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THE EXACT SYNONYM FOR "MISSIONARY" IS NEGRO TEACHER:
BLACK FEMINISM IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

This research is an African-American socio-historical study informed by the tenets of black feminist/womanist theology. African-American Sunday school missionary teachers as othermothers in the early twentieth century were motivated by an ethic of care that was spiritual, historical, and political. Utilizing the scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins, Delores Williams, and Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, this essay re-constructs the oppressive image of mammy by revaluing the image of motherhood and a belief in black women's empowerment to suggest that the pedagogy of missionary othermothers coalesced with the elements of power and caring in their struggles for survival, quality of life, and full citizenship status.

This research examines, uncovers, and gives voice to faceless and nameless black teachers who were leaders in their local communities. While many will continue to remain nameless, a little of their work will be revealed and will aid scholars in continuing to construct an African-American epistemology of teaching.

THE EXACT SYNONYM FOR "MISSIONARY" IS NEGRO TEACHER: BLACK FEMINISM IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

Introduction

In September, 1900 in Richmond, Virginia the Twentieth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention met to organize a new arm of the national body. The official name of the organization, "The Woman's Missionary Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention," afforded African-American Baptist women the opportunity to "organize and systematize" their work for the utilization of talent and stimulation to Christian activity that prompted women to service. In response to the jeremiad of many black women, "if there was only some way for women to work," Layten proclaimed that women should unite with the national organization to revive, stimulate, and enlarge "the missionary spirit" to serve in their churches, homes, communities and abroad through already existing as well as newly-organized missionary societies.¹ According to Mrs. Layten, the goals of black female missionaries were to work to overcome not only godlessness but ignorance, immorality, and prejudice which operated against the acceptance of African Americans as full-fledged citizens of the American Republic.

At the juncture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African-American women organized local and national clubs to implement reform proposals for their communities to improve the social, economic, and political status of black Americans. Fannie Barrier Williams noted in 1900 that the club was only one of many means for the social uplift of a race. Williams further proposed that the club movement among colored women was something deeper than mere imitation of white women. It was "nothing less than the organized anxiety of women" who had become "intelligent enough to recognize their own low social condition and strong enough to initiate the forces of reform."² At the National Baptist Convention in 1900, African-American Baptist women joined the ranks of other female reformers, both secular and denominational, to form an Afro-Baptist society for women's work.

Many teachers contributed to the missionary work of women's societies by teaching both in public school and Sunday school, and by also conducting missionary training to children and youth in local churches. Some even took their teaching skills and missionary spirit to foreign lands. Sunday school teachers organized societies like the African Methodist's Self Denial Missionary Band and the National Baptist Young People's Union which cooperated with their denomination's Home and Foreign Mission Boards to enlist children and youth in missionary work. The foci of African-American Christian women's missionary activism and Sunday school work came, then, to a crossroads at the point of teaching. Mary McLeod Bethune, a leader in African-American education, explained this intersection in her speech entitled, "The Negro Woman in American Life":

¹ National Baptist Convention Minutes (1900), 195-197, microfilm, reel 4427-3.

² Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Club Movement among Colored Women of America (1900)," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 54-59; Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008); Lillian S. Williams, "And Still I Rise: Black Women and Reform, Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 14, no. 2 (1990):7.

The exact synonym for “Missionary” is Negro teacher. The “Gospel” which she carries is that of successful living. Reading and Writing and ‘Rithmetic are her main products, but just as many manufacturing companies do a larger business with their by-products than with the chief commodity, so the Negro teacher must, more often than not, do a large percentage of educating along other than purely academic lines.³

This portrayal of African-American missionary as teacher is conversely different from the predominantly white and overwhelmingly female missionary teachers in Jon Zimmerman’s *Innocents Abroad* where many mission instructors went overseas in an effort to “avoid teaching” and many women imagined themselves as “ministers or ‘missionary evangelists.’”⁴ As well, Sally McMillen limned Sunday school teachers as profoundly influential in the Sunday school classroom, developing a sense of confidence and self-worth in southern women. Yet, McMillen posits that teaching Sunday school offered a different type of experience for southern women than many other organized volunteer activities that left Sunday school teaching an individualized activity and teachers without a sense of female bonding and leadership opportunities.⁵ While these portrayals may be accurate for some teachers, there is an alternative view of African-American female teachers - a black feminist image of Sunday school missionary teachers as “othermothers” motivated by an ethic of care that was spiritual, historical, and political. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes in “A Womanist Experience of Caring” that “to see caring and mothering in larger, sociohistorical realms, we can recognize how in sharing knowledge we can also share power.” The pedagogy of missionary othermothers combined the elements of power and caring in their struggles for survival, quality of life, and full citizenship status among African Americans.⁶

Black feminist/womanist thought develops out of black women’s experiences to express what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins terms “black women’s standpoint” and as Delores Williams defines, “the ethical principle of revaluing.”⁷ Collins argues that the controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother are designed to oppress. In contrast to these oppressive images and by revaluing the image, “motherhood can serve as a site where black women express and learn the power of self-definition . . . and a belief in black women’s empowerment.” Further, Collins asserts that in African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguished biological mothers from other women who cared for children. As a result, othermothers – women who assisted bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – were central to the institution of black motherhood.⁸ As nurturers of children

³ Mary McLeod Bethune, “Selected Sayings,” *Mary McLeod Bethune Papers, 1923-1942*, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, NY, microfilm.

⁴ Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 130, 136.

⁵ Sally G. McMillen, *To Raise Up the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 238-239.

⁶ Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers,” *The Urban Review* 34, no. 1 (March 2002):83.

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 32; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 176.

⁸ Hill Collins, 118-119.

in an extended family network that reached out to the entire African-American community, othermothers provided a foundation for black women's political activism whereby feminist ethics of caring and personal accountability for the generic "black community" moved communities forward.⁹

Evelyn Higginbotham asserts that the catalyst for black feminism in Baptist women's missionary societies in the twentieth century was formed by churchwomen in the late nineteenth century. Using an African-American female interpretation of scripture, those missionary women argued that the creation story in Genesis "denied any right of man to oppress woman for woman was to be man's companion and helpmate." Those nineteenth-century churchwomen also interpreted female biblical characters in other scriptural texts (e.g., Mary the mother of Jesus, the two sisters: Mary and Martha) to formulate a feminist thought that valued motherhood and woman's participation in the home; woman's duties and responsibilities outside the home to prophesy and spread the gospel; charitable philanthropic work and social reform; and, to broaden employment opportunities for women.¹⁰ While Jualynne Dodson utilized hegemony as the source of women's activism in the African Methodist denomination, she acknowledges that A.M.E. experiences were comparatively normative to women's societies in other denominations.¹¹ These studies and others focus on African-American feminist denominational leaders such as Virginia Broughton, Sarah Hatcher Duncan, and those who graced national and international stages, namely, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and others. Conversely this research examines, uncovers, and gives voice to faceless and nameless black teachers who were leaders in their local communities. Albeit, while many will continue to remain nameless, a little of their work will be revealed in this work.

Othermothers

Missionary organizations of northern white and southern black denominations created a number of secondary schools and colleges across the South almost immediately after the Civil War. The American Missionary Association (Congregational Church), Freedmen's Aid Society (Methodist Episcopal Church), American Baptist Home Mission Society, and the Board of Missions for the Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church were most prominent in founding colleges. Black denominations both Methodist and Baptist, as well, established secondary schools and colleges. James Fraser avers that "these religious bodies, and the schools they founded, went in a different direction from Hampton and Tuskegee" which were industrial school models. James Anderson clearly states that "teacher training in the missionary schools supported classical liberal education for black Americans." And it was not, Fraser concludes, "a curriculum that prepared teachers who would encourage those who had recently been slaves to accept political and economic disenfranchisement."¹² Schools including Oberlin College, Howard University, Talladega College, Fisk and Atlanta Universities and single-sex colleges,

⁹ Hill Collins, 129-132.

¹⁰ Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 128-136.

¹¹ Jualynne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 5.

¹² James W. Fraser, *Preparing America's Teachers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 104; James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 240.

Spelman and Hartshorn “were heavily influenced,” Stephanie Shaw asserts, “from their founding and in their development, by Christian missionary principles and community development impulses.”¹³

Those African-American Sunday school teachers who sprang from African-American women’s missionary societies viewed themselves as missionary-minded and were trained to be black feminist/ womanist othermothers. The skills these women developed in missionary societies, like those at missionary colleges and secondary schools, were never intended for their personal advancement alone. Missionary training schools sought to build character, emphasized leadership development, and fashioned servants of Christ with the ability to interpret biblical scripture that would empower a disenfranchised and oppressed people in a segregated society. African-American missionary society teachers as othermothers were expected to serve in their communities. Sunday school missionary teachers as othermothers worked to enhance the quality of life in their communities not only in theory but also in praxis. Othermothers supervised children, helped people struggle with and resist oppression and committed themselves to service in the community and the race. In their commitment to serve, othermothers were motivated by the spirit, negotiated public and private spheres, protected historical tradition, and engaged in political activism shaping a black feminist/womanist image of African-American missionary-minded teachers in black communities.

Spiritual Othermothers

Mrs. H. H. Flowers, in her presentation at the 1903 National Baptist Woman’s Convention, considered “house to house visiting” of greatest importance in missionary work. The first great need, shared Flowers, was that workers “be filled with the Holy Spirit” and thus “be prepared of God to go among all classes of people and help them in whatever condition found.”¹⁴ Though not a tangible concept, “spirit” is a concept that is necessary for understanding the impetus for activism among African-American Christian feminists. Spirituality is integral to black feminist thought in churchwomen. Social scientist Marla Frederick contends that “spirituality is a process of engagement with God that informs the thoughts, motivations, and actions of individuals.” Frederick further opines that “spirituality is about living through moments of struggle and moments of peace and ultimately acquiring a better life, a life that is filled with a deeper knowledge of God. This better life comes from the onset of not only public political confrontation but also personal affirmation and development over time. . . . Spirituality is personal and experiential. . . . One who is spiritual is concerned about others and is especially concerned about what God thinks. Finally, spirituality consists of action, reflected in how one treats others and how one follows the direction of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ Black feminist/womanist missionary teachers were caring spiritual othermothers who believed that the spirit – religious experiences with the divine - empowered them to “help” others in whatever situation people found themselves.¹⁶ This “power” was to be passed on to those in the community to “uplift the race” – uplifting the image of the race, conditions of the race, citizenship status of the race –

¹³ Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 69.

¹⁴ National Baptist Convention Minutes (1903), 343, microfilm, reel 4427-3.

¹⁵ Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

¹⁶ Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

eliminating segregation and disenfranchisement and endowing African Americans with first class citizenship in America. It was “spirit” that not only empowered but motivated missionary teachers into activism as othermothers to African-American communities with particular concern for youth and children. Children and youth were of particular concern for all of America in the twentieth century.

America experienced sweeping child reform in the first several decades of the twentieth century that effected Congress’ creation of the Children’s Bureau in 1912.¹⁷ Baptist women were encouraged to organize through Sunday schools and other groups and “make the Master’s loving law in letter and spirit” their work, as a denomination for the uplifting of the race by “making little ones and their welfare the supreme issue in church and community work.”¹⁸ By the 1930s, following the lead of U.S. President Herbert Hoover, the nation developed a greater interest in child welfare. In December 1930, Hoover instituted a National Commission on Child Welfare that urged the nation “to help give every child its right chance.”¹⁹ Thereafter, Mrs. E. E. Whitfield declared to Baptist churchwomen that the national movement for child welfare made it necessary for the Baptist Woman’s Convention to set up a department of child welfare as Negro children were the “most needy and neglected group in America.” “It is,” Whitfield contended, “plainly the duty of any organization of Negro women to get solidly behind [the child welfare] movement and set in motion facilities for reaching the humblest home in which children are being reared.”²⁰ To that end, orphan homes, hospitals for babies, and delinquent homes were established under the direction of the newly-formed Child Welfare Department of the National Baptist Convention Woman’s Auxiliary. Zion Methodist women, under the direction of the Corresponding Secretary of the A.M.E. Zion Woman’s Mission Society, Mrs. A. W. Blackwell, compared the activism of African Methodist women in the early 1900s to the declaration of war by the female judge, Deborah, in the Bible (Judges 4). There was “a great multitude without church, homes, and pastoral leadership, a great army of children without ‘spiritual guidance’” that cried, “Save or we perish!” And, the Woman’s Home and Foreign Missionary Society came to the rescue in response to the children’s cries for spiritual guidance.²¹ The care of children became not only the responsibility of their own parents, but also the othermothers of missionary societies who understood by Christ’s commandment as it was written in the “loving law in letter” and as guided by the “spirit.” Missionary teachers became spiritual othermothers to the community taking persons to Sunday school and other church services; and holding gospel meetings on the street, in jails and other public places. Home Field Missionary, Mrs. E. E. Whitfield, recruited volunteers to teach in rural districts: “Get children that do not go to Sunday school and get them in a Sunday school somewhere. Little children are waiting to be gathered out of the vice breeding centers of our cities and given a chance to grow into clean, useful men

¹⁷ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 38.

¹⁸ National Baptist Convention, Inc. Minutes (1921), 278-79, microfilm, reel 4427-4.

¹⁹ National Baptist Convention, Inc. Minutes (1931), 291, microfilm, reel 4427-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Second Quadrennial Report of the Woman’s Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1908-1912), 18.

and women.”²² Attentiveness to cleanliness and character was essential for African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, spiritual othermothers who sought to advance the future of the race by getting children in a Sunday school somewhere suggested that Sunday school was a place to learn good manners, high moral standards, a cultured appearance and Christian character so as to refute negative stereotypes by white Americans.²³ Training young people to rise above the expectations of a white supremacist social structure was in itself an act of resistance by African-American Missionary teachers and confirmed the courage they exhibited vis-à-vis the power of God that was subsequently shared with others in their communities. As spiritual othermothers, these teachers were living evidence to the community of the resilience that builds from religious experiences with the spirit.

Black feminist thought through these teachers as spiritual othermothers revalued the consciousness and power of spirit. It was the work produced by spiritual othermothers and resulting accomplishments that revealed the tangibility of spirituality and bequeathed African-American female teachers with agency in their communities. Yet, the intangibility of the “power of the spirit” was a concept in African-American neighborhoods that could not be detected thus not destroyed by southern white hegemony. The work produced by spiritual othermothers, then, not only involved children but entailed servicing all in the community -- men, women, and children. Black feminist/womanist missionary teachers exercised the ethic of responsibility in communities as not only spiritual othermothers but were, too, historical othermothers as vessels of African-American history to biological mothers for transmission to succeeding generations.

Historical Othermothers

National Baptist Home Field Missionary Whitfield was as concerned with the welfare of the mothers as she was with the children. Sunday school/missionary teachers established Sunday afternoon Missionary and Industrial Clubs that revived the African-American cultural practice of quilt- and garment-making during the winter season and set aside time for heart-to-heart talks with members.²⁴ Regenia Perry elucidated that for many generations African-American women in the South engaged in the art of making patchwork quilts. Motivated originally by a need to provide insulation from cold winters spent in drafty cabins, historians subsequently unearthed iconographic symbols of storytelling and secret encoded messages to slaves in the practice of quilting.²⁵ One well-known prototype is the Bible quilt by Harriet Powers which is a vivid and literal interpretation of biblical scenes from both the Old and New Testaments. The technique, design, and patterning of the eleven scenes beginning with the Garden of Eden and ending with the Nativity display both African and African-American influences. Perry and others surmised that Powers attempted to tell a complete story in each square, probably considered herself a lay minister and utilized the quilts to teach Bible stories as a vehicle for

²² National Baptist Convention, Inc. Minutes (1931), 309, microfilm, reel 4427-4.

²³ Shaw, 88-90.

²⁴ National Baptist Convention Minutes (1903), 315, microfilm, reel 4427-3.

²⁵ Regenia A. Perry, *Harriet Powers' Bible Quilts* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1994); Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Weisenfeld and Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith*, 21-31.

spreading God's word and power.²⁶ Additionally, Tobin and Dobard deciphered codes in quilts that revealed such messages as when to gather tools needed for the journey to freedom, when to pack, and the time to escape for runaway slaves.²⁷

It was noted in the National Baptist Woman's Convention minutes of 1903 that "sewing, darning, and patching" were considered by foremothers as "rare gifts." The Missionary and Industrial Clubs revived an "almost abandoned" art.²⁸ Reviving the art of quilting was not merely the practice of quotidian domesticity, but enabled black feminist/womanist missionary teachers to evolve in their regions as historical othermothers. Historical othermothers gathered community women together, particularly biological mothers, in Missionary Clubs, teaching the history of African-American slavery and Bible stories as a vehicle for spreading God's word and "power" just as Harriet Powers had done in prior decades. It was a triple heritage ideology, then, linking the fullness of black heritage as Africans, African Americans, and Christians that operated in black church pedagogy through the revival of quilting.²⁹ Sunday school/missionary teachers as historical othermothers in practicing quilting at Missionary Clubs demonstrated a process of story-linking that Anne Streaty Wimberly asserts is "commonly undertaken by African Americans." Wimberly further explains that story-linking is a process that connects parts of personal everyday stories with the Christian faith story in the Bible and the lives of African-American exemplars of the Christian faith outside the Bible.³⁰ Story-linking in Missionary Clubs shaped positive notions of self-identity through reflections of their historical predecessors, an activity that equipped women to act in ways that were liberating for themselves and the broader community.³¹ African-American missionary teachers became synonymous with African griots, storytellers and historical othermothers in their communities as Missionary and Industrial Clubs elicited opportunities for them to freely and openly share their black heritage while formulating a communal spirit with other women. Because black feminist/womanist othermothers revived an "almost abandoned art," by doing so they revalued what was historically considered to be one of the "rare gifts" of black motherhood, quilting.³²

Political Othermothers

Black feminist/womanist teachers were missionaries that taught the "gospel of 'successful living'" in Sunday schools and throughout African-American communities including public schools in the first half of the twentieth century. Their pedagogy was conducive to a black activist theology of education for the educational, social, political, and economic transformation of African-American people as informed by Christian faith and the interpretation of scripture.³³ Sunday school teaching, along with teaching in other public and private

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 70.

²⁸ National Baptist Convention Minutes (1903), 315, microfilm, reel 4427-3.

²⁹ Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 12.

³⁰ Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 37-39.

³¹ Yolanda Y. Smith, "The Table: Christian Education as Performative Art," *Religious Education* 103, no. 3 (May-June 2008):304.

³² National Baptist Convention Minutes (1903), 315, microfilm, reel 4427-3.

³³ Haggler, xv

institutions, became an arena for political activism.³⁴ By virtue of their visibility in the community and the church, Sunday school teachers emerged as community leaders and black feminist/womanist political othermothers.

Sunday school teachers in the first half of the twentieth century advocated for African Americans and were political othermothers in African-American communities. In 1933, in the Sunday school and B.Y.P.U. Congress report there was a jeremiad against Sunday school literature, specifically “discriminatory” lithographs, printed by the publishing houses of white Baptists and an admonishment for black Baptists to buy from their own printing house, literally boycotting white publishers. The concern by Sunday school teachers for their students read thusly: “One wonders to what extent Sunday school teaching and texts tend to develop a sense of inferiority in young colored folk at the most impressionable age. . . . One wonders what effect this . . . has on the minds of little black children.”³⁵ The political activism for a positive representation of African Americans in teaching materials by African-American Sunday school teachers paralleled the work of school teachers who championed the same cause in public schools. It is not surprising that African-American youth, following in the footsteps of their political othermothers, formed alliances with organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the 1930s to take up the cause against inappropriate representations of black Americans in textbooks.

Sunday school teachers as political othermothers demanded the respect of African Americans in Sunday school literature. Sunday school teachers were political othermothers who, in the records of woman’s societies, disavowed antilynching laws, fought for the elimination of Jim Crow cars in public transportation, solicited the election of Christians to political offices in order to eliminate discriminatory laws, fought for equal justice in law enforcement, woman’s suffrage, and full citizenship rights for African Americans.

Between Church and State

James Fraser authored a book published in 1999 entitled *Between Church and State*. In that monograph, Fraser formulates an overarching question, “How should a diverse and democratic society deal with issues of religion in the public schools?”³⁶ He frames the answer to that question in the context of multiculturalism. Fraser suggests that “a commitment to multicultural education . . . is a commitment to a society in which many different cultures survive and thrive and are encouraged, and in which representatives of these different groups each make their own contribution to a larger common culture that is more vibrant for what all of them bring.”³⁷ Most discussions surrounding multiculturalism emphasize pedagogical methods to instruct students in the tenets of tolerance and diversity. Multicultural education would benefit from an exchange of ideas that increasingly included the diversity of teachers and administrators, in addition to students, and the contributions that these different groups bring to the larger conversation. There are developing ideologies of teacher culture and African-

³⁴ Collins, 150-151.

³⁵ National Baptist Convention, Inc. Minutes (1933), 97.

³⁶ James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

American culture is essential in constructing an African-American epistemology of teaching that would impact a larger discussion of teaching in public education. Religion is integral to any discussion of African-American culture and its influence on both the public and private lives of black Americans. Historically, the essence of black teachers as spiritual othermothers simultaneously thrived in both religious institutions and public education formulating a black feminist/womanist approach to teaching in schools.

Among the myriad of responsibilities, they visited parents' homes, organized fundraising drives, assisted people with legal problems, letters that needed writing, forms that needed filling in, negotiated difficulties with landlords and ministered to the sick. African-American public educators attended church and taught Sunday school.³⁸ Where there was no church and/or Sunday school, school teachers were expected to organize one.³⁹ Former students and faculty at the Caswell County Training School vividly recalled their principal, N. L. Dillard, admonishing them to follow his example and attend the black churches in town. Dillard, even as a male, tapped into the predominantly black feminist perspective on education. Dillard sang in the choir at one church and taught Sunday school at another. Teachers utilized church gatherings as a point of contact with parents.⁴⁰

African-American teachers were spiritual othermothers in state-run classrooms as religion was motivational and a necessary survival tactic for African-American public school teachers as it was for teachers in religious institutions. There are numerous testimonies from black public school teachers of the religious experiences that motivated and sustained them in performing the overwhelming duties required of educators in African-American communities, particularly those teaching in rural schools. One Atlanta University student teaching near Statesboro, Georgia wrote, "I am back in the woods but I have faith in God with me just the same as when I was in school."⁴¹ Katie A. Phillips, who began her career as a public educator and later became a missionary teacher, was also an exemplary spiritual othermother. Born in Beaufort, South Carolina, and raised in Brunswick, Georgia, Miss Phillips was educated at Hampton Institute and lived a few years in Brooklyn, New York where she was active in Sunday school. After six years, she returned to her Georgia home and for a time, taught in a county school on St. Simon's Island.⁴² In later years, Phillips believed that it was "the spirit" that moved upon her heart to teach in Africa where she multi-tasked as an academic teacher and a teacher of the gospel. As Sunday school teachers who were mobilized by the spirit to go out into black communities to find children for Sunday school, Katie Phillips felt "especially" moved by the "spirit" while teaching in a county school in Georgia to expand her classroom from her homeland of birth to "her people in Africa."⁴³ Religious experience for many African-American teachers transcends place and time. It neither has to be in a church nor on a Sunday morning. Spirituality leads them to view their lives as ongoing commitments to the lives of those in

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 241, 246.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁰ Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 85-87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Miss Katie A. Phillips Candidate for Foreign Field," *Mission Herald*, December, 1908, microfilm, reel 4437.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

African-American communities.⁴⁴ For some, that commitment extends to the African diaspora, as well.

Even in this twenty-first century, African-American female public school educators attest to the experience of a divine presence that motivates them in their vocation or calling. Case studies conducted by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant reveal evidence that African-American female teachers focused on possibility and responsibility rather than restrictions and others' expectations in a society that continued to devalue and subordinate women of color. One woman in the study spoke of her responsibility to "manifest the divinity" within her in the classroom. Further, she said that divinity meant for her to "develop a kindness and a love and a patience . . . [a] level of understanding, of humility, of groundedness, of goodness" – a paraphrase of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.⁴⁵ The black feminist/womanist ethos of spiritual othermother is not exclusive to Sunday school teachers and teachers in religious organizations but is characteristically displayed by teachers in state-funded institutions, as well.

The image of public school teachers as spiritual othermothers runs congruent to the black feminist/womanist epistemology of African-American Sunday school/ missionary teachers. African-American Sunday school/missionary teachers who also taught in the public schools brought religion to state-funded education when they entered the classroom. They embodied the "spirit" that elucidated caring for their students. Conversely, as public school educators these same women rendered the work of Sunday school teachers as a public responsibility to support and care for the African-American community as a whole.

Conclusion

Sunday school teachers were black feminist/womanist missionary teachers as they fulfilled the image of spiritual othermothers. As historical othermothers, Sunday school teachers retold the history of African Americans by reviving the African-American tradition of quilting in the community. African-American female teachers as political othermothers were among those who nurtured and mentored young people to think and make decisions for themselves in movements against segregation across America, and particularly in the Jim Crow South.

Sunday school teachers as spiritual, historical, and political othermothers aid contemporary educational scholars in continuing to construct an African-American epistemology of teaching. A more complete construct may be developed by including in this discourse African-American Sunday school teachers. This examination of African-American female teachers is not to resolve the failure to provide a unified account of African-American teaching. It instead attempts to open new doors that have been historically closed and provide additional perspectives on the historically black church as an educational institution as well as a religious organization. This study, too, will help inform teachers in general about their own pedagogy and professional identities as part of the time-honored tradition of American teaching.

⁴⁴ Frederick, 27.

⁴⁵ Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching," *Journal of Teacher Education* 56, no. 5 (November/December 2005):443.

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