



2022

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#### Recommended Citation

Johnston, Taylor (2022) "Our Foremothers' Offering of Salvation," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 8, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol8/iss1/10>

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# Our Foremothers' Offering of Salvation

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I SAW A FULL-BODY SHOT OF my Cook Islander grandmother. It was like looking in a mirror. Although I had never met her, she seemed familiar. She had the same broad shoulders, the same cheek-bone structure, the same long limbs, the same delicate fingers, the same squinty eyes, and the same confused facial expression as I do. As I've contemplated this experience and returned to the photograph over and over again, I am always empowered with the thought, "I was made in her image." But if I was made in her image, how then am I made in the image of God? Am I made in the image of God? In this paper, I will address this question by comparing Patricia L. Hunter and Ivone Gebara's writings, as they discuss the nature of self, sin, and redemption. Although they differ, I hope to reveal a connection between Hunter's focus on developing the self and Gebara's emphasis on community by establishing salvation as a simultaneously personal and communal experience.

Patricia Hunter, a womanist theologian, challenges the commonly held perception that God is white and male. She seeks to answer: *how is a black woman to believe she is godlike, when she is neither white or male?* For black women to overcome these insecurities, Hunter suggests a need to reimage God.<sup>1</sup> As a Polynesian woman, how then do I reimage God in order to believe I am godlike without projecting my own ideals onto Him? I believe the answer lies in turning to the past for a tangible model of what is good, just as I did with my grandmother. We experience salvation of the self when we come to know who our ancestors are as products of the past. Such self-discovery places us in a communal and interdependent relationship with our foreparents as we seek salvation in the present and future. To conceptualize salvation as an offering from the past, I will

<sup>1</sup> Patricia L. Hunter, *Women's Power—Women's Passion*, (New York, Orbis Books, 1993), 191.

compare Hunter and Gebara's commentaries on oppressive interpretations of doctrine and their suggestions for empowering women.

Both Hunter and Gebara object to how women have been disempowered by oppressive interpretations of doctrine but their objection varies in practice. Hunter focuses on unraveling the deficiency in perpetuated beliefs surrounding the nature of God, which prompts her to take a more individualistic approach to empowering women. Gebara, on the other hand, reconceptualizes suffering and salvation as communal experience, which causes her solutions to be community focused.

Women have been defined as antithetical to godliness. This is evident in both Hunter and Gebara's writings, but they observe this antithetical relationship between women and the divine from two different doctrinal perspectives. Hunter focuses on the nature of God; Gebara focuses on suffering and salvation. As previously mentioned, Hunter evaluates the assumption that God is white and male. To characterize God as white and male means defining black women as the opposite of the image of God. This characterization of God causes black women to deny the truth that they are created in the image of God. As a result, black women deny themselves the opportunity to come to know themselves completely and as Godlike which further denies such privilege to other women of color. In turn, black women sin as they attempt to "[remake themselves] into someone else's image."<sup>2</sup> These perceived offenses against God are a product of the perpetuation of a white, male model of God, a model that has legitimized white, male domination over black women.<sup>3</sup>

Gebara observes a similar legitimization of female subordination but focuses on the reality that women's suffering has been devalued and silenced.<sup>4</sup> This has led to the exclusion of women's suffering as a symbol of salvation and has characterized women as cursed and evil. In turn, women have been disassociated from godliness. This is evident in audience reactions to Edwina Sandy's "Christas" sculpture which depicted the crucifixion of a woman. Instead of acknowledging the artwork's religious value, the audience objectified the female body by deeming the work pornographic.<sup>5</sup> This disassociation is a product of the glorification of male suffering, modeled by Christ's crucifixion "as the only way to salvation."<sup>6</sup> Women are then disempowered, confined to a life of suffering and remorseful obedience as they await salvation in the afterlife. As a

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2 Hunter, *Women's Power—Women's Passion*, 194.

3 *Ibid.*, 190–191, 194–195.

4 Ivone Gebara, *Women's Experience of Salvation*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002), 111.

5 Gebara, *Women's Experience of Salvation*, 117.

6 *Ibid.*, 118.

result, religious institutions disempower women by labeling them as subordinates who are guilty and spiritually in debt. Meanwhile, these same institutions avoid accountability for their own sins of oppression.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Hunter and Gebara focus on two different doctrinal issues, they provide varying solutions in the quest to empower women. Hunter suggests a reimagining of God and proposes that black women must “[claim] their divine privilege to be who God has created them to be.”<sup>8</sup> To claim such privilege, black women must find personal passion and power as they strive to live “whole and healthy lives.”<sup>9</sup> Finding their passion involves seeking to know and celebrate the self completely, “psychologically, physically, spiritually and sexually.”<sup>10</sup> Black women must come to know for themselves that “they are wonderfully made [in the image of God]”<sup>11</sup> if they are to find their voice, passion, and value within their Christian communities.

Alternatively, Gebara calls communities to realize the “relatedness”<sup>12</sup> between men, women, and the nonhuman. She builds upon the premise that suffering can be a shared experience and does not need to be borne in isolation. Salvation can be experienced in the present as well as in the future and is not reserved for the privileged.<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate, she breaks down the example of Christ’s crucifixion claiming that “His cross does not stand alone”<sup>14</sup> but was borne in solidarity with the community. Gebara decentralizes and humanizes the symbol of the cross,<sup>15</sup> and normalizes salvation as daily power.<sup>16</sup> She asserts that men and women are responsible for the actualization of such salvation. She utilizes this concept as a framework to understand the relationship between sin and suffering as she observes that, “women’s sins are connected with men’s excesses and that men’s sins are connected with what women lack.”<sup>17</sup> By recognising the relatedness of all things, Gebara denounces a hierarchical, androcentric, and dualistic experience of mortality and promotes justice for all.

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7 Ibid., 117, 113.

8 Hunter, *Women’s Power—Women’s Passion*, 191.

9 Ibid., 195.

10 Ibid., 192.

11 Ibid., 194.

12 Gebara, *Women’s Experience of Salvation*, 132.

13 Gebara, *Women’s Experience of Salvation*, 113–114, 123.

14 Ibid., 115.

15 Ibid., 115.

16 Ibid., 122.

17 Ibid., 143.

Salvation is no longer exclusive to a superior group but is offered to and experienced by all.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Hunter and Gebara providing insight into the oppressive regimes of religious institutions, both theologians limit their solutions to being either individualistic or communal in nature and neglect to present how the self and community are inherently connected in the redemptive process. Hunter, I believe, focuses too much on the self as she states, “The power we experience begins internally and then enables us to influence our surrounds.”<sup>19</sup> Hunter’s egocentric view of empowering women for the community’s benefit neglects to explore how the self is a product of the community. She does allude to some form of community with the past suggesting that, “Our passion is born of our mothers.”<sup>20</sup> She then diminishes this connection as merely a source of inspiration in the self-discovery journey. She disregards the reality that the self’s corporal being is a product of the self’s ancestors. Gebara’s transcendent theory of relatedness and salvation provides a potential avenue for Hunter to intensify the connection between the self and the community. However, even Gebara limits the experience of salvation to the present and future, disregarding the relatedness of the past, present, and future in shaping the community. By bringing the two theologians together, I propose a reading of the self to be a product of a community from the past.

In the process of self-discovery, as promoted by Hunter, an individual is opened to a community from the past. The individual can become aware of Gebara’s concept of relatedness which is formed between the living and the dead, the past and the present. The dead live on in the living with the living existing because of the dead. This is manifest in the physical and metaphysical bodies of the self in which attributes inherited from ancestors are imprinted upon the self. The past is present in the corporal being of the self. This realization empowers the individual to recognize that their value and goodness has been inherited from their past. It empowers the individual to no longer sin as they attempt to remake themselves in the image of another, to embrace the physical and metaphysical attributes they already possess, and to recognize their value in greater society and in God’s kingdom.

In returning to the photograph of my grandmother, I can focus on the truth, “I am created in her image” (“her” being my foremothers) rather than focusing on the ambiguous idea that “I am created in His image.” I can then acknowledge that “God has not made a mistake in creating me of

18 Ibid., 143.

19 Hunter, *Women’s Power–Women’s Passion*, 192.

20 Ibid., 192.

Polynesian descent,” and that I am good and deserving of God’s grace. By refocusing the image of God to be a model of my past, I come to see that salvation is not exclusively offered to me by God but that He offers salvation in union with my foremothers. Salvation then becomes a product of the past. *Salvation is born of our mothers.*

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