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# ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER

## NEWSLETTER

WINTER 1992

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2



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### From the Director, Margaret Wiborg

Last spring when the Shaw Center Advisory Board met to think about the future, we realized that we needed to work harder at hearing and understanding those among us whose realities differ from our own. Two immediate responses to this expressed need have already evolved.

This fall, several members of the Board have been studying Susan Thistlethwaite's book, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White*. With great integrity, Thistlethwaite addresses the question: "What happens when the differences between black and white women become the starting point for white feminist theology?"

This is a difficult study for those of us who are white, because it is not easy for a "dominant" to understand the reality of the "nondominant." Still, it is a necessary study because it points to the ways in which many white feminists are "seduced into uncritical acceptance of the white-assumed privilege of owning the world" (Thistlethwaite, 1991, 90-91).

In addition to this study, our fall and winter newsletters have intentionally presented articles by nondominant voices. In the last edition, we featured an article by Valerie Stiteler on "Singing Without a Voice: Using Disability Images in the Language of Public Worship." This edition features Dean Imani-Sheila Newsome's article on womanist thought.

For yet another perspective, the Shaw Center looks forward to welcoming back our friend, Yoo Cha Yi. Yoo Cha is a Master of Divinity student who returned to Korea this past year to do cross-cultural research on the Korean women's

movement in the early Korean church and on traditional folk arts. Her experience will no doubt lend another important voice to our learnings about difference.

As many of you will remember, the focus of our 1990 *Women and the Word* event was "Honoring Difference." Moving beyond this title to truly honor diversity means constant work. It requires that we deal with hard truths and share power in ways we have never considered or perhaps even valued. We are learning, though, thanks to strong women such as Susan, Valerie, Imani-Sheila, and Yoo Cha, that we can only be about justice-making if our perspective is more inclusive and our differences are recognized and truly honored.

As we continue to grow in wisdom, I hope that we may also grow bolder; bold enough to take the risks we need to take, in order to keep faith with those who look to us to make the world a more just and loving place for us *all*.

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### Womanist Thought in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, a powerful example of the sacred literature of womanist thought, continues the literary tradition of African-American women who seek to promote women's wisdom for the African-American community. Morrison follows in the footsteps of Zora Neale Hurston, Harriet Brent Jacobs, and Nella Larsen, who sought over time to provide resources that would guide African-American women out of a maze of oppression and humiliation. To appreciate the place of *Beloved* in

this literary liberation movement, one must first understand the context in which these women write.

Dr. Katie G. Cannon, in her work on Black women's literature, states that African-American women writers "embrace moral action, religious values and the rules of conduct handed down by word of mouth in the folk culture" (Cannon 1989, 291). She then suggests that the work of these writers "transforms the cultural limitations and unnatural restrictions in the [Black] community's move toward self authenticity" (ibid.).

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In journals, biographies, novels, and poems, African-Americans have created sacred texts that detail not only the creation and recreation of their lives out of despair, but that of their communities as well. In documenting the horror of being African-American and a woman in a society designed to eradicate both, they present a survival ethic that has not been lost on present day daughters. African-American women writers also offer a new view of nineteenth and twentieth-century notions of the "woman's sphere." These women detail relationships, sexuality, childbirth, decision making, partnerships, work, and parenting under the tri-dimensional structure of racism, sexism, and classism that permeates society.

They expose the unfortunate failures and necessary strengths that create the essential "woman self" that is crucial for their function as communal caretakers. For African-American women trying to analyze these sacred texts, in a theological context, the development of the term *womanist* by Alice Walker brings together a concise framework by which African-American women may distill truth for informing their work.

The term *womanist* was constructed by Alice Walker in 1983 in her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. The term embodies the fragments which, when welded together, allow the Black woman to describe the character and actions that evolve from her woman self. A womanist is courageous, willful, capable, and willing to explore the metaphysical frames which govern her reality, making her curious enough to explore beyond the boundaries set for her. She is serious about being serious.

"Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people [sic], male *and* female" (Walker 1983, xi), a womanist works from a context of love. This love, which begins with the shared love between herself and the Spirit, fuels the spiritual relationship that she finds in her everyday contexts of worship, celebration, embodied activities, and conflict. Such a love gives her a view of the universe all her own—a world view that makes life possible.

Like Walker, Black women theologians place the presence of the Spirit, or the God invisible but active, firmly at the foundation of womanist thought. The Spirit informs "women's experience of transcendence, of faith, of ritual and of God" (Williams 1985, 68). This God gives power to transcend the limitations of an oppressive God the Father who represents patriarchal oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, and classism. God in this wise binds wounds and brokenness and confronts evil systems that make living more burdensome than dying.

The womanist tradition elicits a pro-life ethic based on love for the self, regardless, and then, love for the entire community. It is the Black woman who then emerges as the moral agent of the community, moving women, children, and men toward life and life-affirming actions. In the words of theologian Delores Williams, "Black women engage in lifeline politics that maintains life, justice seeking and truth" (ibid.).

As moral agents, using lifeline politics, Black women move to communal centers to present their thoughts and actions as motivations toward pro-life actions. Particularly in Black women's literature and in their lives, this involves their kinship relationship with other women as blood

and adopted kin. True to womanist thought, information is passed mother to child (usually daughter), woman to partner, or woman to woman, as a way of providing paths to liberation.

Black women's literature, historical, theological, personal, and communal, displays the ethic of Black women as Spirit/God-based and love motivated. Personal well-being is not gained at the sacrifice of the communal but personal activity fosters communal well-being. In turn communal well-being attests to the overcoming of the barriers of racism, sexism, and classism. The cycle of well-being of person to community places justice as the ultimate ethical good of all. Such justice work places a challenge before all African-American women. When African-American women do justice work, gender, race, and class analyses are brought to bear, giving birth to the creative energy that confronts the evil which oppression brings.

Now to *Beloved*. The novel opens with Sethe, mother to a daughter and two sons long gone, reflecting on the state of her family. She is mourning the loss of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs Holy, who acted as her loving guide. An evangelist with her own version of the gospel, Baby Suggs Holy once led others by the wisdom of her heart. Busy seeing for and healing everyone else, however, she, like many African-American women, loses sight of her own life and her own hope. In the end, her loss of hope leaves her hungering for whatever bits of life people bring her.

Sethe too has a hunger, a hunger for peace from her past. As an escaped slave living in Ohio, she has escaped physical chains but not mental ones. Sethe's mental chains are linked to her dead daughter, Beloved, whom Sethe murdered rather than see enslaved. The haunting memory of this tragedy is now embodied in the mysterious presence of an African-American woman who comes to live with Sethe and uses the name of the deceased child, Beloved.

Beloved, the woman, drains the milk of Sethe's life, very much like the infant daughter would have required the milk of her breast. She demands all that Sethe can offer, lost stories about relationships, lost memories of a

community of mothering women, old questions about intimacy and desire, reflections on freedom and selfhood which Sethe has avoided. Preoccupied with nurturing the past agony that Beloved personifies, Sethe loses herself and allows her household to be consumed as well. As the embodiment of an unresolved past, Beloved thwarts Sethe's present and threatens her future.

In the midst of this turmoil, Sethe's daughter, Denver, tries to hold things together. Ironically, Denver's birth, like the infant Beloved's death, had held its own tension. Denver's namesake, Amy Denver, was a white indentured servant running from her own prison of class and gender. In a brief encounter with Amy on the banks of the Ohio River, Sethe received the strength to birth the girl child she thought would surely die. When it was over, each fugitive woman had gained a sense of renewal and determination to pursue life when life had been denied by the more powerful forces that controlled them.

Now it is Denver, the child born in past distress, who becomes the voice of hope for Sethe and those around her. Like the daughter in Alice Walker's womanist definition, she begins to put into thought and words the need for her own salvation and her mother's. It is Denver who becomes the grown-up in the mystery world created by her mother and Beloved. She appreciates the beauty they spin out on a wheel of fantasy, yet she searches for a strength that will bring them all into a solid reality.

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*Beloved thus represents the ghosts of foremothers who remind womanists that they must use historical truths of the past to critique the present.*

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As an African-American woman engaging in womanist thought, I draw parallels between the lives of these women and the many dimensions of experience that motivate the womanist scholar.

Baby Suggs Holy, the backwoods preacher whose voice is heard throughout the book, is symbolic of the Spirit. She is loved for the wisdom she offers and the comfort she brings in the crises of life. She is a catalyst for ritual, thanksgiving, and celebration in the community around her. Within the novel, she is a role model who clearly demonstrates the need for the spiritual in response to the tragedies that historical and present-day African-American women face.

*Beloved*, from her mysterious appearance to her eventual disappearance, becomes the catalyst for change in family and community, especially for the women. She reveals the turmoil that comes when African-American women are reminded of the yesterdays they must face before they can embrace the future with integrity.

Left unfronted, *Beloved*, like the unresolved past, eats away at Sethe's ability to commit to her own survival, the survival of her daughter Denver, and her relationship with her community. *Beloved* thus represents the ghosts of fore-mothers who remind womanists that they must use historical truths of the past to critique the present.

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*For true dialogue with African-American women to begin, no other strategy is possible.*

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Sethe and her daughter Denver are caught in a legacy of pain and degradation. Each in her own way seeks to deal with past issues of shame: Sethe by denying it and Denver by finally confronting it. Like many African-American women of today, they are engaged in keeping the lies of racism and sexism from blocking their own sunlight of truth. Sethe is swallowed up in her struggle to the point of invisibility, while Denver takes on the difficult task of reaching beyond the given structure of her world to gain a visible self. In the end, it is Denver's self-awareness and love for herself, and then her family, that leads to communal action on her mother's behalf.

*Beloved*, the novel, thus brings to light the daily battle with racism, sexism, and class that must be fought with thought, word, and deed—tools of lifeline politics that African-American women can never take for granted. Further exploration of this literature by women and men who seek to build a more just world can open a window to the anguish often hidden in the lives of African-American women and their communities. Such insight can lead to a clearer understanding of the emergence of womanist thought and the need to take this thought seriously on its own terms. For true dialogue with African-American women to begin, no other strategy is possible.

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Cannon, Katie Geneva, "Moral Wisdom in the Black Women's Literary Tradition" in *Weaving the Vision*. ed. by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

Walker, Alice, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

Williams, Delores, "Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics in Black Women's Religious Narratives," in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol.1 No. 2 (Fall 1985) : 59-71.

Imani-Sheila Newsome is Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at BUSTH

### Lost and Found: Doing Oral History in Detroit

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Have you ever lost something of which you wish now you had kept a record? This question, posed by T. C. Whitehouse, opened our oral history workshop at the Second Historical Convocation of the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. Held this past June, at the Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Detroit, Michigan, the workshop provided an opportunity for the Anna Howard Shaw Center's Oral History Project Training Team to share the work we have been engaged in since 1986 and to train others interested in preserving the past as well as the present.

After participants shared losses they had experienced, ranging from valuable objects and precious moments to written scripts and spoken words, the training began in earnest. In addition to viewing "The Oral Historian's Work" by Dr. Edward Ives and reviewing oral history resources, Faith Richardson, T.C., and I talked about how our oral history project began and how our work has progressed.

Then I had fun demonstrating the don'ts of interviewing. I fumbled and bumbled, and asked dumb questions like "Who are you and why?" and "For you, what is the meaning of life?" Nevertheless, volunteer David Evans gave a great interview, a copy of which is now in the Shaw Center.

Faith focused on the interview questions, the progression from factual to philosophical questions and the importance of knowing the subject of the interview. Participants then practiced interviewing in pairs. Our hands-on process was helpful and the feedback received was enthusiastic. One participant, Paul Chilcote, was inspired to institute an oral history program at the new Africa University, a UMC-related institution in Zimbabwe!

I only wish there were an oral history of Anna, so that we could experience the clear contralto voice with which she charmed and informed her audiences. The oral histories we are recording now will give future students the opportunity to hear as well as read the words of significant women.

T.C. and I also conducted a separate workshop on "Oral History in the Local Church." Why bother? Consider this: T.C. talked about using oral histories to educate new members, enlighten new ministers, enrich anniversary celebrations and fulfill archival responsibilities for the church of tomorrow that will need to know about the church of yesterday and today.

The Oral History Project Training Team was once six presenters in search of an invitation. That is no longer the case. In October, for example, Margaret Wiborg, along with Faith and T.C., presented workshops on "Women in Ministry" and "Oral History Training" at METHESCO, a United Methodist Seminary in Delaware, Ohio.

Additional team members are being sought to respond to other requests.

If you would like to share the excitement of this project and preserve the history of women as part of the training team, let us know of your interest. The oral histories we have collected are stored in the School of Theology library.

*Lee Carpenter, a member of the Shaw Center's Advisory Board, has been a member of the training team since its inception.*

### **Rest for the Weary: The Women, Work and Wholeness Project**

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that Jesus of Nazareth said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)." Often, only the spiritual dimensions of this passage have been commented upon and preached about. For example, we are told that Christ can relieve us of the spiritual burdens of sin or unfaithfulness, or that our relationship with God can relieve the spiritual weight of grief or suffering. This spiritual interpretation of Jesus' words is, of course, helpful. However, another aspect of this passage also bears reflection. For those women who work to maintain families, churches, and communities, who nurture the next generation, who grease the wheels of everyday conversations and social relationships, who feed, clothe, teach, inspire, advise, and support others, often at the same time that they pursue professional careers and important outside interests, this passage may hold a concrete, here-and-now promise as well.

It was on the strength of this promise that more than forty women gathered this past October at Arnold Mills United Methodist Church, in the rural serenity of Cumberland, Rhode Island, to talk about our work, our lives, and our struggles for wholeness and peace. In a culture and church that encourages women's self-sacrifice, that denies women's work while at the same time relying so heavily on it, we met to ask how we can affirm ourselves, balance our lives, and meet our own needs as well as the needs of our

neighbors. How can we, in short, not only "love our neighbor," but "love our neighbor as ourselves"?

Several speakers contributed to our reflections. In the morning, Nancy Arnison, JoAnn Carlotto, and Sandra Leonard brought us their wisdom about how they balance work and play, how they remain accountable to their own needs, and how they find time to nurture themselves emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Our luncheon speaker, Evelyn Johnson Moore, helped us to see how a family can be fashioned to support all its members. Afternoon small-group sessions allowed us to share our own wisdom about what has worked in our own lives. Later, we learned some concrete components of both personal and professional self-care and received pointers from Margaret Wiborg on spiritual refreshment in the midst of busy lives. Time alone also allowed us to reflect on our complicated, often over-busy lives.

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During the day we learned from women who live alone as well as women who live with family members. We heard from women who are pursuing careers in the marketplace, women who work in the home, women who divide their time among various forms of work, and women who are undergoing transitions in their work lives. We talked about the choices we had made and the ways that societal expectations of women condition those choices. We took time to affirm the many things that we do and the importance of our work. We also admitted that we are often overwhelmed and exhausted.

We left with a healthier sense of ourselves, and of what we can reasonably expect of ourselves. We took with us the empowering knowledge that we are not alone in the struggle to balance our many commitments with our own need for spiritual, physical, and emotional nurture and refreshment. This workshop and others like it

will, we hope, open our churches, families, and communities to a discussion of the many important questions surrounding women's work and wholeness.

*Anne Marie Hunter is a member of the Shaw Advisory Board and recently received a Ph.D. in Religion and Society from Drew University.*

### **Taking Sexual Abuse Seriously**

The Boston University Council on Sexual Abuse (COSA) sponsored a seminar titled "Power Dynamics in Sexual Abuse: A Training Event for Clergy" on February 20. The event featured a role play by an area minister and two council members in which a couple comes to the pastor seeking advice on relational problems resulting from one partner's recent recovery of memories of child sexual abuse. The role play was followed by an in-depth panel discussion on the ethical, theological, and psychological implications of sexual abuse. Featured panelists were The Rev. Dr. Carrie Doehring who is currently serving on the faculty at Boston University, Peggy and Scott Osondu, co-founders of the Council on Sexual Abuse, and the Rev. Alden Flanders.

COSA was formed by School of Theology students and faculty and is in its third year of programming. The purpose of the council is to educate and inform seminarians and local pastors on issues related to sexual abuse. COSA is unique in the burgeoning field of sexual abuse education because of its commitment to viewing sexual abuse as a systemic problem which requires systemic solutions. The council espouses that sexual abuse is not simply an issue of men against women or women against men. It is, ultimately, an issue of societally sanctioned systems of power and powerlessness, which is manifested in the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, but not unique to it. The council has sponsored several educational events in the past few years, videotapes of which are available for loan from the School of Theology library.

Any individual who is interested in being apprised of future COSA events may contact Doreen Treacy at 617/353-3050.

*Doreen Treacy is an M.Div. student at BUSTH*

### News of Our Women Faculty

**Paula Fredericksen's** recent work includes: "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity. From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo," *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991): 151-183; "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 42 (1991): 532-64; "Vile Bodies. Paul and Augustine on the Resurrection of the Flesh," *Biblical Interpretation in Historical Perspective*, eds. M. Burrows and P. Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and "Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Bernard McGinn and Richard Emerson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). In addition to several public lectures, Paula also gave the following papers: "Jewish Proselytism and the Origins of Christian Mission," *Recruitment, Conquest, and Conflict in Judaism, Early Christianity and the Graeco-Roman World*, Emory University, March 1991; and "Selfhood Under God: Augustine and Ancient Christianity," Institute for Philosophy and Religion, Boston University, March 1991.

**Imani-Sheila Newsome** preached on several occasions this past year, including "Who Will Roll Away the Stone...? A Conference Celebrating the Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) sponsored by the Massachusetts Council of Churches, May 11, 1991. She led a women's retreat in September at Bethel AME Church, Mattapan, MA, was a group facilitator at the Shaw Center's *Women, Work, and Wholeness* event in October, and presided at the "Metalogues and Dialogues: Teaching the Womanist Idea," seminar at the American Academy of Religion, which met in Kansas City in November 1991. Imani also lectured in October on "The Womanist Idea in Theology" at the Boston College Chaplain's Program and on "Womanist Theology: Sin and Salvation," at Wheaton College in Wheaton, MA. In December she attended the Pan-Methodist

Coalition Consultation on Substance Abuse in Fort Worth, Texas.

Congratulations to **Jennifer Rike** on the publication of her book *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, co-edited with Werner Jeanrond. (New York: Crossroad, 1991). Jennifer also wrote the festschrift's introduction, "Radical Pluralism and Truth in the Thought of David Tracy," and published "Driving to the Grand Canyon: Thelma and Louise," in *Keep the Faith. Journal for the Ministry of the Laity*, Fall 1991: 14.

**Dana Robert's** recent work includes the following: "Epilogue: Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America," in *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Macmillan, 1991); "The Promotion of Missions" in *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991); She also delivered three lectures: "History of Catholic Women in Mission," at Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Resource Center, Providence, R.I., May 1991; "Research Methodologies for American Women in Mission," at The Association of Professors of Mission, Techny, ILL., June 1991; and "The Mission Theory of Antebellum Women Missionaries," at American Studies Series, Boston University, Nov. 6, 1991.

### Best Wishes Mary Lou!

Congratulations to Mary Lou Greenwood Boice, school registrar and member of the Shaw Advisory Board. As of April 1, Mary Lou moves to new and challenging responsibilities as dean of admissions at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga. Her contributions to the Shaw Center over the past ten years have been immeasurable. Though we will miss her very much we are delighted that such an exciting opportunity has opened up for her. Take Anna's spirit with you, Mary Lou! You have our hearts!

### **Congratulations Anna!**

On February 9, 1992, the Shaw Center observed the celebration of Anna's birthday and recognition of the Anna Howard Shaw window as a United Methodist Historic Site.

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### **ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER NEWSLETTER**

Volume 8, Number 2

Managing Editor  
*Margaret Wiborg*

Editor  
*June Christine Goudey*

Contributors  
*Lee Carpenter, Anne Marie Hunter,  
Imani-Sheila Newsome, Margaret Wiborg*

Boston University  
School of Theology  
745 Commonwealth Avenue  
Boston, MA 02215

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### **Upcoming Events:**

**April 3-5, 1992: *Whose World? What Order? Women and the Politics of Faith.*** An opportunity to honor cross-cultural encounters and reflect on their spiritual and political impact for present and future realities. Leadership includes women from a wide variety of perspectives. For more information, contact the Women's Theological Center at 617/277-1330.

***When Cultures Collide: 1492-1992.*** Lecture series sponsored by Andover Newton Theological School, 210 Herrick Road, Newton Centre, MA.

**Tuesday, April 28, 1992: Who Was the God of the European Christians?: A Native American View.** James Lee West and the Rev. Rosemary Maxey; 7:30 p.m., free.

**Wednesday, September 23, 1992: Evangelizing the "Heathen:" Changing Concepts of Evangelism.** Dr. Luis Rivera Pagán. Fall Convocation, Noon, free.