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Abstract: This paper explores the evolution of womanist Christology through the work of M. Shawn Copeland. To begin, the paper outlines womanist theological thought from the beginning, looking at the origins of womanism and early theologians who contributed to the discussion. Discussion narrows in on the tri-dimensional reality that Black women face in society and Copeland's expansion of the notion to identify additional oppressive systems in place other than classism, racism, and sexism. Copeland's Queer Jesus asks, "who is Jesus to us today?" in the discussion of heterosexism. The author argues that what further pushes Copeland's Christology past early womanist theologians is her multi-dimensional approach. Copeland's ecclesial sacramentality that appears in her Christology demands social interaction and discipleship to truly live out our lives as Jesus did.

Keywords: Christology, M. Shawn Copeland, Heterosexism, Eucharistic Solidarity, Womanist, Queer

M. Shawn Copeland drew me into her theological lens back when I was 20 years old, through her writing about a Black homeless woman searching for food in the dumpsters on the street below her Boston apartment. To Copeland, this woman is no one other than Christ.[1] It was this essaying in the collection, *Thinking of Christ*, that led to my initial interest in womanist Christology. M. Shawn Copeland has continued to challenge my own and many other people's normative views of theology through her discussion of black bodies, African-American religious experience, and the embodied Christ. This paper explores Copeland's Christology, specifically in relation to womanist theologians that came before her. In doing so, it illustrates how Copeland's Christology has embraced what it means to be a womanist, while at the same time distinguishing the notion of a sacramental Christology through a reading of Eucharistic solidarity.

Where has She Come From: The Origins of Womanist Theology and Thought

Alice Walker first coined the term womanist in her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden.* Derived from the Black folk expression, "womanish," womanist is meant to be a transformation in which one is "responsible, in charge, and serious."[2] Walker clearly states that a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color who is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people.[3] Since Walker's publication back in 1983, womanism has made its way into the theological realm. Womanist theologians, such as Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas were pioneers in the field who explored the way womanist theology differed from white feminist theology within the second wave of feminism.

Womanist theology comes out of asserting the fact that a White woman's experience is not the universal experience of all women.[4] Despite being female, White women still have privilege over Black women in this sexist society simply due to the fact that they are white. The experiences Black women have faced throughout their history in America are far different from that of White women. White women have not had to experience the blatant racism of White society along with the sexism in White and Black societies. Violence against Black women has been historically justified through slavery, which classified them as something less than human.[5] Violence against Black women continues today through various oppressive lenses which continue to classify them as "other."

Womanism has also been needed because a Black woman's experience was not initially included in Black liberation. Despite sharing the experience of being oppressed in a racist society, Black men often experience some type of privileged position due to one thing – their

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[1] M. Shawn Copeland, *The Cross of Christ and Discipleship,* ed. by Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 178.
[2] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (*New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), x.
[3] Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, xi.
[4] A. Elaine Crawford, "Womanist Christology: Where Have We Come From and Where Are We Going?" *Review and Expositor* 95, no. 3 (1998): 371.
[5] Crawford, "Womanist Christology," 374.

maleness.[6] Widescale oppression occurs across social levels throughout the nation and also within various communities. Black women face sexism from both White society and within Black communities. While Black women had to stand in solidarity with their male counterparts against racism, they also realized that Black men did not see or respect them as equals.[7] Black liberation focused on one oppression—racism—and had trouble seeing the internal oppression within Black communities, such as sexism and classism.

To address this problem, womanist theology focuses on the complexity of Black women's oppression. This complexity was first addressed as the "tri-dimensional reality."[8] Tri-dimensional theory focuses on ways in which Black women have been exposed to various levels of oppression that the White women of feminism and Black men of the Black liberation movement have not been exposed to. The tri-dimensions of oppression that Black women face are racism, sexism, and classism.[9] At the time of early womanist theology, womanists noted that neither feminist theology nor Black theology talked about classism, despite the fact that both White women and Black men fall victim to this oppressive system. Due to the combination of sexual and racial oppression, Black women make up a significant amount of the poor and working classes.[10] Thus, classism affects Black women in such a way that they are at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. This became a key point of discussion for early womanist theologians.[11]

Jacquelyn Grant does a good job addressing the fact that the oppressive barriers Black women face are not *only* experienced by Black women. Grant explains her understanding of the tri-dimensional reality, stating:

> In each of the three dynamics of oppression, Black women share in the reality of a broader community. They share race suffering with Black men; with White women and other Third World women, they are victims of sexism; and with poor Blacks and Whites, and other Third World peoples, especially women, they are disproportionately poor. To speak of Black women's tri-dimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which connects them with others.[12]

Here, Grant displays the womanist concern with survival of all persons, and the understanding that various women and men across the world have experienced parts of the tri-dimensional oppression also experienced by Black women.

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[6] Kelly Delaine Brown, "God is as Christ Does: Towards a Womanist Theology," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 46, no. 1 (1989): 10.

[7] Brown, "God is as Christ Does," 12.

[8] Jacquelyn Grant, "A Womanist Christology," in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education,* ed. by Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 175.

[9] Crawford, "Womanist Christology," 367.

[10] Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Woman Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (1986): 201.

[11] Grant, "Womanist Theology," 202.

[12] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus (*Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989), 217.

Copeland's Christology: The Evolution of Womanist Christology

Womanist theology came about because Black women's experiences were not being recognized, and womanist thought must continue to acknowledge the multi-dimensional realities of all Black persons. Copeland speaks of "multi-oppressive reality," as the womanists before her did, but also brings various oppressive systems into view and discusses them at length, focusing primarily on black bodies. In *Knowing Christ Crucified,* Copeland labels bodies as marked. Bodies, Copeland writes, are "made individual, particular, different, and vivid through race, sex and gender, sexuality, and culture."[13] In this way, marked bodies pose limitations and have been victims of violence imposed on them by these marks. By expanding the notion of the original tri-dimensional reality, Copeland addresses the various oppressive systems that are stacked against people. Copeland, truly looking towards the womanist notion of survival of whole peoples, takes a strong stance against kyriarchy, which can be seen throughout her work.[14]

Copeland's notion of bodies as marked is crucial in her Christology. She understands that Jesus' mission was carried out in the tension between resistance to empire and the desire for the reign of God.[15] As a body marked and subjugated by the Roman empire, Jesus strategically placed his body within this tension. At the center of his ministry were the bodies of the people—the poor, disabled, and refugees. More importantly, Jesus placed his body where these people were. In doing so, Jesus handled, touched, and healed these women and men.[16] Copeland writes that through healing and exorcisms, families were reunited, people were restored to the synagogue, and those who went long periods without human interaction found intimacy.[17]

Another key aspect of Jesus' mission was table ministry, which Copeland calls the welcome table. In eating and drinking with the others of society, such as sinners, lepers, and women, Jesus showed how unrestricted love for the neighbor must be within the reign of God. More importantly, Jesus showed that bodies, specifically "other" bodies, matter. Copeland states that Jesus' table ministry "embodies the design for the Reign of God: all are welcomed."[18]

Copeland, unlike the womanist theologians who came before her, does not get stuck on Jesus' maleness. Grant, in her now famous line, says, "The crucifixion was for universal salvation, not just for male salvation, or as we may extend the argument to include, not just for White salvation."[19] For Grant and many other womanists, it is Jesus' humanity that matters, not his maleness. However, in failing to talk about Jesus' gender womanist theologians failed to discuss gender roles and Jesus' masculinity. Originally proposed by Sandra Schneiders in *Woman and Word,* Copeland takes up this topic as a way to discuss Jesus' opposition to the

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[13] M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 62.
[14] Kyriarchy, a term coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fionenza, extends patriarchal notions to reach other structures of oppression and privilege, such as classism, racism, ableism, etc.
[15] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 59.
[16] Ibid., 60.
[17] Ibid., 60-61.
[18] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 65.
[19] Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus*, 219.

social gender norms enforced by societal forces.[20] She writes, "Jesus performed masculinity in ways that opposed patriarchal expressions of maleness through coercive power, control and exploitation of 'other' bodies, exclusion, and violence."[21] Jesus made his body available to others, thus countering traditional structures of masculinity. Jesus was an iconoclast when it came to patriarchal family structure. In demolishing these structures, Jesus pushed solidarity beyond blood and marriage.[22]

Similarly, Jesus' actions towards women reformed the male-female relationship. Taking on women as disciples as well as defending them against vicious attacks by men affirmed women's agency over sociocultural and religious norms for women in Roman society. For Copeland, Jesus' masculinity was kenotic in that "he emptied himself of all that would subvert or stifle authentic human liberation."[23] In doing so, Copeland notes, Jesus's maleness undermined kyriarchy and stood against the various oppressive systems that made up his society at the time. Jesus of Nazareth thus proclaimed freedom within the reign of God. Jesus' identification with the others in his society provided a new way to understand being God's people in a new imperial order.[24]

Today, bodies continue to be marked as "other" through various oppressive means. While Copeland does talk about this notion within race and gender, I'd like to focus on her discussion of sexuality. Copeland states:

> If Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, cannot be an option for gay, lesbian, transgender people, then he cannot be an option. An adequate response to this concern requires a different Christological interpretation, one in which we *all* may recognize, love, and realize our body-selves as his own flesh, as the body of Christ.[25]

Copeland, continuing with the theme of marked bodies, explores the queer flesh of Jesus Christ. This is not a claim that Jesus was gay; rather, it defines queer as "whatever may be at odds with whatever is considered normal or conventional or legitimate."[26] In this definition, Jesus is the epitome of queer. Jesus' preferential option to the others of his society projects a queer vision of human life and living. By enacting the reign of God, Jesus flipped the traditional ideologies the empire held. Copeland identifies this as Jesus' "queer vision."[27]

In Black liberation and Womanist Christologies, Jesus is Black. For James Cone, Jesus is "a humiliated Black Christ, a lynched Black body."[28] Jesus is made Black because Jesus is able to identify and be in solidarity with other lynched black bodies.[29] Grant continues this thought of

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[20] For Schneider's discussion of Jesus' masculinity, see chapter 5 in her book *Woman and Word.*
[21] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 63.
[22] Ibid., 64.
[23] Ibid., 64.
[24] Ibid., 65.
[25] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 73.
[26] Ibid., 73.
[27] Ibid., 74.
[28] James Cone, "Strange Fruit: The Cross and Lynching Tree," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (2007): 53-54.
[29] Cone, "Strange Fruit," 54.

Jesus as Black, but goes further to say that Jesus is a Black woman. Grant, like Cone, believes Jesus is made into a Black woman because Jesus can be found in the experiences of Black women.[30] Copeland makes similar statements in other works, noting that enslaved people *knew* Jesus, as Jesus was also an "other" or stranger.[31] However, Copeland notes the importance of making such statements within Christological discussion. "A 'queer' Christ," Copeland writes, "heals the anthropological impoverishment of lesbian and gay and transgendered bodies."[32]

A queer Christ knows the suffering of LGBTQ+ people. Just as members of the LGBTQ+ community are disowned and rejected from their families, Jesus too knows this familiar rejection (Luke 4:16-30). Some theologians make arguments that the LGBTQ+ community has been crucified. Robert Gross discusses this notion in stating that the cross is a political manifestation of homophobic practice and oppression.[33] It is in the silencing, hate crimes, and systematic violence that the community endures. The cross indicates the internalized homophobia, fear of rejection, and persecution that may come hand in hand with coming out. Thus, the cross and Jesus belong to the LGBTQ+ community.

For Copeland, Jesus teaches us what it means to be human in the world. In contradiction to imperial practices of bodily exclusion, Jesus calls us to a practice of liberation and inclusion of all bodies. A queer Christ, as Copeland puts forth, embraces all bodies. This is shown through his ministry, in placing his body within the tension that existed between empire and desire for freedom and inclusion in the Reign of God. It is not about fitting our lives into God. If the community cannot see how the risen Christ, a Christ "queer" in his vision of the reign of God, identifies with LGBTQ+ people, then there is no good news in the Gospel.[34]

Copeland's discussion of a queer Jesus is important as not many early womanist theologians focused on discussion of sex and sexuality. It challenges Grant's tri-dimensional reality of oppression by bringing heterosexism into focus. Anne Marie Terrell, in her book *Power in the Blood?,* addresses Grant's lack of LGBTQ+ representation in her work. By failing to recognize Black women as part of the LGBTQ+ community, Grant does not think to recognize heterosexism as part of Black women's experience.[35] This is why Copeland's discussion of a queer Christ is so important. Not only is it discussed in books where Copeland addresses Black bodies, but it also moves beyond the singular frame of Black women. Copeland's discussion of a queer Christology is not limited by the parameters or race or sex and sexuality, but rather moves beyond them to uphold the womanist commitment to the survival of whole peoples. Furthermore, Copeland is writing in terms of what is happening today. In her 2017 article, *Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ,* Copeland situates her work within the context of the Orlando Night

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[30] Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus,* 220.
[31] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 57.
[32] Ibid., 74.
[33] Robert Gross, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 83.
[34] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 74.
[35] JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in the African American Experience (*Maryknoll, Ny: Orbis Books, 1998), 110.

Club massacre, which took place in June of 2016 and resulted in 49 deaths. In framing her work this way, Copeland continues to ask, "who is Jesus Christ to us today?"[36]

Many early womanist theologians spent time asking a similar question in the context of slave religion. This topic is necessary in framing Black persons' understandings of who Jesus is and where certain notions have come from. One of the earliest womanist Christological understandings was put forth by Delores Williams, who sees Jesus as a surrogate. White men and women exploited Black women to provide surrogate services, such as birthing Black children to be put into slavery, satisfying While male sexual desires, and serving as wet-nurses to White babies.[37] In Williams' view, Jesus is the ultimate surrogate, who died in place of someone else: sinful humankind.[38] One's understanding of Jesus bears a direct relationship to one's understanding of self. In this case, a painful past continues to place societal norms on Black women even today.[39]

Early womanists such as Kelly Brown Douglas or Delores Williams are not alone in looking back on slavery to develop Christological frameworks. Copeland has also spent her time looking at slavery as a frame of Christology, especially in reference to spirituals which she understands as a view into how Black people understand Jesus.[40] While Copeland's discussions on race and gender are crucial and thought provoking, I believe her discussions of a queer Jesus show the full evolution of womanist Christology.

I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table: Copeland's Multi-Dimensional Christology

What truly sets Copeland apart in her Christology is her embrace of other theological dimensions within it. Compared to early womanists, Copeland's inclusion of ecclesial sacramentality within her notion of Christology is unique. Just like Jesus' flesh, Copeland states, the flesh of the Church is marked by race, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture.[41] Like the marks that we carry that differentiate ourselves from one another, the mark received in baptism unifies the Church. Copeland argues that we, the baptized people, "are the body raised up by Christ himself within humanity; through us, the flesh of the crucified and resurrected Jesus is extended through time and space."[42] For Copeland, there is no characteristic more evident in Jesus' flesh than solidarity, which we are called to live out as the body of Christ in our present moment.

We, the Church as the body of Christ, must continue to embody Christ's love for and solidarity with the stranger, the marginalized, and the "others" of our society. Our transformation into Christ invites us to challenge positions of power, wealth, and privilege. If anyone is barred

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[36] Ibid., 111
[37] Ibid., 113.
[38] Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *The Strength of Her Witness,* ed. by Elizabeth Johnson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 208.
[39] Crawford, "Womanist Christology," 367.
[40] To read more about Copeland looking at slave narratives, spirituals, and Christological frames, see "Meeting and Seeing Jesus in Slaveholding Worlds," in *Knowing Christ Crucified.*
[41] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 77.
[42] Ibid., 78.

access to the welcome table, we are not welcoming and we are not Christ's flesh. Copeland states:

> If my sister's mark of sexuality must be obscured, if my brother's mark of race must be disguised, if my sister's mark of culture must be repressed, then we are not the flesh of Christ. For it is through and in Christ's own flesh that the "other" is my sister, is my brother; indeed, the "other" is me. Unless our sisters and brothers are beside and with each of us, we are not the flesh of Christ.[43]

Our explicit lack of inclusion is not the only way we harm the flesh of Christ; if we do not truly embody Jesus in the world, we become complicit in harming the flesh of Christ. If we are silent in the face of war, destruction, oppression, and social sin, then we are enabling the empire's sacrilegious anti-liturgy, which "dislodges the table of the bread of life."[44]

For Copeland, Eucharist is crucial. For in the Eucharist, Jesus' very presence is revealed. By partaking in reception of this sacrament, we are to make visible Jesus' body through a praxis of solidarity. If we are complicit with the oppression around us, then we then pose a threat to the Eucharist and the notions it seeks to fulfill. Copeland explains this by stating, "racism is lethal to bodies, to Black bodies, to the body of Christ, to the Eucharist." In a similar way, Copeland can replace racism with heterosexism, and Black bodies with queer bodies. Her notion remains the same. I would argue that Copeland believes any type of '-ism,' is an intrinsic evil which harms the body of Christ.

If, Copeland asks, a hurting body, Jesus' hurt body, has been a symbol of solidarity for Christians, how can we connect the Eucharist to hurting bodies?[45] Copeland proposes the notion of Eucharistic solidarity. At the heart of the Christian community is the Eucharist. As members of Christ's body, each time Christians partake in the ritual meal, we meet the social consequences of the Eucharist; we are an embodiment of Christ in the here and now.

Eucharistic solidarity is the virtue that contradicts the vices that have made their way into the pews of the Church. These vices are racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and all other forms of oppression that hold one group above another or result in acts of hatred and violence toward others. For Copeland, "Eucharistic solidarity opposes all intentional divisive segregation of bodies on the specious grounds of preference for race or gender or sexual orientation or culture."[46] Eucharistic celebration transforms us into an embodiment of Christ.

Embodying Christ demands discipleship, as it is an embodied praxis which calls for "intentional and conscious Eucharistic living."[47] Christologies are formed through people's understanding of and lived experiences, in which they can relate to Jesus because Jesus relates to them. As such, Jesus becomes queer or Black or female. We, as the embodiment of Christ, are meant to live out the reign of God. This concept is at the heart of Copeland's Eucharistic solidarity. The embodiment of Christ in the here and now, the Church, is to continue Jesus' mission. Eucharistic solidarity not only sustains our praxis of discipleship but teaches us to

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[43] Ibid., 78.
[44] Ibid., 79.
[45] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 110.
[46] Ibid., 127.
[47] Ibid., 127.

create a new possibility for freedom, love, and acceptance. No one should be excluded from the welcome table Jesus prepares; rather we must understand that in his body, we are made anew.

Continuing the work of and moving beyond early womanist Christologies, M. Shawn Copeland provides a refreshing and modern perspective on Jesus. Taking today's social climate into consideration, Copeland expands our understanding of the multi-dimensional reality of oppression, addressing far more than her predecessors. Additionally, in looking at who Jesus is to us today, she takes steps towards furthering the survival and liberation of whole peoples. Unlike womanist theologians before her, Copeland's multi-dimensional approach to Christology demands social interaction and discipleship. No longer is Christology only a reflection of how Jesus is like a certain demographic. Instead, Copeland challenges readers to understand that we all, as a whole, are also Jesus. As an embodiment of Jesus, we partake in his mission. We must prepare a table welcoming all and reject the empire's practice of segregation, violence, and oppression.

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