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**W(holy) Awareness:  
A Womanist Religious Education Curriculum  
Using Jazz for Prostate Cancer Awareness as a Case Study**

**Abstract.** The span and multi-dimensionality of living, inter-institutional and inter-generational, embeds, within each of us, different ways of learning. Particularly, for those in faith communities, we are simultaneously learning and receiving education in faith, on a daily basis, in various situations. Christian tradition emphasizes death and suffering as redemptive processes through which resurrection channels the power of hope, healing, and educative purpose. Death, in Christian education, underscores that death can be life-giving. At a moment of death, Jazz for Prostate Cancer Awareness was birthed.

**Introduction**

In the midst of death, what are the possibilities for one to be born anew, encompassing communal healing and ethos? In the moment of a loved one passing, is it possible that the very pain one experiences can become the resource that is life-saving? Life-giving? Oftentimes, death is seen as finality, where the body, the soul, and the mind cease to exist and leave no productively creative power. Rarely is death seen, experienced, or thought to be a moment to harvest something good and fruitful, especially educative for the purpose of healing and growing one's faith. Once the deceased person is buried, there is the presumption and experience of loss of life, by family, friends, and community. Nonetheless, there is, also, a critically educative juncture of death that teaches and grows one's faith.<sup>1</sup>

Education, then, is ongoing and on a daily basis. Whether we watch a movie, have lunch, talk on the phone, or have a business meeting, we are educated, learning from life's experiences. Reminding us that there is no singularly accepted form or practice of education, Gabriel Moran's *Showing How: The Act of Teaching* insightfully elaborates: "If education is the interaction of forms of life with end (meaning) and without end (termination), then what remains to be done is to describe the major forms that are lifelong and lifewide."<sup>2</sup>

This lifelong and lifewide learning, as Moran highlights, has a particular educative experience for African-American men. Men of African descent, throughout their lives, become knowledgeable that the death-life cycle is institutionally structured, where black men's bodies

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Moran, *Showing How: The Act of Teaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 156.

perpetually exist in a state of impending and/or immediate violence.<sup>3</sup> Enduring such inhumane treatment, such as frequent arrests, police beatings, law enforcement tasing, illegal chokeholds, false arrests, and legally justified homicide, African-American men acquire the wisdom of a lived-experience knowledge, comprehending how to live as unprotected and underserved citizens.

The consistent threat of violence against and the actual death of African-American men is a pervasive phenomenon. Black men's lives, in America, are in an uninterrupted life-death cycle, where, oftentimes, they have no protection, safe spaces, sacred communities, or healing opportunities. Despite the modern-day health and wellness innovations and preventive measures, black men, especially in regard to different types of diseases, such as cancer, face a far more alarming mortality rate than any other group.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, there is a dire need for a healthy and communal intervention to save the lives of African-American men. Currently, there is one approach, such as #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM), which attempts to address the state-sanctioned violence and gendered institutional oppression, providing more protection to save the lives of black men. After the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and Jordan Davis, where the U.S. criminal court found no one guilty of murdering these black men, #BLM “was born out of the outrage that escalated after each of these killings was legally sanctioned.”<sup>5</sup> #BLM, as cultural worker Alicia Garza states, “is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>6</sup>

Another method of saving and prolonging black men's lives is through spirituality. In several studies, specifically related to cancer and black men coping with cancer, researchers<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), Foreword.

<sup>4</sup> “Distrust of Health Care System May Keep Black Men Away from Prostate Cancer Research,” Rachel D. Cohen, aired Oct. 17, 2018, on NPR; “Cutting CRC,” <https://cuttingcrc.com/minnesota>.

<sup>5</sup> Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, “The Power of Black Lives Matter,” *Crisis* 122, no. 1 (2015): 18-23.

<sup>6</sup> Wellington, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Jenkins and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Religion and Spirituality as Resources for Coping with Cancer,” *Journal of Psychology Oncology* 13, nos. 1-2 (1995): 51-74; Cheryl L. Holt, Eddie M. Clark, David L. Roth, “Positive and Negative Religious Beliefs Explaining the Religion–Health Connection Among African Americans,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 24, no. 4, (2014): 311-331; Lee Caplan, Patricia Sawyer, Cheryl Holt, Cynthia J. Brown, “Religiosity After a Diagnosis of Cancer Among Older Adults,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 26, no. 4 (2014): 357-369; Lee S. Caplan, Patricia Sawyer, Cheryl Holt, Richard M. Allman, “Religiosity and Function Among Community-Dwelling Older Adult Survivors of Cancer,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 25, no. 4 (2013): 311-325; Wendy Samter, Chris R. Morse, Bryan B. Whaley, “Do We Need to Put God into Emotional Support?: A Comparison of Caucasians’ and African-Americans’ Evaluations of Religious versus Non-Religious Comforting Messages,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 42, no. 2 (2013): 172-191; Cheryl L. Holt, Min Qi Wang, Eddie M. Clark, Beverly Rosa Williams, Emily Schulz, “Religious Involvement and Physical and Emotional Functioning among African Americans: The Mediating Role of Religious Support,” *Psychology & Health* 28, no. 3 (2013): 267-283.

concluded, in the treatment of patients, spiritual care was significant, throughout the healing process.

Religious beliefs and practices are instrumentally significant methods and measures that greatly enhance the overall quality of treatment and outcome for African-American men. Furthermore, the way black men and women, who have been diagnosed with disease, use their religious education were “positively associated with mental health and vitality.”<sup>8</sup> Community, spiritual care, and guidance are transformational resources. Religious education, as a mode to incorporate a praxis that holistically treats the wholeness of black male subjectivity,<sup>9</sup> is one approach that helps the healing and coping process for patients, building sustainable faith throughout the recovery. “The church [and other faith communities] as a healing community has a major responsibility to address these situations, through both service and advocacy for a more just system.”<sup>10</sup>

Jazz for Prostate Cancer Awareness is one way to start understanding how religious education can be a resourceful tool that teaches, builds community, and increases one’s faith. In 2011, in an intimately safe environment, including close friends and family, a sanctuary of hope was created: jazz, pain, and faith became healing tools. Ralph Stowe, an African-American male and the founder of the nonprofit organization Jazz for Prostate Cancer, a 501(c) that raises black men’s awareness about prostate cancer, spontaneously found a way to bring a life-giving cause to a death celebration. The fact was that no one was sure what happened to James “Jimmy” Stowe, Ralph’s brother, who died from prostate cancer. Once Ralph repeatedly explained to family and friends, at the service, that his brother died from prostate cancer, Ralph, after a brief discussion with his physician Dr. Isaac Kim, felt compelled to do something. This celebratory moment of Jimmy’s life presented a life-saving platform, a spontaneously improvisational conversation about prostate cancer. Awareness was the key to life.

After witnessing Jimmy’s experience of isolation in death, Ralph realized, regardless of money, influence, health insurance, and age, Jimmy died primarily because he was unaware about prostate cancer. Sharon Frederick, Ralph and Jimmy’s sister, stated, “It was devastating to find out that one by one by one [all three] of my brothers had prostate cancer. No symptoms, just go to the doctor. [Each brother told her] ‘I have cancer.’” Re-sourcing the pain of losing his brother, Ralph developed Jazz4PCA as a “campaign which raises awareness about prostate cancer and support for free prostate cancer screenings, using the appeal, inspirations, and draw of live jazz music.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Holt et al., 272.

<sup>9</sup> Harold G. Koenig, “Religion, Spirituality, and Medicine: Research Findings and Implications for Clinical Practice,” *Southern Medical Association* 97, no. 12 (2004): 1194-1200.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Medical Commission, “Healing and Wholeness, The Churches’ Role in Health,” 1990 [https://difaem.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Publikationen/Dokumente\\_AErztliche\\_Mission/healing\\_wholeness.pdf](https://difaem.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Publikationen/Dokumente_AErztliche_Mission/healing_wholeness.pdf) (accessed April 29, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> “Jazz for Prostate Cancer Awareness,” <https://www.jazz4pca.org>, (accessed November 28, 2018).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how Jazz4PCA, as a nonprofit organization, uses jazz culture to explore the creation and re-creation of sacred space, raising awareness about prostate cancer with black men. In particular, my study will highlight the form of religious education curriculum that supports a communal culture and heals black men. Religious education curriculum is a critical method to usher in the presence of God. Educators, in various faith communication and general education environments, should consider curriculum “as artistic educational work contributing to the fashioning of a people.”<sup>12</sup> Culture, as seen with hip hop<sup>13</sup> and other aesthetic forms, has a powerful influence over the mind, heart, and spirit of people. Through cultural expressions, values, mores, epistemologies, principles, and faith are transmitted, and sometimes learned and practiced.<sup>14</sup> Praise and worship, in most churches, are standards in the service, fellowship, worship, and testimonies of God.

## Significance of The Study

The significance of this paper is that I am offering a religious education approach to the particular issue of prostate cancer, in black male lives. Additionally, I will use Jazz4PCA as an alternative religious education model to explore. African-American men, similar to Jimmy, need and desire community, especially in a society where they either live in isolation or lack the safe space to intimately commune.<sup>15</sup> Jazz4PCA is one way to extend the paradigms of religious education. A “warrant toward community is theological. For the touchstone and ultimate symbol of communion is a divinity who from the first centuries has been presented to us as a community of Persons.”<sup>16</sup> We are commanded to be in community, in relationship with God, and with our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40).

A communally-centered jazz cultural model calls men to a context of common concern. We are educated in community, open sacred spaces using jazz culture. This paper evaluates how

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<sup>12</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> There are a number of discussions that acknowledge the significance of culture on the church and faith communities, especially the black church aesthetic. Yolanda Y Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African-American Christian Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Emilie M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 183-202; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “‘Go Tell Mary and Martha’: The Spirituals, Biblical Options for Women, and Cultural Tensions in the African American Religious Experience,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 217-236.

<sup>15</sup> James Ralph Verhoye, “The *Samson Society* and the Rhetoric of Authentic Christian Brotherhood” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2015), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 78.

Jazz4PCA, using a curriculum of *koinonia*, promotes healing, collaboration, and community-organizing, connecting people in faith, in “sacred spaces.”

## Womanist Religious Education and the Lives of Black Men

In an era of #BlackLivesMatter, more attention has been given to raise awareness of the historically disproportionate level of state-sanctioned violence against black men. In response to an increasing number of deaths and brutalities against black men, different types of interventions, such as protests, speeches, and rallies, convened around the country. Yet, there is still a need for intervention. Jazz4PCA, starting in 2001 and till now, made such a critical insertion, dramatically altering the life-death cycle of black men.

African-American men’s lives are the embodiment of “value in the valley”<sup>17</sup> and momentous occasions at the mountaintop. One way to understand black women’s and men’s experiences, particularly in the Christian church, is through Lynne Westfield’s articulation of a womanist<sup>18</sup> religious education. “Womanist religious education, a burgeoning discipline by Black female scholars of religion, addresses the pedagogical, epistemological, spiritual, and sociopolitical implications of the ‘tridimensional phenomenon of race, class, and gender oppression in the experience of African-American women.’”<sup>19</sup> Westfield, “recognizing the complexity of African American women’s diaspora,” uses an alternative framework that intersects across various disciplines, which is not limited to the lives of black women but the entire community. Instead of dichotomizing of one’s subjectivity and secular-profane-and-sacred prioritization,<sup>20</sup> a womanist religious education aims to liberate the entire being, including the mind, the body, and the soul, of black women [and men] and use this alternative, in Christian education and religious education, as a tool of liberation for all people.

A womanist religious education, instead of denying—or at least claiming to deny—the body and one’s subjectivity,<sup>21</sup> intentionally claims and (re) claims the black woman’s and man’s life, a wholeness of mind, body, and spirit, as invaluable significant, in direct relation to other types of subjectivities. Emanating from within Black people’s lives, resilience, as Westfield notes, is significant.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, resilience “is about mastering the terrain of the oppressive

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<sup>17</sup> Iyanla Vanzant, *The Value in the Valley: A Black Woman’s Guide through Life’s Dilemmas* (New York: Fireside, 1995), 22.

<sup>18</sup> N. Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 1-2. For additional information that explains womanism and Westfield’s experiences as a womanist, the first chapter of the book succinctly provides this information.

<sup>19</sup> Westfield, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Elias, *A History of Christian Education*, 96-253. Elias discusses the historically ongoing power struggles in religious education, Christian education, and general education.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8. The author does a brilliant analysis between survival and resilience, emphasizing how “resilience is about finding ways of living within one’s context and understanding the context so well that one reconstitutes the self while in chaos (but not out of chaos) to see one’s self in a positive light while the world around would say the opposite.”

context so well that one re-creates and heals the self in the very midst of chaos. It is mastering the ability to see one's self in life-affirming light while the world around would shroud in shadow."<sup>23</sup> What black people live, as a practice of theology, is what black women and men do: "experiences of God reside in the mystery between our own examined lives and a horizon that surpasses any individual or group's meanings, a mystery we enter through the practices of the ordinary, not through the abstract theorizing about which most of us are ignorant."<sup>24</sup>

Westfield suggests several ways to incorporate womanist religious education.<sup>25</sup> First, storytelling, as an aesthetic, learning site, can become "sacramental encounters" for teachers and students.<sup>26</sup> Second, she unpacks "practices for historical ethos," elaborating more specifically about storytelling implementation. She explicitly states that sharing stories, through novels, poetry, autobiographies, or dramas, are good examples. Additionally, she advises that teachers should "pray for students and self" and "assume nothing."<sup>27</sup> She also notes that "practices of embodied pathos," whereas the teacher and students are intentional about personalizing the development and implementation of curriculum design and lesson *for* an agenda of liberation.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Westfield's third principle of application is communal logos. A womanist religious education, incorporating this last principle, engages in "active listening," expecting emotions, "being responsive," claiming "your own personhood," and "creat[ing] ritual."<sup>29</sup>

There are a number of strengths and limitations to Westfield's womanist religious education, regarding Jazz4PCA. Starting with the strengths, Westfield provides an alternatively productive framework for engaging embodied experiences that are, oftentimes, marginalized, dehumanized, and/or neglected, similar to the lived experiences of black men. She also upends any type of educational setting, religious and non-religious, that supports the status quo of oppressive structures, especially calling out the way most school systems are still segregated and black churches "are intoxicated by the post-civil rights malaise."<sup>30</sup> One other strength of her work is that her approach is holistically applicable to diverse subjectivities and positionalities, as Westfield, using a kitchen-table metaphor, encourages all people to see their accountability in the dehumanizing limitations of oppression and the fruitful creation of liberation. Jazz4PCA, paralleling similar principles, extends an accessible reach, into the living spaces of black men, as well as their respective communities.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 108. Westfield builds her argument by challenging the public schools and the Black church education culture to incorporate a liberation agenda, which is basically non-existent, in these classrooms.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 115. Westfield has an in-depth discussion on how the act of storytelling can invoke mystery, the Divine, and sacred.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 120-122.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on the communal logos, see Westfield, 122-126.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Of course, the process or processes of implementation of many, with a compass that is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multi-directional, has some limitations. One limitation is how to start, continue, manage, and move the process forward, where there are many voices. With Jazz4PCA, the concern is to build a quality communal environment, starting with 100 to 200 people, and a long-term goal is to explore other relationships with more hospitals, cancer support groups, and families. Another limitation is the socialization of identities, acknowledging the cultural and linguistic lens that angles one's vision and capacity for understanding. Moreover, particularly in what some call a post-racial society, a good number of individuals might not be able to see any of these issues.

To address these limitations, an educational curriculum, employing a womanist religious education framework, would need to do several things. Of course, one should plan to institute a flexible learning environment, creating moments that are planned as well as spontaneous. Secondly, there needs to be a clear statement of trust and commitment to the process, as well as ongoing reminders that the learning community is a safe place to grow, make mistakes, and receive necessary help. The overall curriculum design can be a scaffolding of a wide-range of activities, such as Bible study, a book club, movie-going, sharing meals, and possibly one-on-one outings.

### **Womanist Religious Education as Sacred Communal Logos**

There are some important aspects of this kind of gathering that can offer critical problem-solving strategies that heal black men's lives, create safe spaces, and obstruct the violence against black men's bodies. A communal logos, in a womanist religious education, is about the reclamation, rejuvenation, and meaning-making death-life process for black men, women, and communities.

The openness of dialogue supportively reconstructs the event sites and the embodied subjectivities into a spiritual communing. Therefore, the shared stories, located in the historically cultural system of community meaning-making processes, are produced to use communal symbols and references that adhere to that particular interlocutor's expected understandings. The Jazz4PCA sacred space:

1. writes their healing bodies into a counter narrative of American history,
2. gives them a sacred presence,
3. shows black masculine courageous vulnerability,
4. explains a collective opportunity to witness from one's soul, and
5. reorients self in a community (through a discursive and experiential markers of black manhood, a redefining of terminology, such as "strength, a "new black man," "revolutionary," and black manhood).

The communal logos demonstrates how sacred spaces can be created that respond to individual and collective needs. Additionally, this type of womanist religious inoculation can

“maintain a degree of fluidity and flexibility that would enable them to respond to diverse organizational and theological variation.”<sup>31</sup>

The collective “voice” of black men, in resituated sacramental gatherings, also recognizes the ongoing tensions (e.g., strained family and community bonds and support) in the liberation-oppression dialectic and community organizing efforts. Their communal texts explore the multi-dimensionality of their lives and those in their respective communities and provide anecdotal lessons for all attendees. What emerges is an increased awareness about the many challenges and successes of how they have lived with understanding prostate cancer.<sup>32</sup>

The collective power, directly emanating from within the sacred sites of the physical environment and the embodied subjects, not only restructures and rehabilitates their histories and their communities. The dialogically communal logos renders permeable a living sanctuary for liberated black male bodies to heal and *become* in a sacredly defined space. Critically understanding the captive state of black masculinity in the realm of white patriarchy and capitalism, the sacred atmosphere, as previously mentioned, speak to the lack of black male positive role models and the negative internalization that African-American men experienced. Denying the totalizing discourse of white patriarchy that stereotypically degrades black male identity, there is a rejuvenating reconceptualization about African-American manhood.

Curriculum, as a religious education intervention, has several meanings. Elliot W. Eisner noted that curriculum is the development of different events that are put in place for specific educational outcomes for students. Fundamentally, curriculum aims to provide certain desired educational benefits for learners, and, in this process of learning, evaluation and goals are crucial to know, if and when student comprehension was achieved.

Jazz4PCA, using a music aesthetic to develop a nurturing environment, incorporates a curriculum for healing, through sacred spaces. Attendees experience a “[c]urriculum” that “is about the mobilizing of creative, educative powers in such a way as to ‘fashion a people.’”<sup>33</sup> The Jazz4PCA curriculum is a practice, where it is “socially established,” a “cooperative human activity,” “goods internal to that form of activity,” “standards of excellence,” and “our own lives are enhanced.”<sup>34</sup>

## **A Sacred Pedagogy of Community as Culture**

Jazz4PCA demonstrably imbues a culture of community, as a form of sacred pedagogy. When we look at the African-American Christian education tradition, community, culture, and

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<sup>31</sup> Galia Sabar, “Fluid Religious Identities in the Holy Land 1990s-2000s: African Labor Migrants between ‘Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star’ and ‘Resurrection and Living Bread Ministries International,’” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 101.

<sup>32</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanist Literary Theory* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 100.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



faith are integrally connected and promote healing and unity.<sup>35</sup> Religious education embodies an epistemic function, integrally informing one's historicity, potential, problem-solving strategy, and of course, identity. An epistemic function of religious education, understanding the socio-political prescription embedded in one's belief, is simultaneously generative, degenerative, and obstructive. In sum, at this point, I have a more informed understanding of the manner in which religious/spiritual education, in the process and production of ideas, creates and destroys information.

Aesthetics, in womanist theology and black theology, unlike other religious educational models, is an important conduit that provides healing. The embodied experiences of African-American men and women, particularly in a sacramental encounter through a Jazz4PCA event, have a storehouse of shared cultural wealth, identities, and traditions that can build communion and unity. The starting point, as I see, is exactly where we are. We begin, as critically understood in Seymour's article, in linking our socio-historical identities with recognizably historicized periodization, regarding religious and non-religious education. With an organization, such as Jazz4PCA, there can be a personal excavation of our individual families, including gathering artifacts, stories, family heirlooms, attendance at family and community functions, and a family tree. Spiritual healing is about each one needs to teach one. The nourishing healing for those in community is to responsibly shoulder the need to bond in restoration, from daily sins and an external and internal decolonization process.

Culture, implemented in a communal framework, can foster a religious pedagogy that grows the spirit, mind, and soul, fomenting a liberative praxis as sacred. Freire emboldens the possibilities of freedom dreams, and nonetheless, the markings of oppressed, drawn on me and codified in gendered institutional racism. Boldly, Freire admonishes, "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one."<sup>36</sup> Attempting to manage a soul's pain to fight, in a religious educational program, community participants learn, through a cultural paradigm, how to forge ahead, lovingly heal the bruises, and experience the grace of God. A religious experience can be multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and multi-cultural, especially regarding the cultural importations of African-American vernacular culture. Fundamentally, this is the work of Jazz4PCA.

### **Employing Sacred Communal Pathos in Black Men's Lives**

Historically, black men in white America have always struggled against and within the dominant standards of manhood, striving to protect their own lives and others in their respective communities. Struggling to sustain a sense of dignity, self-respect, and personhood, black men, embattled by stifling under- and unemployment and white supremacist state-sanctioned violence, have faced an uphill battle to attain their humanity.<sup>37</sup> Taking an oppositional stance, in many situations, African-American men developed a resistance tradition that spoke true to the nature of

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Freire, 49.

<sup>37</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 101.

their lived experience, culture, and community, even paying the highest price for freedom with their lives.

Resisting such cultural and material oppression, black male lives, existing in a perpetual state of “terror,” are subjected to a dialectical reality of resistance between liberation and oppression.<sup>38</sup> Regardless, if black men conform or not to the prevailing standard of masculinity, they are, nonetheless, in a constant state of fight or flight. George Jackson attested to similar issues in *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. He states,

Black men born in the U.S. and fortunate to live past the age of 18 are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in the sequence of humiliations. Being born a slave in a captive society and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively traumatic misfortunes that lead so many black men to prison gates. I was prepared for prison. It required only minor psychic adjustments.<sup>39</sup>

Permanently stratified outside the circumference of manhood, black men continually challenged oppressive structures, living in the inner-city landscape. Black men have a healthy resistance tradition that reclaims their humanity and are fueled by an urgency to re-characterize their moral status and evaluate how it affected their relationship to manhood. The dominant views of society cast black men as contemptibly promiscuous and stifled their progress “both psychologically and materially.”<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately for them, black men’s bodies were always raced and read against the grain of white men’s masculinity, comparatively stereotyping black men as rapists, brutes, illiterates, coons, Uncle Toms, and social deviants: a socio-political location of innate pathology.

A sacred womanist religious engagement of communal pathos speaks to their struggles against white oppression, culturally and institutionally. Resisting the dominant standard of masculine conformity, black men are able to critique white patriarchy and attempt to demonstrate a discursive and community-organizing process, interrogating the negatively material and immaterial consequences for black Americans. They re-channel to the world the contradictions in America, demonstrably testifying about the unjust treatment experienced in an ideologically democratic society, yet simultaneously nourishing and building a collective pathos. Even in the present-day context, in the turbulence of gentrification, disenfranchised voters, and declining black institutional resources, Jazz4PCA is a critically life-saving intervention.

### **A Womanist Theology of Wilderness Sacredness**

Today, there are numerous challenges about creating healthy and sacred spaces for black men, against the daily gendered institutional racism around the church’s religious education,

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<sup>38</sup> Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? The Afrikan American Family in Transition: Essays in Discovery, Solution and Hope* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), vi.

<sup>39</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Giddings, 85.

such as inadequate discussions about living-wage employment, prison pipeline system, sexuality, sensuality, relevant biblical lessons, and a multi-dimensional pedagogical implementation. From my observation and church experiences, the lack of safe spaces, intentionally created by organizational decision-makers, inadvertently manifest as sites of wilderness. For today's parishioner, oftentimes, the church experience of religious education leaves their souls "uninhabited" vessels, desolate, and barren.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, such tangible conditions, bereft with a seemingly nothing-ness state, are still under the domain of God's sovereignty, and the black male's experience of wilderness, inside and outside the church, is under the reign of God's kingdom, as well.

Similar to the Israelites' wilderness experience, where they learned "obedience," "disobedience," "renewed obedience," that "the Lord is the God of judgment," and about the "faithfulness of the Lord," today's church folks and non-church folks can learn how to resource this wilderness location. Consequently, just as to the Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians salvation are equally significant and interdependent, so is the fact that our black men, in the death-life cycle, are our future. Each generation is, necessarily, interdependent on each other. The church religious education programs *must* reconcile that the salvation of one is about the salvation of all believers. Not one generation can have salvation *without* the other.

A wilderness, desert theology, as a way to contextualize the relationship within the context of state-sanctioned violence against black men, also has some positive implications. The somewhat abandon-ness, a wide and widening gulf in many congregations among generations, I suggest, as it is not intentional, is an environment where God can show his power, as He did with the Israelites, over the 40-day-40-night wilderness experience. Using faith, love, and hope as sustenance, churchgoers can abide by God's commandments and vulnerably bridge dialogues and Christ work together. Believers, children of God, left wandering in a physical state of a barren area, which is "best used for tending to flocks of animals,"<sup>42</sup> can encounter a spiritual feeding of God's love and power.<sup>43</sup>

Jazz4PCA, as a nonprofit organization, provides some critical perspectives, concerning the lives of black men, and implementing an understanding of a theology of wilderness suffering.

The following discussion will explore the theology of suffering in the wilderness, interrogating several aims of Jazz4PCA that speak to a religious education vision for black men. Wilderness suffering, oftentimes associated with the Israelites' 40-days-and-40-nights life in Sinai, can be viewed as punishment for disobedience to God. However, a wilderness experience, also evinced in the Israelites journey, can yield benefits for believers, producing a positive internal transformation and closer relationship with God. Amid a challenging external environment, there is an opportunity for spiritual growth, less dependent on corporeal limitations of the flesh.

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<sup>41</sup> J. D. Douglass, and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Bible Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 352.

<sup>42</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 165.

<sup>43</sup> Merrill and Tenney, 352.

Similar to the Israelites' recompense, even after their consistent complaining, black men, their families, and friends, at a Jazz4PCA event, convey a message of hope and deliverance, despite moments of feeling lost. Participants take a journey of hope, as an example of wilderness theology, formulaically offers a way to live in the unknown, can move from and through darkness to light.

The theology of wilderness suffering explores the themes of worthlessness, purposelessness, ugliness, hurt, loss, and pain, similar to a Job-like reality. Not knowing God's plan for one's life, some people sense no God or higher power, left to waywardness and despair. The fact is: living by faith and trusting God is not easy. A religious education program, specifically opening pathways for people to express their doubts and fears, which would in turn offer wisdom, tentative action plans of faith, and ministry, could strategically help nurture the growing of a believer's faith.

Wilderness suffering proves, in the end, to release Christ followers into a state of freedom. Awareness, which is the primary goal of Jazz4PCA, is a key resource to start healing one's body, knowing that God, a Christian can directly communicate with God. The overall experience is recognizing an awareness of one's physical limitations of understanding, offer up a prayer to God, gaining freedom in having faith. There is faith that God will and can bless a believer's situation, a generation, and society, less focusing on mankind's powers and physical conditions. Through a freedom of faith, we become one, in a state of wilderness submission, with God's plan. One can receive, in an environment of seeming bleakness, God's immaterial gifts of love, mercy, and His presence, intervening in our lives.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of my exploratory paper is to use a religious education curriculum methodology. Evaluating Jazz4PCA, I used short-response questionnaires, surveys, and Jazz4PCA artifacts to explore how the group and participants create an alternative sanctuary through jazz events at different sites. Using the curriculum guidelines from Harris's work, I will analyze the data to develop a religious education curriculum of *koinonia* (community).<sup>44</sup>

The case study method has several benefits for my research. One benefit is that I can closely gauge the various elements of how the nonprofit was created, especially in a time when there is ongoing state-sanctioned violence against men and women of African descent. Another equally important benefit is that faith communities can observe and learn how to intervene, saving souls for salvation and healing. Much of the information for Jazz4PCA events shows that an overwhelming majority of the time, all tickets are sold, participants attend, and a fellowship of healing is provided. A third benefit is to consider implementing similar tools of healing that directly intervene in people's lives, making faith and daily living compatibly inseparable.

The data gathering and analysis of Jazz4PCA, as a case study, includes several components. At the inception of the process, the building of community and organizational insight is an important step. Through informal conversations with founder Ralph Stowe, the executive board, and musicians, I received invaluable guidance that yielded a perspective to

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<sup>44</sup> Harris, 25.

comprehend Jazz4PCA's history, aims, and future goals.<sup>45</sup> Speaking with Ralph and his team, I learned to assess how important the commitment to community was and focus on *how* to develop a communal culture.

Jazz4PCA, as a case study that uses religious education curriculum and brings awareness to save black men's lives, unfolds in several steps. While the first step involves capturing the person or organization's autobiography, the second step, which I implemented, was attending a Jazz4PCA event, receiving "direct observation of the [organization's] action and patterns in various social settings."<sup>46</sup> After speaking with Ralph, other people on the Jazz4PCA team, and event participants, I understood how they managed different dynamics of the preparation and hosting, such as seating, songs played, and audience engagement, and I elaborated on the overall experience of the Jazz4PCA event.<sup>47</sup>

Analytical keenness of a Jazz4PCA religious education aesthetic curriculum offers a number of case study explorations. The integrally intimate aspects of faith, healing, and community, viewed through a Jazz4PCA lens, could demonstrate a "study of social interactions" that lead faith or non-faith leaders to understand ways "to deal with social patterns in a much more concrete and full way."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, while investigating the connection between "expressed beliefs and actions," the Jazz4PCA case study provides a frame to unpack, connect, and deconstruct the interconnectedness, or lack of, to the multi-dimensional and multiple-consciousness of the dynamic human experience. Sometimes, on the notion of faith, there is a paucity of delineating perspectives on this continuum. Instead of defining faith, primarily, through a traditional religious construct, a more fluid nuanced articulation could signal a dramatic juncture to bring in more people into a thriving faith, one attainably livable, inside and outside of church.

The Jazz4PCA aesthetic curriculum, moreover, can be a form of transgressive religious education. Though surrounded by institutional and discursive violence, the nonprofit organization successfully creates sacred sites for black men to heal, learn how to heal, and be educated, in the community. The black church tradition, referencing the distinct African and African-American cultural patterns, effectually imbues a joyfully healing resistance, in the very presence of black-body-killing conditions.

Case study method, analyzing a jazz culture of sacred community, particularizes the cultural capital of jazz music for black men and other event attendees. The experience pours the expressive essence of humanness into a resurrecting power that redemptively reclaims black subjectivity. There is an esteemed value in the overall experience of people of African descent,

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart: Theology and Educational Method* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 37.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

which is pre-life experience before, during, and after the European slave trade.<sup>49</sup> Theological undercurrents of the Jazz4PCA case study can help us “see,” even if only through an intangibly experience of the Holy Spirit, life, in death-like situations.

## Conclusion

The Jazz4PCA aesthetic curriculum can be a form of transgressive religious education. Though surrounded by institutional and discursive violence, the nonprofit organization successfully creates sacred sites for black men to heal, learn how to heal, and be educated, in the community. The black church tradition, referencing the distinct African and African-American cultural patterns, effectually imbues a joyfully healing resistance, in the very presence of black-body-killing conditions. Though God “has not always delivered African American women [and men] from their oppression,” God “has often provided a means of survival and quality of life for African American women [and men] in the midst of their oppressive situations.”<sup>50</sup> This case study sheds light, even though relatively microscopic, on *how to* keep and maintain an ongoing faith, amid daily sins.

Case study method, analyzing a jazz culture of sacred community, particularizes the cultural capital of jazz music for black men and other event attendees. The experience pours the expressive essence of humanness into a resurrecting power that redemptively reclaims black subjectivity. There is an esteemed value in the overall experience of people of African descent, which is pre-life experience before, during, and after the European slave trade.<sup>51</sup> Theological undercurrents of the Jazz4PCA case study can help us “see,” even if only through an intangibly experience of the Holy Spirit, life, in death-like situations.

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<sup>49</sup> Moore, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, 41.