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**Embodied Sisterhood:**  
**God-Talk in the Work of Delores S. Williams, amina wadud, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz**

*Lara N. Dotson-Renta*

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. . . attempting to be faithful to who I am and what I believe God wants of me  
more than in following prescriptions for holiness that require me to negate myself . . .

Ada María Isasi-Díaz

*Mujerista Theology*<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Women are keenly aware of our own physical presence in the world, and how our physicality affects the cadence of our lives. We have monthly cycles, we have the ability to bear children, we are constantly vigilant of our physical safety—the longer, better lit walk home is for us a matter of survival, not convenience. The awareness of these (reproductive) bodies we inhabit, which are alternately sexualized, desexualized, or made vulnerable, extends to our spiritual lives. In a womanist theology, God is within us, around us, and *of us*, and accessible through a distinctly female lived experience. Moreover, God is not encountered through an interpretation external to the self, but rather through embodiment in one’s own (womanly) flesh. The portal body is that which we inhabit as women, and through which the divine is channeled. In their respective texts, Delores S. Williams (*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of*

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<sup>1</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 33.

*Womanist God-Talk*<sup>2</sup>), amina wadud<sup>3</sup> (*Inside the Gender Jihad*<sup>4</sup>), and Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*<sup>5</sup>) articulate womanist and *mujerista*<sup>6</sup> theologies that centralize the lived experiences of Black and Latina women as an articulation of God and emphasize the body and incarnated memory and legacies as a means by which to read sacred texts. Williams draws from the tradition of Black American Christianity, amina wadud from Islam in Black American communities, and Isasi-Díaz primarily from Roman Catholicism as practiced by Latino/a communities.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by different but overlapping lineages and faith traditions, Williams, wadud, and Isasi-Díaz propose re-readings of sacred texts and practices that traditionally marginalize women's roles and contributions, instead deploying alternate understandings that focus on survival, visibility, and liberation within a colonial system.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Like bell hooks, amina wadud prefers that her name be written in lowercase.

<sup>4</sup> amina wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*.

<sup>6</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Isasi-Díaz observes: "Hispanic women's Christianity is of a very specific variety. Its main vehicle, the signs and symbols that it uses, and a significant part of its theology are based on medieval Christianity, the pre-Reformation, sixteenth century Christianity of southern Spain. But this sixteenth century Spanish Christianity is mingled with the religious beliefs and rituals of African and Amerindian cultures as well." Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 74. While Roman Catholicism remains dominant, Evangelical Protestantism has since made important inroads into the Latina community.

<sup>8</sup> As Sylvester A. Johnson notes, "African Americans have been studied as victims of slavery and not as people who have been colonized. The reasons for this are profoundly historical as well as ideological. To examine the colonial status of African Americans requires one to call into

While not co-religionists, these theologians draw on shared experiences of colonial violence and marginalization within the United States as well as legacies of slavery and servitude, as points of connection and continuity upon which to create a dialogue of womanist God-talk, one in which typically othered women speak of and for themselves and their sisters.<sup>9</sup> This is expressed as a devotional act toward self, community, and God, and termed “womanist” rather than “feminist” due to its emphasis on the collective and on the centralization of women of color. The weaving together of Williams, wadud, and Isasi-Díaz as Black and Latina women, respectively, is important. As bell hooks notes, “White women are not the only group who must confront racism if Sisterhood is to emerge . . . Often women of color from varied ethnic groups have learned to resent and hate one another, or to be competitive with one another.”<sup>10</sup>

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question the fundamental paradigm of the United States as a noble, democratic, freedom-loving society. This conflicts with the liberal integrationist paradigm through which African Americans are viewed as always having been members of the United States.” Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “sister” in the work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz is multi-faceted. Isasi-Díaz writes on behalf of Latina women, a particular kind of “sisterhood.” She entered the Order of Saint Ursula as a young woman, another sisterhood. Isasi-Díaz would have also been quite familiar with the foundational work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Mexican writer and philosopher of the Baroque period who chose a religious order so that she could live an erudite life. Sor Juana argued for the education of women and for their full roles in the Catholic Church, pointing out the double (sacrificial) binds in which women in church life often found themselves: “The most venomous and hurtful to me have not been those who with explicit hatred and ill-will have persecuted me, but those persons, loving me and desiring my good . . . who have mortified me and tormented me with these words, ‘*All this study is not fitting, for holy ignorance is your duty; she shall go to perdition, she surely shall be cast down from such heights by that same wit and cleverness.*’ How was I to bear up against this? A strange martyrdom indeed, where I must be both martyr and my own executioner!” Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer/La respuesta*, trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press, 2018), 66. In her advocacy against such “martyrdom” and silencing, Isasi-Díaz continues a discursive tradition of contestation tracing back to Sor Juana.

<sup>10</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 57. In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks extensively discusses sisterhood among racial-ethnic groups. She

In this vein, it is important to note Delores S. Williams's work on sisterhood as distinctly "womanist," and the way in which this is placed in dialogue with (but is not the same as) "feminist" interpretations of religious texts. Typically, a more womanist or *mujerista* approach is intersectional<sup>11</sup> and concerned with the lifting up of a people rather than the individual; whereas "feminism" has been more closely associated with White women<sup>12</sup> and has long been viewed by marginalized communities as concerned with achieving individual and relational equality with men as a means by which to achieve parity. Williams notes that while "The feminist liberation

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notes that the weight of domestic tasks often prevents women from forming relationships beyond their own immediate communities, and that the learning of "cultural codes" is needed across racial-ethnic groups: "Often Asian, Latina, or Native American Indian groups find they can bond with whites by hating blacks. Black people respond to this by perpetuating racist stereotypes and ethnic images of these groups. It becomes a vicious cycle. Divisions between women of color will not be eliminated until we assume responsibility for uniting . . . I have learned the importance of what we call learning one another's cultural codes." hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 58.

<sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw observes that various facets of identity (such as sex, race, and class) overlap in an intersectional way, so that an individual's life experience is impacted not by one facet, but by several: "Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination." Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, Article 8 (1989): 149.

<sup>12</sup> As Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes, the tensions between womanists/*mujeristas* and white feminists go beyond approaches to parity: "Let us, therefore, look at language. For example, the fact that the word 'women' refers only to middle and upper-strata white women shows who decides what is normative. All the rest of us, in order not to be totally invisible, have to add adjectives to the word: *poor* women, *African American* women, *Hispanic* women. *Poor* women means white, underemployed, or unemployed women. *African American* women means poor African American women; African American women who are not poor are called *educated* African American women." Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 20.

lens and the womanist survival lens can, on occasion, provide a common vision,”<sup>13</sup> she is more pragmatic about liberation. She writes:

The truth of the matter may well be that the Bible gives license for us to have it both ways: God liberates and God does not always liberate all the oppressed. God speaks comforting words to the survival and quality of life struggle of many families. The Biblical stories are told in a way that influences us to believe that God makes choices. And God changes wherever God wills. But African American Christian women are apt to declare as Hagar did, “Thou art a God of seeing” (Genesis, 16:15). And seeing means acknowledging and ministering to the survival/quality of life needs of African American women and their children.<sup>14</sup>

Women are survivors, and so Williams’s God is, at the end of the day, a God of survival—a God who sees women and is, in return, seen by them.

Williams, wadud, and Isasi-Díaz pursue a survivalist reading of religious texts that demand the visibility of *othered* women. They do this not only by challenging interpretations of women in scripture, but by relying on firsthand and inherited knowledge of their own traditions and communities. Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes that this requires a radically transparent embedding of the self into the text:

*Mujerista* theology denounces any and all so-called objectivity. What passes as objectivity in reality merely names the subjectivity of those who have the authority and/or power to impose their point of view. So instead of objectivity what we should be claiming is responsibility for our subjectivity. All theology has to start with self-

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 176.

disclosure. Self-disclosure as part of theology should give all those who in one way or another come into contact with our theological work our “actional route.” As a theologian I am obliged to reveal my concrete story within the framework of the social forces I have lived in.<sup>15</sup>

This intimacy allows Isasi-Díaz and other womanists/*mujeristas* to make nuanced critiques of tenets of faith based not only on their interpretation, but on how these tenets are lived out for Black and Latina women.<sup>16</sup> Day-to-day life is not ancillary to their theology, but constitutive of it. Biography is also theology, and as such theology is praxis. In keeping with this paradigm, the writers on which this essay focuses centralize three major aspects of women’s experience: the quotidian, or ordinary ways of knowing through being; otherness and expulsion (as evidenced by the “wilderness” experience and exile); and motherhood and embodiment.

### **The Quotidian, or Lived Experience**

For women of color, the contours of daily life look different from what they may for White women, through a mixture of history, culture, politics, and religion. As a Latina, my sense of responsibility toward family, nuclear and otherwise, is ingrained in and formative of my world view. So is, then, my sense of belonging to and responsibility toward a whole that is bigger than myself, comprising *la familia* (the family) and *la comunidad* (the community). As a Puerto Rican, my historical grounding is that of the twice colonized—first by the Spanish, then by the United States. Given that we represent an ethnic mixture of Taíno, Spanish, and African, Puerto

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<sup>15</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> It must be noted that while Black and Latina may indeed comprise two distinct categories of racial and cultural identity, there are many Latinas who are also Black (i.e., Afro-Latinas).

Rico is considered by many to be “the oldest colony in the world.”<sup>17</sup> Aware of these lineages and legacies, my vision of liberation, then, is never individual but, rather, tied to intimate others who share a common experience, including Black women. As Isasi-Díaz notes, the word *nosotros* (Spanish for “us”) is actually comprised of two words, “nos” and “otros”—nos/otros: “us/others.” The language itself is imbricated in a call to community, to the idea that *we are all others*, yet this is not so when we are together. Communities and families are often held together by women *en la lucha* (“in the struggle”), who must frequently battle patriarchal aspects within the very domestic spheres, churches, and communities that they support in day-to-day life.

This communal aspect of existence is also very much present in Black American communities (of which many Latinas are also a part), and which are reflective of *lo cotidiano* (the quotidian), or as Isasi-Díaz observes:

The stuff of our reality . . . the lived-in text in which and through which Hispanic women understand and decide what is right and good, what is wrong and evil. As such *lo cotidiano* is not a private, individual category, but rather a social category. *Lo cotidiano* refers to the way Latinas know and what we know to be “the stuff” (*la tela*, literally, the cloth) out of which our lives as a struggling community within the USA is fabricated.<sup>18</sup>

Isasi-Díaz re-envisioning “women of the cloth” as those who experience the life-body as a sacred text. As the grounding point of lived experience, *lo cotidiano* is applicable to both Latina women’s and Black women’s distinct hermeneutical approaches.

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<sup>17</sup> BBC News Mundo, “¿Por Qué Algunos Consideran Que Puerto Rico Es La ‘Colonia Más Antigua Del Mundo?’”, *El Mostrador.CL*, June 11, 2017. <https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/mundo/2017/06/11/por-que-algunos-consideran-que-puerto-rico-es-la-colonia-mas-antigua-del-mundo/>.

<sup>18</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 67-71.



The analyses of Hagar/Hajar pursued by Delores S. Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* and amina wadud in *Inside the Gender Jihad* appear to be in dynamic conversation with one another on their experiences of *lo cotidiano*. Each writer draws upon the distinct experience of Black womanhood in the United States as pivotal to her hermeneutic, focusing on Hagar/Hajar as emblematic of a people as well as foundational to a particular religious tradition. There is also overlap in Williams and wadud's womanist approaches, which privilege the connectivity and intertwined nature of relationships and community over individual equality. The reliance on women's shared roots (and routes of displacement, including forced migration and immigration) as a means by which to derive meaning evokes Isasi-Díaz's stance on solidarity as turning "from the 'charity' of the oppressors to solidarity among themselves requires great willingness to take risks."<sup>19</sup> These hermeneutical leaps are taken together, and welcomed by the womanists and *mujeristas*.

This centering of *lo cotidiano* and a turning inward for relief is seen in the First Testament story of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman, serves as handmaid to Sarai and is made to bear Abraham an heir. After she does so, Sarai also bears a child, and Hagar is eventually cast out into the wilderness with her son. The story of an African enslaved woman made to bear a child, mistreated, and subsequently cast out has obvious resonances with the story of Black women in the United States. Williams digs deeper, and notes that while God communicates with and is invested in saving Hagar in the desert, hers is not a liberatory story. God instead tasks Hagar to return to her holders, ensuring the survival of her child. God was invested in Hagar's survival, but not in her freedom. This echoes many later

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<sup>19</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 95.

references in the text to Black women turning to Jesus for strength in survival. Yet, Hagar's story is also subversive:

Though she obeyed God's mandate for her life, Hagar dared to give a name to the God she met in the wilderness.<sup>20</sup> In a sense, this God is *her* God, and possibly not the God of her slave holders Abram and Sarai. No other person in the Bible names God. Many African-American women (slave and free) have taken serious risks in the black community's liberation struggle.<sup>21</sup>

Here Hagar makes personal and takes ownership of her relationship to *her* God, being the only one to engage in naming God. In this she claims agency and becomes her own vehicle of liberation.

### **The Wilderness: Otherness and Expulsion**

Given the common representation of Hagar as an Egyptian princess and second wife to Abraham in Muslim narratives (in which she is known as Hajar), it is interesting that wadud maintains Hajar's representation as enslaved, as commonly read in Jewish and Christian religious texts. Instead of debating Hajar's status as spouse or slave, what wadud refutes is the idea that there could be any doubt as to Ishmael's rightful role as Abraham's heir: "Any offspring resulting from the liaison of the master with the slave woman Hajar becomes heir of a

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<sup>20</sup> The wilderness is not a mere backdrop here, but an active agent and participant in the spiritual endeavor as later reflected in African American narratives with resonances to Hagar's exile: "The wilderness experience, as religious experience, was transforming. Its structure of physical *isolation* (of slave from slave environment); *establishing a relation* (between Jesus and slave); *healing by Jesus* (of whatever malady afflicted the slave); *transformation* (conversion of the slave's more secular bent to a thoroughly religious bent); and *motivation to return* (to the slave community) changed for the better. So, for African-American slaves, female and male, the wilderness did not bear the negative connotations that mainline white pioneer culture had attached to it." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 97.

household ruled by Abraham and Sarah... So when the scriptures command Abraham to take *his only son*, the politics of transmutation that equates to mean Isaac, Sarah's *only son*, are difficult to explain."<sup>22</sup> Whatever her marital status, Hajar retains her authority as mother of the firstborn as well as the ultimate survivor, according to wadud. Hajar's survival after being cast out into the wilderness does not reflect negatively upon her; rather it is the ultimate vindication of her worthiness. This iteration of Hajar's story weaves together most meaningfully with the African American women's legacy that wadud centers in her work. The emphasis given by wadud is not one of strict textual fidelity within her own tradition, but one that speaks directly to her theological and pastoral needs. As Isasi-Díaz notes on women's textual interpretation, "stories become ours when we use them because we need to, and to make them be helpful in a given situation we change even central elements of the story itself, highlighting perhaps nonessential elements. It is not that the integrity of the text is not important; *it is that the need to survive takes precedence.*"<sup>23</sup> In highlighting Hajar's survival over debating her role as spouse or slave, wadud highlights her own off-the-page survival as a mother of five.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz also engages the notion of wilderness and expulsion, but through the lens of the exile and forced migration faced by many Latino/as. A Cuban exile in the United States, she invokes Psalm 137, a hymn that refers to the Hebrew exile in Babylon:

Yes, I understand perfectly what the psalmist was trying to capture in the words of Psalm 137. Exile is a very complex way of life. The anguish of living away from one's country might seem to indicate how very much one remembers it. But then, an intrinsic part of the

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<sup>22</sup> wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 123-125.

<sup>23</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 152.

anguish is the fear that, because life does go on, one might forget one's country. "May my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not count Jerusalem the greatest of my joys!"<sup>24</sup>

For Isasi-Díaz, exile is a "way of life," haunted by the fear of forgetting. Forgetting would be a severing from the ancestors, a loss of identity. For the Latina, the realm of the everyday *is* the wilderness, a place in which we battle to both survive and remain intelligible to ourselves as ourselves.

For both Williams and wadud, Hagar/Hajar is one "who made a way where there was no way,"<sup>25</sup> which Williams interprets as a story of salvific survival and defiance that may supplant the role of Jesus' surrogate death. For amina wadud, Hajar's story is also one of defiance, but a foundational one: she births Islam, but her role in doing so *while alone* is elided by the community of believers that is her legacy: "Her status as single head of household is never commented upon, no one was held accountable for its resolution, and later legal codification in Islam would still overlook it . . . Islamic personal law is built upon a notion of family that does not include a woman thrown into the desert, forced to construct a healthy, happy life for her child and left to fend for herself."<sup>26</sup> In the same way that wadud begins her essay by intimately discussing her own maternity (with emphasis on the carnal nature of birth) and isolation in raising her five children, she centralizes the fact that the foundational maternal figure of Islam was also a woman going it alone. This is contrary to the dominant idea that a Muslim mother will

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<sup>24</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> "When they and their families get into serious social and economic straits, black Christian women have believed that God helps them make a way out of no way. This is precisely what God did for Hagar and Ishmael when they were expelled from Abraham's house and were wandering in the desert without food and water. God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water that she had not seen before." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 175.

<sup>26</sup> wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 144.

always, in some fashion, be taken care of by a wider community or family structure. wadud questions this presumed family as a variable construct, often built to suit the needs of men and the (colonial) state.<sup>27</sup> She brings to the fore the high rate of single motherhood in the Black community and calls for a recognition of this reality, and for a reinterpretation of Islam that validates and supports such women. This would appear to be perfectly consistent with religious texts, given the example of Hajar.

wadud's observation that a woman presumed to have a large network to draw upon—therefore making failures in the domestic realm hers alone—echoes Isasi-Díaz's critique of the ways in which Latina women must do it all, irrespective of whether they have a partner:

In their homes, Latinas work for their men. Latinas are, most of the time, responsible for *lo cotidiano*, keeping house for their husbands or male partners; “finding” the economic resources needed to keep a roof over their own heads as well as those of their children and male partners, to provide for the food and medical expenses of the family. Latinas also are responsible for providing for the emotional needs.<sup>28</sup>

Even as Latina women often undertake the double duty of nurture and economic care, their work is often rendered invisible—the nurture work because it is domestic, the economic work because it will always be secondary income vis-à-vis a male provider, whether or not such a provider exists. There is a gap between the domestic ideal and the reality on the ground that wadud and Isasi-Díaz highlight, one that posits an uncomfortable dynamic between women and their co-religionist men.

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<sup>27</sup> amina wadud notes, “Women’s citizenship is intricately linked to their roles in the family, where family and state can be said to be mutually constitutive.” wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 110.

wadud is critical of any interpretation that denies such lived experiences and the specificity of Black women's paths, proclaiming that, "We [Muslims] are in denial. We do not focus on the realities of these women's experiences, because to do so would be to admit that their lives are far from the ideal perceived to be their right or due in 'Islam.'"<sup>29</sup> Explicit support for the single mother would not be un-Islamic in wadud's reading given that Hajar, a foundational figure, was a single mother. While Delores S. Williams proposes a Black womanist reading of Christianity in which Jesus' life of resistance (rather than his death) helps to foster survival by relying "upon Jesus to help them survive the forging of a new identity,"<sup>30</sup> as exemplified by Hagar's wilderness experience, wadud invites a Muslim re-reading in which God has provided the example of survival, reinvention, and self-sufficient maternity (rather than death) through Hagar/Hajar, and in which her experience of "double burden" (caregiver and provider) is not marginal but rather central. In this way it is appropriate to recall the title of Williams's book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*: while Delores Williams she and amina wadud may not be co-religionists, they are linked by a shared experience of Black American womanhood that creates unifying threads in their reading of Hagar/Hajar and in their broad visions of the divine.

### **Carnal Women: Motherhood and Embodiment**

Williams calls these unifying threads of maternity "re/productive" history, explaining: It involves more than women birthing children, nurturing and attending to family affairs. Though the events and ideas associated with these realities do overlap, "women's re/production history" has to do with whatever women think, create, use and pass on through their labor for the sake of women's and the family's well-being. Women

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<sup>29</sup> wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 145.

reproduce physically, but also *reproduce and pass down knowledge* and ways of knowing, of surviving. Thus black women's resistance strategies belong to black women's re/production history—just as the oppressive opposition to these strategies from dominating cultures belongs to this history. Through the lens of black women's re/production history we can see the entire saga of the race.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, women's bodies have always *articulated* and corporeally reproduced the “saga of the race,” but it is also through speech and acts of the body that women undertook the story telling and narrative care to ensure survivalist knowledge and continuity, community nurture care,<sup>32</sup> and spiritual care. These bodily and spiritual acts (“resistance strategies”) were necessary for the survival of their people but were also opposed both outside and within the women's own Black community when in conflict with male authority. Williams touches upon this in the exploitation of Black women's emotional and physical labor in male led Black churches, and amina wadud similarly approaches the idea in regard to Black women's role in the American Muslim community.

Like Williams, amina wadud emphasizes the physicality of the Black female experience. To be a Black mother<sup>33</sup> especially is an act of fierce embodiment, one that brings with it resonances from a past of slavery:

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<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 140.

<sup>32</sup> This care is often expected to be self-effacing and sacrificial. As wadud notes, “We have an entire array of virtues and values for ‘mothering’ that become a special prison for women who try to emulate them.” wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 128.

<sup>33</sup> There is specificity here according to wadud: “Although not all women are mothers, all mothers are women: gender arrangements play a crucial role in organizing the institution of motherhood and shaping its ideologies.” wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 127.

And I am alone, the mother. No one celebrates the altar at my feet, for like Sojourner, I must plow the dusty fields and draw the carts upon my back. Even as my breasts harden and weep with the fullness of milk, the whip draws blood. Both flow freely in my awakening: there is nothing romantic about the one who works like a man to save her young from the mighty grips of death and despair. She grows hard in the task.<sup>34</sup>

As Williams and author bell hooks have previously noted, the masculinization of Black women was another tactic to de-feminize and subsequently de-humanize, even as Black women's exhaustive labor and (sexual) suffering was a violence they experienced *as women*.

In Latino/a culture and in the Roman Catholic tradition specifically, motherhood is both a source of power and influence and a site of dissolution. From our earliest recollections, those of us raised as Catholics in Latino/a homes could hear the steady cadence of *Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo* ("Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee"), the first line of the Hail Mary. It is Mary the sainted mother to whom we speak when in distress. María figures prominently in every altar in a Latino/a Catholic home, perhaps more so than Jesus. The Mother of us all, she is the ultimate figure of maternal comfort and feminine sacrifice; she understands the pain of birth, the loss of a child, the weight of an unexpected pregnancy. She is the idealized woman, completely divorced from sexuality, who nevertheless brings forth Jesus, the son of God, through her virgin body, a vessel for divine incarnation. Even in our reverence for Mary/María, many of us, then, have to battle the self-effacement that María represents as it manifests itself in our own lives and families, and the general silence with which she accepts her fate (and body) being beyond her control. Isasi-Díaz highlights this:

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<sup>34</sup> wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 126.



*Mujeristas* struggle to liberate ourselves not as individuals but as members of a Hispanic community. We work to build bridges among Latinas/os while denouncing sectarianism and divisive tactics . . . Because Christianity, in particular the Latin American inculturation of Roman Catholicism, is an intrinsic part of Hispanic culture, *mujeristas* believe that in Latinas, though not exclusively so, God chooses once again to lay claim to the divine image and likeness made visible from the very beginning in women.

*Mujeristas* are called to bring to birth new women and new men—Hispanics willing to work for the good of our people (the “common good”) knowing that such work requires the denunciation of all destructive sense of self-abnegation.<sup>35</sup>

That signaled self-abnegation is embedded into Marian discourse and Latino culture. We watch our *mamás*, *tías*, *abuelas*, and *madrinas* (mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and godmothers) wake first and go to bed last; they often cook for everyone but eat scraps while standing up and cleaning the kitchen. If Mary’s hands are always held in prayer, my *abuela*’s hands were in perpetual motion.<sup>36</sup> Yet, unlike White feminists, Isasi-Díaz does not respond by rejecting maternity and family, a core value in Latino/a society. She instead redeploys it, saying women must “birth new women and new men” who in turn will labor towards a more equitable world. In

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<sup>35</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> In her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Alice Walker names this kind of “women’s work” of community and spiritual care as both artistic and creative, but ultimately obliterated within a patriarchal system: “For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane. Throwing away this spirituality was their pathetic attempt to lighten the soul to a weight their work-worn, sexually abused bodies could bear.” Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 233.

her *mujerista* view of theology, God *chooses* women; the image of the divine is “made visible from the very beginning in women.” There is an element of mutual gazing and validation here between women and God that echoes Hagar/Hajar’s dialogue with God in the wilderness. Isasi-Díaz transforms the inculturation of Roman Catholicism into a battle cry, but one that can only be responded to by women. After all, Jesus was born of a woman and God himself; no earthly man took part in the process of conception.

The secondary role of men (beyond the support and legitimacy provided by Joseph) in the coming of the Messiah in Christian narratives points to a lingering tension about the role of men in women’s lives when women make do for themselves, one that is palpable in the texts of Williams and wadud as well. If women are less important, why are they tasked with bringing forth Jesus and Ishmael alone? Even as the male figure is sidelined, the texts and historical record as typically interpreted centralize the male experience. These tensions between men and women continue to manifest themselves in faith life, and Williams carefully traces the ways in which both the internal and the external perception and valuation of Black women has been shaped by the experience of slavocracy.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, Black women who were abused *as women* for the purposes of childbearing and sexual gratification—whose very existence was largely defined by the bodily reality of being a woman—were simultaneously erased *as women* by the slave system that exploited them. As Williams notes:

On some plantations black women worked longer hours in the fields than black men.

What this amounted to, in terms of coerced surrogacy, was black female energy substituting for black male energy. This resulted in what hooks refers to as the

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<sup>37</sup> A slavocracy (sometimes referred to as a plantocracy) is a ruling class, political order or governing entity or system composed of or heavily influenced by slave owners and plantation owners.

masculinization of the black female . . . Black women were considered to have far more physical strength and more capacity for pain than white women.<sup>38</sup>

In this way, Black women were robbed of any consideration of humanity and sensibility that femininity afforded at the time, while performing both male and female roles. Here we can see the trope of the all-enduring “strong Black woman,” which has been so foundational as well as so detrimental to the well-being of Black women.

Interestingly, Mary, by contrast, has been sublimated and softened into an idealized version of femininity in Roman Catholicism. Doubtless a woman of color, she has long been depicted as white.<sup>39</sup> Many iterations of Mary show her with a tear falling down her cheek or holding the body of Jesus. She too is “the mother of sorrows,” enduring the crucifixion of her child and eternally tasked with interceding on behalf of those who suffer. Despite her perfect femininity, she must endure her body being drafted into service and the eventual sacrifice of her child. It would appear that the role of woman is one of endurance, of providing the stable foundation upon which traditions and communities realize and support themselves amid her silence. She is usually depicted standing and gazing, both stoic and beatific. It is here that Isasi-Díaz resists and calls for women to do for themselves what they do for others: “Failing, as the overwhelming majority of humans do, to remember my bodily birth, I am privileged to remember every detail of this birth to the struggle for liberation. But the process of ‘giving birth

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<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 58-63.

<sup>39</sup> Black representations of Mary do exist and are thought to be derived from a variety of sources such as the goddess Isis, the Sarracenes, or syncretic Afro-Caribbean adaptations such as Yemayá. The most famous is likely the Polish “Our Lady of Czestochowa.” The intent of her depiction remains debated.

to myself' was not an all-of-a-sudden experience; in many ways the process had started years before."<sup>40</sup>

Those of us who have given birth know that childbirth and motherhood are acts of both creation and annihilation. The pain of labor feels as if it must lead to death (which is certainly a real risk), though in fact it brings forth another life, in the sense of a new life and of an/other life for the woman-become-mother. A baby's first cry is also the last breath that a mother who mothers will take solely for herself. Birth cracks us open physically and emotionally; the woman who emerges afterward is different from the one who previously existed. Indeed, motherhood remakes us in its image. Isasi-Díaz proposes undertaking the birthing act not on behalf of someone else, but to create ourselves, to mother ourselves, to direct the nurturing energy inward. Bringing ourselves into being is a task constantly faced by Latinas and other ethnic groups, who must continually translate linguistic and cultural traditions from edges to center, laboring ourselves into visibility in both the domestic and public spheres.

In resonance with the Marian story, Williams centralizes the idea of surrogacy in her analysis. She proposes that surrogacy has been pivotal in the story of the African American woman, from the Egyptian Hagar to the present-day impoverished woman tempted to sell her womb to make ends meet. Given this, she reinterprets the Christian salvific value of the Jesus story not through the act of surrogacy, in which Jesus dies for our sins and in which Mary lends her womb, but rather through the praxis of Jesus:

The womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman's world to show black women *their salvation does not depend on any form of surrogacy made sacred* . . . rather their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of

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<sup>40</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 16.

resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethics and world view. This death of identity was also experienced by African women and men brought to America and enslaved. They too relied upon Jesus to help them survive the forging of a new identity.<sup>41</sup>

In my view, this is the crux of Williams's theological task. She rescues the story of Jesus from being one that reifies and vindicates surrogacy (for Black women a violation visited upon them time and again) and turns it into a story that vindicates the life of resistance lived by Jesus, which is to say, his survival. The *life* of resistance to norms and oppression exemplified by Jesus functions as mirror and example for womanists/*mujeristas*, rather than his sacrificial *death*. In this light it may be argued that Williams brings full circle the story of Hagar's survival, in which she "makes way out of no way,"<sup>42</sup> tying her resistance to that of Jesus and to the promise of redemption and salvation.

### Conclusion

The works of Williams, wadud, and Isasi-Díaz are, in many ways, a validation of lived experience, an insistence that our stories and biographies (or the biographies of those we carry with us, such as our mothers and other ancestors) are what give texture and shape to our theology. Our theology and vision of the divine, of what we cannot see or touch, is indelibly shaped by the tactile, that is, by the experiences of our bodies and homes. In fact, it is because *our bodies are our homes* that the three women proclaim a theology of embodiment that acknowledges the unique ways in which the carnal reality of womanhood is also a social and

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<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 16.

spiritual reality that directly mediates the divine. As Isasi-Díaz notes, “The importance we give to *lo cotidiano* steers *mujerista* theology away from any essentialism that would obscure precisely what is at the core of *lo cotidiano*: difference.”<sup>43</sup> What these womanist and *mujerista* theologians do as they highlight and validate the quotidian, the lived experience of the feminine, is to highlight both its difference (from the experiences of men or even one another) and its legitimacy as an experience seen by and of God.

What is proposed by these womanist/*mujerista* theologians is a theology of lived experience, one that is based on solidarity and on bearing witness to self and others. As Isasi-Díaz proclaims:

I believe salvation depends on love of neighbor, and because love of neighbor today should be expressed through solidarity, solidarity can and should be considered the *sine qua non* of salvation. This means that we have to be very clear about who “our neighbor” is. Our neighbor, according to Matthew 25, is the least of our sisters and brothers.

Neighbors are the poor, the oppressed, for whom we must have a preferential option.<sup>44</sup>

This we cannot have apart from being in solidarity with them.<sup>45</sup>

This solidarity—and one can indeed show solidarity to self as well as others—relies on the power of naming, on taking the unsayable of embodied experience and giving it breath outside of ourselves. This makes our experiences, our divinity *as women*, real to the world. Just as

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<sup>43</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> This preferential option recalls the foundational work of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s theology of liberation, which espouses a “preferential option for the poor” and seeks to discover “the face of the Lord in those of other persons, in particular those of the poor and mistreated.” Gustavo Gutiérrez and Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. Robert A. Krieg and James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 42.

<sup>45</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 88.

Hagar/Hajar is the only one who names and sees God, so must Black and Latina theologians name the divine in their own experiences: “To name oneself,” Isasi-Díaz writes, “is one of the most powerful acts a person can do. A name is not just a word by which one is identified. A name also provides the conceptual framework, the point of reference, the mental constructs that are used in thinking, understanding, and relating to a person, an idea, or a movement.”<sup>46</sup> Naming and speaking are fundamental to womanist God-talk. The importance is in the *talking*, in the refusal to be silent and allow others to claim space that women occupy. Yet “God-talk” here does not idly fill gaps, for “there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis.”<sup>47</sup> Womanist God-talk, then, both *witnesses* and *manifests* lived reality as spirituality.

The hermeneutics of Williams, wadud, and Isasi-Díaz rely on incarnated “re/productive” knowledge, on the biographies (of self and other) that constitute a story of womanhood’s encounters with God and women’s creation of a “kin-dom.”<sup>48</sup> This may require readings of sacred texts that interrogate where and what the sacred is and to whom it speaks. Isasi-Díaz speaks for many of us in the Latino/a tradition when she says, “I have come to see that the insistence on the value of suffering for Christians and its placement as a central element of the Christian message is questionable. I believe, *applying a hermeneutics of suspicion*, that it has become an ideological tool, a control mechanism used by dominant groups over the poor and the oppressed.”<sup>49</sup> When suffering is valued as a goal or purpose unto itself, it can be used as a tool to

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<sup>46</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 87.

<sup>48</sup> “At the center of the unfolding of the kin-dom is the salvific act of God.” Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 129.

continually disempower rather than relieve those suffering. Wadud, in her critiques of Muslim legal and cultural customs toward family life, also applies a hermeneutics of suspicion, and questions how motherhood can at once be lauded while its (foundational) challenges are made invisible. Similarly, Williams's insistence on women "doing for themselves" also reveals what is not done for women, and the myriad ways in which women must reinterpret the divine in order to envision themselves within it. By insisting on lived experience and the womanly body as both witness and instrument to what must be voiced, womanist and *mujerista* theologians are staking a claim to space, to agency, and to one another as "sisters." They are writing a testimony to be both seen and heard by their co-religionists and society at large, even as they declare themselves as already seen by their sisters in arms and, most importantly, by God.