BLACK WOMEN'S SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP: SHAPING SACRED AND SECULAR COMMUNITIES, COMPLEXITIES OF RESISTANCE, AND THE POWER OF PERSISTENCE

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ABSTRACT

BLACK WOMEN'S SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP

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This Doctor of Ministry project explores the transformative leadership of Black women and their pivotal roles in advancing the work of social justice across both sacred and secular platforms as spiritual guides, community builders, and liberation advocates. This research examines how Black women leaders navigate oppressive systems, the theological tension between sacred and secular realms, boundary crossing, leadership practices counterintuitive to social norms, complexities of resistance, and the power of persistence.

Five questions were asked to address the transformative leadership of Black women and the complexities of navigating through oppressive structures. What does being a Black women leader mean in the United States? What is at stake for Black women leaders whose sacred and secular worlds intersect? What is received and what is given in resistance? What are the costs associated with resistance, and is the cost of liberation too high of a price to pay? What does the power of persistence entail for Black women leaders seeking justice and change in sacred and secular communities?

Drawing from the story and lived experiences of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, in Exodus 1:15-22, literary research of historical and contemporary examples of Black women leaders and data collected from oral history interviews of three Black women navigating pastoral, community and higher education leadership roles, this project examines transformative leadership strategies essential to faith and advocacy work in communities. Their lived experiences and leadership serve as an exemplary foundation for the development of future Black women called to lead in sacred and secular spaces, advocating for spiritually grounded and socially just communities.

My research revealed that all women shared an experiential commonality in their leadership formation, with faith and resilience serving as the key strategy for overcoming oppressive barriers, sustaining life, and preserving the future of their communities. This project will contribute to the framework, formation, and foundation of Beyond Transition Ministries for young Black women called to lead and transform lives in sacred and secular spaces.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother, Emma L. O'Neal, who taught me about the meaning of God's love through her action of resilience, the essence of pursuing a power greater than myself, and the importance of prevailing in environments less than favorable to Black women.

This project is dedicated to my great great grandmother, Matilda Barnes, who dedicated her life to family and community, while navigating the atrocities of slavery with strength, courage, and endurance.

I dedicate this body of work to every Black woman called by God to advocate for herself on sacred and secular platforms designed to conform her to societal norms and suppress the power of her leadership. Your strength resonates from the divine power of resistance and persistence within you.

Table of Contents

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To my Pastor, Rev. Dr. Dana P. Owens, thank you for empowering me to be my authentic self in ministry. Your spiritual guidance, unconditional support, and leadership has impacted my life and who I am as a minister. You model God's divine framework of a selfless leader who never ceases to pour into and love the people you pastor and lead.

INTRODUCTION

Black women have had to navigate social constructs in public, political, and religious spaces. They have advocated for justice, resisted earthly powers, and contributed to the vitality of their communities. An exploration of contributing factors is necessary to garner a greater understanding of their experience. Historical times lines, the impact of slavery, boundary crossing, leadership practices counterintuitive to social norms, theological tension between sacred and secular realms, community contributions, and the power of persistence were examined to determine how faith and defiance shaped their social justice leadership.

What does being a Black woman leader mean in the United States? What is at stake for Black women leaders whose sacred and secular worlds intersect? What is received and what is given in resistance? What are the costs associated with resistance and is the cost of liberation too much of a price to pay? What does the power of persistence entail for Black women leaders seeking justice and change in sacred and secular communities?

To address these questions, the framework of this project is theologically grounded on the story of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, found in Exodus 1:15-22, whose fear of God becomes the author of their narrative and the power behind their defiance and leadership. Their fear of God helped them navigate through dismantling the power of a king's violence and the threat of genocide to preserve the life of their community. Through literary research, I explore the experience of other women in the bible, Black women

activists, and Black women leadership practices. A qualitative research method was implored to substantiate the connection between the lived experiences of the two midwives and how those experiences manifest in the leadership stories of women Black women.

Oral history interviews were conducted virtually, using a phenomenological approach, which assisted with exploring the lived experiences of three Black women leading in community, higher education, and religion. The selection of participants was predicated on the number of years in leadership, extensive knowledge in respective vocations, contributions to communities, and leadership experiences as Black women. Participants were asked the same series of four questions about their leadership experiences in sacred and secular realms. Oral history data was collected and thematically analyzed, identifying recurring themes related to their lived experiences.

The results of this research revealed that all women shared experiential commonality in the formation of their leadership with faith and resilience serving as the key strategy for overcoming oppressive barriers, sustaining life, and preserving the future of their communities. Specifically, the oral history interviews revealed a deep-rooted connection to overcoming adversities and systemic barriers, deep intertwining of sacred and secular spaces, challenges with navigating power structures and cultural expectations, resistance in and resistance to their leadership, and an authentic need for mentorship and solidarity.

This project expounds on the historical journey of Black women from the shores of Africa to the sands of the United States. This historical review provides the necessary background to understanding the importance of how the atrocities of slavery impacted the

lives of Black women, impinged upon the quality of their life, the development of negative societal constructs about Black women, the endurance of pain and struggle, and the overarching power behind their persistence. Specific periods of African American history are introduced and the context of Black women's leadership in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth century are highlighted. Black women's presence in civil rights, social justice movements, navigation through oppressive circumstances and the behaviors of white men, Black men, and white women are brought to light. In my research I explore critical resistance to injustices and lived experiences pertinent to Black women leadership practices in sacred and secular spaces.

I engage biblical scholars, theologians, authors, feminists, and womanists into the narrative of the two midwives' leadership, with their viewpoint on defiance as an act of God symbolizing God's kingship on earth and the interruption of an earthly kingship to ensure the vitality of future generations. My research gleans heavily from the scholarship of Wilda C. Gafney, Laverne McCain Gill, Irmtraud Fischer, Kat Armas, and Christopher Naseri. Their scholarly work helps with identifying connectors in the intersectionality of the sacred and secular, the struggle of living in the tension of social and theological worlds, advocacy, and boundary crossing, as well as leadership practices that are counterintuitive to social norms. The qualitative literature review in this chapter is instrumental in conveying the message of faith, the presence and power of God as a defining factor undergirding women navigating leadership in oppressive and discriminatory sacred and secular spaces.

This project explores leadership resistance, costs associated with resistance, and the power of persistence, expounding on the formation of advocacy and Black women

leadership strategies. I have compiled the collection of oral history data from interviews of three Black women leading in community, higher education, and religious sectors. A corroboration of findings was extrapolated from questions answered by interview participants regarding their lived experiences in sacred and secular realms of their vocations. The collected data is used to examine the cross intersectionality of leadership on the backdrop of the Shiphrah and Puah story as it relates to positions of leadership occupied by Black women today.

With a clear understanding of how faith informs and impacts Black women's leadership in sacred and secular communities, this research project will help charter the path for developing the framework, formation, and foundation (3F's) of Beyond Transition Ministries, a non-profit for young Black women desiring to lead in sacred and secular spaces, transforming lives through education and community service. Beyond Transition Ministries will focus on holistic faith-based approaches to leadership sustainability and community integration, by cultivating educational, personal, and spiritual growth, and instituting supportive services through faith informed leadership initiatives, workshops, and mentoring partnerships. Shaping secular and sacred communities, navigating the complexities of resistance, and the power of persistence in courageous leadership is undergirded by the fear and power of God.

Chapter One

Introduction

Black women's social justice leadership expands beyond the territory of their households, overflowing into sacred and secular spaces of which they have been called and commissioned to serve. The efficacy of Black women's social justice leadership spanning from the 1950's to 2000's has resonated in a myriad of socioeconomic, political, and religious platforms. Their leadership, although born out of the necessity to address inequities in each of these convergences, has been met with complex levels of resistance rooted in racism and sexism. To further understand some of these complexities, a deeper exploration of resistance practices deployed and encountered in the intersectionality of sacred and secular spaces of Black women's leadership and how it has left imprints on the trifurcated areas of spiritual, psychological, and physical aspects of their lives is warranted.

This exploration is vital to my own ministry as I lead and navigate the intersectionality of theological and societal platforms, what it means to be a Black woman leading in these spaces and learning how to mitigate internal and external resistance to leadership. I will begin this research paper by noting several significant factors that shape the historical context of the Black woman's story in the United States, the emergence and formation of leadership born out of lived experiences overlaid in racism, sexism, and discrimination, the impact these complexities had on the development of Black women leadership and advocacy strategies that informed creative ways of addressing injustices, and the power of persistence that helped shape sacred and secular communities.

In her book *Black Women Leaders*, author and professor of Sociology and African American studies, Lori Latrice Martin, says despite calls for black women to pledge their allegiance to white women, or to black men, or to any other group that feels they have the right to tell black women how, when, and against what to resist, black women have led fights against oppression fighting on multiple fronts.[1] Some of those multiple fronts as mentioned by Lori Latrice Martin, includes advocacy in educational reform, criminal justice reform, Black Lives Matter, leadership against institutionalized racism and sexism in sacred and secular establishments, the mobilization of other black women in the community to collaborate on efforts of addressing social justice issues, as well as tackling the constraints of their leadership being undervalued, demonized, and vilified in their public and private lives. No platform was exempt for Black Women leaders, resistance transcended to social, political, and religious grounds.

To understand the forefront of resistance, a critical lens must be applied to specific periods of African American history in the United States. I will begin with Black women's historical narrative during the time of slavery, most importantly the context of their leadership in the United States during 1950 to 1968 when Black women began to make their presence known in the civil rights and social justice movements. Black women had to navigate through oppressive circumstances and behaviors of white and Black men, as well as white and Black women. An exploration of behaviors is crucial to understanding how resistance overlaid in racism and sexism became disdaining and wounding to Black women leading in sacred and secular spaces. When exploring the nature of these behaviors, the

[1] Lori Latrice Martin, *Black Women as Leaders: Challenging and Transforming Society* (California): Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019), 19.

following questions will help garner a better understanding of the complexities encompassing Black women leadership. In what ways did these discriminatory behaviors aid in the marginalization of Black women and impact societal, political, and religious contributions in sacred and secular spaces? What strategies did Black women leaders use to help them navigate through discriminatory behaviors? What impact did those behaviors have on the spiritual, mental, and physical well-being of Black women? How does the complexities found in resistance aid in the power of persistence displayed in Black women leadership? The goal of this research is to examine the complexities of Black women leadership and to highlight how counterintuitive leadership practices informed the shaping of sacred and secular communities.

The Shaping of the Black Woman's Story in the United States

Black women have a complex and paradoxical relationship with the United States. Black women have been marginalized and ostracized and at the same time have been have used in exploitation to help procreate for the maintaining of white supremacy and its economic prosperity. [2] When African women were kidnapped and bought by European traders from the African Continent, they were sold in abundance. According to Daina Berry, Professor of History and Kaili Gross, Humanities Professor of African American Studies, Black women and children together accounted for the majority of those transported to the Americas during the entirety of the transatlantic slave trade. African women were skilled producers and laborers and specialized in what I used to hear my

[2] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 2.

mother called, "tilling the ground." As a result, European colonists capitalized off their knowledge, skills, and free labor, which helped the colonizers survive and thrive in North America. Stolen from their homeland, their life as God created human beings, and discarded by African and European traders, African women became nothing more than a number and property to their captives. They endured the stress of captivity, physical and sexual abuse, as well as psychological trauma, oftentimes prior to their feet hitting American soil.

Daina Berry and Kaili Gross write about the horror of the slave ship representing one of the greatest atrocities in world history. They exclaim that the experience for Black women was especially treacherous and complicated by physical and sexual exploitation from the ship's crew members. African women were often stripped naked and packed like sardines in sex-segregated holds underneath the deck after already suffering while in holding facilities along the West African coastline for months.[3] As the ships sailed and stopped at ports, African women were repeatedly inspected like insignificant animals, physically and sexually assaulted, raped, and abused by merchants and traders. Life as they knew it, as stated by Daina Berry and Kaili Gross, had changed dramatically. They were torn from their families, communities, and forced into a living nightmare on unfamiliar soil.

Unnamed African women, identified by numbers only, were unceremoniously tossed into the Atlantic Ocean. Daina Berry and Kaili Gross mentioned an African woman identified as No 83 who was pregnant at the time of her captivity. Her pregnancy was of no relevance to one of the crew members who brutally and violently raped her as other

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[3] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 26.

members of the crew watched. When recording the incident, the captain of the ship logged the incident as seduction. No 83 was sexually violated by a crew member to the point of humiliation and shame. Using the word seduction suggests No 83 was a willing participant rather than a victim of violence. No 83 was only one of many unnamed African women slung into the Atlantic Ocean. Daina Berry and Kalis Gross states that there is no known log about how No 83 died. The disdain for the lives of African women by white European captors and enslavers was reprehensible as were the construction of negative narratives about Black women.

Religious ties to slavery can be traced back to the Catholic Church who financially supported and benefited from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Pope supported the Spanish colony legislation that governed practices of slave ship owners and merchants. The Spanish colony established laws to control the bodies of enslaved women and even in "alleged" freedom, enslaved women were subject to the tyrannical control over their bodies and exploited. Laws were instituted stating that enslaved women could become free when her lord puts her into prostitution to make money from her.[4] Tyrannical control over Black women's bodies and prostitution dressed up as freedom served as a constructive narrative by European enslavers to control the governance of society, leadership, and the story of Black women. The message of the narrative, unspoken and spoken, indicated that Black women only had value and freedom if they were prostitutes.

As early as 1643, the Virginia Assembly allowed for African women to be taxed for their labor, while white women were not. Such legislation marked Black women's bodies as taxable property, and they were expected to work in the fields, which was an

[4] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 31.

intentional distinction from white women.[5] Another narrative that depleted the value of Black women and paints the picture of Black women being strong like animals whose value was compared to that of a farm animal. From house labor to field labor, tilling the ground, plowing, planting, cooking cleaning, washing, and ironing clothes, taking care of their own children, and a mandate to take care of the enslaver's children, governed and shaped the lives and experience of Black women in the United States. To add injury to insult, additional legislative governance was enforced on Black women, dictating the type of clothes they could wear and the type of hairstyles they were allowed to have. A continuous shaping of the Black women's story, with many chapters to the book of standards written by European enslavers.

Complex societal narratives constructed by European enslavers were intentionally designed to systematically destroy and negate familial structures of Black women. Black women narratives and constructs imposed physical and psychological trauma on the entire family unit. Enslavers normalized family separation, murder, and rape as a way of life for Black women and their families. Husbands, fathers, and brothers were stripped from family units, sold, and auctioned off, leaving Black women to carry the burden of providing for and raising families alone. Wives were beaten, raped, and gave birth to children that became property of the enslaver. Children were taken from mothers, sold, and many of the little girls were beaten and raped like their mothers. As negative narratives unfolded about Black women, the narratives were marketed to the masses, portraying Black women as single mothers, murdering criminals, strong like animals, and angry Black women. Nothing in the constructed narratives highlighted the trauma of being stolen from their homeland,

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[5] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 33.

violently abused, endurance, or leadership skills that undergirded their survival in environments plagued by violence.

Many White Nineteenth-century enslavers, traders, physicians, businessmen, and showmen became obsessed with Black women's bodies. With the closing of the transatlantic slave trade, natural, and forced reproduction became the key to maintaining the system of slavery with additional sources of labor. This sparked and deeper interest in the Black female body by white medical professionals. From the auction block to medical schools, Black women and girls faced sexual assault and exploratory surgeries on a regular basis.[6] Instead of being provided gynecological and maternal child health care, the bodies of Black women became experimental objects, further adding another layer to the shaping of the story of Black women in the United States. The unfortunate outcome of this narrative resulted in the disparities of Black women's health care, as Black women bodies were deemed to be stronger and could sustain more than a white woman's body.

Reverberating through these stories embedded in Black women's history in the United States, I can hear the voice of my enslaved maternal great grandmother, Matilda Barnes, as if she were still alive, bearing witness to what it means to be shaped as a Black woman on the soil of the United States. The atrocities and struggles that shaped who she became in her sacred and secular communities, her personal and external complexities of resistance in her Black womanhood, and her persistence to push, propel, and survive would precede in telling her story for her.

If my maternal grandmother were still alive, having delivered over one thousand Black babies successfully without any deaths of mothers or babies, she would proclaim

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[6] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 65.

with a loud voice the importance of midwifery and its positive affect on the mortality rates of Black women and their babies. If my mother were living, she would be inclined to share her story about having to be pulled out of school in the fifth grade to help till the land for her sharecropping parents, what it felt like having to clean white people houses, the experiences of being raped by a man she was forced to marry, the endurance of domestic violence, having lost her factory job because the factory closed down, becoming a product of the welfare system long enough to provide for her family, going back to school to complete her education, and becoming a certified home health aide because taking care of others was what she enjoyed. All three women whose stories are intersectional by shared experiences with so many other Black women past and present, is a true testament to Black women leadership.

How does this history inform contemporary constraints, yearnings, and fortitude of Black women leaders? What does it mean to be Black women leaders whose story in the United States has been shaped by European enslavers? Black women leaders have navigated through the struggles and complexities of leadership to help sustain the vitality of their communities. To be Black Women leaders in the United States means to encompass physical and psychological violence to personhood, womanhood, and character, to defend against exclusion, rapists, enslavers, racism, and sexism, to fight for social and political protection for herself and her family, to embody the strength of endurance and survival, while pushing through complex systems of oppression to ensuring social justice in sacred and secular spaces are being addressed and action oriented solutions benefit the communities they are serving and advocating for.

Black Women's Social Justice Leadership Shaping Sacred and Secular Communities

From being muted to unmuting, a journey of social justice leadership and advocacy that grew out of the tension of their passion for freedom and change. Black women's social justice leadership served as the conduit to reclaiming mind, body, soul, and what they believe belonged to them. Unmuting is embodied in the struggle for justice, not only for themselves but for their families and communities. From the end of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, Black women's quest for social justice crossed intersections of politics and religion, race and gender, places, and spaces. Their leadership entered public spaces, shaped religious practices, and influenced the struggle for civil rights. In spaces generally considered masculine and white, Black women leaders are employed in the fight for social justice and Christian activism.[7] The duality of being Black and a woman, carries the weight of confrontation with what religious historian Betty Livingston Adams refers to as the "Women Question and the Race Problem."

This demarcation of gender and race causes Black women leaders to experiment with various organizational social justice leadership models and transgress boundaries, often in opposition to Black and white men as well as middle-class white women.[8] The intersection of religion, society, and the empowerment of marginalized people became centralized to Black women's social justice leadership. In her analysis of twentieth century Northern suburbs in *Black Women's Christian Activism,* African American Religious scholar Betty Livingston Adams, proclaims that religious thought and practices sustained

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[7] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 1.

[8] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 3.

their community-based activism and the intertwining of religion, gender, and politics in an increasingly secular society. Black women expanded the religious discourse beyond personal salvation and offered an alternative model of religious and political interaction.[9] Because of the myriads of narratives placated on Black women, Livingston said Black women were often viewed as the ones in need of reform. Despite negative narratives, they fought for a place for women's work in the church and for their race work in the community.

Sociologist Lori Latrice Martin refers to Black women social justice leaders as race-transcending prophets who combine the life of the mind with the struggle for justice and human dignity regardless of risks or costs to them personally or professionally.[10] Black women founded organizations, created clubs within churches, developed Black women suffrages, built institutions and industries, engaged in politics, organized campaigns against racism, embedded activism in art, entertainment, political action, and sexual attitudes, they founded Greek organizations that worked fervently and feverously on behalf of Black women and Black communities, ensuring that their voices were heard in public spheres. From 1950 through 2000, Black women inspired social movements, continued to build institutions and organizations, as well as helped to define new identities and cultures in sacred and secular communities. On the backdrop of European narratives, the activity of Black women leaders during this time is significant to reclaiming voice and story in their leadership narrative apart from European claims about their personhood. A review of a small segment of Black women leaders in varying political, social, and religious vocations during this period is warranted to help with encapsulating a larger perspective on the

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[9] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 15.

[10] Lori Latrice Martin, *Black Women as Leaders: Challenging and Transforming Society* (California): Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019), 21.

contributions of Black women leaders fighting for social justice, and vitality within their communities. It will also help with visualizing how the work of these Black women leaders intersected in their sacred and secular spaces, instituting changes that impacted and shape communities. Black women's social justice leadership is not separated or segmented apart from the totality of who they are. Injustices impinge upon the vitality of life in their religious, social, and vocational lives; therefore, it is encumbered upon them to address the intersectionality of the sacred and secular. The women highlighted in this section brings awareness to Black women leadership in these two spaces.

1949 – 1950

Alice Medals, a track and field athlete, was disciplined by her father for attending practice after school, citing track and field was a masculine activity and wanted her to be dainty. Breaking through the barriers of sexism at home and in society, Alice became the first Black woman to win in track field events in London and to be honored by a parade in Albany, Georgia, thus a trailblazer paving the way for so many other women that came after her.[11]

Pauli Murray, a lawyer, writer, activist, feminist, and minister, who Daina Berry and Kali Gross describes as a slim, androgynous woman, wrestling with her attraction to members of her own sex, came to terms with her sexuality, her tendency for dressing in men's clothing, and the emergence of her boy-self. Murray and her roommate were arrested for removing a colored only sign on a bus and placed in a filthy jail cell. As an emerging

[11] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 145.

activist, she had connections to the NAACP. The NAACP along with other civil rights organizations and leaders helped with getting her charges dropped for violating segregation laws. Despite having those charges against her dropped, she was charged with disorderly conduct, and the NAACP made the choice to not move forward with helping her, which may have resulted from Pauli's sexual orientation as stated by Daina Berry and Kail Gross. Pauli Murray continued to challenge discriminatory laws by fighting both racism, sexism, and I would add genderism,[12] shaping the community of so many other androgynous Black women who are able to freely express themselves and embrace their sexuality.

The Women's Political Council (WPC), which included Rosa Parks, with continuity deep rooted themselves, engaged in, and aided efforts to obtain justice for Black communities in Alabama, inclusive of rape victims. Resounding in cadence, Daina Berry, and Kali Gross writes about the importance of Black women's significant role in the WPC and its political evolution mirroring and foreshadowing Black women's activism intersecting on sacred and secular platforms during the civil rights era, which have spilled over into our current times.

1950-1970

Many other Black women social justice leaders have played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. Household names like Rosa Parks, Mamie Till-Mobley, Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson, Mahalia Jackson, Dorothy Height, Nina Simone, Fannie Lou Hamer, and countless others have left indelible leadership imprints in the shaping of sacred

[12] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 155.

and secular communities. They have fought discrimination on multiple fronts, their victories helped change the country, Black communities, religious institutions, sports, armed forces, film, literature, and activism.[13] Daina Berry and Kali Gross articulate how Black women never forgot what they were fighting for, even as they worked to create fulfilling personal lives in whatever way was most meaningful to them. Educational and religious institutions, as well as political platforms became foundations of change under the social justice leadership of Black women. Whether challenging segregation in education or in public spaces, Black women and Black girls were on the front lines where new laws were transformed into changed daily practices, while confronting gender disparities within the nucleus of their own communities.[14]

Personally, for me, Fannie Lou Hamer serves as the poster child, and she is the face I unequivocally attach to the trifurcated intersectionality of Black women's social justice leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer experienced racism and sexism on multiple platforms personally, communally, institutionally, nationally, civilly, and politically. Her ability to withstand and press her way forward was impeccable and commendable. Fannie Lou's experience as a Black woman leader may have been too much to handle for most women, but it gave Fannie Lou the inspiration she needed to cultivate her political activism. Woven into her leadership was the embodiment of spirituality and experiential testimony that served her radical posture when communicating the need for transformative change to audiences on religious, political, and national platforms.

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[13] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 161.

[14] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 169.

At an early age, Fannie Lou Hamer's mother taught her about the importance of spirituality over the consumption of hatred. Her mother shaped and influenced Fannie Lou's life by teaching her about respect for herself and having a voice as a Black woman. Fannie Lou would listen to her mother express through song how Black people wanted a better life outside of the perils of poverty, living on plantations, picking cotton, sharecropping, being exploited, misused, lynched, violated, and denied their rights to live as decent human beings.

According to her biographer Kay Mills, Fannie Lou learned many of her religious principles at home from her mother and including the idea that hating made one as weak as those filled with hatred. Fannie Lou attended church, read the bible often, and strongly believed in the radicalness of Christ. Mills recalls in her book Fannie Lou Hamer saying "Christ was a revolutionary person, out there where it was happening. That is what God is all about, and that is where I get my strength." Hamer's spirituality gave her the strength to embody a radical formation in her leadership. A leadership that was not stagnant behind the walls of a church but was catapulted into the trenches of communities outside of church, fighting against injustice, racism, discrimination, deprivation, and violence. She was a revolutionary warrior, modeling the prophetic ministry of Christ, dwelling among the marginalized population of people who needed her help, service, mighty voice, and advocacy. And, like Christ, she challenged societal laws and was willing to give up her own freedom for the freedom of others.

It is in this revolutionary framework of Christ that Fannie Lou's spirituality, leadership, and activism is informed and shaped. She became the driving force behind voter registration in Ruleville Mississippi, canvasing communities, and educating Black people

in voter registration. As a spiritually informed radical, she understood the risks and the inevitable push backs she would get from white people. Nevertheless, she forged forward as a Black woman leader in her community despite losing her job, becoming homelessness, dealing with challenging health conditions, setups for failure, hatred, terroristic threats, and hateful white people.

Another biographer, feminist scholar Chana Kai Lee, in the retelling of Fannie Lou's story, conveys that when Hamer persisted beyond the legal obstacles to cast her first vote in 1964, her victory in doing so subjected her family to retaliatory attacks by angry white citizens and law enforcement officers. What I believe to be the crowning moment of such hatred is descriptively regurgitated in chapter three of Lee's book, when Fannie Lou Hamer, June Johnson, and Annelle Ponder experienced inhumane brutality orchestrated by white police officers. They were jailed, beaten to a pulp, and sexually violated as if they were not human.

It did not matter to the white police officers that they were women, in their hearts they were just a bunch of "Niggers" who deserved to be beaten. In Hamer's case, white officers forced Black men to beat a Black woman, bearing the ugly implication of domestic violence and establishment of the right for Black men to beat Black women. It was an experience Hamer would later tell audiences that she would never forget. As Black women, human rights, civil rights, and the right to exist had no significant value to those white police officers. Having to succumb to the beating of a Black man, Fannie Lou Hamer felt betrayed by her own race and could not understand how a Black man could follow orders from a white man to beat a Black woman. At the smallest whim, she thought she had a

small chance this Black man would come to her rescue, since the fight for equal rights was something that impacted the community of Black people.

Yet, in all her pain, Hamer finds a way to let the disdain for a Black woman's life live in the tension of her spirituality by instructing the jailer's wife to read a scripture that expounded on wrongdoing. Furthermore, she engaged in discussion with the jailer telling him his actions would be judge by God. Fannie Lou's spirituality was never disconnected from her activism and social justice. Instead of reacting with shame and silence from this traumatic experience, she gave public witness to the racist attack and violation against her in ways that propelled her social justice leadership.

Hamer realized that her fight encompassed something larger than herself. Her voice resonated from a place deep within her spirituality and the story was Fannie Lou's to tell the world. As Megan Parker Brooks, Assistant Professor of Civic Communications, stated in her book she prayed to discern the Lord's will and if the movement of social justice was itself a form of familial and community care. The Lord gave her the answer as her spirit would not sit still, and she goes on to lead activists from across the country for the work of social justice as indicated by Brooks.

The work among the people, especially among Black women mattered to Fannie Lou Hamer as a leader. Malcom X said the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman, the most unprotected person in America is the Black woman, and the most neglected person in America is the Black woman. Fannie Lou was that Black woman and was not afraid to use the transformative power of her voice to speak up against the violation of her Black body and to advocate for socio-political change. Her deep-rooted spirituality

pushed her to be radical in her leadership, giving her the boldness and strength to label her white violators as an overall issue plaguing America.

Many years after Fannie Lou's testimony, we are still those Black women social justice leaders, wrestling with the disdain for human life, domestic violence, police brutality, and sexual assault. Dr. Traci West, Associate Professor of Ethics and African American Studies, declares in her book "*Disruptive Christian Ethics*," that racism and women's lives matter. Our voices matter, our spirituality matter, and our leadership matter. Testimonial and spiritual leadership can let the stories be told and expose to the world the plethora of violations that Black women have endured. Religious and vocational platforms can be transformative spaces in lives of Black women. Radical leadership transforms into radical spiritual spaces. Radical spiritual spaces transform into radical voices. Radical voices encourage women's leadership and open dialogue about violence and sexual abuse committed against Black women and girls. Radical leadership, spirituality, platforms, and voices can work together to bring about a little Fannie Lou Hamer activism and social justice change in our communities and beyond.

1970 – 2000

"Doc you better know what you're talking about because I am running for Congress, and I am not going to have a baby." A quote from the mouth of Shirley Chisholm who announced that she would be seeking the Democratic presidential nomination. Influenced by the struggles for civil rights, Shirley Chisholm joined the ranks of many other audacious Black women during this period, whose passion for justice catapulted them into political spaces. Shirley's run for the presidency pushed boundaries and raised

awareness about the political issues impacting not just Black men and women but poor and working-class people in communities across the racial and political spectrum.[15] Although she was met with resistance from the legacy of Black Nationalism, sexism, racism, and misogyny, she was a catalyst during her time, advocating for political and communal changes, an activist for the struggle of Black women who came before her, and touching the lives of Black women and girls who have come in the decades since she powerfully changed an entire era.[16]

Gracing the doorstep of social justice leadership during this time in history were a plethora of Black women activists, artists, feminists, and intellectuals working across political, social, religious, and class strata to change and shape the dynamics of society and to break the strongholds of degradation of people existing in sacred and secular communities. Such Black women as Dorothy Jama and Brenda Haiba Karenga, founders, and earliest organizers of the Us Organization who helped with liberating Black people through an embrace of its leader's studies of African social, cultural, and political ideologies. They also used their positions as caretakers of the family to build institutions such as the Us School of Afro-Americans Culture, teaching local area children about the idea that cultural autonomy is the cornerstone of Black liberation. Black Feminists were vocal critics of sexism and misogyny who led movements, protests, cultivated feminist writing that amplified their own voices in society. Black women like Marsha Johnson, born Malcom Michaels Jr, formed the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, established

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[15] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 187.

[16] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 207.

STAR House, a communal space for homeless transgender women. Nina Simone, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Catlett, and Ntozake Shange enhanced Black culture and Black power through the creativity of art, critically challenging chauvinism, and racism.

Carol Moseley Braun, the first Black woman elected to the US Senate, continued the work of Shirley Chisolm. Black Women in the Black Panther Party organized free breakfast programs for school children that became models for public schools nationwide. They organized free medical care by collaborating with Black doctors and nurses who volunteered time and resources to the poor and working-class Black people. Black women sponsored food and clothing drives, trained revolution and were armed with firearms, as well as made follow up house calls through the Black Panther Community Survival Programs, checking the results of administered tuberculosis tests.[17]

I have highlighted the journey of several Black women leaders shaping sacred and secular communities, pointing out how their leadership spans across vocations, communities, and platforms. Their leadership was not void of potential threats in the form of sexism and racism. Black women navigating leadership in a male dominated society brings attention to gender and race, and the complexities of resistance to leadership or within leadership. Unfortunately, these are factors and components that have been built into the framework of Black women leadership. An exploration of what this means for Black women in leadership can assist with understanding how working through the calcifications of these components plays out in the life of Black women taking up the mantle of leadership.

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[17] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 189-199.

Racism, Sexism, and the Complexities of Resistance

Professors of History, Darlene Clark Hines, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, in *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible,"* in efforts to articulate their definition of resistance, says to understand resistance is to look at the character of domination to exercise power over the dispossessed by whatever means necessary, but without overt conflict where possible. Conversely, resistance is defined as any act, individual or collective, symbolic, or literal, intended by subordinates to deny claims, to refuse compliance with impositions made by superordinate or advance claims of their own.[18]

Violence in Black women's history is multifaceted, encompassing a variation of forms. When we talk about violence and Black women, an image of physical violence is usually the imagery. However, representational forms of violence in the life of Black women are all encompassing. Violence such as the use of racist images and caricatures, exclusion, denial of social and political participation and protection, and even poverty. Black women have defended against rapist enslavers as well as their God given freedom to exist as Black women. The legacy of struggle is visible in Black women's religious and political activism, the right to vote, civil rights and Black power movements, protesting police violence against themselves, children, and Black men, running for public office, and sustaining worth and relevance in religious spaces. Resistance is steeped in Black women's embrace of their natural selves, as they often engage it passionately and courageously.[19] From the arrival of African women on the shores of the United States, we can contribute

[18] Darlene Clark Hines, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 344.

[19] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 5.

racism, sexism, genderism, and various forms of resistance to society's stigmatization of Black women. The construct of negative narratives has severely impacted how Black women mitigate spaces they themselves have chosen to occupy, spaces chosen for them, and spaces forced upon them.

Racism, sexism, and complexities of resistance have a natural obsession to infiltrate Black women's leadership in sacred and secular platforms. Historically, the words woman and Black, exhibited the duality of two explosive elements for Black women leading in religious, political, social, and personal spaces and produced bifurcated responses of resistance. Black women developed, designed, and implored their own form of resistance to help them combat injustices in these spaces. In the same sense, resistance was developed designed and implored to prevent Black women from capitalizing on justice in these spaces. The complexities of resistance were steeped into their sacred and secular lives, producing positive and negative outcomes that impacted the physical, psychological, and spiritual essence of who they were as Black women. The distribution of wealth, opportunity, and privilege for Black women's leadership was limited and came with a hefty price in both their public and private lives.

To understand how the intertwining of racism, sexism, and complexities of resistance can emerge, I will begin with the personal life of enslaved Black women who fought against restrictions placed upon them through violent measures by white enslavers. According to Daina Berry and Kali Gross, considering both day-to-day resistance and more overt acts such as rebellion, they continued to demand justice in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. How they made those demands was extreme in some instances and subtle in others. Some Black women committed acts of infanticide, suicide, and murder.

Others fled to other communities, committed arson, administered poison, and became literate. Many of them paid heavy consequences for their actions, including rape, dismemberment of body parts, severe whippings, hanging, lynching, and death.[20]

Shifting to Black women's work environment during the time of World War I, professors of history, Darlene Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed highlight the plight of Black women domestics combatting employment injustice with their resistance to accepting harsh working conditions and low wages. As household workers struggled to negotiate conditions of abject servitude, their employers pushed back with their own resistance and worked even harder to repress and contain these workers.[21] Domestic workers needed time off to take care of their family and religious obligations, but black codes and laws were designed to suppress and dismiss Black women's right to fair labor contracts. This subjected Black women to blatant unjust harassment and disdain for domestic workers requests to take time off to manage the necessities of their personal life. Black women resorted to quitting their domestic household jobs, an opposition to the law, and strategy of resistance. Such resistance led to the loss of wages and instability in provisions for the family. To counter this resistance, damaging narratives were constructed about them being the cause of contagious diseases filtrating the water system and the harbingers of social diseases. Not only did Black women have to pay the price with little to no income streams, but they also had to suffer through the narrative of being diseased menaces to in a white society.

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[20] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 60.

[21] Darlene Clark Hines, Wilma King, and Lind Reed, *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 344.

In the political sector of Black women's lives, resistance on both ends is the most daunting as patriarchal stigma impeded on Black women's advancement in the political arena. Black feminist, Michelle Wallace, summarized the sentiment by saying "The Black woman had gotten out of hand. She was too strong, too hard, too evil, too castrating. She got all the jobs, everything. The Black man never had a chance. No wonder he wanted a white woman. He needed a rest. The Black woman should be more submissive and, above all keep her big black mouth shut."[22] Anita Hill was slandered by the political and justice system after her public testimony at U.S. Senate hearings made sexual harassment allegations against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.[23] In spite of Anita Hill's testimony, Supreme Court nominee Thomas was confirmed. Anita's resistance to patriarchal and sexual harassment by way of her bravery was met with resistance from the Black community as they believed Anita had betrayed the race by testifying against a Black man publicly.[24] Anita Hill endures the pain of humiliation for the price of becoming what Berry and Gross describes as a hero and one whose testimony opened the flood gate for legislative policies on sexual harassment in the workplace.

I mentioned Shirley Chisholm as a trailblazer in shaping sacred and secular communities, however, it is important to note how she too paid a hefty price for carving her imprint on the political canvas. Black Nationalist ideology and sexist attitudes in the Black community believed that the liberation of black people rested in the Black man being restored to his rightful place at the head of Black families and of Black social justice

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[22]Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 204.

[23] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 202-203.

[24] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 202.

movements.[25] Although her run for presidency pushed boundaries, she was placated by danger, attempted death threats, racist hate mail, and vandalism. Shirley's social justice leadership caused her to pay the price of change and equality with her life. On the religious front, complexities of race, sex, narratives, leadership capabilities, and resistance were embedded in the life and community of Black women's Christian activism. Black Christian women became organizers of social reform but not without push back from a male dominated religious platforms and a white society. The intersectionality of race and gender led black women to subscribe to a different understand of religion and society and to respond differently to their singularity of issues.[26] In the Baptist denomination, from which I hail, men and women clergy held a vehemently different understanding of a Black women's role, responsibilities, participation, and value to the church and perspective communities. Throughout the years, racism and sexism have existed in various components in the life of Black Baptist clergywomen. They have experienced racism and sexism personally, communally, institutionally, nationally, civilly, and historically.

Black women have had to fight and are still fighting two cultures in the church. The culture of white clergymen dominance stained within the foundation of Black churches and its carbon copy in that of Black clergymen. However, their resistance to these bifurcated cultures germinated from their passion, compassion, their ability to hold no leverage over the suppressed and oppressed, and insert themselves into God's Imago Dei narrative, which gives them the authority, ability, and capability of theologizing and leading from the pulpit. Resistance abounds in the same instance from Black clergymen who held Black women

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[25] Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 188.

[26] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 39.

captive spiritually and psychologically by refusing to recognize the preaching and administrative skills of Black clergywomen and denied them the rite of ordination or opportunities to speak at denominational meetings.[27]

Black Baptist clergymen recognized the active social roles of Black Baptist clergywomen, their determination to help battle racial inequality, and their determination to take on a supportive role in helping with the development of Baptist churches and the National Black Baptist Convention. Nevertheless, they continued to focus on providing Black clergymen with full manhood rights while offering the status of separation and inequality to Black clergywomen.[28] Black clergymen relegated the female community to supportive and nurturing roles rather than elevating them to pastoral and ministerial roles within Black Baptist Churches and the National Black Baptist Convention. Black women became the backbone of Black Baptist churches, taking on the woes of discrimination, racism, and gender inequality. The same backbone that held things together then is the same backbone that continues to hold communities together now, through movements like Black Lives Matter, Mothers of Black Boys, Mothers of the Movement, and Moms of Black Boys United. Black women joined forces, turning grief into opportunities to rally in communities, advocating against injustice and for justice.

Among the many Black clergywomen who have found divine purpose in their social justice leadership and who have run the race as a form of their resistance, I have resounded in cadence. I have pounded the streets, marched, supported, rallied, and have been vocal about injustices in communities of color like so many before me. I have marched

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[27] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism: Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 41.

[28] Evelyn B. Higginbotham, "The Righteous Discontent" The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920, (1993): 3

on the streets of Washington DC in support of woman's rights. I am that Black Baptist clergywoman, who has gone against the grain, confronting an egotistical, suppressive, dominating, narcissistic Black Baptist Pastor. Advocating and protecting young adults from traditional ritualistic norms and theology that did more harm than help to their already confused and progressive minds about religion. As a result, I too am that Black clergywomen who paid the price of counter resistance from a Pastor that emailed me formal letters accusing me of disobedience to the office of Pastor because he and I disagreed on how to minister to young adults in this changing and ever evolving culture of church. All attempts by him to subject me to his verbal abuse, narcissistic behavior issues, and attach psychological counseling mandates to ordination requirements, failed because of my action of resistance. A contemporary lesson from a historical context that can serve and benefit other Black clergywomen or non-clergywomen experiencing the same type of behavior from authoritative male figure.

Contemporary Lessons from a Historical Context of Black Women's Leadership

Resilience fatigued, racially gendered battle fatigued, and the power of persistence are some critical contemporary lessons to learn from the historical context of Black women's social justice leadership. In their book, *Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest,* authors Sonia Rodriguez and Kelly Brown identifies resilient strength as an attribute among women, however the need to keep up resiliency comes at the expense of emotional and physical fatigue that permeates the

bodies of Black and Brown women.[29] Black women social justice leaders are strong Black women who seldom have the opportunity to express their emotions and the endurance of pain while leading and shaping sacred and secular communities. The fear, according to Sonia Rodriguez and Kelly Brown is that these impressions lead to the constructed stereotype of the do-it-all strong Black woman who can bear all the pain without complaints. Resistance, whether giving it or receiving it can cause spiritual, psychological, and physical distress.

In addition, Black women social justice leaders bear the burden of gendered racial fatigue. Navigating through these unsettling leadership spaces can be daunting and a huge undertaking for Black women in ways that can are harmful to the totality of their existence. Resistance can be suppressive and disruptive to selfhood especially when the resistance is exasperated by race and gender. In this case, Black women leaders are constantly defending and validating their positions while make themselves vulnerable to being silenced by resistance and interruptions to their leadership.

Despite these challenges, Black women social justice leaders keep showing up with the power of persistence. They keep showing up because there is a profound understanding that the calling and purpose of their leadership in both sacred and secular spaces is larger than societal narratives and barriers. Lori Latrice Martins provides the formula for Black women leaders who keep showing up to challenge and transform sacred and secular communities. Martin frames this formula in what she calls adaptive leadership. A framework that understands authority, power, and influence is important in the practice of leadership but does not define leadership. She always identifies leadership as a series of

[29] Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown, Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest (Pennsylvania: IGI Global Publisher of Timely Knowledge, 2021) 167.

actions and not a job. The actions might involve an ongoing process involving observation, interpretation, intervention and not a job.[30] For Black women specifically, it is more than a crossing of the sacred and secular, it is a crossing of multiple worlds and borders that we inhabit because of our gender, sexuality, color, class, personality, spirituality, and lived experiences. Society exiles Black women according to its bias and racist critiques on ethnicity, gender, and status. However, it is our faith that allows our exile to become a transformative space. Exile is where we communicate to God about our social justice leadership, it is where we are empowered to shape our sacred and secular spaces, it is where we formulate adaptive leadership to resistance, it is where we receive the power of persistence, and it is where we learn how to lean deeper into our faith and trust God for protection and provision.

[30] Lori Latrice Martin, *Black Women as Leaders: Challenging and Transforming Society* (California): Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019), 24.

Chapter 2

Authors Sonia Rodriguez and Kelly Brown declare that societal perceptions of Black women are challenged by Black women's ability to survive in spaces that have historically been uninviting. Black women's leadership practice has developed in response to their racialized and gendered lived experiences, they operate at the intersection of resistance and leadership, and their leadership has become a skill, practice, and tool that creates space for themselves. [31] For many Black Christian women, a self-understanding of being created in the image of God can become a skill, practice and tool used as the catalyst for advocacy and boundary crossing where lived experiences become transformative leadership opportunities. Uninviting exilic spaces is where communication with God becomes paramount to faith informed leadership practices. It is where Black women leaders are empowered to cross sacred and secular boundaries. It is where counterintuitive leadership practices are developed to combat social norms. It is where the cost of leadership is informed by the power of persistence. It is where Black women leaders lean deeper into faith, trusting God for protection and provision as they advocate for justice for marginalized communities.

If the trees of Lancaster, South Carolina were to echo whispers of the past, they would tell the story of my great-great grandmother and her experience as a female slave. When the story of slavery is told, women are often grouped into the larger context of the story, with little to no emphasis placed on the societal slavery within the slavery. My great-great grandmother had to endure the pain and violence attributed to lack of social status,

[31] Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown, Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest (IGI Global Publishing of Knowledge, 2021), 124-125.

ranging from subservient roles to rape, and general abuse as a Black woman. This is only one side of her story but if an ear is bent to listening a little harder, another side of her story can be heard. A story of a Black woman whose faith in God, leadership, courage, strength, defiance, and endurance, crossed societal boundaries for the greater cause of the survival of her family. Her story echoes the story of other Black women surviving and leading in communities under oppressive circumstances established by the nature of oppressors.

Liberationist Christian theology stresses how the totality of human existence, inclusive of characteristics and leadership authority, is predicated on the spiritual imprint of God. God makes a profound proclamation about the divine nature of humanity in Genesis 1:27 when God said, "Let us make mankind in our image," and proceeded to create male and female in God's own likeness. It was God who decided to create women in God's own image; therefore, women possess the divine characteristics of God. Despite demeaning societal narratives, racial obstacles, and resilience-fatigued spirits mentioned in chapter one, a higher calling abounds for Black women leaders because they are created in the image of God. A leadership that consists of intertwined spirituality and faith can produce the strength needed to cross sacred and secular boundaries for the whole of the community in which God summons them to navigate and shape.

As such, the leadership of Black women transcends across the inhabitation of multiple worlds, borders, and extends to gender, sexuality, color, class, personality, occupation, vocation, and lived experiences. Liberation theologian Gustavo Guiterrez says ordinary people are forced to make extraordinary decisions to leave the oppressive contexts

they find themselves in, in search of something better, a new reality. [32] That new reality is a faith that transcends exilic experiences and transforms oppressive situations into God informed outcomes that are beneficial to both sacred and secular communities. Although informed and guided by faith, a closer look at what is at stake is warranted, especially when transcendent faith leadership dismantles powerful sacred and secular systems for the divine purpose of the oppressed and powerless. One can be left to ask if God's reward is worth the price paid for crossing authoritative boundaries to advocate for the powerless. A question that can be examined through an interpretation of the lives of two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah, whose fear of God directed them in changing the fate of an entire nation. This chapter utilizes biblical analysis from a range of liberationist and womanist scholars for interpreting the meaning of their roles within the Exodus text as well as more broadly pointing to social and theological implications that studying them can have for contemporary readers. For example, theologian and Professor of Scriptures and Biblical Languages, Christopher Naseri, lends voice to examining costs and rewards associated with the fear of God and crossing authoritative boundaries. According to Naseri, the nexus between human actions and man's religious allegiance to God is depicted in Exodus 1:20-21 as reward and punishment. Religion creates a world in which human actions are founded on the moral teachings that are derived from the commandments of God. When these actions are in consonance with the moral standards set by God, the actors are considered as acting in faithfulness to God or fearing God and are consequently rewarded. Inversely, when the actions are at variance with these moral standards they attract punishment.

[32] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Michigan: BrazosPress,2021), 55.

Shiphrah and Puah are rewarded by God with families of their own for enhancing the families of the Hebrew women whose children they refuse to kill. Naseri goes on to say that when human actions are also morally acceptable, they lead to a fruitful and progressive society. By the midwives' decision to preserve lives, they attract fruitfulness and vitality to the Hebrew community. Concluding that the price is worth the benevolent recompense of the benevolent life giving and saving God.[33]

Shiphrah and Puah: Hebrew Midwife Leaders

For Black women with Christian faith communities, the notion of faith, advocacy, boundary crossing, and the cost of leadership derived from studying women in the bible used by God to transform communities by navigating through oppressive societal systems. A glimpse of this trajectory can be found in Exodus 1:15-22 when the author introduces the two midwives whose fear of God becomes the author of their narrative. The first act of defiance in the social, economic, and political system of oppression under the king of Egypt is lived out by two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. The midwives are compelled by their belief in the kingship of God, to save the lives of Hebrew male infants from the death edict instituted by the earthly kingship of Egypt.

Exodus 1:15-22 sets the narrative stage by introducing readers to the king of Egypt whose own fear and prejudices permeates in such an authoritative rule that it creates a

[33] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021), 51-52.

hostile living environment for a large group of displaced captives. Shrewdness, ruthlessness, unrealistic laborious tasks, violence, and genocide are etched in the institution of his kingship. An introduction of this nature immediately places the focus on the powerful versus the powerless and depicts the difference between Godly and earthly kingships. Embedded in this narrative that focuses on powerful versus the powerless are the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. As midwives by trade, they serve as life preservers to the powerless community of displaced captives. However, the powerful king of Egypt has commanded them to become life destroyers and kill the Hebrew male infants during the birthing process. The Hebrew male infants were social determinants under the king's oppressive leadership and were incorporated into the king's plan to systematically breakdown the multiplying group of marginalized people. By killing the male infants, the intention of the king was to create a weaker and more subservient culture. Enslaved to the patriarchal ideology, the king believed the impact would have been felt the greatest by voiceless women living in an oppressive culture dominated by the power of men. Women were perceived to have no imminent threat to a patriarchal society and male dominated kingship. [34] The thought of their lives having divine purpose as women in leadership escapes the mind of the king, but it does not escape the mind of God.

Despite the command of the earthly king, their reverence for the divine King usurps the authority of earthly king of Egypt and they refuse to adhere to the king's commandment (Ex 1:17). The two midwives use the king of Egypt's own fear, racial, and societal bias to outwit his disdain for a group of displaced people living on the margins of an Egyptian society. In doing so, Shiphrah and Puah serve as a divine framework for boundary crossing

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[34] [34] Kat Armas, *Mocking Empire: Christian Century* (June 2021), 26.

and navigating the intersectionality of the sacred and secular during systemic discord. Their leadership approach embodies defiance, courage, strength, and survival for a community in its entirety as dictated by their faith in God.

In the secular kingdom, the Hebrew midwives are attached to the act of defiance, unraveling the social, economic, and political system of oppression. In the sacred kingdom, author and theologian Kat Armas refers to the midwives as the first on the scene representing God as co-creators of life, spiritual leaders, and healers to the community.[35] Their faith and reverence for God caused them to provoke civil disobedience to ensure justice is lived out within the community of the oppressed. Their ability to intelligently outsmart the king could have cost them their lives or a lifelong imprisonment sentence but their faithfulness, although not void of sacred and secular tension, expanded their divine leadership role within the community as evidenced in Exodus 1:20-21. God multiplied the community of marginalized people and gave Shiphrah and Puah families of their own to continue the work of leading, crossing boundaries, and intersecting sacred and secular spaces.

Shiphrah's and Puah's refusal to follow through with the king's command creates tension between the secular world of earthly kingship and the sacred world of divine kingship. Responding out of reverence to God downplays the king of Egypt's authority and establishes a divine responsibility to their own leadership as women. In the backdrop of the midwives' life, at what point in the social justice leadership of Black women, does the intersection of the sacred and secular becomes the determinant factor of life and death in

[35] Kat Armas, *Mocking Empire: Christian Century* (June 2021), 24.

communities depending on their leadership to make the right decision? Like Shiphrah and Puah, Black women leaders who choose to operate in divine leadership arrogates the authority of a patriarchal society and their defiance threatens oppressive social constructs. Being able to navigate the nuances of faith over fear in these spaces can be costly but faith and trust in God makes the understanding of divine purpose and the sovereignty of God a crucial part of their courageous leadership journey.

The Intersectionality of the Sacred and Secular

It is God who marries the intersectionality of the sacred and secular in the third chapter of Exodus when God said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." In the same frame of reference, Jesus follows in God's footsteps in the fourth chapter of Luke when he said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When social justice leadership is positioned by the responsibility of faith, the sacred and secular are destined to collide, and the result is a divine shift in status. Author and biblical scholar Laverne McCain Gill said many centuries before Jesus, Shiphrah and Puah refused political intimidation. They accepted the threats that political authorities used

to try to control them and walked in God's way. In doing so they found joy, they fostered life, and they fomented hope. That is what taking up the cross is all about, said.[36]

Because of technical skills and religious functions of a woman dealing with the profound experience of bringing a new life into the world, midwives were valued members of societies and were believed to have power to transform childbirth from a life-threatening experience to a joyful one said biblical scholar Carol Meyers.[37] Shiphrah and Puah had access to the king of Egypt and the divine King of the community they were called to serve. Mortal man versus immortal God intersecting at the helm with each other, determining the crucial matter of life and death of a community. The duality of this access positioned Shiphrah and Puah between the dichotomy of serving the courtship and the community.

As God-fearing midwives, Shiphrah and Puah exemplified agency through their actions to the community as life givers, which takes precedence over the king's order to aid in community genocide. They stood in the in the presence of the king of Egypt receiving orders to destroy life, while dwelling in the presence of God accepting the divine order to become life givers. Much like the two midwives, the Black women leaders like those identified in this research have chosen to be life givers of the community. They have navigated complicated intersections of politics and religion, race, and gender, shaping religious practices and public policy for the greater good of communities impacted by their leadership. Womanist, biblical scholar, and theologian, Wilda Gafney, defined Shiphrah and Puah as the mothers of a revolution waged by women who become the first delivers in

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[36] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003), 34.

[37] Carol Meyers, Exodus: *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Durham NC: Cambridge Press, 2005), 41-42.

the book of deliverance.[38] Black women leaders who are intentionally conscious about operating in divine leadership juxtaposes the authority of a patriarchal society and their necessary defiance threatens oppressive social constructs. It is the transcendent power of God which wanders earthly platforms of the sacred and secular in the lives of Black women leaders who are called to help institute justice where there is injustice. Black women leaders like those mentioned in chapter one, leave indelible marks of being delivers in the narrative of deliverance. It is crucial to the life of the community that Black women leaders navigate in between these secular and sacred spaces with the fear of God guiding them, and just like the midwives, it requires creativity, tenacity, understanding of divine purpose, and the sovereignty of God who is the ultimate giver of life.

What is at stake for Black women leaders whose sacred and secular worlds intersect? Author and theologian Kat Armas refers to the action of the midwives as sacred acts, an embodied wisdom coming together with their faith in God to bring forth new life into the world. History proves that the midwives are more than women who obey the king, they are ancient keepers of wisdom who carry medicine in their hands. They are women who love God, spiritual healers, and cocreators of new life.[39] Similarly, the story of the midwives in Exodus 1:19-20 reveals the healing powers of Shiphrah and Puah through their deceptive response to the king. “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So, God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems notes that Shiphrah and Puah use the weapon of deception

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[38] Wilda C. Gafney, Womanist Midrash: *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017), 91.

[39] Kat Armas, *Mocking Empire: Christian Century* (June 2021) 24

where the truth is not defined by the powerful but becomes the priority of the underclass to interpret and shape according to their own reality.[40] What is at stake for Black women leaders operating in faith is the opportunity to expose the truth about who God created them to be in a society that dismisses their purpose, capabilities, and renders them powerless because of ethnicity and gender. Black women operating under the auspices of God, in their faith and lived experiences, are awarded the opportunity to become healers that shape the present and future of their communities. In her study of women characters in the Hebrew Bible, Irmtraud Fischer, theologian and professor of Old Testament and Women's Studies, said God acts with and in and for women as well as men. The narratives show us that women sometimes have a better sense for interpreting and actualizing the divine word and bringing to fulfillment the divine plan for pursuing justice in our communities.[41] Fischer's words should serve as a reminder to Black women leaders pursuing justice for their communities while operating in the tension of sacred and secular spaces across religious, political, and societal platforms.

Living in the Tension of Theological and Societal Realms

God's divine plan for justice produces tension between theological and societal realms and navigating leadership in the intersectionality of the sacred and secular can be daunting. It is daunting because God's justice lives in the tension of theological and societal realms. Theologian and professor of Old Testament and Women Studies, Irmtraud Fischer,

[40] Kat Armas, *Mocking Empire: Christian Century* (June 2021) 27
[41] Irmtraud Fischer, Women Who Wrestled with God: *Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 149

conveys that tension has already been set within the oppression narrative of the Israelites in Egypt. Israel's protectors in Egypt, Joseph and the Pharoh who placed him in his prominent position are long dead (Ex 1:6, 8). Israel has developed into a powerful people and the promise of God to make them a great nation has manifested. What was continually in view as a promise to be a great nation became a political threat to the kingship under the rule of the new Pharoah and he deemed the Israelites be a menace worthy of oppression and genocide. Pharaoh imposes hard and demeaning work at inadequate wages barely enough to sustain life. So that the oppressed may not revolt, brutal men are set over the Israelites as overseers.[42] The socially powerful against the socially weak and the fundamental conflict is between the fascistic policies of the king and God's fulfillment of the blessing of increase.[43] When faith in and reverence for God is a determinant factor in courageous leadership, the intersectionality of the sacred and secular is inevitable, and tension between theological and societal realms is inescapable. The tension is between God and rulers occupying powerful places in society. As evidenced in Exodus 1:17 when Shiphrah and Puah refused to participate in genocide as the king of Egypt commanded and they let all the male children live. In their moment of being confronted by an infuriated king, God becomes stronger than the greatest societal and political power. In their wisdom, creative storytelling about the Hebrew women, and intellectual ability to use the king's bias against him, Shiphrah and Puah committed themselves to leading out loud without fear and intimidation. God approves disobedience to institutional power structures when the purpose of God's work is for the life of God's kingdom here on earth. So, God dealt well

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[42] Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 115
[43] Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 116

with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own (Ex 1:20-21).

Living in between the tension of theological and societal realms of leadership is not as harmonious or glorified as it is portrayed to be in the Exodus narrative of the midwives. When researching the Women's Bible Commentary to support this idea, I found that it does not extrapolate on the gender, ethnicity, class, socio status polarization, and atrocities of women living in captivity under the king's rule. It merely determines that the text does not include information that would help us better understand Shiphrah's and Puah's gendered experience. It expounds on how their story is preserved because it explains how male Hebrew babies survived. However, it does mention the important work of Feminist biblical scholarship and a variety of exegetical methods that bring light to the treatment of women in a patriarchal society.[44] In her review of the Womanist Midrash written by Womanist Wilda Gafney, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, professor of Religion at Shaw University Divinity School, provides historical and traditional interpretations from a womanist perspective with a mindfulness to oppression arising from gender, class, and ethnicity.[45]

The tension of theological and societal realms is not a comfortable space, it creates an atmosphere of action, undertaking both sides of the ampersand of positivity and negativity. God is the giver of life and those who fear or live in reverence of God are called into action to become lifer preservers. When there are human power structures in opposition of the life-giving omnipotent God of life, it creates an unsettling battle ground

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[44] Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, Women's Bible Commentary: *Third Edition* (Westminster Knox Press, 2012) 58.

[45] "Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, review, endorsement, Womanist Midrash: *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, book jacket."

for the two women who are called to advocate and navigate these spaces. Shiphrah and Puah becomes enthralled in the battle between the earthly king and the divine King. When brutal men have had no success against the Israelites, Hebrew women are brought in to carry out the next stage of the pogrom to kill only the male children.[46] Killing the male children is significant in a patriarchal society where the identity of women gets submerged into the identity of men. In this form of society, a nation that lacks men loses its identity, but slave women are always useful says Irmtraud Fischer, theologian and professor of Old Testament and Women Studies.[47] Tension arises within the two spheres of authority as the two midwives must either respond to the theological realm which is the fear of God or to the societal realm which is the fear of the king.

Choosing which realm to exist within determines the outcome of their life and social status as women, and the community in which they are purposed and positioned by profession to help maintain life. Without confirmed knowledge of their fate, the midwives reject the authority of king (Ex 1:17) for the redemption of their life-giving work and their fear of God.

The king in his authoritative position demands an answer, which is equivalent to a disciplinary action. It causes a collision between the midwives theological and societal realms. According to Rabbinic scholar, Inbar Raveh, the theologically radical element that comes to expression in this collision is the introduction of God, the source of power and authority into the hegemonic framework populated by men.[48] The ultimate power of God

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[46] Irmtraud Fischer, Women Who Wrestled with God: *Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 116
[47] Irmtraud Fischer, Women Who Wrestled with God: *Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 116
[48] Inbar Raveh and Karen Fish, They let the Children Live: *A The Midwives at a Political Crossroad. Feminist Rereadings of Rabbinic Literature* (Brandies University Press, 2014) 19

rules in the tension of the greater purpose. The two midwives show no fear and vehemently dismiss who the person deemed as the mightiest man in their society. The intentionality of being leaders in the theological realm versus the societal realm could have ended in tragedy for Shiphrah, Puah, and the entire Hebrew community. Instead, God approves their disobedience and rewards their resistance for becoming courageous leaders who refuses to succumb to the intimidation and fear of a powerless king in the presence of a powerful God.

So, God delt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families (Ex 1:20-21). Paradoxically, this text appears to focus more on the nature of the midwives' reproductive system and their place in society, rather than their innate ability to lead. With my critical lenses, I find the need to ask why the writer of this text did not expound more on the midwives' leadership in their community rather than the reproductive system. The writer seems to find comfort in submerging the midwives ability to lead into a childbearing reward from God. It took boldness and tenacity for the two women to courageously lead while entrenched in an oppressive environment. Childbirth is a natural occurrence for Shiphrah and Puah but to stand bold in the face of an authoritative figure who has the power to eradicate or isolate them, is unnatural in patriarchal society. To help shed light on this perceived tension in the text, biblical scholar, Wilda Gafney said it is noteworthy to see the midwives as unspoken leaders because of two reasons. One, there is no mention of the midwives being married or even if there are men in their lives. Shiphrah and Puah are heads of their households. Two, the promise of a house makes them matriarchs of a better

dynasty.[49] Author and biblical scholar, Laverne McCain Gill, points out that Shiphrah and Puah become the first Hebrew women to acknowledge God in the book of Exodus and have become symbols of women who held a significant role in God's salvific plan.[50] Rabbinic scholar, Inbar Raveh focuses on the power and empowerment of having families of their own. The midwives' reproductive system may be interpreted as recognition of women's power of childbirth and life, and as its empowerment, specifically within the political and national context. Shiphrah and Puah amplify the power and role of femininity operating for the benefit of the establishment of the nation.[51]

As a Black women leader, living in the tension of theological and societal realms is a familiar space. Societal perceptions of who I am as Black woman is challenged by my ability to survive in spaces that have historically been uninviting. The experience of Shiphrah and Puah serves as a catalyst in understanding how my leadership practice has developed in response to racialized and gendered lived experiences in sacred and secular communities. This impacts how I negotiate my space and position myself as a leader in theological and societal spaces.[52] Theologian, Kat Armas, reminds us that God is often at work in the informal space where life and faith happens at the same time. God has positioned and purposed Black women leaders like me to shake up societal norms in patriarchal environments that wants to keep us submerged in silence and dismissive practices in the theological and societal realms of life.

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[49] Wilda C. Gafney, Womanist Midrash: *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017) 91

[50] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 25-27

[51] Inbar Raveh and Karen Fish, They let the Children Live: *The Midwives at a Political Crossroad. Feminist Rereadings of Rabbinic Literature* (Brandies University Press, 2014) 24

[52] Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown, Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest (IGI Global Publishing of Knowledge, 2021) 124-125

The significance of who I am under the power of God, cannot be ignored and my faith as a Black woman leader resounds in the face of injustice. Black women leaders are disrupting normative practices in a myriad of sacred and secular vocations. Black women leaders, like those identified in this body of work become life givers in a world that have become life takers. Black women leaders have disrupted normative practices to advance the greater purpose of the Kingdom of God. Social implications and actions have significance in the Kingdom of God when the struggles of living in the tension of theological and societal realms are disrupted by the power of faith.

Black women leaders who understand their leadership calling are navigating sacred and secular spaces with intentionality, challenging male dominated leadership, and engaging in transformative work that benefits those sitting on marginal outskirts. Whenever there is an encounter with the reverence of God, it warrants the deployment of action. God is obligated to responding when the struggles of living in the tension of societal and religious norms are disrupted by the power of faith. The response from God is a call to action and a divine command from God to engage in advocacy work for justice that crosses theological and societal boundaries.

Advocacy and Boundary Crossing

Some feminist scholars lend their voice of rebuttal to the assertion that the midwives were engaged in advocacy work and boundary crossing by saying they were nothing more than weak submissive women staying within their traditional boundaries. Hebrew studies scholar, Francis Natak questions the ethnicity of the midwives by asking if

they were Hebrew midwives or midwives to the Hebrews. In his final analysis, Natak supports the position that the midwives were Egyptians and not Hebrews. This observation questions the validity of advocacy and boundary crossing. As Egyptian women, they had the power to maneuver through powerful spaces is applied, which is why the king was mild in his behavior towards the insubordinate midwives.[53]

In comparison, biblical scholar, Ilona Rashkow, said questioning their ethnicity highlights the significant role of the two midwives. Hebrew or Egyptian they were extremely strong women who subverted the king's command, overstepping boundaries by trusting God, accepting their communal responsibility, and advocated for the redemption of the future generation of a nation.[54] Rabbinic scholar, Inbar Raveh, said Hebrew midwives not only help the actual birthing mothers; they also play a symbolic role in the story of the birth of the nation of Israel. Instead of being a tool in the king's hands and killing the Hebrew infants at birth, they mount a powerful resistance against the repressive and authoritarian forces symbolized by the regime.[55] Inbar Raveh points out that together it takes Hebrew and Egyptian women to defy the king's authority, crossing boundaries of socioeconomic standing, education, nationality, and religion, to save the life of a single boy.

In her article, *"Let the Children Live:" The Midwives at a Political Crossroads*, Inbar Raveh also argues against feminists' notions of Shiphrah and Puah as anything other than women of heroism, by expounding on their act to change the social and religious

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[53] Ilona Rashkow, 'Shiphrah and Puah: A Two Strong Women in Exodus*" Jewish Bible Quarterly Dor le Dor,* 52, no. 2 (2017) 102

[54] Ilona Rashkow, 'Shiphrah and Puah: A Two Strong Women in Exodus*" Jewish Bible Quarterly Dor le Dor,* 52, no. 2 (2017) 103

[55] Inbar Raveh, They let the Children Live: *The Midwives at a Political Crossroad. Feminist Readings Rabbinic Literature* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012) 12

reality, to resist the prevailing order, becoming the people's predestined fate, and remolding them in a life-giving direction. Inbar Raveh takes the liberty to define Shiphrah and Puah as social and spiritual activists using all possible means to help the birthing mothers and the newborns, resulting in a theologically radical element of the introduction of God as the source of power and authority.[56] I concur with Inbar Raveh's analysis of Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives feared God and submitted themselves to the transcendence of God's power, which catapulted them beyond the boundaries of narratives, traditional roles, and patriarchal power. God is transcending and God's justice goes beyond limitations and boundaries to address the injustices of this world.

Feminist theologian and biblical scholar, Rosalind Janssen writes about Shiphrah and Puah recovering their voices in an ancient world that suppresses their gender and ethnicity. Rosalind Janssen states that they are the only ones in the Exodus narrative to be named as the women who silenced the all-powerful King of Egypt, and whose voices become the agency for God. Although many scholars have debated over the ethnicity of Shiphrah and Puah, using the etymology of their names, Janssen offers a rebuttal by redefining them as powerful Israelite prophetesses, rather than lowly uneducated women.[57] In their faith and reverence for God, Shiphrah's and Puah's act of resistance resulted in having to navigate through the theological essence of being life givers and having to creatively formulate a political negotiation that would save lives. In doing so the two midwives safeguarded their community and the future of generations to come.

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[56] Inbar Raveh, They let the Children Live: *The Midwives at a Political Crossroad. Feminist Readings Rabbinic Literature* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012) 19

[57] Rosalind Janssen, A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah: *Recovering their Voices* (Feminist Theology 27, 2018) 9

Shiphrah's and Puah's voices are echoing from this Exodus text and speaking out to Black women leaders today. Black women's social justice leadership requires navigation and negotiation from pulpits to political platforms. In her book *Vashti's Victory and Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice*, author Laverne McCain Gill said it took women from different social, religious, racial, cultural, and class backgrounds to make this event happen. God's message here continues to resonate today as efforts for liberation increasingly must include inter-generational, interfaith, intercultural, interclass, and interracial efforts to become a part of God's salvific plan for humanity.[58] The midwives' faith in and fear of God broke glass ceilings, disturbed the status quo, and uprooted patriarchal power. They exercised their faith in God by using deception and the king's own prejudices to dismantle oppression. They countered the king's violence, which was deep rooted in his disdain for the Hebrews, with deception that saved the community. The Hebrew midwives, like so many women after them, work in society to uncover its inconsistencies, inequalities, and injustices. Paradoxically, they crossed boundaries with deception and became advocates of the truth. The Hebrew women were not like the Egyptian women, is what they told the king. They delivered their babies before the midwives could get to them to kill off the babies. Shiphrah and Puah crossed the boundaries of power and weakness with deception. What is weak under oppression becomes strong under deception. By exposing the deficiencies of what is and offering an opportunity to see what could be, they advance justice for the whole of the community, and they are blessed by God.[59] Here we see God's blessing crossing boundaries and becoming a part of the advocacy for life.

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[58] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 34

[59] Kat Armas, *Mocking Empire: Christian Century* (June 2021) 28

Black women are crossing gender and racial boundaries in sacred and secular spaces, encountering gender and racial bias on social, political, and religious platforms. Within the prevue of leadership, their work requires creative boundary crossing and advocacy efforts that in many cases becomes a matter of life and death for future generations in the communities they are shaping and serving. In chapter one, I described how negative narratives about Black women have been concretized into societal norms and patriarchal power structures, with the intention to dispel their value, capabilities, and stifle their freedom to be more than exploited bodies. Bible scholar, Wilda Gafney, asserted that to be a Black woman in the Americas is to navigate and negotiate multiple identities and perspectives.[60] Boundary crossing and advocacy for was instituted by a power greater than the earthly power dictating their involvement in genocide. When the necessity of boundary crossing and advocacy rises for Black women wearing the cloak of leadership, spiritual guidance is needed to help with fighting for justice in their communities and to help with resisting power surges that seek to oppress. For Black women leading by faith, God becomes the central focus of power and preservation when advocating for the powerless in both sacred and secular communities. Advocacy and Boundary crossing is an endless necessity for leadership practices that are counterintuitive to social norms.

[60] Wilda C. Gafney, Womanist Midrash: *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017) 2

Leadership Practices that are Counterintuitive to Social Norms

Environments that are unfavorable or even hostile towards women can be used by God as breeding grounds for unconventional leadership practices that are counterintuitive to social norms. Shiphrah and Puah are staple examples of women who have operated in defiance, lived in the tension of theological and socio realms, advocated for the marginalized, and crossed political and societal boundaries. They had to creatively navigate through insurmountable gender and societal roadblocks which warranted leadership practices that were counterintuitive to societal norms.

Christopher Naseri, professor of Scriptures and Biblical Languages, conveys that Shiphrah and Puah acted contrary to the order of the king. The motivation for their bravery is the fear of God, which implies that their action is not based on any nationalistic instinct.[61] Some biblical scholars have described Shiphrah and Puah as tricksters who circumvents the king's political and societal bias and usurps his fear of the expansion of the Hebrew people. Biblical scholar, Rosalind Janssen notes in her writing in the 1988 volume of Semeia, which was entirely devoted to the role of women as tricksters in both biblical and Near Eastern literature, the term is defined as using deceptions when necessary to influence the course of events and to keep out of trouble with one in authority.[62] God, then becomes the formation of the midwives' leadership practice that is counter intuitive to the king's societal norm to annihilate a nation of people he despised. Trickery, also known as deception in biblical terms, is a leadership practice that enabled Shiphrah and Puah to stand

[61] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021): 45

[62] Rosalind Janssen, A New Reading of Shiphrah and Puah: *Recovering their Voices* (Feminist Theology 27, 2018) 19

up to the king and turn the king's genocide plans inside out. The apparent opposition raised against the king by the midwives who were presumed by the king as soft target collaborators reveals more about the divine hand regulating and directing the course of history of the Hebrew people. The imperative political designs of the power of the earthly king turned counterintuitive through deception and became the vehicle through which the invisible and unstoppable power of the divine King used to build an even stronger nation of people. Shiphrah and Puah in their commonplace reply to the query of the king in Exodus 1:19 represents the vulnerable biblical minorities who, assisted by God can trick their oppressors and wrestle themselves out of life-threatening situations.[63]

While Shiphrah and Puah were being commanded by the oppressing king of Egypt to become reproduction stoppers, Black women were demanded by oppressing enslavers to become reproduction suppliers. The notion of trickster becomes positive when Shiphrah and Puah deceives the king to save their community. When trickster is applied to Black women, the notion becomes negative, associated with sexual connotations and perception is that they are not worthy of saving in the community. The reproduction of children born to enslaved Black women became more important after the U.S. Congress banned the importation of slaves in 1808. Black women's bodies were before and after the act, a site for sexual violence and exploitation, particularly from elite white males whose wealth and social standing was enriched by the controlling of Black bodies for profit and pleasure. The overlapping experiences of being black and being women meant that they experienced and understood the world in profoundly separate ways from both Black men and white

[63] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021): 51-52

women.[64] Why is this pertinent to Black women as leaders? Black women voices have been submerged in the trauma of their experiences. Reclaiming their voices is essential to their leadership practices. Their voices proclaim who God has created them to be. Their voices tell stories in a manner that they can become agents of change in their communities. In the onset of their lived experiences, Black women have navigated through the complexities of a society that devalues their existence, despite being a representation of the Imago Dei. Leadership practices that are counterintuitive to societal norms have been concretized in their voices, catapulting Black women to unmute themselves and tell their stories.

Author and professor of Sociology and African American studies, Lori Latrice Martin, said scholars writing about the practice of leadership and Black women include spiritualism and faith as an important tenet to the practice of leadership. If Black women consider themselves to be truly interested in the full liberation that frees them from discrimination and oppression in any and all forms, they all have a moral obligation to understand that they cannot see advances of women's rights if women of color are somehow conspicuously left behind.[65] Patriarchal power has haunted Black women throughout U.S. history, dismantling stereotypical identifications and patriarchal power requires the sovereign power of a God greater than that of a perceived earthly power. To ensure the powerless is getting what they need to survive in communities, Kat Armas, theologian and biblical scholar, said a Black women's fight for an equitable future is

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[64] Lori Latrice Martin, Black Women as Leaders: *Challenging and Transforming Society* (Santa Barbara CA: Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019) 3

[65] Lori Latrice Martin, Black Women as Leaders: *Challenging and Transforming Society* (Santa Barbara CA: Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019) 20

intimately connected to her belonginess with one another. But they cannot belong to one another if they are not committed to telling the truth about themselves and each other. Injustice affects both the oppressor and the oppressed, so Black women leaders must tell the truth about the past and the ways they have disrupted their sacred belonginess so they can heal their future.[66] Unmuting oneself is embodied in the struggle but it is a necessary struggle to reclaim mind, body, soul, and voice. Their bodies tell stories about themselves as leaders and about the divine who empowers them to become a part of God's salvific plan of justice in this world.

Author and biblical scholar, Laverne McCain Gill, introduces what she has termed as the justice ready strategy, in which she says continue to inform and enlighten her understanding of the role that women play in God's story about salvation. Patriarchy, gender, race, and class have been used in the past to point to the oppression of women. God's call for justice is evident throughout the Bible, but nowhere more poignant and powerful than in the stories of women in scripture texts. The intention might have been to suppress the voice of women in the Bible, but a God of justice narrates stories that show women included in God's created reality, resisting cultures that oppresses them against God's will for their freedom.[67] In her book *Abuelita Faith, What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*, Kat Armas highlights the story of five sisters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah found in Numbers 27:1-11, who use their voices and bodies to articulate the inequality of land distribution. After the death of their father, who had no sons, the five sisters were cut out from receiving land since it was

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[66] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Michigan: BrazosPress,2021) 72

[67] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) xiii

customary for sons to inherit land from their father. Kat Armas refers to their ability to use their voices as a bold, audacious, and incredibly daring move as they stand before Moses, the priest, chiefs, and entire community demanding their rights as heirs to their father's land. Armas said they not only question Moses's opinion but also a direct decree from God, pushing for a divine instruction be revised. God answers, God vindicates, God changes, and God listened to the cries of the women and acted on their behalf. When those who are marginalized through systems that keep them down speak up for themselves, God listens. God honored their standing up for what was right for themselves and the other women in their clan.[68] Women speaking out and standing up for themselves is a leadership practice that is counterintuitive to social norms.

To this end, author and biblical scholar, Laverne McCain Gill points out that Ida B. Wells was an advocate for human rights and women's suffrage. On both fronts she confronted a society that found her strong spirit and her bold actions problematic for the continue rule of white supremacy in American society. She was an unsung heroine of her time, but that never stopped her from using her voice and seeking a change to what she saw as life-denying actions against African Americans.[69]

Other Black women leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer realized that her fight for women's rights and equality encompassed something larger than herself. She used the transformative power of her voice to speak up against the violation of her Black body and to advocate for societal and political change. Fannie Lou Hamer's voice resonated from a

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[68] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Michigan: BrazosPress,2021) 178

[69] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 35

place deep within her spirituality, God granted her the strength to share her testimony on religious and political platforms to expose to the world the plethora of violations that Black women endured.

Christopher Naseri, theologian and professor of Scriptures and Biblical Languages eloquently states, the midwives are conscientious objectors, heroines of civil disobedience and paragons of God-fearing virtue. Their actions as conscientious objectors reveal the power of will and character possessed by women. Shiphrah and Puah, although misjudged to be weaker, changed their society for the better. They did this by remaining the counter force against despots and the leadership crises that were faced with. The midwives' courageous decision to stand up to the king led to the proliferation of life among the Hebrew people. When the moral standard for human activity is the fear of God as demonstrated by Shiphrah and Puah, the result is the care for and the prosperity of lives. Shiphrah and Puah are models of faith, conscience, courage, and respect for life. The action and voice of the midwives is understood to be their response to the fear of God. It is the responsibility of being human while in partnership with God, to ensure vicious circles of violence, persecution, and destruction of lives are counterproductive.[70] Our voice as leaders become counterintuitive tools used in leadership practices, in cadence alongside the

[70] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021): 51-52

omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God in sacred and secular realms that need to hear the voice of hope.

Chapter 3

Resistance and the Cost of Resistance

What is received and what is given in resistance? The refusal to conform to any type of oppression is overlayed with societal and religious complexities. God informs the navigation of resistance in the sphere of sacred and secular spaces. What is received in resistance is the divine emergence of strength that enables Black women leaders to disrupt injustices, resist power surges, and the courage to fight for the future existence of themselves, families, and communities. What is given in resistance is the power of narrative ownership and redirection of preconceived notions about the value, worth, and purpose of Black women leaders in God's redemptive process in this world. The voices of Black women leaders have blared from the margins for decades. They are important contributors to the stories of advocacy and resistance in the life of their communities.

This chapter focuses on how a critical component of resistance can be found in the lived experiences of Black women leaders at the forefront of their varied expressions of their vocations repel authoritative structures as they simultaneously navigate through the reception of resistance from those same authoritative structures. Listening to and gleaning from the lived experiences these Black women leaders who are willing to become vulnerable through the storytelling of their personal lived experiences is invaluable to the work of this courageous leadership project. It adds value to the framework of how to mentor and develop young women rising in leadership roles and those seeking leadership roles in sacred and secular communities.

There is much to be said about Black women leaders who recognize and acknowledge God as the source behind what they do and the impact they have made to the lives of those crossing their leadership paths. They understand their calling from God is to resist all notions of oppression by becoming revolutionary, resilient, and radical leaders whose collective voices have become tools of resistance and a cadence of hope. Voices of hope that resounds in leadership practices counterintuitive to stereotypical laboring of women in leadership, social norms, discriminatory practices, and who are not afraid of speaking out, rejecting injustices, and oppression in sacred and secular communities. Within the walls of resistance dwells hope, faith, and the power of God, producing agents of change and benefactors of the hand of God. With the understanding that all Black women leaders are not coming to the table with the same attributes, characteristics and leadership styles, I can appreciate those Black women leaders who have accepted their divine purpose of becoming a part of God's social justice plan and causing a disturbance in the foundation of oppressive institutions and nomenclatures. I have profound appreciation for Black women leaders who resist authoritative demands in both their personal and professional lives that are not conducive to the freedoms they have instituted in their daily lives.

As with any freedom movement embedded in a Christian commitment to God's framework of morality, resistance comes with a price to pay and casualties. Black women leaders like the ones I had the pleasure and opportunity of interviewing for this project, acknowledges what resistance gives and takes through their own lived experiences. In addition, they have also learned how to trust God and lean into their faith, the power of persistence, and forge ahead with advocating for justice in spaces that are less than kind to their existence, leadership, and contributions. Author and biblical scholar Laverne McCain Gill said these

are women whose stories encompasses an involuntary collaborative effort that resulted in God's will being made manifest in the world. Black women leaders have learned how to navigate their roles with high levels of adaptability and are aware of the challenges they may face, which is an ongoing practice for Black women in their leadership space[71]

Oral History Research Approach and Interviews

Oral history interviews were conducted virtually, using a phenomenological approach which assisted with exploring the lived experiences of three Black women leading in community, higher education, and religion. The participants are subject matter experts in their perspective vocations and were selected based on their lived experiences, leadership capabilities, and contributions to their field of work. A series of four questions were developed to help with understanding the extent of leadership experiences of each participant in sacred and secular realms. Each participant was asked the same questions for the purpose of collecting oral history data to be analyzed for thematic occurrences of lived experiences.

The results of my research revealed that all women shared experiential commonality in the formation of their leadership with faith and resilience serving as the key strategy for overcoming oppressive barriers, sustaining life, and preserving the future of their communities. Specifically, the oral history interviews revealed a deep-rooted connection to overcoming adversities and systemic barriers, deep intertwining of sacred

[71] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 26

and secular spaces, challenges with navigating power structures and cultural expectations, resistance in and resistance to their leadership, and an authentic need for mentorship and solidarity.

Research Questions:

1. Please describe some of the most significant experiences in your development as a leader. Specifically, what was impactfully inspiring, challenging, or even hurtful in your formation as a Black woman leader?

2. Based on your own experiences and understandings, how would you define and differentiate what are the spiritual and sacred realms from what are the secular realms in the life of the communities you inhabit as a Black woman leader?

3. Can you describe some of the interactions you experienced in your leadership that have helped you with navigating and connecting the sacred and secular realms of community life?

4. In those combined sacred and secular spaces, what were the most challenging experiences and biggest obstacles for your leadership and what strategies did you use to respond to them? What kind of support did you need and want?

Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality and to protect the identity of interviewers.

Claiming Her Calling

Georgina, a Pastor, Licensed Massage Therapist, and advocate for Black women, takes a voyage through her own Vashti experience, articulating her silencing and gender-based leadership from the man dualistically serving as her pastor and husband and how it shaped her leadership journey.

Georgina: "When I began recognizing God's call in my life and presented God's confirmation my husband, seeking his pastoral advice but was rejected by his cone of silence. He never acknowledged how we sat in front of each other and me saying to him I

felt a calling on her life. I did not know at the time what that calling meant for me and needed my pastor to help me discern through the process. My husband never acknowledged my call or me but instead rejected me with his silence."[72]

Georgina proclaims that she was not silenced in God's calling, but that her husband was silent towards her. The silent movement from the person serving in the bifurcated role of pastor and husband, was extremely hurtful to her.

Georgina: "Despite the earthly silent treatment, I moved forward in ministry, shifting according to the divine voice of God and how God's Spirit was leading me to start a prayer ministry. The cost of following God's directions and not adhering to the denial of my husband, he told me that I could not serve in any type of leadership capacity within the church."[73]

Georgina firmly believes being a woman existing in the domicile of their home triggered his refusal to recognize her and acknowledge the calling on her life.

Georgina: "From within the context of my relationship with him as his wife, it was easy for him to support women, preachers, and women in ministry because he had no hand in making or breaking them. However, there was no intersectionality with me as his wife, he wanted the power to make and shape me, and if that was not possible the ultimate desire was to break me. He had no issue with supporting women in ministry but when the woman was his wife, the one in which there was a high level of expectancy to be submissive to the point of subserviency, presented a challenge for him."[74]

Resisting this notion of oppression, Georgina followed the direction of her faith and belief in God. Georgina's resistance to her husband's oppressive nature and decision to take a leap of faith ignited the flame in the demise of her marriage.

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[72] Georgina (pseudonym), interview by Peggy Thompson, Oral History Collection, New Jersey, January 23, 2025
[73] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025
[74] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025

Georgina: "Recalling my painful realization, I can say it was beyond hurtful and in some ways stunted my growth. In a more significant way, it drew closer to God. The struggle with being married to a pastor is the expectation that divorce is not an option and leaving the marriage was more complicated than people from the outside looking in could understand."[75]

Enduring the pain, Georgina continued operating in her normal capacity as the leader of the Women's ministry until she surprisingly and hurtfully discovered that a female preacher from another church was summoned to replace her.

Georgina: "It was another hurtful moment for me, I realized if my husband had not demonstrated he wanted nothing else to do with me privately, I would not have become as intimate with God as I did while on my battlefield." [76]

In Georgina's secular world, the human man sat her down to oppress her but in her sacred world, God sat her down for twenty-one years to heal, strengthen, and prepare her for becoming the Pastoral leader that she is today.

Georgina: "I credit God for using my hurtful and tumultuous experiences to grow and develop my Pastoral leadership. There are no wasted experiences with God. Even God's hard stops in life have purpose and meaning. God makes a way for provision when Black women leaders are at the lowest points in their lives. What is lost in the process of God's development is what God intends to be lost, it is a part of the leadership preparation that ennobles the stamp of God. In God's world, the sacred and secular are intertwined. Who Black women leaders are in the sacred world are who they are in the secular world. The two midwives knew who they were in both the sacred and the secular realm of their leadership, but the outside world leaves this notion at that. There is no examination of what their leadership entailed in those two worlds, the pressure, captivity, oppression, and they

[75] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025
[76] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025

had to make decisions. Leaving this out of their leadership story for the sake of keeping the sacred spaces clean is a disservice to the empowerment of Black women who need mentoring through the difficulties of leadership."[77]

Georgina recalled how she had no desire to preach or pastor. The initial dismissal of her call from her husband, so she believed, did not have much of an impact. Although she felt the call on her life, she resisted, the notion of the clergy world because of the traumatic experience with the clergyman, serving as pastor and husband in her life.

Georgina: "Even after my divorce, my most challenging experience and biggest obstacle was with me thinking I was not good enough and wrestling with the feeling of being inadequate. Fearing and trusting God are key components in Black women leadership. God will provide the necessary support systems in the sacred and secular environments where God plants Black women, to help them grow and develop them into tenacious leaders needed for such a time like this."[78]

In resistance to her ex-husband, she allowed his denial to affect her mindset, believing she was not smart enough, had enough, knew enough, powerful enough, and respected enough as a Black women leader in ministry. God allowed her resistance to propel in a healing direction apart from the church. Through the process of becoming a massage therapist and life coaching, she was able to eradicate her earthly fears, feelings of inadequacy, and step into the Pastoral leadership role with assurance and a keen since of God's purpose for her life.

Resistance is complex and complicated, but it also encompasses the courageous and audacious movements of faith to move beyond self-inflicted obstacles like the ones Georgina instituted into and triumphed in her leadership. Shiphrah and Puah exemplified

[77] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025
[78] Georgina (pseudonym), interview, January 23, 2025

the tenacious and creative power of resistance when they feared God more than they feared the king. Ultimately the midwives' resistance set the stage for generations to come and birthed resistance into the narratives of other women leaders who were courageous enough to help bring forth liberation and healing into the life of their communities.[79] The scripture reveals how in God's overall assessment of oppressors and environments of oppression, there are divine factors of resistance instituted into the process of liberation. As a result of their fear of God, Shiphrah and Puah become co-labors alongside God in God's divine resistance against the earthly power structure of the king and benefactors that aided in the restoration of life for the next generation of community leaders.

It was God who responded to and acted upon the fear that Shiphrah and Puah had for God, a divine invitation to the table of resistance against the demands of the king's genocide edict. When God becomes the center of resistance, it undermines the plans of the enemy and enhances the vitality of God's promise to set the captives free, give sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. Nestled within the process of divine resistance are favorable outcomes. Shiphrah and Puah used deception as a form of resistance to influence the course of events, and in the face of a threat from the most powerful figure in Egypt to humorously reverse his power in favor of life.[80] Resistance to injustice, especially where the breath of life is threatened, is rewarded by God. So, God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. God rewarded Shiphrah and Puah for their faithfulness in

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[79] Kat Armas, Abuelita Faith: *What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2021) 62

[80] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021): 47

accordance with God's demand to preserve and sustain life as articulated in Exodus 1:20-21. Theologian and professor, Christopher Naseri, likens the favorable outcome of resistance to a blessing from God. While the king's divine/royal act in the narrative consists in his quest to destroy life, God's divine act of blessing consists in proliferating the midwives by virtue of giving them children of their own and multiplying and strengthening the Hebrew people. God's blessing for resisting the violent notion of the king is that he gives Shiphrah and Puah families of their own and aligns their future with the fortune of the Israelites. While the king seeks to manipulate the midwives into becoming murderers God appreciates the work of their resistance and brings success to the work of their hands[81]

As with many injustices in our society, it is easier to blame the individual rather than the system because blaming the system means we all play a part in upholding it and are thus accountable.[82] Black women leaders who are committed to social justice and equity are breaking barriers, and leading meaningful change in sacred and secular communities. In doing so, they have had to develop resistance against power structures in pulpits and community platforms. The fear of God propelling over the fear of power structures becomes the catalyst of the leadership journey. Like Queen Vashti, Georgina used her voice to say no to despicable treatment against her body and her intellect. As a Black women leader, Georgina pushed back on injustices that impacted the vitality of her identity and resisted the notion of notion of societal narratives and used the cultural biases of her ex-husband against him by affirming her purpose and pastoral leadership.

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[81] Christopher Naseri, "Exodus 1:15-22 and the Midwives who Dared Pharaoh to Protect Lives," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 159, no. 3 (June 2021): 48-49

[82] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Michigan: BrazosPress,2021) 154-155

Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality and to protect the identity of interviewers.

Navigating Both Racial and Gender Barriers

Esther, a Vice President and public policy professional, with an extensive background in educational and public health policy, rehashed the lived experience of resistance to her leadership as a Black woman leading in what she termed as "Dixie Spaces.''

Esther: "I was raised by my parents to learn all the tributes of the Bible, understanding the Old Testament, New Testament and God's will and purpose to the world. While in college at Cornell University I witnessed activism all around me, including sit-ins that led to the Africana Studies Department being created."[83]

Esther entrenched herself in the experience of her college life, acknowledging her commitment to God and walking in the path that God wanted her to walk.

Esther: "I aways remembered what my aunt would say to me, "Divine Order, God's got you." She knew I hated public speaking, but she knew it was a gift that God had for me to do something with. I was asked to moderate a panel at a very huge event in New Jersey, and someone said to me "You are amazing, you have a gift, and God does not want you to hide your light under you." From there I said to God, 'when you call me, I will answer, but only when you call me."[84]

By this Esther meant when she is called to secular and sacred spaces, she analyzed how her voice and understanding of issues were going to guide her or do something different in those spaces.

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[83] Esther (pseudonym), interview by Peggy Thompson, Oral History Collection, New Jersey, February 14, 2025
[84] Esther (pseudonym), interview, February 14, 2025

Esther: "The spiritual realm is a part of the world that I am always in, it is what centers me and what helps me to understand, reflect and centers myself on divine order to help me move forward in the right way."

Esther elaborately discussed her Black women leadership experience at a sales event for Merck, Sharp, and Dome held in Atlanta, where the company had a huge mandatory dinner that was required for executives to attend.

Esther: "I remember the theme of this conference was, "I wish I were in Dixie." I looked around the room watching people as the music played loudly, sitting grinning, and smiling because that was the corporate culture. There were very few Black executives in the room, and I could not believe what was happening. I got up and walked out with two of my Black colleagues."

Esther wrestled with a conflicting conscious but in good conscious would not allow herself as a Black women leader be disrespected.

Esther: "The idea of white executives acknowledging and endorsing the concept of Dixie, which represented confederate states, slavery, racial division, segregation, and Jim Crow laws was unacceptable. After looking around the room, I realized they did not care what Dixie meant to the ten percent of Black people in the room, and I was willing to be fired for walking out. I asked my direct report if she understood what Dixie represents to Black people. Unfortunately, as a Black woman she was clouded by her need to be in that white world and told me I was out of place for walking out like the angry Black woman and needed me to understand the privilege she was given to be at that event."

Esther did not feel supported by her boss and mentioned that her boss did not support any Black woman because saw them as competition. Esther feels there needs to be more Black women leaders supporting, mentoring, and training each other on how to navigate through complexed, often racially disturbing spaces.

Esther: "I feel uncomfortable in places of whiteness, because sometimes it made me feel like I was threatened physically. I grapple with this as a grown woman and when I walk into places where white folk is, I feel unsteady. I feel like any minute something can go down, and it could be to my detriment. You cannot trust these people in this environment. You must push, train, and teach them how to deal with you, how to respect you, and that is something you should not have to be burdened with."[85]

When asked what kind of support she needed in her career, Esther was inclined to say she did not need support but wanted support from other Black women. She felt blessed to have several career opportunities but needed mentorship.

Esther: "I received my mentorship from a white male but felt it would be more beneficial if it were in the form of a of a Black woman. God gave me the strength to move through political spaces and claim my worth, but I felt the necessity to have Black women in those spaces with me for spiritual connections and guidance."[86]

Sisterhood and connection are needed to go against a king of oppression when walking in the path of faith. In Esther's existence as a Black woman in the State of New Jersey, doing policy and advocacy work, she walks by faith. Esther walks with divine purpose, and thanks God for divine intervention, compelling her to support and mentor other Black women.

Esther: "Mentorship is a critical component to Black women leadership because it is Black women fighting battles of injustices, they must circle and encase themselves in community. The divine and secular communities become protection for Black women leaders. Having a presence in political spaces, discussing educational policies that impact the life of Brown

[85] Esther (pseudonym), interview, February 14, 2025
[86] Esther (pseudonym), interview, February 14, 2025

and Black communities is my commitment to lifetime advocacy work as a Black woman in leadership."[87]

Esther possesses characteristics of and the drive for justice demonstrated in the advocacy work of twentieth century Black women Christian activists. Twentieth century Black women Christian activists submerged in faith, navigated complexed intersections of gender and race, resisting religious and political power structures overlayed in misconstrued ideologies of Black womanhood. Black women like Reverend Florence Randolph and Violet Johnson, living and working in the northern suburbs, entered public spaces, shaped religious practices, and influenced the twentieth century struggle for civil rights and social justice. Reverend Florence Randolph and Violet Johnson participated in the discourse of true womanhood and separate spheres, a discourse often at odds with the gendered and color-coded society in which Black women confronted both the *Woman Question* and the *Race Problem*. They were discriminated against because of their gender and race. In resistance to this double bias, they wage battles for physical and moral space within their sacred and secular communities. Seeking just laws and ethical transformation of religious and political order, their resistance impelled them to transgress boundaries, often in opposition to Black and white men, and middle-class white women. Sometimes that meant standing up for the right to speak in church or build a church on a street demarcated as *white* space or engaging in direct political action and the women suffrage movement. Randolph and Johnson advocated just laws and moral institutions, sustained communities, and listened to voices on the margins of society.[88] The resistance work of

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[87] Esther (pseudonym), interview, February 14, 2025

[88] Betty Livingston Adams, *Black Women's Christian Activism*: *Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016) 1-3, 159.

these two women prolifically carried over into the twenty-first century and serves as a reminder to Black women leaders that God values womanhood, women leaders, justice, and transcends political and religious structures of injustice for the betterment of communities that are entrenched in the nature of oppressive authoritarian behaviors.

Young and Community Focused

Thelma, a Community Service Director, advocate for environmental justice, Black families, and young Black women mentorship, tells her story from the lens of an unexperienced young Black woman in leadership, void of the mentorship she needed to help cultivate and prepare her for successful leadership in the community.

Thelma: "I started exploring leadership type roles at the age of twenty-four. I was inherently issued projects to oversee and manage because of my ability to find solutions to arising issues. I found myself in situations, circumstances, and sitting at tables that I did not feel fully equipped to manage and often questioned if I was being placed at those tables to succeed or if it was a setup for failure. The most significant example is when I had to thrash out and negotiate opportunities for acquiring a piece of land. I was tasked with ensuring the land met the necessary standards to be functional, organizing people on the ground that lived in the community, corralling and organizing heavy hitter influencers like the mayor of the largest city in the State of New Jersey, Council people and public safety directors as well as nonprofit leaders."[89]

Thelma felt like she was thrown out there to do it right, with very little instruction and guidance. The person assigning her projects was her supervisor, a Black female in her fifties. As a Black woman in community development, her supervisor was breaking glass

[89] Thelma (pseudonym), interview by Peggy Thompson, Oral History Collection, New Jersey, January 22, 2025

ceilings with being the first Black woman leader in company's organizational leadership framework which was a great accomplishment.

Thelma: "As a Black woman leader, my supervisor did not shift empowerment over to me, leaving this rising Black woman leader to not feel supported or mentored. Because of my passion for serving communities, and developing authentic relationships within the community, I unapologetically used this experience to mentor myself and developed leadership approaches that I could pass to other young women like me leading in community spaces."[90]

Thelma, as a Black woman leader, is currently coping with being in the environment of other Black women leaders doing what she identifies as the "performative song and dance about Black Girl Magic" but in the moment they are faced with challenges and adversities, they fall on the sword.

Thelma: "When it is time to demonstrate camaraderie, community, connection, and ambassadorship for great phenomenal Black women leaders, those characteristics disappear. I cannot really put my finger on it but there is some type of transition shift with Black women in leadership, where the Black women leaders I have encountered assimilate by taking on attributes of their white women leader counterparts. Their assimilation process does not always show up in their appearance and outward perceptions, but in ideologies I identify as brainwashing mentality that white is always right and if the white man said it, it must have some factuality to it."[91]

Black women leaders Thelma encountered in her leadership as a young Black women all had white counterparts they were trying to appeal to. Those women attempted to guide Thelma in the direction of how the white women were doing it, in which they believed to be right way.

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[90] Thelma (pseudonym), interview, January 22, 2025
[91] Thelma (pseudonym), interview, January 22, 2025

Thelma: "I did not subscribe to or believe in the one size fits all approaches, it takes away from individual strength and character and I stand firm in on my own beliefs, values, and ethics. Black women need the support of being able to have someone to relate to experientially as Black women in leadership. Someone who could impart knowledge, wisdom, and mentorship while navigating through the expected and unexpected processes of leadership as Black women. Black women leadership requires support in times of uncertainty and crises, spiritual grounding while leading, like minded Black women, mentorship, and being able acknowledge that these outlets and resources are much needed tenants for Black women in leadership. To be grounded in this aspect heightens awareness and informs how Black women leaders show up in sacred and secular spaces. With my experience as a young Black woman in leadership, I would hate for other young Black women to experience what I experienced."[92]

Thelma challenges herself every day to pay it forward, imparting wisdom, authentic guidance, and building up young Black women in the community sector, field, and industry. Her hope is that it influences their reapproach, their mental, and spiritual being.

Thelma: "As a leader, you must be leery of other leaders who delineate from the real work that needs to be done. You must follow the leadership of God in your life because the most challenging group could be the ones God uses to change the quality of life and the experience for the community they are in. Going against the grain can lead to feelings of loneliness for Black women leaders and if they are not spiritually grounded, they can find themselves depressed and feeling like a failure. Not everybody is on board with what Black women are executing in their capacity as leaders. When this happens, people will no longer support Black women as leaders, there's loss of human capital, they do not have the buy-in, the political support, and there is the notion they will fail."[93]

Thelma's advice to Black women in leadership is to be clear about God's direction, even when it is tough, you may waiver and question it. Seeking God, asking, and talking

[92] Thelma (pseudonym), interview, January 22, 2025
[93] Thelma (pseudonym), interview, January 22, 2025

conversationally with the Creator, about God's help will help them navigate through the process.

Thelma: "I resort to Scripture for confirmation and tap into spiritual leaders in my ethos about my experiences as a Black woman leader. I feel blessed and fortunate to have God in my life and those always standing behind me, helping me along in my Black woman leadership journey."[94]

Authors Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown said as an often underrepresented and misrepresented group, restricted by the "outsiders within" stereotypes, Black women have developed a set of skills and strategies to resist the negative perceptions of who they are. Resistance becomes a practice of dissent. Black women introduce intentional skills and strategy in their practice as a complex approach to resistance as leaders; and as they navigate White spaces, they continue to resist the negative stereotyping at the same time.[95] Betty Livingston Adams, an independent scholar whose research focuses on African American religious history, proclaims that Black women's Christian activism matters in Northern suburban local community life. Betty Livingston Adam's research and work on women, race, gender, and religious activism, is significant to this project because it adds value to understanding the important leadership contributions of African American women in religion and society and exemplifies the true essence of living in the tension of theological and societal realms. Over the first half of the twentieth century, African American women living in Northern suburban communities in New Jersey built churches, sustained communities, advocated for laws, and moral institutions. As the twenty-first

[94] Thelma (pseudonym), interview, January 22, 2025

[95] Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown, Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest (IGI Global Publishing of Knowledge, 2021) 137

century weaves more diverse strands into the American religious and civic fabric, may the religious narrative of ordinary of women leaders remind us that in the fight for just laws and moral institutions we can transform immoral places into sites of resistance.[96]

Resistance garners a variety of formations; some are subtle while others are not so subtle. Regis Fox, author and professor of English, explores African American literary and the Black women's critical thought as the proverbial lexicon of what she inherently labels as resistance reimagined. Fox argues that stories of Black women are integrated into demands for justice. The telling of their stories anchors comprehensive approaches to protest and community involvement. Story telling as a form of resistance abandons the politics of representation and canonization of race, gender, and class norms. It expands the knowledge of Black women thought leaders and black possibility beyond that of Sojourner Truth or Ida B. Wells, as well as resists firm strictures of class status. Resistance reimagined commits to articulating ways of knowing by and about Black women past and present, destabilizing discourses of individualism and universality that give the lie to Blackness and defy modalities of reason and equity that contribute to striking pasterns of disparity and racial Otherness.[97]

While storytelling and destabilizing traditional narratives are forms of resistance, resistance can also be manifested in personal lived everyday experiences or what Laverne McCain Gill refers to as the pocket of resistance to personal injustice.[98] Personal injustice is a paradigm in which women are subjugated to oppressive cultures and become victims

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[96] Betty Livingston Adams, Black Women's Christian Activism: *Seeking Social Justice in a Northern Suburb* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016) 159

[97] Regis M. Fox, Resistance Reimagined: *Black Women's Critical Thought as Survival* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2018) 143-146

[98] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 12

of patriarchal systems intended to sequester the totality of their freedom to be who God has created them to be. Queen Vashti, in Esther 1, 2:1-4, embodies resistance to personal justice when she refuses to adhere to her husband who is the king and his command to parade herself around in front of a group of inebriated men wearing her crown just for their pleasure. In Old Testament Hebraic sacred literature, the narrative of Queen Vashti attaches her actions of disobedience to her demise and downfall. Looking at the divinely inspired word of the Bible, Laverne McCain Gill, argues against this notion of demise and downfall by saying it is possible to find that the lesson in Vashti's story comes as God speaks through Vashti's reaction to the king. Her response to the king shows that she no longer sees herself as the property of a man but as a child of God.[99] Her "no" speaks to Black women leaders today, articulating the chance to change oppressive situations at any time to become what God would have them to be. God's call for justice and release of captives' echoes throughout the bible as God's paramount vision for all of humanity. Vashti models what we know as God's call to resist oppression. Such resistance is associated with God's call for justice and directly speaks to the role that women play in God's unfolding plan for humanity.[100]

Black Lives Matter movement, a modern example of resistance in the twenty-first century, in a profound and divine sense speaks to Case Study Three's leadership journey. Established by self-identified queer Black women, the Black Lives Matter movement stretched beyond gender status, joining forces with a plethora of Black women thrusted into the spotlight due to their personal pain or the pain they experienced through others.

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[99] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 2

[100] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 12

Professor of sociology and African American studies, Lori Latrice Martin indicates Black Lives Matter rejects assaults on Black women in the practice of leadership in their homes and community organizations and instead, celebrates Black women in these specific roles. At the forefront of Black Lives Matter movement is the core of unequivocal resistance against anti-Black violence in which the founders outlined a set of shared beliefs and used social media and new technologies to disseminate them. The beliefs involved diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirmation, unapologetic Blackness, collective value, loving engagement, Black villages, Black women, Black families, and intergenerational affairs. With these values, Black Lives Matter, according to the founders, is a part of the larger Black freedom movement for the twenty-first century. Black Lives Matter movement incorporates the commonality of the politics of respectability in the framework of its resistance tactics, utilizing empowerment, agency, and social justice to fight the struggle of national and global anti-Black sentiments. The politics of respectability was codified by Black women in the National Baptist Convention to address racialized and engendered structural barriers inherent in the daily operations of every American institution. Mobilizing others under the larger umbrella of Black Lives Matter has meant finding and capitalizing on innovative ways to communicate and to organize. It requires a contemporary language of resistance in a digital age. In doing so, Black women leaders have played important roles in the socialization of resources in young adults and familial capital. Black Lives Matter has reinforced the ability of Black women who are engaged in the practice of leadership to convert navigational and resistance capital into collective

actions to mobilize and establish resistant strategies against structural racism and genderism in communities beyond geographical boundaries.[101]

Women using diplomatic strategies of resistance and moving offensively against representatives of oppression is confrontational.[102] The realm of resistance is a bifurcated state of existence; it liberates when it forces tangible change and imprisons when there is a price to pay for liberation of change. Opposition to power structures is not without consequences and the question to ask is at what cost. What are the costs associated with resistance and is the cost of liberation too much of a price to pay? Women leaders have made astronomical strides throughout the years with building foundations of resistance against social, political, and religious injustices but not without trepidation to the impact it has on their own lives and well-being. Disruptions of oppression can unmask the oppressor's refusal to relinquish domination and power over who they believe to be powerless. Jesus's death on the cross is evidence of that and bears witness to what disruptions in oppressive religious and political systems can manifest when resistance to injustice are a part of the design of God's salvific plan.

Pressing and moving forward within volatile environments can impinge on spiritual, mental, and physical well-being, cause isolation and loss, as well as interruptions in advocacy work. Womanist theologian, Wilda Gafney, said there's a bruising and a blessing when there is wrestling with God, particularly when God is responsible for the call to resistance.[103] Resistance to injustice of any kind is a divine battle, the intensity and

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[101]Lori Latrice Martin, Black Women as Leaders: *Challenging and Transforming Society* (Santa Barbara CA: Praeger / ABC-CLIO, 2019) 89-90, 94-95, 104-105.

[102] Irmtraud Fischer, Women Who Wrestled with God: *Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginning* (Liturgical Press, 2000) 124

[103] Wilda C. Gafney, Womanist Midrash: *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville KY: Westminster Knox Press, 2017) 91

burden of the cost of resistance can lead to cross bearing before achieving victory. Although Shiphrah's and Puah's fear of God rested in the center of their resistance to the king, they experienced isolation under the earthly king's rule. Unable to rely on the midwives to be co-conspirators under his genocidal plans, the king summons all the Egyptians to carry out his orders, vicariously indicating he has no more use for the midwives. With his actions, the king seeks to silence their voices and make it known he no longer sees value in their skills or status as midwives to the Egyptian and Hebrew communities. Isolation meant they were no longer privileged to have the protection of the king's court, making them vulnerable to death threats, violence, and despair. Queen Vashti refused the summoning of the king; he reacted with the whole force of his authority against her and the rest of the women in his empire. Vashti's unelaborate refusal to be a spectacle at her husband's command by choosing self-respect over obedience to an unjust request led to the stripping of her crown, being divorced from the king, excommunicated, a negative reputation among the kingdom men, potential homelessness, and replacement by another woman.[104]

Black women leaders in secular spaces have wrestled with marginalization, isolation, inequities, racism, and disrespect. Marginalization and isolation make it extremely difficult to navigate through promotions, being recognized for their professional contributions, and being considered for higher leadership roles. These obstacles and challenges have created unnecessary stress and anxiety, taking a toll on their mental and physical well-being. Authors Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown iterates the notions of power, leadership, and intelligence have been defined and shaped by colonialism, White

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[104] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 11

supremacy, patriarchy, and sexism. America overlooked and ignored women of color from mainstream leadership conceptualizations. Black and brown women have been anchors to their families throughout history in response to and resisting oppressive systems to preserve their family and dignity. Resilient strength is considered an attribute, however, the need to keep up with this relentless performance comes at the expense of resilience, racial battle, emotional, and physical fatigue that permeates their entire being. Although the Black women's body bears a close resemblance to the White female, the Black woman epitome is masculine with an aggressive and overly assertive temperament, leading to the stereotypical identity of the "Strong Black Woman" or the "Angry Black Woman." This in turn makes it difficult to express pain and fear, and seldom, if at all, leads to the luxury of expressing their emotions. Black women bear the burden of the "Do-it-all" strong Black woman who can bear all the pain without complaining in various sectors of their professional life.[105]

[105] Sonia Rodriquez and Kelly Brown, Black and Brown Leadership and the Promotion of Change in an Era of Social Unrest (IGI Global Publishing of Knowledge, 2021) 124-125

Conclusion

The Power of Persistence

What does the power of persistence entail for Black women leaders seeking justice and change in both the sacred communities they inhabit and lead? When those who are marginalized through systems that keep them down speak up for themselves, God listens says theologian and author, Kat Armas.[106] God listens not to remove the obstacles of injustice, God listens to raise up leaders undergirded with divine power to be stronger than the earthly structures of power. Banishment and demonization were the systemic tools used for those who attempted to suppress the works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett. In her quest to save African Americans from lynching, she confronted presidents, Congress, and members of state legislatures to enact antilynching laws. With courage she defied the power structure of the day to affirm the life of a people considered a threat by the powers of the day. She said "no" to the life denying laws of the power structure.[107] In front of a crowd of three hundred attendees gathered at Williams CME Church in Harlem, New York, Fannie Lou Hamer testified about her experience of being fired, evicted, shot at for trying to vote in Mississippi, and described her experience with police brutality in a Winona jail cell. Fannie Lou Hamer's faith and religious beliefs parlayed into justice centered politics and

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[106] Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Michigan: BrazosPress,2021) 72

[107] Laverne McCain Gill, Vashti's Victory: *And Other Biblical Women Resisting Injustice* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2003) 37-38

her unique speaking abilities were God-given gifts to be used to conduct God's will on earth. In the transformative power of the spirit and her reinvigorated vision of social justice, Fannie Lou Hamer was determined to lead and do what she was gifted to do on platforms that extended beyond Mississippi. Conducting God's plan meant not being afraid to testify about her own personal experiences and atrocities, naming each violation against her one by one for the world's ears to hear. Her radical leadership was centered on her spirituality, as she described Jesus to be a revolutionary person whose work among the people mattered.[108]

The notion of persistence entails persevering as agents of change with God at the helm of every battle. Every battlefield is bifurcated with causalities and victories but while on the battlefield Black women are in the trenches with God. God methodically maps out the pathways of persistency for the greater purpose of Black women's social justice leadership, designed to change the outcome of people living on the margins of society. The power of persistence is timeless and limitless; its source is not the human vessel but the indwelling of the power of the spirit of God in the human vessel. The power of persistence in Black women leaders objectifies God's justice for humanity in the past and is currently objectifying the same in the present. God's power under grids persistence, Black women social justice leaders have wrestled with God and have prevailed. The need for ongoing power in resistance is never ending, the tenacity to continually fight injustice requires a strength that is stronger than human existence. Leading in faith and God's power is the thrust of persistence.

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[108] Maegan Parker Brooks, America's Freedom Fight Woman: *Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lanham MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2020) 90,110,118

In chapter one, I offered a review of the history of Black women's journey from the continent of Africa to the shores of the United States. I highlighted the shaping of the Black woman's story in the United States, the atrocities, and perils of their journey through slavery, racism, discrimination, and constructed societal norms about their body, mind, and spirit. I also detailed how the disdain for their skin color made them targets for violence by European enslavers, which was designed to systematically destroy, and negate the familial structures of Black women. From being muted to unmuting, the tumultuous history of Black women and their quest for freedom is what catapulted them into the journey of social justice leadership and advocacy. Their leadership entered public, political, and religious spaces, shaping practices and influencing the struggle for civil rights. Because of a myriad negative narratives constructed by European enslavers, Black women were viewed as women in need of reforming and has had to fight through these narratives for the duration of their existence. Nevertheless, Black women continued to press their way through, founding organizations, creating church clubs, women suffrage marches, building institutions and industries, engaging in politics and political action, organizing campaigns against racism, activism in art and entertainment, and fighting on behalf of Black communities ensuring a seat at the table so their voices can be heard.

Chapter two focused on the leadership of Black women transcending boundaries, the intersectionality of their sacred and secular realms, the tension in those spaces, advocacy, and leadership practices counterintuitive to social norms. The backdrop of chapter two is on the canvas of Shiphrah's and Puah's defiance against the king of Egypt to become genocide co-conspirators. I explained the ways in which operating in divine

leadership arrogates the authority of patriarchal societies and how defiance threatens oppressive social constructs. I explained how the fear of God is incorporated into courageous leadership because God is the one who marries the intersectionality of the sacred and secular. I articulated how the transcending power of God institutes justice where there is injustice and conveyed how faith is a determinant factor in courageous social justice leadership and pointed out how tension between theological and socio realms is inescapable. Black women engaging in advocacy and boundary crossing, mount powerful resistance against oppressive structures like their midwives' predecessors. Leading in environments unfavorable toward women is used by God as a breeding ground for unconventional leadership practices that are counterintuitive to social norms. I addressed how these practices have helped Black women navigate through the complexities of environments that devalues their existence, using their voices to speak out against evil demands of evil leaders in sacred and secular spaces. Concluding with saying the voices of Black women leaders represent the voice of the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God.

In chapter three, I explored resistance, the cost of resistance, and the power of persistence, defining the meaning of secular and spiritual resistance. I provide an analysis Queen Vashti's refusal to be a spectacle on display at her husband's all male drunken stupor gala, the midwives examples of God ordained resistance, and the navigation of Black women leaders through mechanisms of resistance. Also included in this chapter were oral histories from interviews conducted with three Black women leaders, their experiences of resistance, the cost of resistance, and strategies that helped them navigate through the hurt and disappointment of resistance. Resistance is complex and complicated, but it also

encompasses the courageous and audacious movements of faith, especially for Black women leaders who have endured resistance from within, resistance from outside, and the curtailing of their own resistance against oppressive environments and institutions. I talk about the causation of resistance from Black women leaders being rooted in the opposition to societal narratives concerning the totality of their being, ethnicity, character, and ability to lead. The remedy to resistance, is in the power of resistance. This power does not stem from human nature; it is a supernatural force illuminating from the depths of one is being. The power of persistence is timeless and limitless; its source is not the human vessel but the indwelling of the power of the spirit of God in the human vessel. God's power prevails in persistence, becoming a never-ending source needed to continue fighting against everyday injustices.

In my secular world, God has placed me in a higher education administrative leadership position where I get to live out the intersectionality of my sacred and secular in the community by serving underrepresented populations. As a Black woman leading in this capacity, I am extremely observant of the need to mentor young Black women for future leadership in a world that dismisses the essence of how fearfully and wonderfully they are made in the image of God. In my sacred world I serve as an Associate Minister in the heart of an urban community. Incorporating Black women leadership into ministry projects is vital to the livelihood of the occupants of the community. Insularity and traditional ways of developing the next generation of Black women leaders can no longer remain an option in today's climate where the secular and sacred become intersectional amid a myriad of inequities.

I plan to use the framework, formation, and foundation (3F's) of this research to develop Beyond Transition Ministries for young Black women desiring to lead in these sacred and secular spaces, transforming lives through education and community service. Beyond Transition Ministries will focus on a holistic faith-based approach to leadership sustainability and community integration by cultivating educational, personal, spiritual growth, and support for young Black women leaders through faith informed leadership initiatives, workshops, and leadership mentoring partnerships. Navigating through the nuances of sacred and secular intersections warrants mentoring and training from experienced Black women leaders who have already navigated these spaces and who can engage in the meaningful development of the next generation of Black women leaders. As an Associate Minister at a church in Essex County, I will use my ministerial influence to build a human capital resource base for young Black women, connecting them to community-based organizations that can offer insight and hands on experiential community leadership learning opportunities.

The concept of Beyond Transition Ministries has been brewing for some years in my own sense of calling and vision of transformational community spaces. The initial ideation of Beyond Transition Ministries began with me working with women in a transition house in my local town, engaging them in meaningful bible study and spiritual support. The startup of this ministry service theoretically and conceptually remained on paper, eventually making its way to social media platforms as a Beyond Transition Ministry page, providing biblical based encouragement, and updates about ministry events happening in various communities. Growing out of my experiences as a Black woman leader, God has compelled me to change the trajectory of the targeted audience

for this ministry service to young Black women leaders to help strengthen and prepare them for leading in sacred and secular spaces within their communities. The concepts in this research will serve as a guide for the fundamental principles of Beyond Transition Ministries. Young Black women need to know their value and worth in society, the center of that is their strength from within. Believers and non-believers, the power of God's presence is within each one of them. Their leadership needs to be pushed forward on all platforms and especially now at such a critical and fragile time in our country. Leadership development and mentorship will play a crucial role in the future of their success.

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