Reimagining public discourse

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This essay focuses on the basic theme of black theology as public discourse, by placing black theology and feminist theology side-by-side to consider, retrospectively, how they function as public discourse and have shaped public discourse and, prospectively, one possible vision of the future. I assume that, as David Tracy has argued, all theology is in some sense public. I want to examine how these two theologies, taken together, are to be interpreted as "public discourses" and how, in turn, they redefine or add to our notion of "public discourse."

I will bring together black and feminist theologies for both personal and cultural reasons. As a theologian whose whole career has been spent participating in liberation theology—indeed, as someone who is part of the first generation to grow up with these movements and whose career has been so deeply formed through the emergence of feminist theology—I find myself wondering about the past and future of my theological home and inescapably drawing comparisons between it and the retrospect and prospect of black theology. These two theologies share a common cultural context, some common theoretical resources in ideology critique, hermeneutics, and the retrieval of the prophetic or mystical/prophetic strand in Christianity. By bringing these together we may be able to understand that something quite distinct has been happening in theology and public discourse during the last thirty years.

To bring these two movements together and ask, "What do they tell us about public discourse?", is a problematic task! Indeed, such theological movements have said so soundly that there is no abstract public, no unmarked voice in the center, and that one can only speak from one's own place, that I falter a bit before I begin. How can I, a white feminist Christian, say anything about black theology? But, of course, the whole point of discourse and public discourse is to communicate, to be heard, to engage in what Hannah Arendt would call simply, "debate." So in bringing together these two discourses--feminist theology and black theology--to inquire into "public discourse," I do so recognizing that my own location may well prejudice how and what I hear. While I do not intend to read black theology through feminist theology, I am openly bringing along my place as a feminist theologian, rather than abstracting from it, in order to be honest about the perspective I bring--and my own retrospective.

I also fear that by bringing these two discourses together I might be heard as not dealing significantly enough with the differences between these two and mitigating or belittling the problems of sexism in black theology or the problems of racism in feminist theology. The differences are very important. Womanist theology has had the double burden of pointing this out in both theologies: Thinkers such as Jackie Grant and Delores Williams have had to analyze the structuring of oppression in each discourse.

It is, therefore, important to keep these multiple and complex problems in the foreground as we examine the ways in which black theology and feminist theology function as public discourse and how they have helped transform the nature and status of public discourse. I will organize my argument under three rubrics:

1. Narrative Identity and Public Discourse (how these theologies function),
2. Public Discourse and Testimony (how they have shaped discourse) and,
3. Imagining the Public as a Space for Cultivating Compassion (a prospective proposal).

1. Narrative Identity and Public Discourse

Let me begin by locating "public discourse." Let us assume that public discourse can mean, from the work of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, the sphere of rational discourse in which citizens are free to debate matters of interest in the social order. Habermas and historians of the "public sphere" argue that the public arose with liberal democracy and depended upon a number of historical factors, including the emerging urban geography of pubs, libraries, civic associations, and other arenas of and for discourse. Habermas recognized that this public failed to ever be completely realized and, perhaps rightfully so since, as alternative public sphere historians have shown, it depended upon exclusions of gender, race and class. As Fraser points out, there is a certain irony: the public sphere is developed as place of free speech, but it, in turn, creates and secures distinctions and calls into
question the "public" nature of it all.\[2\]

This broad sense of the social public must be supplemented, in the case of theology, by the publics of church and the academy. Especially in late industrial capitalism, the church and the academy also are publics--spaces to which persons belong and, in some sense, determine interests in common. These are not three separate publics, but overlapping and reinforcing ones. The autonomous rational citizen of the social public was trained in the academy and received legitimation and comfort in the church. The academy and church shared common assumptions with the social public about rationality, anthropology, freedom, discourse, and identity. And, as Fraser notes, there are also sub-publics and counter publics—such as the black church within the ecclesial public—though, I would suggest, these counter publics are such by virtue of what we perceive as public and, thus, are a constitutive part of the larger, overlapping publics.

It is, of course, calling into question this irony of publicness that is the aim and work of so much of black and feminist theologies. One way to understand the retrospective aspect of black theology and feminist theology is to sketch out in broad strokes how they have called into question the narrative identity of the social and ecclesial publics (I will leave the public of the academy for another day).

To analyze how black and feminist theologies called into question the narrative identity of the public, I need to define, briefly, what I mean by "narrative identity." A public depends on what Raymond Williams would call a "selective tradition," i.e., a narrative of rationality, of rational human beings, of human rights, of revolution in politics, economics, law, and, yes, even religion.\[3\] I like to adapt the phrase of Benedict Anderson, and say that a public is an "imagined community" based on the narration of memory, inclusivity, shared commonness.\[4\] By "narrative identity," I mean the "we," the story we tell ourselves that defines our "we." This is not the only feature of the public, but it is, from a theological viewpoint, a very important characterization because it provides our fundamental assumptions, our images upon which we build our norms, our values such as courage, respect, dignity, and compassion. As Paul Ricoeur would suggest, the "we" is an ideological construct, a means of social and public cohesion, though the "we" fails to fully represent the real.

Black theology and feminist theology used what Gadamer and Ricoeur might call an "applied hermeneutics" to remember and retell the history of the American and Christian publics. The social public and the ecclesial public formed their identities through their narratives. And these narratives were shaped through the prejudices of those who—in the best Gadamerian sense—told the story. Black and feminist theologians criticized the assumed narrative identity of America and American Christianity by remembering and retelling how things really happened and constructing new narrative identities for these publics. So Black and feminist theologians had to engage in ideology critique, an ethical responsibility to retell the story told from the viewpoint of hegemonic discourse. But along with such critique, to engage in what Ricoeur and Kearney might call "poetic license"—as well as historiography—these theologians created new narrative identities based on alternative memories and experiences not yet represented in the public as real. Narrative helps us represent the past as it really was and reinvent it as it might have been.

Central to both the ideological critique and the new sources for narrative identity—in both black and feminist theology—is the memory of suffering. It is suffering and oppression in multiple forms that provide the impetus both for ideology critique and for the speaking and hearing of voices forgotten or silenced. As Richard Kearney has observed, our identity—be it national or communal—is inextricably linked to our memory.\[5\] Questioning which memories we recall and which ones we repress is how both black and feminist theologies have functioned in the public domain, enlarging and expanding our narrative identity.

Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, to take the "classic" example, is about questioning the narrative identity of the public, it is about the memory and expression of suffering and oppression. His insistence on remembering and telling the story of suffering was striking and upsetting to the "real" of the narrative identity of white male American public discourse. It sounded angry; it was.

In reading back over *Black Theology and Black Power* I am struck by how Cone used the basic tools of American narrative—such as freedom, hope, and existentialism—and the voices of its public intellectuals—Tillich, Camus, Barth, and others—to remember. Narrative identity can remember new things, but it does so through present signifiers. To make an analogy, therapy can allow you to remember what you have forgotten, but it does it through what is very present to you: your own values, beliefs, perspectives. Remembering what really happened occurs, not so much by telling the rest of the story, but first by using the assumed values and sacred doctrines of the present against themselves or by using them to question back history.

I am also struck by the clarity with which Cone understands the irony of exclusion in both the publics of church and society and the irony of the complicitious relations. He understood quite well that only by remembering could the irony of the social public and the ecclesial public be exposed. But beyond this, remembering brings out the irony of how America and the church were complicitious in forgetting what really happened. Cone says it this way:

It is ironical that America with its history of injustice to the poor (especially the black man and the Indian) prides itself as being a Christian nation. (Is there really such an animal?) It is even more ironic that officials within the body of the state have called into question the "public" nature of it all.\[2\]
Providing what Ricoeur would call "eyes to see and weep," Cone, and other theologians with him, remembered a history of suffering and told new stories—sometimes through songs and sermons as well as narratives—to shape the American and the American Christian narrative identity. It was not only remembering and telling within the social public, but it was also remembering in the ecclesial public. Theological constructs are, in relation to narrative identity, always poetical: telling the truth but telling it in performative ways in which, perhaps, we can see the real differently. Cone remembers and retells, in Black Theology of Liberation and God of the Oppressed, the story of God on the side of the oppressed, of Black Christ, of historical transformation rather than an other-worldly liberation.

The narrative identity of society and of Christianity takes on a new shape, one gained through remembering what others have forgotten, denied, ignored. This reshaping of narrative identity can also be seen as the function of feminist theology whose quest for narrative identity focused, not only on remembering and telling of the suffering of women, but also on figuring new voices and new stories in the publics of society and church. From Mary Daly's Beyond God the Father to Ruether's Sexism and God-Talk, the real of the social and ecclesial publics were written in new ways. Women rushed to talk of women's experience themselves accepting, at first, an oppositional definition and also ignoring and forgetting particularities of race and class for the sake of universal, and thus hegemonic, experience. But the point is that feminist theologies—like black theologies—functioned as markers for fields of experience, opening up multiple voices, contestation, difference. In these texts and many others, narrative identity is shaped and reshaped through interlacing rhythms of remembering, of telling of suffering, of ideology critique, of new voices, experiences, expressions.

It is important to note that from the beginning these stories themselves were contested, they were fought over and retold in many different ways. Very soon African American women and lesbian women added their memories and stories to the narrative identity of feminist theology. The critique of "essentialism" led to the exploration and inclusion of diverse voices in the works of theologians like Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Paula Cooey. Similarly, black theology underwent criticism within its own ranks for borrowing white academic discourse and criticism from other liberation theologians for ignoring structures of oppression in class and gender. A further development came with the "second generation" of black theologians who, as Shawn Copeland has observed, shifted "their attention to both their enslaved ancestors and to their children," finding new theological memories and sources for narrative identity in slave narratives, music and rap, literature and poetry.

My first point, then, is that as public discourse, black theology—as well as feminist theology—functions as public discourse in terms of narrative identity: identifying the real through the memories of suffering and inclusion of new voices. As public discourse these two theologies have criticized and reshaped who "we" are, as a social public and as Christianity, by making public the memories of suffering and giving public hearing to new voices, experiences, and expressions of life while calling into question essentialist and hegemonic definitions of these publics.

### 2. Public Discourse and Testimony

If black theology and feminist theology have criticized and reshaped the narrative identity of the publics of American society and American Christianity, they have also modeled new forms of public discourse. It is not only what they have said and why, but how they have said it that has shaped public discourse. In what I will call the "poetics of testimony," black and feminist theologies not only added new voices, but contributed a genre to public discourse that invites these diverse voices to speak and be heard, questions the politics of the public/private separation, and requires the ethos of the public to be guided through an ethical responsiveness to the other or, what I will call in section three, an ethos of cultivating compassion.

Black and feminist theologies have been identified with the theological movement known as liberation theology and, indeed, have self-consciously accepted or debated this term. Liberation theology refers to theological discourses from oppressed and marginalized groups that speak in their own voices and criticize the oppressive practices, values, and structures of the hegemonic center of church and society. It exposes the suffering and oppression caused by the center and guides praxis of oppressed groups to interrupt, critique, and transform the center.

Well into the fourth decade of liberation theology, we can identify various "generations" or stages of how it has functioned. Liberation theology has pursued its work through radical movements of empowerment (e.g., Black Theology as Black Power or feminist theology as Beyond God the Father), through cultural separatism by finding one's voice, through appropriating cultural stereotypes in what Henry "Skip" Gates calls "profound acts of artistic exorcism," and through theoretical critiques utilizing marxism, poststructuralism, and liberal theory (in thinkers such as Cornel West and Mary McClintock Fulkerson). In feminist theology one can talk about stages of asserting equality, romantically embracing difference, transforming cultural rules through gender analysis. Similarly, a number of scholars of black theology such as James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, and Shawn Copeland have identified various movements or generations of thought operating in these last forty years.
As someone who both writes in and on liberation theology, I accept these dimensions as strategic practices that, depending upon the cultural situation at a given point in time, give voice to the particularity of one group's experience, as well as criticize and transform the dominant social order. In my judgment, liberation theologies were and are directed to the movements from which they arise and to which they are accountable. Cone has been justified in insisting that black theology is, first and foremost, for black people and the black church.

My claim is not to replace the term, "liberation theology," but to argue that, as public discourse, liberation theology is best understood as a poetics of testimony. Through this phrase, "poetics of testimony," I want to suggest that black and feminist theologies have sought to shape public discourse by combining diverse genres with an ethical summons to be responsive to those who suffer. If liberation theology aptly names how these discourses function as interruptions of the center, the poetics of testimony helps us understand how these discourses transform the shape of the public from the center—where the price of access is the acceptance of the dominant code—to a reimagined and embodied public, a public where what I will call "an ethos of cultivating compassion" is foregrounded, a public where the texture of narrative identity is woven through particularity and difference. In this section, I will attend to the questions of poetic narrative, and in my concluding section I will attend to the ethical demand of imagining the public as a space for cultivating compassion.

The genre of the "poetics of testimony" gathers together poetry, theology, novels, and other forms of literature that express how oppressed groups have existed outside modern rational discourse. You may recall Elie Wiesel's observation, "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony."[9] Wiesel's invention names the work of black and feminist theologians, writers, and artists. The poetics of testimony as a genre provides a strong critique of dominant cultural practices and provokes refuguration of the social imaginary, i.e., the basic presuppositions, metaphors, and rules that frame cultural operations. The poetics of testimony challenges how the real is both represented and created through public discourse. In other words, through the poetics of testimony, both our narrative identity and our understanding of discourse are constituted and shaped by multiple rather than univocal representations.

Though I use this trope of the poetics of testimony, I do not want to limit it to poetry proper. I use poetics to draw our attention to the fact that public discourse, at least in forms of black and feminist writings, asks us to reimagine the real both in terms of the narrative memory of the public—who we have been and are—and in terms of the very nature of public discourse. Such discourse is an invention, in and of itself, for it must create language, forms, images to speak of what, in some way, was ruled unspeakable or not worthy of speech in the public. Indeed, here we could even point to the transcendent, which modernity relegated to the private sphere or ruled out of court as unspeakable, and to the contemporary need to rethink and recreate our notions of transcendence in relation to narrative and public discourse.

Poetics is discourse that calls into question, reshapes, fashions in new ways and enlarges the ordering of discourse within what Julia Kristeva and Hommi Bhabha have called "the social imaginary." While our efforts at this conference are directed at theology, my argument suggests that theology, poetry, fiction, music, films, all participate in this genre of public discourse. Understood in this way, one realizes why so many theologians such as James Cone and Will Coleman, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Katie Cannon use, not only traditional doctrine, but ecclesial practices, music, and literature of their movements to create theological discourse.

As a type of public discourse, the poetics of testimony has three fundamental characteristics. First, the poetics of testimony seeks to tell the truth or the real represented in and through narrative identity, by combining a legal sense of giving a true account with a religious sense of pointing to the absolute through the conditions of particular cultural movements. Second, the poetics of testimony functions as an ethical summons to attend to the other in a responsive fashion. Third, the poetics of testimony requires that forms of public discourse become more tensive, more poetic, open to more diversity or what I will call multilingualistic or polyglot public discourse.

The first characteristic of the poetics of testimony as public discourse, in both church and society, is truth-telling or reconstructing that which constitutes or forms the real of the narrative identity. Truth-telling combines a legal or juridical sense of providing a true account, as in a trial, with a religious sense of pointing to the real of the absolute, in and through the conditions of a particular experience; here, the experience of a cultural movement. Ricoeur has pointed out how testimony blends this juridical notion of being on trial with a religious or prophetic claim to the irruption of the absolute within the narration of the "facts," or what I have suggested is the narrative identity of the public.[10] There is both a historical-cultural dimension and a recognition of transcendence, of the power and spirit of transfiguration, evoked by testimony.

As the narration of facts that seeks to remember accurately, to correct the existing narrative, and to describe the real, testimony is neither a symbol of a depth dimension or whole nor an analytic example of the structure of consciousness. Rather, testimony in public discourse narrates a story, a story that allows the transcendent, the possibility of the new, to break in and open us to change and transformation. Such testimonies are not just expressions of a prelinguistic experience or even of a religious code; they are neither subjective nor objective; they are, instead, collective and social. In addition, testimony is both private and public. One testifies, after all, in and to the public space about what one has seen, what one has experienced, what one knows to have happened.
Testimony, in its religious sense points to the absolute through the relative and particular, not as a claim about cognitive limits nor as a foundational grounding, but as a narration of suffering and hope that is experienced, witnessed to within the particular but in terms of the absolute. Because the witness tells the story out of a determination to live, to survive, the juridical sense of testimony points to the conflict of life and death that is at stake, but more importantly, points toward the prophetic sense, or how we salvage, transform, ensure life and survival in the face of oppression, suffering, death. This movement of testimony from the historical to the transcendent and back again allows us to rewrite the narrative, to retell the truth, to enlarge the narrative identity.

For Cone this is represented, for example, by the slave songs which moved from the particular experience of suffering to the hope placed in the transcendent God and back to living in the present context with a different story to tell. It is represented by the black and third world theologians and peoples who utilize the resources within their own cultural contexts in order to point beyond oppressive regimes and draw upon the spirit and power of the transcendent God to rewrite and relive the story toward economic and political liberation. As Cone argues in My Soul Looks Back, the slaveowners and missionaries weren't going to provide liberating resources or facts; rather, these facts have to be found within the particular historical realities and the transcendent possibilities embodied within and recognized by a cultural movement.\[11\]

The second characteristic of the poetics of testimony has to do with its ethical summons to attend to the "other." Testimonies enact a moral consciousness and a social, even at times, global responsibility. It invokes an ethical claim—it is from someone to someone about something. And in testifying, one summons the hearer to respond. A decision is called for, a change in reality is required. Within testimony lies something like Levinas' claim that we are constituted through responsibility to and for the other, a responsibility that is not reciprocal, a responsibility that exists within historical and cultural realities. Testimony summons the public space to serve those who suffer and hope, those whose voices testify to survival, those who dare to imagine and enact transformation. It summons the public space to serve them in their particularity, rather than drawing them into the image of an existing and partial "we."

The poetics of testimony functions as a moral discourse, as a summons to otherness, and this discourse works by requiring that the public be ethically constituted through hearing those who suffer, who have been forced to be the "others" of history. But testimony is not simply in terms of the social reality, it is also in reference to the absolute. In the ecclesial public, the church is the space of God and the people of God working on behalf of the oppressed. As Cone insists, God is on the side of the oppressed. But God is never confined to or equated with the ecclesial public. The church, as a public, is defined in and through its ethical responsiveness to the "other" of history which is funded by and through God's liberating work. Recall Cone's section on the prospects for the future in his book For My People where he summons church and community to be responsive to the others of history:

> As black churches and black theology prepare for the future, it would be wise for them to move beyond their mutual ignorance and antagonism and begin to recognize their need of each other. We must ask not what is best for the survival of black churches or black theology, but rather what is best for the liberation of the black poor in particular and the poor of the whole world in general. Unless we black preachers, theologians, and lay persons are prepared to measure our commitment to the gospel in terms of our participation in the liberation of the poor, then our gospel is not good news to the poor but instead an instrument of their oppression. We must be willing to submerge our personal ambitions, transcend denominational differences, and overcome personality conflicts in order to bear witness together that God's liberation of the oppressed is at hand in the words and actions of black Christians.[12]

Here, too, we see that for Cone, testimony and the summons to responsibility is always in relation to the otherness of both the historical realities of culture and the transcendent possibilities of God's liberating action which must be enacted.

The third characteristic of the poetics of testimony is its sensitivity to diverse voices, broken language, and multiple discourses. In relation to this characteristic the debates in black theology and feminist theology over the use of "white European, patriarchal discourse" have been very important. This is not to say, however, that using the "master's tools," to employ the phrase of Audre Lorde, is wrong or unhelpful. Indeed, Cone and other black and feminist theologians use these discourses to further their own claims. But if only the categories, resources, and argument structures of the dominant discourse were utilized by black and feminist theologians, then public discourse would have been confined to functioning as integrationist or substitutional discourse. The debates over the utilization of African sources, of slave narratives, of music and literature in black theology and the use of women's stories and women's art in feminist theology expressed the demand to add new sources, voices, and types of argument as public discourse in both society and the church. Public discourse, in all its voices and shapes, can no longer be monological (monotonal) or translated through one type of argument, style, or voice. Public discourse must now be polyglot, not a tower of Babel hoping to be translated into one primal voice, but a fluid, empowered and spirited gathering space understood in its differences, its connections, in ever changing re-creation of common places or tropes.

This characteristic of public discourse as heterogeneous or polyglot functions in two ways. First, the diversity of genres in public discourses means that the public, itself, is implicitly shaped as a kind of multilingual space. The norm of a general "we" who hear in one voice or way is put aside, as are translation models of the diversity of discourse. The public is reimagined as spaces where
voices are spoken and heard. The second aspect of polyglot discourse refers back to the ethical imperative of black and feminist theologies and has to do with the genre of discourse that summons the public to hear the other and to respond through the cultivation of compassion as integral to public space that is shaped by the ongoing movement of the historical and transcendent realities.

In summary of this section, it is important to observe why the "poetics of testimony" is the term best used to describe these theologies as public discourse. There are other ways to describe black theology and feminist theology as public discourse, including interpreting them through current cultural theory and/or through a kind of practical systematic theology (the former working best in the social public, the latter preferable in the church). But such interpretations fail to give full weight to the substance of the claims of black and feminist theologies and the new shape they give to public discourse. Black and feminist theologies are not merely examples of cultural theory nor are they variations of some structure called systematic theology (though they are both exemplar and variation). More properly understood in their own measure, black and feminist theologies call the publics of society and church into a conflict over truth and freedom, both in their representation (the narration of the real, the reference to the absolute) and in terms of the ethical imperative (the summons of responsiveness to the other, the pluralism of voices and shapes of discourse). Black and feminist theologies insist that our narrative identity and our public discourse be expressed in diversity and in historical-cultural particularity.

But transformation or liberation is never abstracted or isolated from the transcendent dimension, the new possibilities, the hope of liberation that breaks into the historical-cultural realities and is enacted in and through these particular cultural movements. This work of "naming God" or tracking the spirit and power of transfiguration in the midst of social and ecclesial publics—which is so central to Cone's theology--means theology, itself, is summoned to respect, to hear, to respond to the otherness in and through reflection and praxis.[13] The purpose of these discourses is to testify to what really happened, to shape the narrative identity with true words and forms and, in so doing, to change the direction and outcome of the story. Through the phrase, the "poetics of testimony," we can best give these theologies, as public discourse, their full ethical and poetical force.

3. Imagining the Public as a Space for Cultivating Compassion

If testimony tells us who we are and shapes us in the present through remembering those forgotten in the past, we must also ask how it helps us to imagine ourselves and others differently in the future. As Ricoeur has suggested, testimony has a utopian, prospective sense, as well as a historical, retrospective sense. One testifies not only so the truth will be told but, according to both the juridical and religious senses of testimony, so that the future might be lived differently in light of the history of suffering. Testimony requires truth about the past and insists on justice as the goal for the future. When we understand black theology and feminist theology as poetics of testimony, we are challenged to imagine the public as a space for cultivating compassion. By the term the "poetics of testimony," I have been trying to uncover both the substance of the discourse--the narrative identity—and the form of the discourse--the poetic resources of stories, songs, fictions, theologies. I have been trying to show that liberation theologies as poetics of testimony insist that our narrative identity and public discourse be constituted in diverse and multiple ways.

When we ask about the future, we can see how the convergence of form and substance, how the poetics of testimony enables us to trace and to imagine the future of the public in new ways. This convergence of form and substance, of ideology critique and poetic possibility, creates what I will call the "ethical imaginary," for it has to do with how the poetics of testimony requires us to understand and shape the future as a space for cultivating compassion—of the basic other-regarding attitude that resists hegemonic "integration," that struggles against denying the other or making the other into the dominant, hegemonic image. This futuring work of testimony develops the ethical imaginary and cultivates compassion through three characteristics which function to keep the public space from moving toward closure or univocity:

1) the phronesis of empathy,
2) solidarity in difference, and
3) transcendence as possibility and praxis.

I will figure these three characteristics of the ethical imaginary as concentric circles.

The first circle of the ethical imaginary is the space of the phronesis of empathy. As a public space, it is an imagined community where the texture of our interactions shapes and forms who we are and how we live together. Here the poetics of testimony is at work shaping the ethical imaginary through the voices of those who question back history and draw upon poetic resources. Challenging and retelling the story in songs, fictions, theologies stirs up emotions and creates a plot in which we can imagine ourselves, others, our world in different ways. To imagine ourselves living in difference and living differently, requires the phronesis of empathy. As Kearney, Martha Nussbaum, and others point out, narrative identity functions within an ethical context that cultivates character, virtues, an ethos, or what Aristotle would call phronesis, practical wisdom. A primary value guiding the ethos of cultivating compassion within the public space is the phronesis of empathy, or the ability to identify with and understand someone different than one's self. As Diana Tietjens Meyers has suggested, empathy requires the ability to imaginatively conceive of what life is like for the other person. One's own experiences can contribute to the phronesis of empathy, but cannot be the sole
basis for understanding the other. Empathy, according to Meyers, requires us to mobilize our "powers of attentive receptivity and analytic discernment." She continues, "Particularly when the other's background or circumstances are very different from one's own, empathy may require protracted observation and painstaking imaginative reconstruction of... the other's viewpoint."[14] The phronesis of empathy requires complex intellectual and emotional capacities. It reconceives the public space in terms of what Iris Marion Young has called, "asymmetrical reciprocity," and forms Social relations and individual character consistent with this empathic quality.[15]

If we are the stories we tell ourselves, then the stories of black and feminist theologians call and invite the public space to cultivate compassion through empathy for the other as well. Without the ability to hear the otherness, to promote understanding and living with difference on a most basic and fundamental human level, the publics of church and society cannot and will not be communities where diversity is recognized and encouraged. Sisters in the Wilderness, by Delores Williams, is a collection of narratives that urges us to hear and understand our narrative identity as Christians and Americans in new ways, by remembering women who have served and suffered.[16] Through the story of the slave woman Hagar, we hear the stories of African American women cast out, of struggles and of suffering.

Building her own theological discourse on the Hagar story and placing it into dialogue with other womanist and feminist theologians such as Renita Weems and Elsa Tamez, Williams forces the reader to imagine all of the narratives at once, to imagine a world where there is no one public discourse, a world where all engage in asymmetrical reciprocity.

The first circle, then, suggests that cultivating compassion requires the phronesis of empathy. Indeed, this collection of essays may represent the phronesis of empathy at work--perhaps we are learning to hear James Cone, Delores Williams, and other diverse voices; perhaps we are beginning to understand. Our narrative identity is being re-formed as testimony allows us to imaginatively understand difference and differently.

The second circle of the ethical imaginary--which draws in closer to the ethos of cultivating compassion--is the space of solidarity in difference. Cultivating compassion requires, not only that we hear and understand difference, but--as Delores Williams' multiple narratives demonstrate--that we learn to live together in our differences, to enact transformation, to redeem suffering. Here again, the poetics of testimony of black and feminist theologies are essential to shaping the ethical imaginary toward cultivating compassion. Ideology critique serves as an ethical responsibility to bring to light and remember the stories of those who suffer and to resist being drawn into the image of a partial and hegemonic "we." And poetics offers new ways for different voices to speak and to keep public discourse open and fluid. But the poetics of testimony suggests that recognizing and encouraging such diversity through the phronesis of empathy is not enough; rather, it requires us to fashion the public space as a space of solidarity. Solidarity in difference, or the flourishing of polyglot discourse and the furthering of survival, is the frame within which compassion is cultivated.

The public space as a place of solidarity is a polyglot texture of different bodies, different voices, different people. It means that the "we" of the public is not and cannot be one singular voice, cannot be reduced to a least common denominator, cannot promote sameness as the basis for our interactions. As Janet Jakobsen has suggested, the public must not be shaped in terms of an overarching body, but instead, must be imagined as a network of interrelations among multiple and overlapping or contending public spheres.[17] The ethical imaginary cultivates compassion when we create networks of diverse and complex voices, bodies, and publics. In forming such networks, our ethical imaginary--in the largest and most utopian sense--fosters solidarity in difference so that no one suffers as a result of oppressive hegemonic public spaces.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and other feminists show us a vision of the ecclesial public as a place of solidarity in which ecclesial citizens participate fully no matter what their sex, race, class, or sexual orientation. The images feminists use, such as the ekklésia, the community of friends, and the roundtable, all suggest that the public is a place where differences are embodied and embraced and no body suffers or is rendered invisible because of its difference. This second circle of the ethical imaginary thus is figured as a public space where, in and through our solidarity, we understand difference, understand differently, and seek to redeem suffering, to struggle against hegemonic integration, to enact change.

The third and most tightly drawn circle through which testimony forms the ethical imaginary is the space of transcendence as possibility and praxis. Transcendence is not about other-worldly hope, the neo-orthodox hope of God interrupting history in one brief point. Rather, transcendence requires us to continually think of the public in new ways in and through the embodied memory of particular stories, to continually enlarge our imaginary. The poetics of testimony as transcendence, empowers us to imagine the public space differently, to think the "we" in new ways, to sing new songs, to live in ways that enact and embody transformation. The otherness of transcendence breaks into the public sphere in and through these testimonies and empowers and requires us to imagine and enact a public space in which compassion, regard for the other, is primary. Testimony is not finally about redemptive suffering; it is, first and foremost, about hope figured as the future of justice. The testimonies of black and feminist theologians speak of transcendence as the spirit and power of transfiguration that vetoes the law of slavery, breaks the chains of classism, rewrites the social customs that erase and deny women's dignity through various practices of abuse and so-called protection. Calvin
Schrag has suggested that this is a transcendence coupled with alterity, with otherness, that exceeds the bounds of what we might call ordinary transcending. In Levinas's notion of radical alterity or Tillich's claim of

God beyond God, one finds this strong sense of transcendence as both the source and dynamics of transfiguration. Schrag observes, Neither a metaphysical designator of a being in some supernatural realm nor an epistemological protocol positing conditions for knowledge . . . transcendence is more like an existential-pragmatic alterity—an alterity that registers its efficacy by making a difference in the experience of ourselves and the world.[18]

Precisely in this "other" space of transcendence, we receive the ability to glimpse other spaces, to change the "we" of the imagined public, to enlarge our ethical imaginary in ways that perceive new possibilities and enact transformation. In this space of transcendence as possibility and praxis, the public space for cultivating compassion can be figured as hope.

From his earliest writings, James Cone has asserted the importance of hope in black and liberation theologies. But Cone's hope, and the hope of testimony, is not only about the neo-orthodox hope of God interrupting history in one brief point--though in the early writings of Cone, the Wholly Other God is quite present in order to interrupt racism. God's transcendence, witnessed to in and through these testimonies, is also the power and dynamism of historical transfiguration, the enactment of justice in and through the public space. As Cone states in God of the Oppressed, "While the meaning of liberation includes the historical determination of freedom in this world, it is not limited to what is possible in history."[19]

In resisting the movement toward closure of the public space, compassion requires the transcendent possibilities and praxis which open and enlarge our imaginary and empower our enactment.

The ethical imaginary that cultivates compassion is thus constituted through these three concentric circles, representing the basic characteristics of the future public space: the phronesis of empathy, solidarity in difference, and transcendence as possibility and praxis or hope. But, perhaps, drawn in an even tighter circle, forming the heart or the reshaped center of the ethical imaginary, is the ethical responsibility of testimony to the memory and the presence of the dead and those who suffer. The circle of the suffering, the oppressed, the dead--figured as the center of the ethical imaginary--summons us to see them, to hear them, to remember them, and in compassion, to rewrite and relive the narrative toward a future and a present of justice.[20]

Notes


[20] I want to express my deep gratitude to Elaine Robinson, my research associate, who researched and edited this essay, shaped the narrative of the third section, and contributed useful insights into the role of transcendence in the poetics of testimony.

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