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# A Christian Understanding of Aesthetic Agency: A Theological Framework of Resistance to Cultural Imperialism

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## Abstract

*Aesthetic agency refers to conditions, capacities, and states that inform artistic forms of acting and exerting power on social structures. In resistance to the marginalization of women of color, aesthetic agency is exercised through creative acts of culture-making and critique of such practices to challenge domination and representation of the oppressed other. To support this work as a feminist Christian ethicist, I construct a theological framework for aesthetic agency. This paper proposes a theological understanding of transformative aesthetics and then describes the exercise of aesthetic agency for Christian communities by using a television special, Black Girls Rock! as an example.*

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Racism, sexism, and oppression of minorities are ethical problems that assume varied forms. One form identified by Iris Marion Young as cultural imperialism is expressed through cultural forms that universalize a dominant group's experience and make it the societal or cultural norm. (Welch 2008) Cultural imperialism concurrently stereotypes and marks a group as "other" while rendering the perspectives of those from inside the group as invisible. By perpetuating patterns of invisibility and aversion, cultural imperialism pushes minority groups to the margins of a culture. (Welch 2008) Stereotypes of women and people of color are communicated through society's cultural forms: books, advertising, television, and artistic images. Yet, resources for resisting this marginalization can also assume cultural forms. Artworks and literature can be sites of resistance; galleries, museums, and schools can be spaces of opposition. The act of creating is self-affirming and when undertaken by marginalized peoples can be a source of empowerment to counter their mistreatment. In *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, bell hooks states, "It occurred to me then that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can only be undone by acts of concrete reclamation." (Hooks 1995, xv) Hooks' statement provokes consideration of how artistic and aesthetic practices can address the ethical problem of the marginalization of women of color in the United States.

How do the arts relate to social transformation? I use the concept of aesthetic agency to address how transformative aesthetic practices function at personal and social levels. A generalized concept of agency describes a person's abilities or capacities to act; in ethics, moral agency usually refers to one's ability to make ethical decisions and act responsibly. Aesthetic agency is related to these other meanings. Aesthetic agency refers to the conditions, capacities, and states that inform creative and artistic forms of acting and exerting power on social structures. Acts of aesthetic agency exert power on social structures through the critique and creation of cultural and artistic works. For those resisting the marginalization of women of color, aesthetic agency is exercised through creative acts of art- and culture-making and through theoretical critique of such practices in order to challenge immoral practices of domination and representation of the oppressed other. This concept, as described by Christa Davis Acampora and Angela L. Cotten and developed from the work of hooks and others, does not explicitly engage spiritual practices much less Christian theological frameworks. Yet, as a Christian ethicist who seeks to support this work (and participate in it) with the tools of my discipline, I feel it is appropriate and helpful to construct a theological ethical framework for aesthetic agency as it addresses the cultural marginalization of women of color.

This essay proposes a concept of aesthetic agency that is supported by religious experience and theological interpretation from the Christian tradition. Work by theologians in the field of aesthetics and womanist ethicists provides insightful ways to understand the spiritual power and meaning of artistic and cultural works and to theologically address the marginalization of African American women. But because their works tend to exist in separate theological conversations—one aesthetic, the other ethical—these scholars do not address specific concerns about adopting transformative aesthetic practices to de-marginalize women of color. In this paper, I develop a theological proposal to address this specific ethical and aesthetic issue and describe the exercise of aesthetic agency through a Christian lens by analyzing the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Special *Black Girls Rock!*. My constructive project is formed through a discussion of the relation of womanist theological ethics and aesthetic agency, the development of a theological understanding of transformative aesthetics, and a description of the process of exercising aesthetic agency in Christian communities.

### **Aesthetic Agency and Theological Ethics**

Aesthetic agency is already practiced to some degree in theological circles. In the field of Christian ethics, womanist scholars have used cultural forms from black women as resources for ethical reflection and construction. These theologians use methods of aesthetic agency as a resource to engage in acts of concrete reclamation of black women's experiences. They have examined film, music, and visual art as part of their theological work. Most common, however, is an examination of the black women's literary tradition, which includes poetic, fictional, biographical, and autobiographical narratives. Katie Cannon explains why this material has been so useful for resisting marginalization:

[T]he Black woman is placed in such a sharply disadvantaged position that she must accept obligingly the recording of her own story by the very ones who systematically leave her out. But, the work of Black women writers can be trusted as seriously mirroring Black reality. Their writings are important chronicles of the Black woman's survival. Despite their tragic omission by the literary establishment, Black women have been expressing ideas, feelings, and interpretations about the Black experience since the early days of the eighteenth century. (Cannon 2007, 61-62)

The writers in this literary tradition are typically not formally-trained historians, sociologists, or theologians, but Cannon finds a correspondence with reality in their work because these black women writers' social location makes them participant-observers in the context of which they write. Because their writing projects are typically created not as art-for-art's-sake, but to record values and experiences in the black community, the patterns and themes in literary works are understood by womanist ethicists as reflective of historical facts, sociological realities, and religious convictions from the community's ethos. (63) Cannon explains, "Black women writers function as continuing symbolic conveyors and transformers of values acknowledged by the female members of the Black community." (60) The work of these writers therefore becomes a resource to womanist ethicists.

Although Cannon prioritizes literature above other forms of cultural production as a resource for theological reflection, I assert that the project of capturing women's experiences will remain incomplete and deficient if womanist scholars limit themselves to values expressed through textual practices. Womanism rejects epistemologies based on disembodied and disengaged minds and souls, as do other feminist perspectives. It places special emphasis on particular embodied realities and practices, and likewise, should seek resources in cultural forms that are also embodied or developed to protect and express the body. The performing arts (dance, music, theatre, dramatic readings, and spoken-word poetry) are physical in their expression; they require a body be present to communicate the meaning of a work. This is also true of installation art; it requires expression in physical form. Mediums of design like fashion, architecture, and interior design are also based in embodied realities and can also be examined for the symbolic and transformative values they communicate.

The practice of aesthetic agency in theological fields must be broader than, yet inclusive of the practice of literary criticism and interpretation. This opens up a variety of cultural and aesthetic forms for theological reflection and examines them for expressions of the spiritual. Considering aesthetic agency theologically and considering theology aesthetically could benefit the work aesthetic agents do in order to address the problem of marginalization. There are legitimate reasons to form a theological response to a social problem (such as marginalization) that could be addressed without theology: to access the power of spiritual language and practice, making the activist work more effective, and to add Christian dialogue partners who can benefit from and contribute to this aesthetic "discussion."

Supplementing the physical, emotional, and intellectual efforts required by aesthetic practices against marginalization with a spiritual component could strengthen the effectiveness

of artists' work. Feminist scholar Sharon Welch asserts that theological and ethical traditions provide both constraints and opportunities to address the issues of marginalization.<sup>1</sup> Concepts such as "the capacity to create" (hooks) and "redemptive" acts (Acampora and Cotton) have parallels in Christian doctrine which have been explored by Christian aesthetic theologians. These religious symbols carry meaning and weight in the dominant culture; therefore, cultural critics and artists should be equipped to access them.

My second reason for providing a theological critique of aesthetic agency is to allow a Christian perspective to engage with aesthetic practices that are already open to "the spiritual." Cultural studies scholar Laura E. Pérez associates the adoption of culturally "different" spiritual beliefs and practices of marginalized and disempowered people as an act of resistance against dominant capitalist and imperialist visions. (Perez 2007, 23) In her analysis, mainstream Christianity is deemed patriarchal and is found inadequate with regard to gender equality, sexuality, and respect for nature when compared to indigenous, diasporic, Eastern, pagan, and non-human centered spiritualities. The body of work from the artists she examines often presents hybridized spiritualities that "navigate *through*, rather than *to*, dominant forms of Christianity." (95-96) This work is sometimes pejoratively described as syncretic or syncretistic. However, mainstream Christians cannot afford to dismiss its value because it is not "pure" or explicitly Christian. When Christian theologians become dialogue partners with activist artists and cultural critics, additional paths are opened for the transformation of Christian values that enable marginalization. This interaction provides an opportunity to unmake and remake the Christian "face that marks them as female and gives them racial particularity... through their cultural productions in which they aesthetically transform the values that have been used to stain them as inferior, deficient, and defective." (Acampora 2007, 2) Because Christian values have been used to denigrate women and non-dominant groups, agents who work to remake them should be given opportunities to acknowledge and participate in cultural work that may heal the damage these malformed values have caused.

If spiritual power is to be accessed by Christian theologians for a process that involves non-Christian artists, the model of agency adopted should be one of shared power. It is a power that works with others, not a power that advocates domination of one set of religious practices. Triumphalism would have no place in this effort, and participants would have to accept the inherent "messiness" of it. (Townes 2006, 9) As a Christian theological articulation of aesthetic agency, my proposal will undoubtedly conflict with religious traditions other than my own; the Christian justification of transformative aesthetics will rely on distinctively Christian beliefs and practices. Yet although its justification may be closed to others, the exercise of aesthetic agency as I describe it will be open to and dependent on participation by non-Christians and Christians who possess different religious commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Welch notes this in the introduction to her work about how the international community might prevent, stop, or punish crimes against humanity. She looks for theological and ethical resources to aid in peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts. Welch, *Real Peace, Real Security*: 1.

### A Theological Concept of Transformative Aesthetics

Aesthetic critique and culture-making are acts of reclamation and subversion of marginalization and oppression; these acts can draw upon the theological concept of salvation as restoration of wholeness and full humanity. Through transformative aesthetics, black women and those who marginalize them are saved, and the cultural forms that marginalize them are redeemed. Monica A. Coleman explains that womanist theologians regard quality of life issues for black women as soteriological, salvation-oriented, in nature:

Theological reflection on oppression and its defeat leads to a conversation about salvation. Oppressive forces are identified as death-dealing for creation and sinful from God's perspective. Efforts to overcome sin constitute various concepts of salvation. While religious concepts of salvation often focus on peace and eternal life in a realm beyond this world, black and womanist theologian maintain a focus on achieving life and liberation here in the land of the living. In this way, they are faithful to the root meaning of the word salvation, which literally means health and wholeness. (Coleman 2008, 11)

Womanist theologians' descriptions of wholeness and full humanity for black women and their communities must include restoration of their capacities for creation and self-expression, since as hooks noted, the loss of connection to these abilities is a part of the subjugation of their humanity to the dominant group's humanity. (hooks 2005, xv) The implication of such a concept of salvation—as restoration of wholeness and full humanity<sup>2</sup>—is that although it may be theological, it is not necessarily Christocentric. This type of salvation can be attained outside the bounds of Christian doctrine and practice. Would this make my proposal objectionable or offensive to more orthodox Christians? Possibly so. Yet, I assert that although my definition of salvation may not be Christocentric, a concept of Christ as the enabler of redemption in the communities that bear his name and/or work to carry out his ministry and live out his teachings is included in my theological support for aesthetic agency. This is why I articulate a process for aesthetic agency in Christian communities. Also, although I frame the ethical problem of cultural marginalization as a theological one – asserting that it is oppositional to salvation – one need not agree with my theological framing of the problem to embrace my theological solution. One can engage in the process without justifying it theologically. The reader is free to affirm or reject the language of salvation in my proposal according to her or his own Christological and soteriological doctrines

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “full humanity” where others might say personhood, or selfhood. I am speaking of a sense of being fully, wholly human, of having opportunity--not just ability--to express the physical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional aspects of being within one's life. The capabilities and opportunities for expression are manifested in communal forms as well as individual forms. Language of “personhood” or “selfhood” emphasizes individuality over communality as a condition of being human, whereas “humanity” is more ambiguous, bearing individual and communal connotations, which is why I have chosen it.

(or lack thereof).<sup>3</sup> The solution I propose is to work through cultural forms to resist the marginalization of black women. This process involves people who hold varied religious perspectives.

The theological transformation named in transformative aesthetics is the recovery of the divine image in culture and the redemption of cultural forms. From a theological perspective, rejecting cultural forms that oppress and creating cultural forms that support the health and wholeness (salvation) of black women are acts of “redemptive remaking.” Edward Farley uses the term redemptive remaking to describe an aesthetic and ethical process that reveals beauty in the Christian life of faith, which is our “individual, interhuman and social existence.” (Farley 2001, 83) Farley calls redemptive existence “the actual salvific transformation of individual persons in their communities,” a description with which womanist theologians would likely agree. (84) The divine image, human beings’ resemblance to God, is restored from its corruption by sin in events through which humans are “founded in and by God” (the events more commonly referred to as conversion, regeneration or justification). (93) Farley’s concept of redemptive remaking depends on the triadic structure of 1) the divine image; 2) the corruption of the divine image by sin; and 3) redemptive transformation which presupposes that human beings need to be remade because of sin and evil and that humans able to be remade because of the divine image embedded in them. (119) I use Farley’s articulation of redemptive remaking of a human being as a model for the transformation of the cultural forms humans create. For the first part of this triad, the divine image is the human resemblance to God and the common ontological nature that all humans share. This divine image exists in human beings and should therefore be present in representations of humans in cultural forms. The second part of this triad –the corruption of the divine image by sin– occurs when black women are marked as the aversive or invisible “other” through the sins of marginalization and cultural imperialism. In the third triadic element, redemptive transformation occurs when the forms that display the corrupted divine image are identified as such by critique, and then subverted through creation of new forms. Thus, the divine image is remade, and the work that accomplishes it is redemptive, leading to salvation and wholeness of black women.

One critique of Farley’s proposal, and of my proposal which uses his as a model, is that its focus on conversion experiences to counter the corruption of the divine image means that it will exclude those who have not experienced a Christian conversion from their participation in the work of redemptive remaking. I do not think this is what Farley intends, and it is certainly not my intent. The praxis of aesthetic agency relies on participation by people with various perspectives, including those that are religious and spiritual. My model locates the possibility of restoration from corruption of the sin of marginalization in the act of ethical self-transcendence

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<sup>3</sup> I assert that exercises of transformative aesthetics are salvific. Yet I leave the issue open to interpretation because efforts to counter the marginalization of black women can and do occur in contexts that are not concerned with spiritual wholeness or well-being, such as secular university environments. One need not posit--as I do--that wholeness is a part of salvation in order to work to achieve that wholeness or to think that a theological framework for achieving it aesthetically would be useful to Christian communities. In the first section, I described why someone might find my proposal helpful for those in the Christian community and therefore for the effort as a whole, even if they did not consider themselves to be part of that community.

(to be described below) instead of in the conversion experience.<sup>4</sup> As I will explain further below, the process of self-transcendence must occur in multiple people who possess multiple perspectives. The emphasis on multiplicity mediates the risk of excluding non-Christians from redemptive work.

### **The Exercise of Aesthetic Agency in Christian Communities**

There are specific characteristics of art that are modes by which aesthetic agency is exercised: art's interpersonal nature, its capacity for meaning-making through form, and its active function in diverse contexts through a multiplicity of forms.<sup>5</sup> Each characteristic is manifested in current Christian practice. For a theological proposal to be both reflective of and practical in the life of the church, it must connect to its religious experiences and practices. In the following section, I articulate a process of exercising aesthetic agency in Christian communities that meets these criteria. The exercise of aesthetic agency that incorporates Christian understandings of transformation, aesthetics, and relationship in community is a continual process of transcending self-centered subjectivity, remaking redemptive cultural forms, and assessing these forms.

### **Transcending Self-centered Subjectivity**

Countering cultural imperialism must begin with the de-centering of the dominant perspective. Liberation theologians have often argued that the process of a justice effort that combats marginalization must begin with the marginalized. Miguel De La Torre, an ethicist who addresses issues of racial justice, claims that although such quests for justice benefit all of society, including the dominant group, the focus of such efforts must remain on the marginalized. (De La Torre 2007, 105) He argues that when marginalized voices express themselves to the dominant culture, it "forces the dominant culture to view the marginalized as subjects like themselves." (104) The humanity of the marginalized is affirmed by the assertion of their subjectivity.

Aesthetic agency that opposes marginalization depends on challenging power structures by presenting visions of the marginalized in their own voices. It is critical that marginalized voices be expressed. However, I assert that not even a marginalized voice can be allowed to stay "centered" in the process of transformative aesthetics. This is because any singular voice or perspective is not representative of the collective, of the multiplicity of experiences that black

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<sup>4</sup> For Farley, ethical self-transcendence is an effect of the "founding" in and by God. It "undermines the anxious need for idols and their security... [It] draws the human being out of the self-preoccupied immanence that cripples its capacity to engage a genuine other. Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>5</sup> I describe each characteristic in more detail in another unpublished essay that I wrote prior to this work. For each characteristic, I provided one or more examples of how it is manifested in current Christian practice. By critiquing how these practices are insufficient for opposing the marginalization of black women, I identified criteria by which a Christian theological understanding of aesthetic agency should be framed. These are (1) shared authority between God and particular communities, (2) dependence on grace to redeem the brokenness of culture, and (3) a principle of affirming inclusion and multiplicity.



women have faced as a marginalized group. Any artistic object incorporated into a process of transformative aesthetics that presents a singular perspective would essentialize the experience of its creator if it were to occupy a centered experience. It would simply reverse the existing patterns of domination instead of subverting the system of domination. In addition, there are no clear lines which distinguish the oppressor from the oppressed. It is possible for a black woman to have been cast in gender or racial stereotypes, to have felt invisible in the dominant culture and to therefore create an artwork that reflects her own position. Yet this position might uncritically marginalize black women of differing economic classes, geographic locations, religious sensibilities, or other aspects of social location. The process of transformative aesthetics must move beyond not only self-centered perspectives of the dominant group, but self-centered perspectives within the marginalized groups. It should transcend all self-centered subjectivity and shift the cultural perspective to a collective subjectivity, ultimately aligning it with the divine—that which is beyond the human collective.

A shift from self-centered subjectivity to collective subjectivity is required because marginalization is not most potent at the individual level, but at the social or community level. Likewise, salvation from marginalization in the extension of wholeness and full humanity occurs collectively. Individual experiences and singular human perspectives are brought together to work for a liberating goal that extends beyond the individual. Racism, sexism, marginalization, and oppression are exclusivist practices that divide communities of people. Therefore, any effort to counter them must aim for establishing a greater and more genuine sense of community and common humanity. (Coleman 2008, 99) The emphasis on collective experience in resisting oppression is reflected in part of Alice Walker's definition of womanist, one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people." (Walker 1983, ix)<sup>6</sup> Coleman's womanist theology incorporates this womanist commitment to community as the vehicle and goal of salvation: "The activity of salvation cannot occur in isolation, but rather in the relationality of the world and God. That is, salvation aims at bringing communities together, and there is no salvation unless the entire community is saved." (Coleman 2008, 18) Salvation requires collective subjectivity to be affirmed.

Moving from individual subjectivity (engagement of the world from the perspective one's singular identity and experiences) to collective or communal subjectivity (a perspective of engagement that based on shared identity and experiences) is necessary, but it can be problematic. In *The Religion of Reality*, Didier Maleuvre challenges the uncritical replacement of individual notions of subjectivity with collective ones: "The drift of twentieth century critique of subjectivity has thus been to substitute a "we-definition" for the previous "i-definition" of human experience. The trouble is that this move fails to transcend anthropocentric bias: it is multiplied or massified, but not overturned. For Language, Power, and Ideology are in the end products of subjectivity writ large." (Maleuvre 2006, 9) Just as I argued that the individual marginalized voice cannot remain centered, neither can the collective voice.

Maleuvre's work discusses the artistic paths that lead away from the anthropocentrism of individual and collective subjectivities. Artworks are attempts to overcome the limits of expression and knowledge, and therefore transcend the human standpoint. Art transcends not

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<sup>6</sup> This is also quoted in Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*: 18.

only subjectivity determined by racial or gendered identity, but all anthropocentric i-subjectivities and we-subjectivities based on essentialist anthropocentric constructions. Maleuvre's work argues that art is the religion of the modern, secular mind. If we accept this as true, or at the least take seriously the historical connection between art and religion, we can begin to see how the spiritual is active in the artistic experience, whether explicitly religious or not. By framing expansive descriptions of human culture in the world and not limiting the self to definitions of particularity, art participates in what Maleuvre describes as "religion", which he contrasts with "idolatry":

Idolatry seeks particulars and figureheads; it focuses on the limited, on what can be held and caressed by thought. Idolatry thus naturally harkens to images, masks, gods that tangibly resemble us, speak our language, and confirm, rather than stretch, our understanding... Religion, by contrast, seeks the universal... Even while religious faith requires an active commitment of one's inner life and conscience, ...[and] personal forethought or deliberation, this commitment in the end recommends giving over the grossly individual. (7)

For Maleuvre, a central feature of religion, which art shares, is that it puts the self in the world of a vast reality along with other selves and multiple objects. This means that art possesses an ability to transcend preconstituted human identities and stereotypical images of marginalized peoples. My theological account of transformative aesthetics depends on a model of proper relations between humans. I find Maleuvre's description of the transcendence of anthropocentrism as "religion" particularly fascinating because it simultaneously critiques oppression by religious authorities as idolatrous and as contrary to religion (because it places the particularized self above other subjects in the world). Religion, as Maleuvre describes it, seems compatible with Laura E. Pérez's description of non-institutional spiritualities evident in many Chicana artists' work as an offering of greater personal integrity, empowerment and social justice, and an attempt to reintegrate a spiritual worldview about the interconnectedness of life. (Perez 2007, 23)

It is art's ability to go beyond the work itself and its creator that makes it more than a representation of an individual or collective subjectivity. If a work does not transcend the subjectivity of its creator to reach an audience, it does not do what it was intended to do; it is ineffective. This translates to a critical theological point about transformative aesthetics. If a cultural form does not transcend individual subjectivity or the subjectivity of the community, it will be insufficient for opposing marginalization. It needs to transcend the limits of human subjectivity and connect to the divine. Wholeness and salvation might be found *in* the community, but it is provided *through* the community by God. It is in this same spirit, with this same perspective, that communal prayers, songs, and other cultural forms within liturgy are expressed. Multiple individual voices—officiants, composers of songs, creators of litanies—express the perspective of the body of Christ and individual bodies present in the worship

experience. They communicate not only to each other, but reach out to the spirit that transcends them all. The individual and collective are ordered in relation to the divine.

Farley's exploration of the relation of beauty to self-transcendence provides an important clarification about acts of transcending self-centered subjectivity. The type of transcendence sought in transformative aesthetics is not a formal self-transcendence; instead, "the ways in which human beings are drawn beyond external and internal determinations into meaning, language, truth, subjectivity, creativity, self-making, and futurity." (Farley 2001, 86) Going beyond oneself in any of these ways does not entail the pursuit of justice or liberative efforts. Ethical self-transcendence, that which pushes one outside the self to feel and act from motivations other than self-survival and self-interest, is required to effectively resist marginalization. Ethical self-transcendence acknowledges the other and summons a person into the world and reality of that other. (88) The capacity to enter the world of the other encourages empathy in human relationships, such as those between marginalized and dominant groups. In the human to divine relationship, it provokes human alignment with the divine will.

This "first step" is not the first to occur chronologically, as this movement of spirit and transcendence of subjectivity occurs at every phase in the process where art and cultural forms are being made, critiqued, and affirmed. Yet, it is prior to the exercise of transformative aesthetics as establishing the orientation or relational model under which a theologically sound process would occur. If the participants do not understand their task to be both affirming new images of the marginalized self while recognizing its insufficiency, they will attempt to reverse the dominant/subordinate relationship instead of ordering both as equals and in relation to God. Adopting a proper perspective of the process, one that de-centers the self and the collective precedes the acts of critiquing old forms, creating new ones and assessing them to fight the marginalization of black women and continues throughout it.

### **The Redemptive Remaking of Artistic and Cultural Forms**

At its core, the exercise of aesthetic agency is about acting and exerting power on social structures through the critique and creation of cultural and artistic forms. The cultural or artistic forms we are concerned with here are objects of art, artifacts of culture, and literal or figurative images that represent black women. Black women are represented through artistic mediums as diverse as visual art, installation art, scripted and unscripted ("reality") television shows and segments, films, music, poetry, prose, music videos, theatrical performances, and dance. Their representation through cultural mediums can be found in advertising and marketing campaigns, journalistic articles, photographs, and linguistic phrases and terms that describe the identity and experiences of black women. This is not an exhaustive list of forms, but a descriptive list of the types of media that transformative aesthetics address. These cultural and artistic forms may convey denigrating images that reinforce the cultural imperialism that too often pervades social structures, or alternatively, they may provide images that deconstruct the patterns of invisibility and aversion that marginalize black women. When it reflects the aim of aesthetic agency, a transformative aesthetic process will focus on critiquing culturally imperialistic representations of black women and subverting them through creating representations from perspectives of those

who inhabit these invisible bodies. I describe a continual process of redemptive remaking of aesthetic objects that is expressed via multiplicity. Instead of proposing one mode of action, my theological proposal asserts that various agents with diverse perspectives remake multiple forms with numerous valid interpretations for many contexts and uses. Multiplicity applies to the identity of agents, the agents' approaches and perspectives, the variety of forms they use, interpretations of their work, and the sites and locations their work is put to use, and the desired functions and outcomes of its uses.

The inclusion of multiple agents indicates that participation in this process is not limited simply to artistic black women. Earlier, I indicated that both the marginalized and those who marginalize require redemption. Within this redemptive framework, those who oppress are engaged in sin. That redemption for sinners is provided by God is a core tenet of Christianity. Although De La Torre suggests that members of the dominant culture take a secondary role in efforts for reconciliation, he explicitly states that they can accompany the marginalized in their struggle: “[T]hey are to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, even at the cost of their own power and privilege.” (De La Torre 2007, 7) This moves both oppressors and marginalized peoples from their pre-existing worlds that provide some comfort. The inclusion of those who have been seen as oppressors may not feel good to those who are marginalized. The remade cultural form may not feel good to those who do marginalize black women and see their views being countered.

The jazz aesthetic of black theatre provides a way of including multiple agents in cultural forms when it creates representations of black women in aesthetic works which non-blacks can “play.” Joni L. Jones writes, “‘Playing black’ in a theatrical jazz aesthetic is expressed in the most inclusive terms. Casting is multiple and often includes people of various races. In this way, casting encourages audiences to experience the political complexity of seeing non-black people as black, and thereby to see black as something beyond phenotype.” (Jones 2005, 599) The exercise of “playing black” challenges the assumptions of the audience as well as the actors who portray characters different from their expected roles. Inclusion of multiple agents can extend to different genders and skills as well. One would expect that within this inclusive model, men could also “play” black women. This technique is a practical model for decentering one’s own subjectivity. Inclusion also encourages the work of aesthetic agency to not remain limited to artists and cultural critics. Based on a model of shared power, each person who is open to participating, learning, and pursuing the goal of liberating justice is included in the process. We see this principle at work in the theatrical jazz aesthetic and also in the relation between apprentice and master and among members of the theatre company:

The bodies [participating] have their own stories to tell, and the performers’ visceral negotiations between their physical selves and the physical realities of the various characters enacted becomes a vital component of the experience. As suggested by such negotiation, this work is about process. It is about the humility involved in apprenticeship as one painstakingly acquires one’s own aesthetic character at the feet of the master. It is about the performers finding their way, bringing their distinctive gifts to the

work and letting those gifts ring forth through the characters,  
through the breath of the company. (599)

This suggests that multiple perspectives and multiple stories need to be engaged in aesthetic agency. Any perspective has the power to be oppressive if left unchecked. Even creative expression and assertion of meaning can exert domination over others if they enforce a hegemonic vision. The intentional inclusion of diverse perspectives counters this tendency. Hegemonic dominion is a risk not only for the meaning that goes into a work (its perspective) but the meaning that comes out of it (its interpretation). Because artistic works are not univocal and rely on interpreters to derive their meaning, the inclusion of multiple interpretations is a necessary component of transformative aesthetics.

When multiple perspectives are presented, they cannot be expected to take the same form. Multiple forms must be affirmed and sought out. Existing aesthetic representations come in varied artistic and cultural packages and remade aesthetic works will also. The intentional cultivation of a diversity of forms also enables aesthetic agents to speak in various cultural “languages” to address the diversity of persons. This is the best solution for human communities that are not cohesive but rather, disordered, like Babel. Unity and solidarity may be a goal of salvation, but to romanticize it and presume it is already attained before transformative aesthetic efforts are complete would be to overstate human ability.

The multiplicity of redemptive remaking needs to include consideration of multiple contexts. The diversity inherent in communities suggests that works be situated in a variety of contexts. This means not only contexts in the sense of location (urban contexts, church contexts, public contexts), but in contexts of application and use. Within the life of a Christian community, art is already used for decorative, didactic, devotional, and prophetic purposes. (Jensen 2004) Transformative aesthetics promotes this expansion of artistic forms beyond liturgy and worship contexts in the church. These uses are often employed to meet particular needs in specific locations. For example, a poster might be mounted to the wall of a children’s church classroom for a didactic purpose. Instrumental music might be used in a concert for devotional purposes for an audience who can interpret the meaning of the work without words. Photographs could be used to accompany a prophetic sermon about poverty to shock a complacent group into seeing what is typically invisible. Transformative aesthetics does not allow a single use to dominate.

Transformative aesthetics also preserves the ability for art to exist for art’s sake and for the expression and appreciation of beauty to be affirmed. As many theologians and philosophers have stated, beauty is an attribute of God and God’s will for humanity.<sup>7</sup> Appreciation of artworks solely for their beauty has a place in the life of faith. It allows rest and renewal in God throughout a transformative process that can be demanding and difficult to sustain. Promoting beauty maintains the aesthetic meaning of “goodness” as well as its moral meaning. A community should be able to look at a work and affirm its goodness for existing as an object of beauty, even as the same community recognizes that other ethical considerations may qualify its goodness. A cultural object can provoke delight in one context and while eliciting interpretations that cause anger in another. Attention to the multiplicity of contexts and uses for which

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Farley has made this observation, as has Frank Burch Brown and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

transformative aesthetics can be employed requires consideration of an audience and its particular standards of beauty.

Conscious or unconscious critique of existing representations of black women occurs prior to remaking their representation. Making new forms or reinterpreting old ones implies a rejection of the old forms as they were. The old forms are not always discarded, due either to the intentionality of claiming a good or truth that is in them with the evil or to the impracticality of disposing of it, as with a linguistic term that has widespread use. It is important to note that transformative aesthetics as I have described it does not depend on a model of removal and replacement. It depends on subversion and transformation; I have called it redemptive remaking, not redemptive creation. This is for two reasons: to minimize the potential for idolatrous analogy in ascribing creative abilities that rightfully belong to God to humans, and to recognize the ambiguity of humanity and therefore human forms.

The analogical distortion that humans are creators as God is Creator is idolatrous and misrepresents human ability. Humans can create wondrous, sublime works, but even the highest human cultural achievements emerge from an error-prone process and are subject to co-option for evil or simply misguided purposes. This is why the maintaining the role of God as divine agent and provider of grace is so important to this theological proposal. Grace is understood as God's work with humanity within human limitations to bring about redemption and salvation. Divine agency cooperates with human agency. Human ability is limited both in its actual situation—the limitations of time, place, and dependence on cultural forms already in place to even communicate—and in its ability to create that which is perfectly good.

As human products and representations of humanity, cultural forms do not exhibit clear distinctions of good and evil. The Christian metaphors of fall and expulsion from Eden remind us that good and evil, right and wrong coexist within individuals and societies. Welch reminds us that evil is as much within those who seek to be “bearers of virtue” as with their opponents. (Welch 2008) It is therefore also in the things they produce. Redemptive remaking recognizes this ambiguity, but still seeks to identify what is beautiful, what bears the divine image, and what is true, so that its goodness can be reclaimed by those who see themselves reflected by it.<sup>8</sup> Because those who work to oppose marginalization must recognize their own fallibility, unresolved issues, and potential for evil and perpetration of sin, assessment of forms both old and new must occur throughout the process. Feminist ethicist Sharon Welch remarks: “Wisdom, ongoing self-critique, and accountability are required of all of us, not just the imperial others, in the exercise of social, cultural, economic, and political power.” (Welch 2008, 102) Her words provide a necessary caution to human creative activity. This leads us to the final step in the process: analysis of new forms.

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<sup>8</sup> Radical separation of good and evil is an unattainable ideal for humans. Yet various theologians will insist on the relevance and significance of such a radical ideal. Even if the ideal cannot be attained, it provides a vision that guides our actions toward God. The ideal can be approximated, and doing so makes us followers of the divine ethical standard. Reinhold Niebuhr's work is characteristic of this view. “Prophetic Christianity... demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wresting from man the cry of distress and contrition...” This stands in contrast to the more common negotiations of justice based on the relatively good and relatively evil. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935). 97.

### Analysis of Remade Forms

There are many risks in transformative aesthetics: the risk that remade forms will bring about evil or domination through hegemonic rule; that they will reinforce already existing negative images; that they will promote forms that lift up black women at the expense of other marginalized minorities; or that they will be ineffective overall. Nevertheless, the potential opportunities of transformative work encourage action, as long as that action takes into consideration the known potential harms. The presence of risk does not mean that the project is not worth undertaking.<sup>9</sup> Instead, acknowledgement of risk means that any solution must be subjected to evaluation and should be regarded as a non-permanent solution. Analysis of transformative work provides an impetus for agents' continual engagement with their art. Not only does it hold those who participate accountable for what they produce, it gives them opportunities and encouragement to address and improve upon their works. It hopefully provokes them to participate in continual work for the salvation of others. This captures the ethical ideal of Christianity – a concern for the other that is expressed in theological assertions ranging from the Great Commission to Miguel De La Torre's ethics of reconciliation to Edward Farley's concept of ethical self-transcendence.

The significance of this ethical impulse in the life of faith suggests that transformative aesthetic work in Christian communities needs to be integrated with discernment and possible recognition in divine agency in the work of salvation. In assessment of cultural work, recognition of divine agency provokes transformative agents to consider the goodness of their works. Divine agency assists human ability to continually recreate the divine image in what has been corrupted. By relying on grace, humans have the possibility to bring about good effects from their works. Grace also provides transformative agents with a divine forgiveness for evil that may emerge as an unanticipated consequence of working with risk.<sup>10</sup>

### An Example of Resistance: *Black Girls Rock!*

In the wide and ever-expanding reality television genre, there are many shows that cast a black woman as a villain (the “black bitch”) or sexual object. Yet since 2010, I have perceived a subtle shift in television programming that features black women. In addition to negative portrayals, there are other shows that present alternative, positive images of black women as caring, capable, professional, and talented.<sup>11</sup> These shows can be considered “remade forms” that

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<sup>9</sup> Sharon Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* presents a full argument that risk is necessary to address large ethical problems.

<sup>10</sup> The provision of God's forgiveness or grace for acting despite risk does not eliminate the need for agents to consider the consequences of their actions. It also does not provide forgiveness from people who may be harmed by the consequences of action.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking of shows like *Braxton Family Values* and *I Do Over* on Oxygen Network that show black women in their career settings. *America's Supernanny* on Lifetime also features a black woman as the capable agent in transforming parents' approaches to child rearing. Oprah Winfrey's television network OWN has *Oprah's*

I would like to analyze in light of my discussion above. Here, I briefly discuss *Black Girls Rock!*, a television show promoted by its creators as a celebration of the beauty, power, and courage of black womanhood.

This special presentation, which aired on Black Entertainment Television in November 2011, highlighted achievements made by women of color. This airing marked the second year the show had been broadcast on BET. The show included performances by musicians including Erykah Badu, Jill Scott, Estelle, and the gospel duo Mary Mary. The show also honored girls and women of diverse careers and interests by presenting awards to women including Angela Davis, Taraji P. Henson, Malika Saada Saar and Imani Walker, and highlighting girls who are making a difference.<sup>12</sup> Beverly Bond, a DJ who started *Black Girls Rock!*, the foundation that is highlighted in the special, describes the importance of the work being done by the organization and the television show in her remarks to the audience. She states, “*Black Girls Rock!* has become the visual tapestry of every black girl in the African diaspora’s beacon cry for visibility.... *Black Girls Rock!* is now at the forefront of a movement inspiring all women of color to take charge of our images, our dignity, and our impact on the world.”<sup>13</sup> She believes that a show like *Black Girls Rock!* contributes to a global discussion of how black women can be self-determined in their purpose, becoming powerful leaders who love themselves and transform the image of black womanhood throughout the world.

This television show was not produced by a Christian organization, but it is relevant to a Christian understanding of aesthetic agency. One connection to spirituality in general, and Christianity in particular is the recurrent message of hope and faith in the change that is possible in the world and in the individual black female self. Additionally, there are three specific themes throughout the award recipients’ and presenters’ statements that resonate with themes of aesthetic agency. Two are concepts that could be incorporated into Christian practice to support acts of cultural production and reclamation – community building and education. The third is a discussion of how the participants’ remarks were indicative of the transcendence of self-centered subjectivity.

Angela Davis, recipient of the shows Icon Award, encouraged women to find solidarity and to build communities of resistance. Christian communities have theological models which, if consulted, could encourage black women to be creative, rather than copy others’ patterns, and to form new ways of seeing the world and being in it. What I have discussed above is my attempt to draw on those theological resources, but models can also be found in doctrines about God and

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*Masterclass* and *Oprah’s Next Chapter* in which she plays a key role, as well the new show *Welcome to Sweetie Pie’s* and a documentary club which has shown *Miss Representation* and *Louder Than a Bomb* about other women and people of color. In a previous post, I discussed *Born to Dance* and briefly mentioned *Sunday Best* on BET. Black Entertainment Television (BET) also aired the special *Black Girls Rock!* in 2010 and 2011. Obviously, these shows are on networks that target women or black viewers. However, recent seasons of competition shows like *Top Chef: Texas* and *Project Runway* have also featured black women with considerable skill and talent.

<sup>12</sup> The program included segments that showed the action of “M.A.D.” young women. M.A.D. was used throughout the show as an abbreviation for “making a difference,” but it was also a play on words that subverts stereotypes of angry (mad) black women.

<sup>13</sup> *Black Girls Rock! 2011*, executive produced by Beverly Bond (2011; BET Networks.), Television, <http://www.bet.com/content/betcom/video/blackgirlsrock/2011/full-show/bgr11-full-s8.html>.



creation. Christianity offers an image of a Creator who designs and constructs abundantly, as other religious traditions do. The created world contains more colors, shapes, flowers, and species than most of us ever imagine. Christian communities, such as churches, could encourage girls and women to see their contributions to the world as uniquely creative and in response, use religious communities to abundantly create resources, objects, and forms that sustain and promote black women, as *Black Girls Rock!* founder Beverly Bond has done. Christian organizations, youth groups and ministries could support efforts of cultural reclamation by providing artistic materials and equipment, tools and training, encouragement and love.

Tatyana Ali, a young actress, received an award for her work as an educational activist. In her remarks, she spoke about the importance of education, provoking me to consider the importance of religious education that includes critical engagement. If religious education in churches and seminaries and religious schools could be broadened so that it becomes the norm, not the exception, to learn about women's contributions, goddess traditions, and positive images of women within and beyond the Christian tradition, students would know the power women have and these students might be inspired to share it with others. If a larger segment of the community sees the diversity of ways in which feminine or female spirit is honored and affirmed, they would be better equipped to recognize and critique its denigration or negation.

*Black Girls Rock!* promotes a paradoxical rejection of individual pietism that attempts to raise self-esteem while locating those efforts beyond oneself. In other words, the show presents an elevation of self-image and individual recognition that occurs alongside affirmation of solidarity and collective work. The honorees and program participants encourage individual responsibility and the need to think for oneself, but emphasize participation in networks and communal efforts. Remarks by honoree Shirley Caesar demonstrate this kind of self-transcendence, and she sites it even more explicitly within her Christian practice.

Caesar acknowledges the place and power of women in "the Kingdom" of God. Although her emphasis (when she speaks of the Kingdom of God) is mostly on women's role as it relates to childbearing and childrearing, she also thanks God for culture creators like Beverly Bond<sup>14</sup> and Debra Lee, the Chair and CEO of BET Networks.<sup>15</sup> Caesar acknowledges that it is pursuit of her own calling to sing and create music that has had a positive impact on other black women and that she believes this is her ministry, her work in God's Kingdom. She is honored as a *Black Girls Rock!* living legend because of her music career, body of work, and spiritual contribution to her community. She is a transformative aesthetic agent.

<sup>14</sup> Caesar thanks God for Bond, who listened to the voice inside that says "do something for the beautiful black women."

<sup>15</sup> BET, Black Entertainment Television, has been widely criticized for its derogatory and misogynistic portrayals of black women, and for reinforcing negative stereotypes of black people. Discussing BET's new brand strategy in a Forbes.com interview, Lee says, "We respect, reflect and elevate our audience. They want to be entertained, but they also want to be inspired." They are using original programming, such as the *Black Girls Rock!* special to do that, replacing music videos as the core element of their programming. Lee says, "We started *BET Honors* to shine a light on people doing great things in the community and *Black Girls Rock!*, which is basically an all-women show. Our programming filter now is: It has to have a message, can't be derogatory and has to show positive images. That doesn't mean that it's unreal or fake. We're not going to be the PBS of black television. We still have to get ratings." <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2011/08/10/bet-ceo-debra-lee-takes-a-smart-bet>

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## Conclusion

Transformative aesthetics is an under-examined cultural solution to a theological problem commonly addressed by womanist and liberation theologians – the marginalization of black women. Transformative aesthetic practices utilize creativity to engage in liberating practices. I have argued in this paper that because exercises of aesthetic agency address social structures through artistic and cultural forms, they provide a means for those who work for justice to represent black women in a way that promotes their wholeness and affirms their significance within society. Such work reclaims black women's rightful status as bearers of the divine image and beings who possess full humanity. My proposal as to how transformative aesthetics can become theological, ethical praxis is intended to provide a spiritual component to an exercise that is already taking place in some secular settings. It is my hope that locating this praxis in the world of theological ethics might provoke Christians to expand their conceptions about the roles of art and beauty in the life of faith.

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