the rich canonical tradition Bell was contributing to. Also, Hackney points out that Du Bois recognized "black spirituals as the most potent expression of religious faith" and also that "the religious strivings of black folk were part of the struggle to create a just American society" (Hackney 151). This spiritual aspect of Bell's work becomes clear through an analysis of his works, especially *Gospel Choirs*, and will be connected with womanist methodology in later chapters of this thesis.

The influence Du Bois had on Bell is worth examining to correctly put Bell's theories into context within the history of African American writing and scholarship. Du Bois' work was transformative for the time, as one of the first American theorists to develop a way of addressing racial issues in a way that was clear and easily understood by his diverse audience. In her introduction to Du Bois' book *The Souls of Black Folk*,



Farah Jasmine Griffin writes, “it is a brilliant, multifaceted, learned book addressed to an intelligent lay audience as a means of informing social and political action” (xvi). Griffin also cites Du Bois’ use of the first person *I* in his writings as a “distinctive feature” that allows Du Bois to insert himself “as a subjective student of and participant in black life and culture” (xvi). These two methods—the use of first person narrative voice and addressing an audience of everyday people are also distinctive features of Bell’s legal storytelling.

In addition to their similar writing styles, Du Bois and Bell both explore the themes of racism, class disparity, and prejudice. While discussing racial prejudice, Du Bois states,

“Such curious kinks of the human mind exist and must be reckoned with soberly. They cannot be left away, nor always successfully stormed at, nor easily abolished by act of legislature. And yet they must not be encouraged by being let alone. They must be recognized as facts, but unpleasant facts; things that stand in the way of civilization and religion and common decency” (Du Bois 69).

This idea put forward by Du Bois of the need to discuss and recognize the ways in which racism functions in the United States connects perfectly with Bell’s theory of “racial realism”, which will be discussed at more length later in this chapter. Du Bois also points out that theorizing about racism must be “frank and fair, and not falsified and colored by our wishes or our fears” (Du Bois 118). In this respect, Bell’s writing continues the



important work of Du Bois while heeding his call for a thoughtful, rather than idealistic, approach to the issues of racism that continue to flourish in the United States.

Binny Miller discusses the use of stories and narrative in the realm of teaching and practicing law. She connects strands of legal theory, including CRT, and feminist theory when arguing that, “[storytelling] can be seen in part as an outgrowth of the various critical theory movements that emphasize the importance of voice and narrative. Critical race theory tends towards very personal expression and relies heavily on personal experience in seeking to change the law and the place of people of color in legal structures” (Miller 4). She discusses the use of both real client-centered stories and fictional narrative in legal settings.

An important distinction that Miller makes between these two types of stories is that, “fictional stories may not contain within them a greater number of meanings than real stories. But in the process of creating a story the fiction writer is freer to choose its meaning” (Miller 9). Miller cites Derrick Bell’s use of storytelling in a few footnotes, and seems to suggest that both ways of telling stories, fictional or “real”, are important to make law more easily understood and communicated given that, “stories are lively and engaging in ways that doctrine often is not” (Miller 7). Therefore, Miller is arguing for the importance of storytelling in communicating complicated theory to students and people outside of the academy. Through analyzing Bell’s main approaches and arguments in his legal storytelling, this project will add to Miller’s assessment of narrative as an important method for pedagogy.

In “The Clouded Prism: Minority Critique of the Critical Legal Studies Movement”, Dalton critiques critical legal scholars lack of “praxis” in their production and consumption of theory (Dalton 80). Bell addresses this critique by developing his narrative storytelling as a kind of practice, or praxis, in which he connects high theory to everyday understanding. Bell connects his storytelling with his lived experiences in the academy, which often blur together, especially in *Confronting Authority*. In this way, the connectedness that Dalton is referring to is used as a basis to develop a foundation of activism and reform. Dialogue is simply one tool that is used to communicate this unique, if uncommon, form of practice.

George Taylor examines the apparent contradiction that exists within Bell’s theories on race, and applies a metaphor of original sin to understanding Bell’s arguments. Taylor writes that, “A number of critics find Bell’s thesis about racism’s permanence to be so despairing that, on its own terms, it renders any meaningful possibility of action against racism pointless” (Taylor 433). Although he begins by acknowledging this pessimistic effect, he goes on to give Bell’s theories credit by comparing them to Niebuhr’s “political theology”, in that both recognize “liberalism’s failure to attend to the seriousness of evil”, and seek a different way to salvation (Taylor 438). Taylor’s comparison of Bell to Niebuhr and theology is interesting in that it credits the unique spiritual aspect of Bell’s theories. Taylor also points out the importance of Bell’s legal storytelling, saying that “a deeper purpose informs Bell’s writings...These ‘counterstories’ at the same time contest majoritarian stories and ‘strike a chord’ with the ready listener...for those readers, mainly white, who have not trod Bell’s path, Bell’s

writings serve a second function” (Taylor 437). Therefore, despite the negative conclusions many readers may originally reach, the storytelling method Bell uses helps diverse readers confront this frustration in order to understand the larger message of Bell’s work concerning social justice and racism. This narrative function also becomes clear through Geneva Crenshaw’s character in relation to gendered issues and discussions.

Bell’s first work, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*, was published in 1987. In this book, Bell introduces Geneva Crenshaw, a fellow lawyer with whom Bell claims to have worked on civil rights legislation in the 1960s. Geneva writes a letter to Bell, asking him to meet her at a cottage to help her interpret stories that she had after being in a car accident (*And We Are Not Saved* 20). Crenshaw refers to these stories as “chronicles”. From her introduction, Crenshaw possesses an air of unearthly mystery about her. The reader is first introduced to Crenshaw’s voice when she writes to Bell,

Dearest friend, I have folded my wings for a little while and returned to this world...My mind is filled with allegorical visions that, taking me out of our topsy-turvy world and into a strange and more rational existence, have revealed to me new truths about the dilemma of blacks in this country. To be made real, to be potent, these visions—or Chronicles, as I call them—must be interpreted. I have chosen you to help me in this vital task. (*And We Are Not Saved* 22)

From this introduction to Crenshaw's role in the book, the reader is drawn into the world of the story where Crenshaw claims to have received these "allegorical visions".

The initial disbelief Bell has in listening to Geneva tell her chronicles connects the reader with Bell in that both are going through this experience in dialogue with Crenshaw. This situates Bell as a reliable narrator of the fictional interactions, since he shares initial skepticism with the reader. After each story Crenshaw relates to Bell, the two engage in a dialogue about the meaning and application of each chronicle to current racial relations in the United States, with the reader serving as a witness to their debates. During these fictional conversations with Crenshaw, Bell's optimism about the effectiveness of civil rights legislation is challenged, and—along with Bell, the reader can be similarly impacted and influenced by these insightful arguments.

For Bell, Crenshaw serves as the muse and mouthpiece in much of his writings about civil rights and legislative effectiveness, in this and many other books. Crenshaw's chronicles in *And We Are Not Saved* are communicated in such a way as to seem real, at least to her. Bell's narrative voice helps in this characterization of Crenshaw and her chronicles. He writes, "Clearly she (Crenshaw) didn't consider her Chronicles mere flights of high fantasy. She would never have asked me to cross the country simply to listen to her recount a series of dreams" (*And We Are Not Saved* 42). This admission by Bell serves again to draw the reader into the world of this story, while expressing his own questioning of Crenshaw's intentions.

From the beginning of this book, Bell makes connections between the earthly and heavenly realms. Crenshaw is one of these devices, as she serves as a mouthpiece for an



otherworldly group, the “Celestial Curia”. Crenshaw describes the Celestial Curia as “a sort of supreme court with more than the usual judicial power” (*And We Are Not Saved* 50). Crenshaw explains to Bell that the Celestial Curia are a kind of spiritual court of female figures, each of whom have a different outlook on how to improve racial relations in America, including “disruptive protest” and “massive exodus” of people of color from the United States (*And We Are Not Saved* 53). Geneva claims that the sisters recruited her to work with a “conservative crusader”, presumably Bell, to examine the Chronicles in hopes of coming up with a “Third Way” for racial justice and equality (*And We Are Not Saved* 251). This also reflects Bell’s academic mission to interrogate issues dealing with racism in nuanced and different ways. It is also notable with regard to connections between the visible and invisible realms that the Celestial Curia, a kind of divine court, it contrasted in the book with the delegates at the “Black Bicentennial Convention”, a collection of civil rights lawyers who also examine Crenshaw’s chronicles. These two groups serve as another contrast by Bell between the human and heavenly aspects of knowledge production more generally. This is a theme Bell explores further in other works, especially *Gospel Choirs*, which will be examined in more detail in chapter three.

The main arguments presented by Bell in *And We Are Not Saved* seem to become clear to Bell through his dialogue with Crenshaw. When the chronicles are finished, Bell writes, “the real message of the Chronicles was stark: white society would never grant blacks a fair share of the nation’s benefits...What should we do now that in our distress we cry out with Jeremiah: ‘The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved’?” (*And We Are Not Saved* 241). This communicates Bell’s theory of racial

realism: the idea that civil rights legislation, which he begins the book having great faith in, is not ultimately equipped on its own to bring about true justice and equality. Bell's theory of "racial realism", or the idea that racism is a permanent facet of American society is an idea Bell shapes and forms in his following books as well, and serves as a foundation for his questioning of liberal agendas which espouse equality (*And We Are Not Saved* 256).

Written in 1992, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* serves as Bell's continued exploration of the implications of the theory of racial realism. In this book, Crenshaw returns with a new set of Chronicles for Bell's consideration. The first Chronicle, "The Afrolantica Awakening" addresses the idea of a mass exodus of African Americans from the United States, the same theme that one sister of the "Celestial Curia" put forward in *And We Are Not Saved*. In this story, a massive island emerges from the sea that only African Americans can inhabit, due apparently to an atmosphere that is hostile to everyone else who attempts to colonize it (*Faces* 34). This image alone causes the reader to consider the broader implications of hostile environments for people of color in the United States. In the story, after the initial excitement of African Americans for their newly discovered "promised land", the island of Afrolantica begins to drop quickly back into the ocean, and hope of relocation is lost (*Faces* 45). This suggests that Bell's argument concerning a mass exodus is that realistically, it may not exist, and working to better conditions in the United States may be more helpful in the long run.

The story of “The Afrolantica Awakening” is not ultimately negative, however. Bell writes that, “Blacks discovered that they themselves actually possessed the qualities of liberation they had hoped to realize on their new homeland. Feeling this was, they all agreed, a liberation—not of place, but of mind” (*Faces* 46). Bell is therefore suggesting that the mere idea or possibility of an actual exodus from the United States is inspiring on its own. The image of Afrolantica serves as proof of the strength of spirit and community possessed by black Americans as a result of their cultural history of oppression. Bell concludes the chronicle on this positive note:

The spirit of cooperation that had engaged a few hundred thousand blacks spread to others, as they recalled the tenacity for humane life which had enabled generations of black to survive all efforts to dehumanize or obliterate them. Infectious, their renewed tenacity reinforced their sense of possessing themselves...somewhere in the word *America*, somewhere irrevocable and profound, there is as well the word *Afrolantica*. (*Faces* 46)

With this, Bell leaves his reader feeling thoughtful about the state of belonging individuals experience in different locations, both physically and psychically, and the implications of these ideas specifically for African Americans, but also for all marginalized groups in the United States. While escape to a new promised land may not be a viable option for the oppressed, Bell suggests that in the struggle for equality, a place of belonging may be found.

The next Chronicle in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* is one of Bell’s more controversial stories, “The Racial Preference Licensing Act”. In this Chronicle, business



owners are permitted to legally refuse service to individuals on the basis of race, as long as they apply for a “Racial Preference License”, and pay an accompanied fee. The fee money would then be funneled into an “equality fund” that would help pay for loans and scholarships for African Americans (*Faces* 48). This Chronicle may seem like a reincarnation of Jim Crow segregation laws, but Bell is actually trying to communicate a valuable insight about civil rights legislation and the harmful tendency towards liberalism within the law. In his conversation with Crenshaw, who suddenly appears in Bell’s study after he has read the Chronicle, Bell is originally outraged at the implications of the Racial Preference Licensing Act. He says to her, “Geneva, I think your story’s going to turn the civil rights community against us” (*Faces* 53). In this way, Bell acknowledges the potential controversy in even theorizing about such a law, but Crenshaw continues to discuss the implications with Bell and win him over. Crenshaw points out later in their conversation that, “this story is not intended to urge actual adoption of a racial preference licensing law, but to provoke blacks and their white allies to look beyond traditional civil rights views”, and suggests that in racial bias, there is the potential of exploitation by minority communities for their benefit (*Faces* 60). In this way, Bell is theorizing a shift way from idealist integration laws that still allow racism to function unconsciously in the current systems (*Faces* 61). This is also a lesson Bell had learned the hard way when his great hopes in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case decision proved to be of little value in reality. Therefore, many of the critiques of Bell’s views on racism due to this story are a result of misunderstanding his actual argument, which is, when considered in context, worth serious consideration by those invested in working toward social justice goals.

Bell discusses many issues dealing with racism and the law in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, but he also includes a chronicle that considers gender and inter-racial relationships in "The Last Black Hero". This Chronicle deviates significantly from Bell's other Chronicles in that, instead of jurisprudential concerns, it addresses romantic love and the implications for social justice advocates when their personal lives intersect (or divert) from the rhetoric of rights-oriented activism. This story addresses the personal conflicts that may arise when an individual is invested in work for social justice, proving that it is not always easy to practice what you preach. When discussing gender relationships in this way, Bell allows Crenshaw's voice to become the mouthpiece for women of color, a narrative strategy that seems very effective in theorizing productively about such issues, by creating some narrative distance between Crenshaw's views and Bell's views as a *male* author. Though Bell may not have experienced gender-related discrimination in the same way as women would, he allows his understanding for such things to be spoken and expressed through Crenshaw's feminine voice. Bell's theories on gendered issues thus subvert and challenge critiques put forward by Critical Race Feminists that the men involved in CRT only, or primarily, (and problematically) theorize from their own gendered locations *as men* (Wing 7).

"The Last Black Hero" is the story of Jason Warfield, the charismatic leader of a black activist group called "Quad-A (The African American Activist Association)" (*Faces* 65). After being injured by a bomb, Jason spends time recovering in the hospital, where he develops a romantic relationship with Sheila, his white female doctor. Sheila is set up in this story as a foil, or contrasting character, to Neva, a black woman with whom

Jason works closely at Quad-A (*Faces* 68). Neva and Jason have never had a romantic relationship, but Neva is nonetheless disheartened when she discovers Jason's relationship with Sheila (*Faces* 76). In her disappointment, Neva says to Sheila, "Jason is not the first black leader who has failed to live up to the people's expectations and hopes. I doubt he'll be the last. He has, in fact, provided us with a needed, if unwanted, reminder that human heroes have feet of clay" (*Faces* 84). This shows the contradiction Jason and Neva face while working for ideals such as interracial marriage and equal civil rights while being torn by implication of such equality in their personal and romantic lived experiences.

At the end of "The Last Black Hero", Neva makes peace with the fact that both Jason and Sheila will be returning to work with Quad-A. Jason feels guilty about hurting Neva, but concludes that, "Love was surely not the answer to America's racial problems, but who knows? Perhaps their decisions would suggest new policies that would reach both whites and blacks" (*Faces* 87). This conclusion suggests that coalition building along boundaries of gender and race, while sometimes difficult, are worthwhile for divining fresh solutions to the problems of racism. Another theme in this story is the danger in activists holding the "hero" status, and the pressure that accompanies such titles. Jason thinks to himself, "I certainly hope I am the last black hero. Our people must rely on their faith in God and themselves. Human beings may be able to *inspire* that faith. They cannot replace it and should not try" (*Faces* 87). This expresses the risks involved in activist movements when one single leader is looked up to as the sole hope for social change and are discovered to have "feet of clay". This also hints at Bell's increasing

conviction that faith in a higher power, not mortal men, may be the true path to progress and change, as laws can only go so far in changing hearts and minds.

In *Confronting Authority: Reflections of an Ardent Protester*, Bell writes in a different style from the previous texts. *Confronting Authority* reads more as a self-reflection and biography, and does not take place entirely in a fictional world of narrative and storytelling. This text most directly addresses Dalton's earlier critique of a lack of praxis for many CLS scholars, as Bell explains his attempts throughout his career to enact the change he taught to his students (Dalton). Other critics have also written about Bell's use of "action as protest", which Bell discusses in depth in this reflective work (Taylor 436). However, Bell does not completely abandon his legal storytelling method in this book. As a prologue to each chapter, Bell tells the story of the "Citadel", an elite ruling class with "Xercis" serving as the leader over the "lowlanders" (*Confronting Authority*, 101). Xercis' daughter, Tamar, sees the injustice in the fact that the lowlanders are not allowed to serve on the "Council of Elders", the decision-making committee of the Citadel (*Confronting Authority*, 67). After being convinced by his daughter, Xercis allows one representative from the lowlanders, Timur, to serve on the council (*Confronting Authority*, 125). Eventually, Timur's expected representation for the lowlanders is corrupted by his power, and he betrays the wishes of lowlanders, to Tamar's dismay. In a fit of rage, Tamar tries to kill Timur, and is subsequently banished from the Citadel and her father (*Confronting Authority*, 147).

This story serves as another one of Bell's Chronicles, which mirrors his own personal struggles with the ivory tower of academia. At the very end of the story, Bell



incorporates a twist for the reader that shifts perception of the story's implications. After Tamar has been banished from the Citadel, Bell writes, "the lowlanders sensed...another era, an era long before this one when fair-skinned, straight-haired people like themselves had been dominant in the world... they had been the oppressors and those who now ruled from the Citadel with their dark skins and thick hair had been the oppressed"

(*Confronting Authority*, 165). This is written in such a way as to expose the fact that many readers probably imagined the Citadel members as whites. Through this ending, Bell challenges his readers to examine which group they imagined as the oppressors throughout the story, and what these assumptions imply about racism.

In this broken up story, Bell is making a powerful statement about the nature of oppression, in that it does not necessarily matter the race of the person that holds the position of power, only that these hierarchies breed negative and oppressive consequences for those who do not belong to the in-group, in this case the Citadel members. In relationship to his own experiences, Bell may be making a point about selling out as a person of color once a tenured position at Harvard, his personal "Citadel", was accomplished. Unlike Timur, who becomes the oppressor despite his roots as a lowlander, Bell sticks to his principles and goals of justice in his protest of Harvard's lack of full-time faculty of color, eventually losing his position.

While recounting his personal act of protest at Harvard, Bell is realistic in his assessment. He writes:

I have yet to discover any action so precise in its means and so elegant in its delivery that its unmitigated success is assured. To the contrary, most

single-handed protests—and many movements—will not accomplish their goals. What separates the protester from those who stand aside and debate and critique—seemingly without end—is the protester’s sense of personal urgency and the recognition that, in the real world, we cannot expect—and certainly should not wait for—the perfect solution. (*Confronting Authority*, 138)

Bell’s assessment of his own actions are humble and do not represent him as the perfect protester, if such a thing exists.

For Bell, the *intentions* behind a personal protest and the achieved goals of the same protest are often incongruous. Bell admits that, “my good intentions might well translate into results that—at least in part—might be the very opposite of what I intended. The discrepancy between doing that one thinks ‘right’ and doing ‘good’ can be applied profitably to an assessment of civil rights efforts over the last dozen years or so” (*Confronting Authority* 148). However, the effort made to protest, and to work towards civil rights goals is not wasted energy for Bell, even if the desired outcome is not reached. This exemplifies an important connection to Bell’s “racial realism” theory, in that even if racism cannot be completely eradicated from a society, those committed to the struggle for justice will and should continue to do what they know in their hearts to be *right* in working toward these goals.

In *Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival in an Alien Land Called Home*, Bell more closely examines the spiritual aspects that have appeared in his previous works. This book was written in 1996, and most explicitly expresses the connections of Bell’s theories to

his concept of spirituality, expressed through gospel songs that nourish the soul with hope for the future. Bell begins this book with a powerful call for the role of spirituality directed social justice work. He writes, “we need a foundation for new tactics that speaks directly to today’s crisis, one that also encompasses the vehicles of faith and steadfastness that have served us so well in past struggles” (*Gospel Choirs* 11). This call for a shifting of energies, and the need for a new foundation, is a conclusion Bell has been working toward throughout his books, beginning with *And We Are Not Saved*.

Through this close analysis of Bell’s storytelling in a few of his major works, it is clear that the confidence in the legal approaches with which Bell began writing have given way to something new. The conclusion Bell reaches about the ultimate ineffectiveness of civil rights legislation, examined through his theory of “racial realism”, does not cause him to despair or relinquish his goals. Rather, he searches for a different means to the same end, one which may not rely solely on the promise of jurisprudence. The approach he adopts in *Gospel Choirs*, which will be examined in chapter three, may converge and connect well with another theory from a different source: womanism.



## CHAPTER II

### SITUATING WOMANIST THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

*On the ninth day, the world was expectant. Some gathered at their churches or their courthouses. Families grouped together, some in excitement and some in fear. No one went to work that day, and everyone seemed to be getting their things in order in case of some catastrophic event. When possible, families stocked up on drinking water and food supplies, some even built underground bunkers. With no idea of what to expect, however, preparation was difficult and seemed irrelevant. Most notably, wars that had been raging in the months and years preceding the Sky Song ceased on this final day, and no country or individuals moved to break the ceasefire on that day. When the face appeared, it was as if the atmosphere had been peeled back, and the sky moved translucently to the background. No matter an individual's location on the planet, and regardless of it being day or night, the face was clearly visible. It took up the whole sky, and for a few moments, spoke to the people of earth. What no one expected, however, was the form the face took. She was beautiful. She looked kind yet stern, and her hair flowed around her strikingly perfect features. Her voice was deep and rousing, and her skin was dark. ~*

Womanism is a theoretical perspective that draws from many scholars and fields of study. In the field of women's studies, womanism has served as a theory related to black feminism, and addresses the critique of feminism as for white women only. In addition to issues of gender, womanism, like black feminism, takes race into account when addressing social justice. In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips<sup>1</sup> points out that, "Outside women studies, as well as an marginalized corners of the field, the employment of womanism as a theoretical frame had proliferated...constituting a venerable and persistent underground movement indicating the ongoing productivity and relevance of the perspective outside the academic mainstream and even beyond the academy itself" (Phillips xix). Thus, while womanism

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<sup>1</sup> Layli Phillips' last name was changed to Maparyan when writing *The Womanist Idea*

functions within academic disciplines, such as women's studies, its applicability extends beyond the academy into the everyday lives of people of color from all walks of life.

Before womanism is further situated for this comparative project, the use of womanism in connection with CRT instead of Critical Race Feminism must be addressed. In her introduction to *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, Adrien Katherine Wing describes the gap that critical race feminism, or CRF, seeks to address. Wing describes CRF as "a feminist intervention within CRT" (Wing 7). Wing argues that, "some women of color realized that certain perspectives presented in CRT literature may have assumed that women of color's experiences were the same as those of men of color" (Wing 7). Apart from this explicit inclusion of gender and the use of some feminist methods, CRF seems nearly indistinguishable from CRT. Wing's assessment of CRT implies that its theories express mainly the experiences of men, and leave out issues of gender, thus the need for CRF.

Far from being stuck in his own male experience, Bell was well aware of the impact gender has on theories dealing with race and racism in the United States, especially in later works such as *Gospel Choirs*. My focus on Bell's chronicles in relation to womanism is also an attempt to show that, through the use of narrative and storytelling, authors are able to transcend the boundaries of theorizing only about their own lived experiences and identities. This expresses the belief that scholars in the field of women's studies would be served well to look outside of explicitly "feminist" modes of theorizing to find authors who have written with stunning insight about women, even if

they did not identify explicitly with feminism, or wrote from the perspective of a man.

Womanism, in contrast, addresses many of these issues.

Critical Race Feminism effectively addresses the issue of incorporating gender into discussions and theories about race, and provides an important addition to some critical race theories. Judy Scales Trent argues that this addition of gender concerns to a racial theory is essential for women of color to carve out a space within these theories, and explore how certain laws affect them specifically (Scales-Trent 42). For instance, Scales-Trent examines the implications of the Equal Protection Clause and the Fourteenth amendment of the constitution in relation to women of color, and argues that black women's lens through which they view this clause is unique and important (Scales-Trent 44). While these discussions are essential to broadening feminism's influence in the field of critical race theory, womanism offers a slightly different lens. The element that distinguishes womanism from Critical Race Feminism most obviously is the component of spirituality that womanism incorporates. This spirituality, which Bell addresses in his theories, represents an important departure from traditional CRT and CRF theories. Only through a womanist lens can this aspect of spirituality within Bell's CRT be sufficiently addressed and explored.

Shifting back to womanism, it is important first to distinguish it from feminism and black feminism. As Phillips points out in the introduction to *The Womanist Reader*,

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in black women's and other women of colors everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving and everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending

all forms of oppression for all people, restoring balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. Its relationships to feminism, including black feminism, are important, but it's relationships other critical theories and social justice movements are equally important, being less frequently discussed or acknowledged. (Phillips xx)

For this discussion of womanism in relationship to Derrick Bell's CRT, the distinction is important because it acknowledges womanism as a theory that expands beyond traditional feminist frameworks, including CRF. While it is often discussed or used theoretically within feminist academic spaces, womanism's goals are broader than traditional forms of feminist theorizing within the academy, especially because of the aspect of spirituality that womanism articulates.

Phillips compares feminism and womanism within an analogy of familial relationships, explaining that the two theories are "like cousins" in that they "are related and can be mutually supportive" (Phillips xxiii). Overlap exists where womanism and feminism are both concerned with social justice movements and ending oppressive systems, but womanism differs from feminism in a few key ways. First, womanism is equally concerned with all identity categories that may be used to oppress individuals, especially race. Second, where feminism can be interpreted as a social and political movement, womanism is also a spiritual way of life.

Even though womanism diverts from feminism and black feminism, Phillips argues that this break is non-oppositional and in harmony with cooperation and collaboration for both camps of thought. Phillips states that,

The womanist idea is not owned by black women and women of color, even if it was developed, launched, articulated, and elaborated primarily by black women and other women of color. Men of color, particularly black men, have participated in the womanist enterprise almost from the beginning. White women have questioned whether they, too, might be womanists. To date, I have not seen this question posed by white men, but this fact does not preclude the possibility that white men could be womanists. (Phillips xxxvi)

This means that womanism, while having its roots tied into the experiences particularly of women of color, is open for application by other groups of individuals who identify with its call for connection and change on a social, political, and spiritual level. Phillips' point of black men using womanism is also interesting for drawing connections to Bell's potential use and enactment of womanism. It is disheartening that Phillips had not yet encountered a white male who would explicitly identify with womanism, but the open invitation for this to happen is certainly clear in her explanation.

The origin of the term "womanism" has been frequently credited to fiction author Alice Walker, though the ideas associated with womanism may have preceded her terminology. From the first buds that appeared in Walker's fiction writing, womanism



has blossomed outward to encompass a theory and worldview for all of humanity. In 1983, Walker wrote a dictionary-style definition of womanism:

#### Womanist

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.” A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than in considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.”...

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit.  
Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the  
Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker 19)

This definition is important to keep in mind for many reasons. Here, Walker artfully describes womanism as universal and empowering for women especially, though it is not off limits to men. This definition of womanism also describes the connections of womanism to black women's lived experiences, and the use of womanism to fight for the "wholeness" of both men *and* women. Feminism is often criticized as being a "for women only" group, and at its worst, it is a "for *white* women only" group. In contrast, Walker's description of a flower garden with "every color flower represented" illustrates that womanism recognizes the divine and sacred nature of all living things, even extending to non-human beings, and the importance of diversity in social justice movements.

With its emphasis on spirituality and interconnection, womanism offers something new to those who do not identify with feminism, or have the feeling that expressly feminist theory is lacking something important that may be needed for lasting social transformation. Phillips acknowledges the power of Walker's definition, saying "because the definition of womanist offered by Walker was poetic in nature, it became...immediately attractive to and resonant for many people who are searching for an alternative to 'feminist' as an identity or praxis" (Phillips xix). Initially, womanism most likely appealed to women of color who felt as though feminist goals were not



adequately accounting for racial elements of discrimination. Eventually, however, the potential of womanism has been expanded, as Phillips explains, and this expansion allows white women and men to claim the identity of “womanist” as well.

Another aspect of womanism that distinguishes it from feminism is that one does not have to explicitly identify with womanism or as a “womanist” to enact womanist methods and goals. Phillips explains that, “since the beginning, the womanist frame has been applied more frequently than it has been written about. That is, more people have employed womanism than have described it. What this reflects is the tendency of womanism to be approached and expressed intuitively rather than analytically” (Phillips xxi). This intuitive aspect of womanist theory is important because it opens up womanism to texts, authors, and theorists who may not have even used the term “womanist” to explain their approach. This also connects to the deeply rooted spirituality womanism uses in connecting humans to one another. Because of the spiritual aspect of intuition, womanism extends its use to people all over the world who may have never even heard the term.

While Phillips and Walker have connected womanism to feminism in different yet complimentary ways, some womanists see feminism as separate from and damaging to movements for social equality and change. Clenora Hudson-Weems’ articulation of “Africana Womanism” makes this clear. In a diversion from Walker and Phillips, Weems writes, “rather than create their own paradigm and name and define themselves, some Africana women, scholars in particular, have been persuaded by White feminists to adopt or to adapt to the White concept and terminology of feminism” (Hudson-Weems 39).

This move is viewed as another colonization and appropriation of the thoughts and works of people of color, delegating their views and goals as afterthoughts to a White feminist movement. Hudson-Weems goes on to describe the importance of womanism in contrast to feminism, arguing that “it is crucial that Africana women engage in self-naming and self-definition, lest they fall into the trap of refining a critical ideology at the risk of surrendering the sense of identity” (Hudson-Weems 40). Therefore, Hudson-Weems views womanism as an essential survival tactic for women of color in the academy who may otherwise lose their unique identities in the explicitly feminist struggle, which Weems critiques for seeking power and not true change (Hudson-Weems 40).

Another interesting distinction Hudson-Weems makes about womanism is its inclusion of men in the movement. While feminists may be skeptical of men based on their role as the patriarchal oppressor, Hudson-Weems claims that the Africana womanist, “perceives herself as the companion to the Africana man, and works diligently toward continuing their established union in the struggle against racial oppression” (Hudson-Weems 41). For womanists, then, men are not perceived as oppressors but as potential allies in social justice movements. Hudson-Weems also connects this continuing partnership to the importance of family to womanists, while critiquing some feminists as seeing the erasure of the traditional family as liberation from oppressive roles (Hudson-Weems 42). While some of these arguments concerning men and women’s relationships have been interpreted as condemning homosexuality, the idea of balance and participation of both genders in social justice movements deserves attention and consideration. Hudson-Weems concludes in this reading that, “Africana men and women

are and should be allies, struggling as they have since the days of slavery for equal social, economic, and political rights as fellow human beings in the world” (Hudson-Weems 43). This partnership will be examined in later chapters in relation to Bell and Crenshaw, and their connection may prove to evoke many of Hudson-Weems’ ideas of what a successful womanist partnership might look like.

Hudson Weems’ idea of the complimentary male and female partners as allies is also examined by Nah Dove when writing about “African Womanism”, which seems closely linked to Hudson Weems’ “Africana” womanism. Dove points out the influence of African matriarchal societies. She writes:

The concept of matriarchy highlights the complimentary aspect of the female-male relationship of the nature of the feminine and masculine in all forms of life, which is understood as nonhierarchical. Both the woman and the man work together in all areas of social organization. The woman is revered in her role as the mother who is the bringer of life, the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the center of social organization. (Dove 520)

This definition of matriarchy is important in that it clarifies the “nonhierarchical” cooperation of men and women in society. Matriarchy in this way is not a simple inversion of patriarchy where women are now the oppressor, but instead women are respected for their motherly qualities in a society where men and women are on an egalitarian, equal footing. Dove also points out that “mothering”, in these terms is not a role that only women can fulfill, and that this concept of mothering even extends to non-

family members (Dove 521). Used in this way, “mothering” is a womanist method for building up communities and strengthening connections among human beings in the broadest sense.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi has also articulated a version of African womanism (21). Ogunyemi examines various depictions of gender and racial inequality in relationship to womanism, and similarly to Hudson-Weems, does not view womanism as having a completely symbiotic relationship to feminism (24). Ogunyemi points out that, “while the white woman writer protests against sexism, the black woman writer must deal with it as one among many evils; she battles also with the dehumanization resulting from racism and poverty” (25). The serious consideration of racial and class struggles is an important facet of womanism that distinguishes it from feminism for many scholars such as Ogunyemi. While feminism’s main concern is gender, some scholars have pointed out that race and class often fall behind gendered analyses in a type of hierarchy that still rests on problematic identity categories (Fernandes 30). Womanism, on the other hand, attempts to tackle issues of classism and racism while simultaneously acknowledging the negative consequences of sexism. The writings of Bell also examine the implications of these categories. In her discussion of womanism, Ogunyemi also points out the differences between feminism and womanism when theorizing about power. While white feminists can be seen as wanting to share in the power that white men already possess, womanists present a challenge to the entire system of power, acknowledging that their share in it has always been minimal at best (34). This distinguishes womanism’s universal appeal as opposed to feminism in that it seeks to change and re-structure

existing systems of oppression altogether, rather than to simply invert such systems or share in the rewards granted to the privileged few in power.

One of the most important aspects of womanism for this analysis is its spiritual component. Delores S. Williams identifies “womanist theology” as drawing from “many sources—biblical, theological, ecclesiastical, social, anthropological, economic, and material” (118). She uses Walker’s articulation of womanism to explore the implications of theology on womanism. Williams points out the roots of this theology are connected with “non-bourgeois black folk culture” (118). One of the interesting components of this womanist theology is the importance of the black female in articulating spiritual concerns and goals.

Williams points out that in social movements, as well as womanist theology, “female models of authority have been absolutely essential for every struggle in the black community and for building and maintaining the community’s institutions” (119). In contrast to a white, Christian theology, which lifts up male figures and prophets, womanist theology has always recognized the strength and importance of women. In addition, Williams recognizes “black women’s historic connection with men” as important for putting this community-building theology into practice (120). She also uses Walker’s definition of womanism to point out that while womanist theology has its beginnings in the culture of black folk, it can and must extend outward to encompass all people and nations. Williams writes of the Christian womanist theologian that, “her concern for community building and maintenance must *ultimately* extend to the entire



Christian community and beyond that to the larger human community” (120). This expansion sets womanism apart.

Concerning the methods put into practice by womanist theologians, Williams recognizes the importance of language and the challenging and re-construction of nuanced forms of spirituality. She writes, “womanist theological language must, in this sense, be an instrument for social and theological change in church and society” (Williams 123). In this way, church and society are intimately related, and the inclusion and recognition of women of color in one space will spread and translate to the other as well. Williams does not construct womanist theology as a closed system that has already been established, rather, she describes it as an ongoing process that many women can take part in. The common thread that binds all of these women is the recognition and worship of “spirit”, a broad manifestation of God. Williams describes the “great respect Afro-American women have always shown for the presence and work of the spirit” as a common strength among womanist theologians (123). This aspect of womanism is one that Layli Maparyan discusses at length in her own way in *The Womanist Idea*. This extension of a theological worldview is an integral part of womanism that most obviously distinguishes it from feminism, which is usually secular in nature. Williams’ acknowledgement of the spiritual components of womanism builds a foundation for Maparyan’s extension of the power of spirit for womanists working for social change.

*The Womanist Idea* was written by Maparyan in 2012, and builds on the foundational readings that were explored in *The Womanist Reader*. In this text, Maparyan works to articulate her vision of womanism as something that is accessible to everyone,

“a gift to all humanity” (Maparyan 33). While Maparyan acknowledges that, “taken together, Walker, Ogunyemi, and Hudson-Weems can be viewed as three weight-bearing pillars of the womanist idea”, she works in this text to further her own understanding of womanist thought (29). Maparyan identifies that there are problems with the current state of political activism that her concept of womanism can address (4). She writes that, “political activism is assumed to be the answer to human misery, strife, and injustice. Yet, the limitations of this strategy are rendered invisible by belief systems that, at best, separate the material world from the spiritual realm or, at worst, negate the spiritual realm altogether” (Maparyan 4). This is an interesting point about activism, and one that will be explored more in relationship to Bell in later chapters.

Maparyan’s ultimate goal in her articulation of womanism is “luxocracy”, a global spiritual manifestation of humanity’s fully realized potential (4). She goes on to point out that, “it is only the *universal* recognition of innate human divinity *and* the immanent spiritual nature of the lifespace in which humans exist—above and beyond all religions—that would make luxocracy possible” (Maparyan 5). This distinction of womanist spirituality from religion deviates from William’s concept of womanist theology in that Maparyan’s spirituality is more open and encompassing of non-religious practices as well as traditional religious activities. In this way, Maparyan attempts to open up the womanist idea for all people, even those who may not identify with specific religious groups or activities. Maparyan goes on to describe a spiritual force referred to as “source” that connects all beings on a non-earthly plane (6). These spiritual aspects serve

to give Maparyan's articulation of womanism a nuanced perspective that opens up its application for all people, regardless of their race, gender, or class identity.

Maparyan also describes the three main concerns of womanists in a graph called the "triad of concern" (36). These three aspects are: "human-human relationships", or social interactions, "human-nature relationships", or ecological concerns, and "human-spiritual relationships" or the connection of the visible and non-visible worlds (Maparyan 36). The first two aspects are already addressed in many movements for social justice. What distinguishes womanism is the special emphasis on the connections to the spiritual world. Again, this extends far beyond what most would think of as religion. Maparyan writes that "human affairs, world conditions, and the like, are as much a product of forces operating on the invisible side of reality as they are a product operating on the visible side" (36). The recognition of a thin veil between the earthly and spiritual worlds certainly sets womanist activism and identification apart from many traditional social justice movements. When this spiritual realm is acknowledged as being real and impactful on the human world, womanist activism may effect change on an unprecedented level.

In *The Womanist Idea*, Maparyan uses unique methods of analysis—approaches she terms "spiritual politics" and "spiritual archaeology" (86). These two methods, and their definitions, are important to understand because of their application to the works of Bell. Regarding spiritual politics, Maparyan explains:

Spiritualized politics are animated by metaphysical and cosmological understandings and practices, by love for people and other beings as a

feeling and a praxis, by inspiration as a higher vibrational state filled with clarity and power, and by inspired vision illuminating and giving life to future, present, and past realities. (86)

The term politics, as used here, expands beyond legal or academic understandings of the term to suggest an awareness of the ways in which actions are connected and impact one another on multiple realms of understanding and existence. Maparyan's reference to inspiration as a "vibrational state" is also interesting in that it suggests a "metaphysical" quality of feeling.

The second term Maparyan uses, "spiritual archaeology", is a methodology she defines as "backward-looking spiritual story recovery, the act of digging up the spiritual roots of womanism by looking at the spiritual lives of self-proclaimed womanist and their kindred spirits" (87). In this sense, womanism can be recognized and analyzed retrospectively. This implies that texts by authors who do not necessarily identify themselves as "womanists" may still enact womanist methods and practices. Similarly to Maparyan's articulation of "spiritual archaeology", this project attempt to look back on Bell's work for connections to womanism. Whether Bell was a womanist or a "kindred spirit" to womanism will be explored more in the following chapters. Therefore, Maparyan's method of "spiritual archaeology" certainly suggests such uses for scholars interested in womanism as a theory, practice, and lens that contributes to dialogues surrounding social change.

### CHAPTER III

#### GENEVA CRENSHAW AS WOMANIST MUSE

“My children: listen to my words so that I may guide you. I am the great mother of earth and sky. I appear to you in this human form so that you may understand my message. The face you see is not my only essence, which is vast and has no correspondence to earthly beings or images. I come with this face, in this form, so that you may know who is closest to understanding my wisdom. I birthed the world long ago, and have watched silently waiting for the truth to be known. I come to you now in distress, watching my children suffer from war and disease, competing with and killing one another for their own bodily satisfaction and survival. Do you realize that the path you now tread is far from the one I set for you at the beginning? I alone will ultimately decide your eternal fate. The time for renewal has come. Seek those out who resemble my face and study their voices. The wisdom they hold and the burden they have borne makes them most qualified to teach. You must undo the ties that bind you now and start fresh, not through blood but through loving-kindness only. It is my wish that you take my message into your hearts, so that they might be transformed. Only then may you return to the path of true wisdom, and find me again. If my message is ignored or forgotten, an untold age of despair will befall all who do not seek the truth of my words.” *The world watched in silent awe then; and the face of the goddess retreated slowly back through the sky, smiling down at them. ~*

Now that Derrick Bell and womanism have been introduced and explored, Geneva Crenshaw's character will be examined for her potential as a womanist figure in Bell's writings. Bell's development of Crenshaw in his works represents an interesting narrative device that enables Bell to interrogate his views through fictional dialogues with Crenshaw. Given his maleness, Crenshaw's opinions are also useful for Bell to explore issues relating to gender and relationships from a female perspective. This allows Bell to step away from his maleness and, through his writing, put himself in the position of a woman of color. Despite her gender, Crenshaw has a very similar background to Bell as a civil rights lawyer and may be a representation of Bell's feminine self.



It is important to situate Bell's position as a man writing about issues dealing with women and gender. In *The Womanist Reader*, there are a few men who discuss their place in feminist and womanist theorizing. Michael Awkward writes about his position as a man, and questions his ability to effectively participate in feminist discussions and theories. However, as a man of color, Awkward argues that womanism is more invitational to his cause. He writes, "womanist theory is especially suggestive for Afro-American men because...womanism foregrounds a general black psychic health as a primary objective" (Awkward 74). While he tends to use womanism as interchangeable with feminism in this article, his suggestions regarding what would constitute a "male feminist" are interesting to consider in relationship to Bell. Awkward goes on to say that, "perhaps the most difficult task for a black male feminist is striking a workable balance between male self-inquiry/interest and an adequately feminist critique of patriarchy" (Awkward 75). In Bell's discussions with Crenshaw that will be examined in this chapter, the balance Awkward is suggesting can be found in the narrative use of Crenshaw as a guiding female voice.

Gary L. Lemons also discusses the black male's place in womanism in *The Womanist Reader*. He argues that, "theorizing a womanist space for black men means focusing on the historical impact castration and lynching have had on the black male psyche and on ways we construct our identity as men" (Lemons 97). Bell discusses these concerns about racism and masculinity in conversations with Crenshaw, and this may suggest that his methods are womanist in nature. In this sense Bell, like Lemon, can be seen as attempting to build solidarity with womanist strategies and struggles, and

working to “claim a destiny beyond the bounds of patriarchy” through his critique of racial as well as gendered oppression (Lemons 112).

In *And We Are Not Saved*, Bell tells “The Chronicle of the Twenty-Seventh Year Syndrome”, where he recounts a dream to Geneva. It is interesting to note that in this book, this is the only chronicle Bell himself claims authorship to within the world of the story. All of the other Chronicles in this book are presented by Crenshaw’s character. In his dream, women of color who are educated beyond a bachelor’s degree, and have never entertained a marriage proposal from a black man, are overtaken with an illness which causes them to fall into a deep sleep and, when they wake, they have lost their educational experience and knowledge (*And We Are Not Saved* 199). Black men then rally together in the story to propose to women who may be afflicted in order to save them from the syndrome. After Bell finishes telling Crenshaw this chronicle, they have a lively debate about the fissures that exist between men and women in the African American community (*And We Are Not Saved* 205).

In their discussion, Bell points out to Crenshaw that the urge for black men to protect women of color is thwarted by the persistence of a racist society, in a sense “castrating” them (*And We Are Not Saved*, 204). Crenshaw replies with a quote from Alice Walker, and points out that “nobody’s as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls don’t we?” (*And We Are Not Saved*, 204). She therefore does not let Bell shift blame for violence against women by black men onto white racism. Crenshaw goes on to confront Bell about his chronicle, which she claims is replicating sexist and patriarchal beliefs. Instead of allowing black men to “save” women of color, Crenshaw

suggests that a better option is, “for black men to reject the whole protective role concept and become one with black women in order affectively to confront the common enemy – racism” (*And We Are Not Saved* 211). This quote by Crenshaw is reminiscent of many womanists cited in the previous chapter, who claimed that men and women must become allied with one another in order to address the serious problems faced by the African American community.

Through their conversation, Bell comes to agree with Crenshaw’s ideas about men and women working together, outside of patriarchal constraints. He concludes this discussion by saying, “Someday, the society will evolve beyond its present rigid views of sex roles, but that time has not come. And black men won’t be ready for the era of complete sex equity until they have gained that confidence and sense of themselves essential to male–female relationships based on mutuality and sharing” (*And We Are Not Saved* 213). Therefore, Bell comes to share Crenshaw’s view that only through mutual help and cooperation will men and women be able to reach a state of equality, from which issues relating to racism can be more fully addressed within their communities.

At first, Bell is skeptical about some of the things he and Crenshaw discuss. He worries about Crenshaw’s mental health, but eventually comes to realize that she actually *believes* in the Curia and the importance of her Chronicles outside of simply debate and discussion. Crenshaw, sensing Bell’s initial skepticism, exclaims, “The Curia was right in warning me that Western people simply reject anything not explicable in scientific terms. But for me, friend, it was neither vision or dream, and no more fantasy and then some of the beliefs that you have said you hold” (*And We Are Not Saved* 101). The beliefs she is

referring to here are Bell's continued faith in the effectiveness of civil rights legislation to ease racial problems. The thread linking Crenshaw's belief in her *Chronicles* and Bell's belief in civil rights litigation is that they both have *faith* in these concepts.

Toward the end of the book, after days of meeting and speaking with her, Bell's character finds that Crenshaw has disappeared. When he goes to listen to their recorded conversations, Bell is shocked to find that, "mine was the only voice recorded. Where Geneva's voice should have been, there was not so much silence as a sound like the murmur of the sea on a calm evening" (*And We Are Not Saved* 235). This serves to legitimate Crenshaw's claims about her otherworldly experiences and origins. In other words, Bell is telling the reader that logically he *understands* that Geneva Crenshaw is a fictional character that he has, in a way, made up for his stories. However, the importance and effectiveness of Crenshaw as a narrative device and for Bell, as a muse and keeper of his faith is, in this way, very *real*. In fact, during an interview with Stephanie B. Goldberg, Bell spoke of Geneva, saying, "people often ask, 'How is Geneva? When did you see her last?' I always say, 'She's fine, but she's not happy when I call her fictional'" (Bell as quoted in Goldberg 58). Therefore, even in his "real" life, Bell speaks of Crenshaw as if she were really a woman that appears to and helps him, and readers can never know if she really *does* or not. Bell thus blurs the line between fantasy or fiction and reality. Again, the element of *faith* is essential in examining Bell's theories on this level.

Faith is a theme that is very important to many of Bell's works. Faith can be understood in a few different ways. By the end of *And We Are Not Saved*, Crenshaw and



Bell come to the conclusion that, “while the central motivating theme of black struggle is Faith, the common thread in all civil rights strategies is eventual failure” (*And We Are Not Saved* 248). Despite the possibility of defeat, the resolve to work toward new and transformative theory remains important to Bell. Crenshaw’s call to the delegates at the end of the convention sets the stage for Bell’s future books, and can also be read as a nod to the goals of womanism. She proclaims, “let us take up this legacy of faith and carry it forward into the future for the sake not alone of ourselves and our children but of all human beings of whatever race or color or creed” (*And We Are Not Saved* 257).

*Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival in an Alien Land Called Home* was written by Bell in 1996, almost ten years following *And We Are Not Saved*. Despite the time between the two books, they work well in combination and expand on Bell’s theories dealing with race and gender. *Gospel Choirs* addresses Bell’s continued attempt to “convey the basic truth about the ineradicableness of racism not as a scary premonition but as a challenge to think about the law and race in new ways” (*Gospel Choirs* 11). In this work, however, Bell shifts from his faith in the legal system to faith more broadly, in a spiritual capacity. He draws on the history of faith for African Americans as a tool that provided “peace to the mind and solace to the soul” (*Gospel Choirs* 12). In this way, Bell suggests a perspective that can be read as his own manifestation of womanism for the transformation and uplifting of African Americans in the struggles for social and political equality.

In the Prologue of this book, Bell gives credit once again to his muse and his “lawyer friend and Curia Sister, Geneva Crenshaw” (*Gospel Choirs* 13). When writing of



Crenshaw and her influence on his work, Bell says, “Geneva, as I came to know in the course of our friendship, also possesses strange powers and a prescience I can only call supernatural. One of a trio of godlike Sisters, the Celestial Curia, Geneva uses parables to illustrate her rare understanding of racial dynamics” (*Gospel Choirs* 12). This introduction says explicitly what was hinted at in *And We Are Not Saved*, that Crenshaw is “godlike” and has a “supernatural” quality about her that comes through in Bell’s storytelling. In the prologue, Crenshaw appears to Bell and discusses the book with him. This gives the narrative a believable and self-reflective quality that emphasizes the “faith” at work in this book. Crenshaw says to Bell that gender needs to be addressed in *Gospel Choirs*, pointing out that “we can only strengthen personal relationships if men reject male dominance and women reject female subordination”, a method very much in line with the womanist idea (*Gospel Choirs* 15). Bell even cites Alice Walker, one of the first to write explicitly of womanism, here, saying:

We do have resources. We—As Alice Walker observed, not in complaint but in celebration—‘do not come from people who have had nothing. We come rather from people who’ve had everything—except money, except political power, except freedom.’ Our challenge is to identify and harness our ‘everything’ to meet the current crisis. (*Gospel Choirs* 15)

Of the “resources” Bell is referring to here, one is Gospel music that originated in spirituals sung by slaves. Within this music, Bell identifies a source of strength and power that people of color have put to use throughout their long and troubled history (*Gospel Choirs*, 11). Gospel music, when described by Bell in this way, represents a

womanist tool for survival and hope. This music serves as an article of faith that brings humanity closer to Maparyan's "luxocracy" and full recognition of innate divinity within each person.

While Crenshaw appears throughout *Gospel Choirs*, the stories told in this book are from Bell's point of view, as he voices his own version of Crenshaw's earlier Chronicles in *And We Are Not Saved*. However, Bell still employs the conversational debate within the world of the story --this time with a limo driver named Jesse B. Semple--to interrogate his positions on race and gender. As Crenshaw suggested earlier in the book, Bell explores themes related to gender in detail in *Gospel Choirs*, and comes up with some very interesting theories that connect well with womanism. In a chapter called "Women to the Rescue", Bell has a fictional dialogue with Semple, where he is asked about having a romantic relationship with Crenshaw. Bell seems offended by this suggestion, and tells Semple that, "you have to give up the belief that the primary reason women are on this earth is to entice and satisfy what you call your 'nature.' Women are far more than sexual vessels" (*Gospel Choirs* 154). By saying this, Bell is challenging the heterosexist beliefs men sometimes hold about women. He points out that it is an especially important goal for those in the black community because it keeps people divided and unable to fully connect with and understand one another.

It seems that Bell's views on gender have become more important to his racial analysis over time, as he explores gendered themes that were only alluded to in *And We Are Not Saved*. Bell explains this shift in his perspective and the importance of gendered analyses, saying:

For a long time, I thought race and sex were separate agendas, but I have slowly come around to agreeing...that we blacks must deal with sexism and patriarchy in our communities before we can address effectively the continuing evils of racism. Indeed, black people must come to realize that our greatest strength—our survival hope, if you will—is black women.  
(*Gospel Choirs* 155)

This is a very strong statement by Bell, and it also suggests the importance of Crenshaw's character in providing an alternative female perspective in Bell's writings. This strength and hope that women provide can be read as in-line with womanist logic. As Maparyan also points out, "Womanists and womanism are not concerned only with the 'problems' or 'issues' of women of color. Rather, womanism represents what everyday women of color would say or do with regard to and world problem affecting or related to any group inhabiting Earth" (Maparyan 57). The strength in womanism comes from its roots in the experiences of women of color, as Bell comes to understand. However, this does not imply that womanism's concerns stop with people of color. Rather, the spiritual component ensures a spreading of this activism, what Maparyan terms "womanist universalism" (57). Bell's emphasis on respecting and taking seriously the views and strengths of women of color implies that he recognizes the power everyday womanists have in producing lasting social change. He clearly suggests this womanist power when saying, "just as we acknowledge women's power to give life, we must come to recognize their power to sustain us in life, to play critical roles in planning and action in the critical

times to come” (*Gospel Choirs* 156). The women Bell refers to who hold these critical roles certainly sound like womanists.

Particularly, three stories in *Gospel Choirs* are important to examine for their womanist themes and messages. The first is called “The Electric Slide Protest”. The story of this “protest” is told through the voice of Semple, Bell’s limo driver, while he recounts the story to his brother over the phone and Bell, his passenger, takes notes. This voice of an everyday man gives the story a tone of casual conversation. Semple explains that women all over the United States began gathering in the streets at the same time. He describes the diversity of the group, saying “these women were young, old, and all manner of in-between. They were all sizes, shapes, colors you can imagine...some of *them* were there, too. This wasn’t no class thing. To tell you the truth, it wasn’t a strictly black thing either” (*Gospel Choirs*, 166). This diverse makeup of women connects to Walker’s earlier definition of womanists as “like a flower garden, with every color flower represented” (Walker). Semple explains that, in unison, as if hearing music simultaneously in their heads, all the women took to the streets and started dancing the electric slide (*Gospel Choirs* 168).

Semple goes on to describe the power in the women’s movements, saying “there was a joy in the dancin’...it was a soulful response to the music, all those women actin’ together but also for their own selves. In fact, what they were doing puts the word *movement* to shame” (*Gospel Choirs* 168). This description gives an idea of the impressive and non-violent nature in which the women were dancing. His emphasis on the dance putting *movement* to shame can be read as a critique of the term “women’s

movement” to describe traditional feminist activism. The power of their dancing again connects to Walker’s definition in that a womanist “loves music. Loves dance...Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*” (Walker 19).

The electric slide protest encompasses many aspects of womanist activism in that it is universal, non-violent, and full of spirit. It is also in this story where the book’s title, *Gospel Choirs*, finds its meaning. During the women’s dancing, police begin to attempt to stop the women, and are mostly unsuccessful. The women then begin to sing a gospel song. Semple says, “the sisters is their own gospel choir...probably the biggest, baddest gospel choir in all of history” (*Gospel Choirs* 171). In this way, the protest is connected back to women of color’s spirituality and anchored in their faith. This story is meant to communicate the power of women of color, womanists, to come together and effect positive change in unique and unprecedented ways.

Bell explains in the next chapter that Geneva Crenshaw was involved as a key player in organizing the electric slide protest. Bell says that Crenshaw, “kept repeating that it was a great event for black women, and should be an inspiration, a classic example of a social gathering harmonized with political activism. She insisted that women’s groups had done most of the organizing... and that her role was purely one of coordination” (*Gospel Choirs* 175). The word choices of “harmonizing” and “coordinating” point to the conclusion that Crenshaw is a womanist.

Maparyan mentions “harmonizing and coordinating” in both *The Womanist Reader* and *The Womanist Idea*. She says that, harmonizing and coordinating “involve figuring out how to make disparate elements work together”, which in Crenshaw’s



protest may refer to people or ideologies of what “protests” usually look like (Phillips xxvii). Maparyan goes on to explain that harmonizing and coordinating, “is both a disposition and an activity” and is “foundational because all womanist methods have as their ultimate goal or organizing telos the desire for the reconciliation of human-human conflicts, human-environment conflicts, and human-spiritual realm conflicts” (Maparyan 57). In this way, Crenshaw’s role of harmonizing and coordinating the protest is a clear indication that the electric slide protest, as well as Crenshaw’s character, are working within the womanist method of social change.

Another story worth examining for its womanist themes is “Equality’s Child”. Bell tells this story at a social gathering of friends and colleagues, including Crenshaw. Bell says before beginning the story that it was “about a person something like Geneva”, and that she was the inspiration for the story (*Gospel Choirs* 177). It is interesting that he explicitly says this, since the reader assumes that Crenshaw has influence on almost all of the stories told by Bell, whether directly (as in *And We Are Not Saved*) or indirectly.

The story begins by describing the social, economic and political makeup of the United States. Bell points out that vast socioeconomic differences divided people into “haves” and “havenots”, and that women “suffered from a deeply embedded patriarchy” (*Gospel Choirs* 178). The idea of equality is given lip-service in this society, but its goals are never actually attained. One day, a female child appears, calling herself “Equality’s Child” (*Gospel Choirs* 179). She tells people she has no family, and Bell admits this is true in the nuclear, traditional sense. However, Bell points out that “Equality’s Child had a mother...She and her daughter were able to communicate across space, mind to mind”

(*Gospel Choirs* 179). Once again, Bell endows his female characters with supernatural abilities that cross the physical plane into a spiritual world that has the power to influence situations on earth.

This connection between the material and spiritual planes is another idea that is discussed in womanist texts. Maparyan describes this connection, saying, “the human condition sits at the interface of the visible and invisible realms. Thus, womanists are prepared to entertain—and influence—both sides of the equation” (Maparyan 36). Such influence can be caused by womanists through what Maparyan terms “spiritual methods” and “energy manipulation” (Maparyan 36). Equality’s child, and her mother on the invisible plane of existence, can therefore be read as womanists who are attempting social change. Equality’s Child *does*, in fact, produce change. She comes into contact with various people and, through their interactions, individuals are changed into fierce advocates for social justice, often at a cost to themselves, their fortunes, or their livelihoods (*Gospel Choirs* 181). The consequences of these individual’s newfound commitment to justice and true freedom and equality are, however, of no consequence to the individuals, but rather perceived as a threat to the powerful elites in government.

The court agrees that, in relation to Equality’s Child, “a nation’s most dangerous citizens are those who seek to implement rather than simply espouse the country’s most cherished ideals” (*Gospel Choirs* 182). This criticism can also be connected to Bell’s racial realism and interest convergence theories in that concepts like “equality” and “freedom” serve as false hopes for progress and change that actually maintain the harmful status quo of unequal treatment. Therefore, when threatened with action from the

courts, Equality's Child responds by saying, "those who commit themselves to real equality will find personal triumph even as they suffer public defeat. Their risks...serve to reveal the hypocrisy of those who use the words of justice for selfish, self-serving ends" (*Gospel Choirs* 183). Equality's Child is then imprisoned and put on trial. Her mother in the spiritual realm attempts to help her daughter, but since she has committed the "Great Transgression" of influencing human behavior, her fate is sealed (*Gospel Choirs* 184).

This conclusion may appear far from optimistic, but Bell is communicating the need for action and attempts to change the current state of the nation, even though these attempts may ultimately end in failure. This is a return to Bell's somewhat contradictory theories in which, even though the desired outcome may not be reached, the struggles for ideals such as equality are still worthwhile in and of themselves. Bell then quotes fellow CRT theorist, Patricia Williams, saying, "she reminds us that our goal is not the achievement of rights—which may or may not happen—but the committed struggle, one we should seek to join" (*Gospel Choirs* 186). Like Equality's Child, whose "Great Transgression" eventually doomed her, Bell is arguing for continued resistance to oppressive systems, in spite of the potential for destruction or personal punishment. Crenshaw also speaks to this type of risk when she hints at another activist project she is organizing, which she explains is "absolutely forbidden to my Curia Sisters and myself...after this second effort, I may have to leave for a long time—perhaps forever" (*Gospel Choirs* 187). Therefore, Crenshaw is using her powers as a Curia Sister and as a womanist to influence people to change at great risk to herself.

Womanist change, as Maparyan explains, is directed at “consciousness itself”, and is “different from intervening at the level of materiality”, which is simply the outward expression of consciousness (Maparyan 50). Equality’s Child affected change in people on the level of consciousness, not simply on their material, physical realities. Therefore, like Equality’s Child, Crenshaw is attempting to implement womanist methods of resistance and change through movements like the Electric Slide Protest, and recognizes that the seeds of change she will plant are worth the risks that accompany this action. The final act of change Crenshaw alludes to is further explained in the next chapter of *Gospel Choirs*: “The Entitlement”.

“The Entitlement” is an interesting story because it addresses sex explicitly, and because of its implications for gender roles. In this story, Crenshaw appears to Donnell B. Dancer, a television show host, and uses a false name—G.C. Curia (*Gospel Choirs* 194). She discusses with Dancer an affliction that has impacted black men and women alike called “S.E.T.” for “Sexual Entitlement Therapy” (*Gospel Choirs* 194). What happens to men and women is, just as they are about to have sex, they begin to hear gospel choirs singing about earning the entitlement, which is the act of sex. Crenshaw points out that, “all black couples hear the music, but many couples –evidently those in healthy, nonabusive relationships—experience no barriers” (*Gospel Choirs* 195). Other individuals are made unable to have intercourse because of “barriers” that appear and make sex impossible. It is interesting that Crenshaw says when sex is “marked by either dominance or manipulation” it is taken off the table and prevented (*Gospel Choirs* 196). Through this story, we come to understand that this is Crenshaw’s final attempt at social



activism and change that she alluded to in previous chapters. It can be read as womanist in that it seeks to address breakdowns in human-human relationships, even though it specifically impacts the black community.

Crenshaw gives Dancer evidence that the SET is an opportunity for growth, and not cause for despair. She says, “sexual fulfillment has to be deserved, and is the result of loving treatment flowing in both directions between two people who honestly love and respect one another” (*Gospel Choirs* 198). One can imagine how, if this were a requirement of *all* sexual encounters, gender relations may be radically refashioned. Crenshaw gives insight into the spiritual importance of gender equality in the realm of sexual relationships, saying “this most dramatic treatment was intended to get us to see the need to restructure our spiritual selves, to rethink what life is all about, and to bring into harmony all the forces of our being” (*Gospel Choirs* 201). She eventually convinces Dancer of her point, though he is resistant, stubborn, and embarrassed to admit she may have a point. She then literally disappears before Dancer’s eyes, revealing to him, and reminding the reader of, her otherworldly powers (*Gospel Choirs* 202). This story is very interesting in that it suggests that relationships between men and women, even at the sexual level, can greatly impact the spirituality these individuals possess.

By returning to spiritual connection, Crenshaw suggests that people can reshape their interactions with each other and the world around them. Bell thus allows Crenshaw to have a voice in this story, and to enact her womanist methods of change. Through Crenshaw’s development through *And We Are Not Saved* to *Gospel Choirs*, it is clear that her actions and her influence on Bell represent and embody a womanist worldview. The



overlapping themes of “harmonizing and coordinating”, the alliance of men and women in communities of color to enact change, and the ultimate goal of extending this change outward to all of humanity, represent the major connections that have been made between Crenshaw’s character and womanism.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONNECTING WOMANISM WITH BELL'S CRT

*The world buzzed with talk, which vibrated up to the sky toward the newly revealed mother. It was clear that god, appearing as a woman, was not what many had in mind for the second coming. The news covered nothing else that week, and many worked to decode the great mother's message. The global ceasefire was extended for a time until the earth could catch its breath and attempt new understanding. Women of color flooded into the streets when the message was over, and in the days following, singing and dancing in celebration. Their prayers, which had been sent up dutifully in times of joy and sorrow, had finally been received. Neighbors, government officials, and the media approached these women, who had never been given such attention before. Women everywhere were asked to give their interpretations of the message from the sky. The world was surprised at the divine understanding they held, especially from those women who had never received any formal education in all corners of the globe. The mother, they explained, wanted the world to change. A rebirth needed to happen. They spoke, encouraging the global citizens to recognize and implement the powers of love, charity, and kindness that could only lead to their redemption. Everything needed to be changed, and these women knew the way. Whether or not the world would follow their lead has yet to be seen. ~*

### A CONCLUSION

It is clear that Bell developed and wrote the character of Geneva Crenshaw to express complex themes that tie into racial inequality and oppression. As discussed in the previous chapter, Crenshaw embodies and enacts many decidedly womanist methods of spiritual activism. However, to attribute these womanist qualities to Bell without further discussion would be missing something. If we read Crenshaw as an extension of Bell's feminine and spiritual self, many things may be inferred about Bell's shift from a purely legal analysis of law to his questioning of gender and spirituality. For Bell, these issues are inexorably linked to struggles that are often debated through the courts and lawmaking bodies of the United States and in constitutional law courses.

Bell's development and representation of Crenshaw, especially in *Gospel Choirs*, shows that she was engaged in spiritual activism, a womanist method. During Maparyan's discussion of change through "standing in", she argues that this requires individuals, "to do the work and be the agent of change, even at some personal risks to themselves. Stated differently, they were standing up, whether quietly or boldly, as representatives and leaders of 'another world', positioning themselves to invite others to it" (Maparyan 70). Crenshaw, then, can be interpreted as enacting the womanist method of stand-in as a visitor from the heavenly realm of the Celestial Curia to inspire and provoke Bell to write and consider points of view he had been previously neglecting. It has been discussed that Bell considered Crenshaw to be "real", but how he meant this was unclear. It can be inferred, however, that her presence and guidance was real *to him*, to his process of writing and theorizing, and that this is just as important as imagining her as actually present in the physical sense of the word.

Bell blurs the lines between reality and fantasy through his vivid and persistent characterizations of Crenshaw, and his use of her character may suggest that he was using womanist methods to theorize about social change in regard to racism. Maparyan writes that womanists, "see the relation between 'above' and 'below', 'within' and 'without'" (Maparyan 101). Bell's interactions with Crenshaw, most notably in *And We Are Not Saved*, as well as *Gospel Choirs*, show that his understanding of oppression and inequality in the law was greatly influenced by Crenshaw, a manifestation of the spiritually rich and influential womanist activist. Through his characterization of Crenshaw, Bell shifts his own understandings of the importance of spirituality in thinking

about racism. By the time he writes *Gospel Choirs*, law is hardly the topic anymore, and the dialogue has shifted to incorporate gender inequality, spirituality, and uncommon forms of activism. While ideas such as “equality” and “freedom” are still explored by Bell, as in “Equality’s Child”, the tone of his inquiry has become much less based in rhetorical analyses of law and jurisprudence and much more aware of the spiritual implications for all humans.

Maparyan has pointed out that, “to deal in the invisible world – to see it, to communicate with it, to work it – is the logical upshot of both womanist spirituality and spiritual activism” (Maparyan 101). While she is speaking here of metaphysical practices such as energy manipulation and vibrational work, there is no reason to think these methods are the *only* ways in which to engage with the invisible realms of reality. Bell’s writing, and development of Crenshaw, can also be seen as an engagement with this “invisible world”, and indeed, Crenshaw is literally an invisible woman. Some may think that for Bell, a civil rights lawyer and law professor, to move to such a place negates or takes away from his more logical, analytical side. However, these two modes of analysis are not inherently dichotomous. As Maparyan argues, acknowledgment and engagement with the spiritual realm “is another way of thinking, another way of cogitating, another way of understanding; one that does not compete with rationality, but rather, overlays it” (Maparyan 101). Therefore, Bell, through the shift in his writing voice as the detached, rational law professor to the spiritual, gospel-singing activist is not contradictory, but may point to an evolution and development of his womanist beliefs.



Crenshaw's character serves many purposes for Bell, and one of these can be seen as representing what Phillips refers to in *The Womanist Reader* as "differential consciousness" (Phillips xxvii) She explains that this form of consciousness, "permits movement among and between divergent logics" (Phillips xxvii) Through examining Bell's writings and theories, such as the idea of "racial realism", it became clear that Bell often holds two contradictory beliefs simultaneously, without one de-legitimizing the other. This move on Bell's part shows his "differential consciousness", and the powerful stories an examination of these contradictions produced. In reference to social change, Bell admitted that, more often than not, victory would not be attained. However, this conclusion did not prevent Bell from arguing for the importance of protest, organization, and action. In this way, Bell does in fact hold a womanist mindset and embraces this unique way of thinking, writing, and theorizing.

Phillips stated that, "womanists exercise the right to describe someone or something else as exhibiting womanist tendencies if it appears that way to them, with the full understanding that someone else might have a different opinion" (Phillips xxxiv). This idea of identifying womanist qualities in something or someone, even if it does not identify itself as such, connects as well with her theory of "spiritual archaeology" discussed earlier. Through this analysis of Bell in relation to womanism, his theories have been re-examined for something new that had not been identified within them yet. The otherworldly aspects in Bell's writing reflect the development and exploration of a deeply rooted spirituality that Bell was accessing more and more over time, with the help of Crenshaw. When this spirituality was combined with his already developed passion for



activism and social justice, Bell completed his transformation into an example of what a womanist looks like. Though some may not fully agree with this assessment, it would be difficult to find another theoretical lens that so completely encompasses Bell's spiritual arguments and both social and political acts of protest and change.

Would Bell consider himself a feminist? Considering the many critiques of feminism's exclusion of women of color, Bell's personal emphasis on issues of race, and his hesitance in putting faith in liberal, identity-based ideologies, he would not likely identify his work as feminist in nature. Should we call Bell a womanist? Most definitely—if he hadn't considered the term before, he certainly wouldn't denounce the title. The ability for womanism to be broadly and fluidly analyzed and applied to diverse authors, texts, and individuals, makes it an important theory to consider for scholars not only in the field of women's studies, but for other individuals who are searching for a way to analyze spiritual outlooks, and to escape the binary setup of current identities.

Bell's writing ultimately shifted away from completely rational, logic-based examinations of law to a more encompassing worldview. *And We Are Not Saved* consisted almost entirely of detailed legal debates between Bell and Crenshaw, which uncovered the inherent contradictions within the legal system Bell originally had faith in. Once Bell's faith that jurisprudence and the legal system had the ability to enact social change was put into question by Crenshaw, he concluded that this was an impossible hope. However, his faith then moved to something more innate and empowering—the value of personal protest and taking action in the face of injustice and oppression, despite the odds being against the individual protester.

Bell wrote in a narrative style that reached out to individuals beyond the academy. While he examined legal principles and outcomes of legislation, his stories tended to get at the deeper *meaning* behind these laws and actions. As time passed, Bell's writing became more spiritual in nature, suggesting a shift to a womanist point of view. This exploration of Bell has attempted to show that womanist themes and expressions have been used by scholars and people, especially those of color, over time. Although individual writers and scholars, such as Bell, may not have used the term "womanism", the connections appear when sought out. Womanism then, becomes a valuable lens through which to view diverse scholars and texts in a new way, and to explore themes relating to spirituality as being worthy of serious academic consideration, especially for those engaged in the struggle for social justice and full equality. The stigma relating to spiritual thought in the academy should be re-examined, as this may be just what social change activists need to propel them into a new way of theorizing and practicing.

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