

## **Building a Beloved Community in a Wounded World: Womanist Thought and the Pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois**

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**Abstract:** This essay began as a keynote address on W.E.B. Du Bois for the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial Philosophy of Communication Conference: Pragmatism at Duquesne University. The pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois and the womanism of Alice Walker and Katie G. Cannon are discussed in the context of the beloved community in a wounded world with warring ideals. The traditional definition of ethics focuses on moral duty and obligation. “Warring ideals” involve a struggle between aspirational ideals of what a community is supposed to be and what it actually is, especially for those who are marginalized. The ethic of community is defined as the moral responsibility to engage in collaborative processes as agents for equity. The ethic of community, the beloved community, centers the communal over the individual as the primary locus of collective moral agency.

**Keywords:** womanism; pragmatism; Cannon, Katie G.; Walker, Alice; Du Bois, W.E.B.; beloved community

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“One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”  
—Du Bois ([1903] 2009)

“Womanism requires that we stress the urgency of Black women’s movement from death to life. In order to do this, we recount in a logical manner the historical consequences of what precedes us. We investigate contestable issues according to official records. In other words, womanist religious scholars insist that individuals look back at race, sex, and class constructions before it is too late and put forth critical analysis in such a way that errors of the past will not be repeated.”  
—Cannon (1995)

## Introduction

Over the years, I have been preoccupied with a search for the beloved community. I look for it everywhere, and when I see glimpses of it, I work to shine a light on it whenever and wherever I can in personal and professional spaces. In a special issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, the opportunity was provided to highlight the various ways that individuals work to help build the beloved community in the places and spaces to which they belong based on their skills in collaboration with the wants and needs of the people around them (Madlock 2020). When asked to share my thoughts on the pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois, I had to make the connections between the three philosophies of pragmatism, womanism, and the beloved community. Kipton Jensen and Preston King (2017) remind us that the term “beloved community” was coined by the early twentieth-century philosopher Josiah Royce (1855–1916). However, many learned it not from Royce but from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who often spoke of the beloved community. Ideally, the beloved community can be established in any physical location; however, it is an inclusive place where all people share in the earth’s wealth and where poverty, hunger, homelessness, and other forms of social injustice are not tolerated. Peaceful conflict resolution prevails where love and trust triumph over fear and hatred, and all God’s children rejoice in peace and justice. In this article, the womanist ideal of Alice Walker, the womanism of Katie G. Cannon (1950–2018), and the pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois are discussed as examples of a strategy or framework that can be used for the creation of a beloved community in a wounded world. The ethic of community, the beloved community, centers the community over the individual as the primary locus of collective moral agency to heal a wounded world.

## Pragmatism

Although it is known that Martin Luther King Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois disagreed philosophically on reconciling issues of marginalization and oppression of Blacks in the United States, they were both pragmatic in their approaches. Historian David Levering Lewis (2002) discusses in his article “Two Responses to American Exceptionalism: W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr.” that they are studies in contrast. Still, both came to the same conclusion that “to suppose that racial discrimination could be abolished solely through cutting-edge scholarship or exemplary suffering” would not be enough (17). Du Bois and King were pragmatic in their firmly held convictions on overcoming social issues.

Thinking about what it means to be a pragmatist in its simplest form suggests “someone who deals with problems in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following particular theories, ideas, or rules” (Cambridge University Press 2023b). Pragmatism is “the *quality* of dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules” (Cambridge University Press 2023a, emphasis added). Considering pragmatism’s root definition, womanism can be

seen as a pragmatic tool. Alice Walker (1983) identified and named womanism in response to systems of oppression that impact women of color and their communities. Kate G. Cannon (1995), among others (Madlock 2020), have expanded upon and used Walker's womanist framework as a philosophical and theoretical tool to call out the various oppressions in systems such as theological, academic, and societal spaces. In 1903, Du Bois predicted that one of the main issues of the twentieth century would be the "problem of the color line" (Du Bois, [1903] 2009, p. 15). The pragmatism of Du Bois's work, which is expressed through his activism and efforts at racial reconciliation, can be juxtaposed with the womanist work of Cannon, as each has identified the wounds that need to be healed in order to achieve the much sought-after beloved community.

### *We Live in a Wounded World*

Wounded world, wounded communities, wounded people, and a wounded environment—the wounds are extensive. We, the people, are hurting mentally, physically, and spiritually. We are wounded people on multiple levels. We are socially vulnerable as we live in a world of increasing social unrest. Social vulnerabilities refer to the potential adverse effects on communities caused by external stresses on human health. Such stresses include natural or human-caused disasters: disease outbreaks, pandemics, catastrophic weather events (such as Hurricane Katrina), political uprisings, insurrections, global conflict, ethnic cleansing, mass incarceration, police misconduct, housing crisis, corporate greed, and economic swindles. This is not an all-inclusive list; you can, of course, add your own stressors. With that being said, every one of these stressors is exacerbated by racial and economic inequality, the color line that Du Bois ([1903] 1994) spoke of. For some, this is the logical place to start the healing process. If one were to think and act practically/pragmatically to reduce social vulnerability, the tangible result would be a decrease in both human suffering and economic loss. Again, one might be inclined to start with the root problems of social vulnerability and racial and economic inequality. The following quote by Justice Thurgood Marshall ([1992] 2015) is poignant and representative of our current societal situation:

I wish I could say racism and prejudice were only distant memories. I wish I could say that this Nation had traveled far along the road to social justice and that liberty and equality were just around the bend. I wish I could say that America has come to appreciate diversity and to see and accept similarity. But as I look around, I see not a Nation of unity but of division—Afro and White, indigenous and immigrant, rich and poor, educated and illiterate.

Current political, humanitarian, and global crises are reminiscent of a distant and not-so-distant past. Political and humanitarian crises are the problems that Du Bois, others before him, his contemporaries, and many others to come, as of this date, have not been able to correct.

### *Du Bois's Pragmatism*

To provide some insight into Du Bois's perspective as a pragmatist in search of racial reconciliation, it is essential to consider his beginnings. W.E.B. Du Bois—in full, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois—was born February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He died August 27, 1963, in Accra, Ghana. He was an American sociologist, historian, author, editor, and civil-rights leader. As an activist, he was one of the essential Black protest leaders in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. His maternal and paternal families had been freed from slavery for several generations. After the death of his mother in 1885, he attended Fisk University with the help of his community. He graduated from Fisk in 1888, with much happening in the years following. Du Bois received a PhD from Harvard University in 1895. Two years later, he accepted a professorship at Atlanta University, where he conducted empirical studies on the social situation of African Americans from 1897 to 1910. During his time at Atlanta University, he concluded that change could be attained only through agitation and protest, a view that clashed with his contemporary Booker T. Washington. Du Bois shared in creating the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and edited its magazine, *The Crisis*, from 1910 to 1934. His 1903 collection of essays, "The Souls of Black Folk," is a landmark of African American literature. Du Bois returned to Atlanta University in 1934 and devoted the next ten years to teaching and scholarship. After a second research position with the NAACP from 1944 to 1948, he moved politically toward the left.

In 1951, Du Bois was indicted as an unregistered agent of the Soviet Union. He was later acquitted of these charges by a federal judge. Recognizing his failed attempts at racial reconciliation and disillusionment with the United States, Du Bois joined the Communist Party, moved to Ghana, and renounced his US citizenship (Lewis 1993; Waite 2001). This brief recollection of Du Bois's life experiences hints at the origins of his pragmatism. One of the keys, here, is the sheer amount of time he spent researching, collecting information, and writing (Lewis 1977).

### *Du Bois's Black Men and the Wounded World*

Collecting evidence of the war experience of Black soldiers in the form of documents and personal papers was DuBois's (1936) practical way of gathering evidence for the world to see in his fight against racism and inequality. His collected data was crafted into a draft manuscript titled "Black Man and the Wounded Word." Historian Chad Williams (2018) examined and evaluated Du Bois's use of this material to solve the problem of double consciousness and the color line. It was one of the ways Du Bois thought there could be a reconciliation of people and identities: using the historical facts and lived experiences of Black soldiers to secure the humanity of Black people at home. It fell short for all of its worth, and it was not good enough.

## Womanism and the Beloved Community

We live in a time of increasing social unrest that has created a sense of lament, yet some are still faithful to the ideal that love and justice will prevail. We are a people feeling the sorrow and grief that comes from the continued loss of Black life and social injustice, but, at the same time, we are a people filled with hope. Hope comes from witnessing a twenty-first century rainbow coalition of citizens take to the streets to advocate for social justice that builds a stronger community for everyone. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of hate crimes, or those crimes reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that are “motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity” (FBI, n.d.). The most recent U.S. Department of Justice (2023) report on hate crimes, initially published in December 2022 and updated in March 2023, indicates that the most prominent form is anti-Black or African American hate crimes. Crimes of hate are woven into the fabric of the United States and have been persistent since the country’s founding. Not counted in the reported numbers are the mental, physical, and spiritual violations, both macroaggressions and microaggressions, that go unreported or ignored due to various social inequalities found in systems of government, prison, education, health care, religion, and the economy and, most notably, due to police misconduct. Individual fear and complacency also play a role in underreporting racially motivated injustice, a deterrent to community building.

### *Walker, Womanism, and the Beloved Community*

Several autobiographical essays in Alice Walker’s collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* praise Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and identify him as one of Walker’s heroes. King also had some spiritual influence on Walker. In particular, King’s notion of the beloved community, a religious and social ideal that epitomized the civil rights movement’s goals during much of the 1950s and 1960s, shows itself in Walker’s novel *Meridian* (Tewkesbury 2011). The values of redemptive suffering, nonviolence, love, and community are as central to Walker’s novel as they are to King’s thought and work toward a beloved community.

### *Cannon, Womanism, and the Beloved Community*

Katie G. Cannon (1950–2018) was an advocate for racial-gender justice and lived by the mantra “there is no value-free space” (Princeton Theological Seminary 2018). According to Cannon (1995), understanding the prophetic tradition of the Bible empowers Black women to fashion a set of values on their terms and to master, radicalize, and sometimes destroy the pervasive negative orientations imposed by the larger society. Also, Black women articulate possibilities for decisions and action that address forthrightly the circumstances that inescapably color and shape Black life. Black women serve as contemporary prophets, calling other women forth so they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality. Womanist notions of ethos,

logos, and pathos reject oppression and are committed to social justice and inclusivity for all humanity; these values go beyond theology. The overarching question, then, is as follows: "How can we create the beloved community, despite the increase in hate crimes and socioeconomic and health disparities?" Also, "What does a womanist rhetorical vision look like when applied to the building, creation, and development of the beloved community?"

### *Lamenting God's Beloved Community*

The definition of lament is "a passionate or demonstrative expression of grief" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023a) or "sorrow" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023b). How can one lament what never was, what has never been experienced? As we imagine the possibilities of what could be, the actuality of reality brings discontent and lament. There is a wailing coming from the community in the form of protest and civil unrest. As a womanist scholar, daughter, sister, mother, aunt, chaplain, ordained minister, health advocate, university professor, and more, I hold a notion, with the hopeful others that came before me, that God's beloved community can be realized. The womanist way and God's way seek an all-inclusive place. The idea of creating God's beloved community once seemed achievable and possible, not by magic or prayer alone, but because of the hard work and the literal blood, sweat, and tears that have been invested by so many. Many knew and understood that Black people were more than just Black bodies. Many who advocated for our humanity saw us as fully human, not invisible, voiceless expendable commodities. The rise of Black voices over time, the investment in issues of social justice, and this notion of racial reconciliation brought exposure to the value of Black life and humanity itself (people of color and poor people) for those who chose to see the value.

The mind, body, and spirit of Black people brought to these shores have a legacy of trauma that persists. Black people worked as enslaved commodities to build a nation that enriched a select few white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and other Europeans. The labor of the oppressed was compensated with all manner of cruelty, which defined their expendability. To fight against this demonic treatment in life meant death or a crippling bodily injury to be a lesson to others who would dare think their life had value. The insidious nature of this evil has just shapeshifted into a shape that continues to use the guise of Christianity and democracy.

Plagued by the ostentatious yet ethically debased political state of this country's top leader and those that condone and complacently follow that leadership is heartbreakingly sickening and continues to traumatize our community. The current political administration, having no ethical or moral compass, moves the realization of God's beloved community further into the distance.

### *Du Bois's Black Male Feminism*

While some do not consider Du Bois a profeminist or a profeminist thinker (Weinbaum 2013), others do (Gilkes 1989; Lemons 2001) as they recognize the evolution of his Black male feminism over the years (Dennie 2020; Griffin 2000). Nneka Dennie (2020) suggests that the rhetoric and content of Du Bois's early works were constructed with a masculinist framework for overcoming racism, while his later writings provide a Black male feminist interpretation of racism and sexism. Although Du Bois did not specifically include the experiences of Black women when he documented the experiences of Black men and their role in and contributions to the war effort, he was not blind to Black women's contributions (Keene 2001). Cally Waite (2001) writes extensively about the women who influenced and were influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois, such as Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Du Bois had "attuned to the complexity of Black women's oppression" and had "advocated for Black women's rights in speeches, articles, editorials, essays, and fiction" (Lemons 2001, 200). Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1989) notes that, in Du Bois's essay "The Freedom of Womanhood," he discusses and acknowledges Black women's contributions to their race, local community, and the nation at large. According to Gilkes (1989), Du Bois acknowledged Black women's dual heroism: first, their historic role in slavery and following, their "politics of rebellion and resistance" (574). This dual heroism of Black women is a critical phase in the journey toward democracy and creating community.

While any discussion of systemic inequality or racism is too complicated and wide-ranging for any single essay or collection of articles to cover, I hope that this particular essay continues the discussion of what it looks like when individuals communicate for survival. The emphasis here is on women's work toward community healing and restoration.

## **Conclusion**

The work of Katie G. Cannon and Alice Walker reflects the pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois, as both women have sought facts throughout history and in the lived experiences of Black people and all those who are marginalized and oppressed. This pragmatism is reflected in their scholarship and creative work, which has sought to better the lives of Black women, the Black community, and society.

Other examples of the womanist style of pragmatic work discussed in this article are articulated in Annette Madlock and Cerise L. Glenn's (2021) edited collection *Womanist Ethical Rhetoric: A Call for Liberation and Social Justice in Turbulent Times*. The contributors to this work are scholars and practitioners who center discourses of rhetoric, race, and religion—in this instance, various notions of religious rhetoric and their influence on Black women's aims for voice, empowerment, and social justice. In conjunction with other frames, the chapters use womanism to examine how Black women incorporate different aspects of our

identities into our struggles for empowerment and how we celebrate who we are in holistic ways that center love and community.

This edited collection begins by examining Black women's spiritual and professional identities among those with belief systems of the religious right, often associated with conservative values centering on white masculine notions of Christianity. It then moves to a national landscape that analyzes the Black Lives Matter movement through a womanist lens, reflecting on tensions within and advancements of activism through more formal organizations and with protests on the ground. The third chapter explores the macro landscape of Black womanhood in religious spaces in popular culture, mainly through leadership and activism, using tenets of womanism and Black feminist thought. The following two chapters expand the notion of a beloved community to address racial academic achievement gaps and inclusion of all Black women, specifically those who do not adhere to norms of "good" Christian Black womanhood. The sixth chapter explores womanist leadership in the AME church, contributing a historical perspective to contemporary issues. The collection concludes with an invitational rhetorical approach to Black women helping each other through sisterhood. Our collection embraces the commonalities and differences between womanists through theoretical and applied contexts. Embracing both allows us to centralize the plurality of Black women's lives, which is vital to advancing our voices and the voices of others.

As a womanist, I take the position that I am not only a witness to the realities of the lived experience of some African American women and their various communities but also a documentarian. My sister scholars would agree that Black, African-descended women in the Academy do not research and write for the sake of research and writing. Our work comes with the responsibility of restoration, healing, and hope. Our strength and the ability to have the opportunity to work, write, and research to document the realities of our communities also provide a modality for healing. The modalities are exemplified in so many ways, some of which were talked about in the book *Womanist Ethical Rhetoric*. Modalities for healing this wounded world also come in the responsibility of being a legacy keeper. As such, these modalities include making community connections to provide creative space and opportunities for women and girls outside of the Academy to be documentarians of their experiences and the experiences of their community. This is what Du Bois was doing when he collected historical narratives of the contributions of Black soldiers during World War One and beyond in the hope that it would be evidence enough for the white establishment, the powers that be, to include African Americans. Using the nomenclature of the time period, Du Bois sought to document factual "Negro" stories, share those stories, and get the word out. This type of work and documentation is practical, as it serves as evidence of the reality of the experience of being Black in this country.

Womanist work is for everybody. What are your practical solutions for justice, reconciliation, and contributing to building the beloved community?

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" —Micah 6:6–8



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