

Eske Wollrad

Beyond the Pale: Towards a Critical White Feminist Theology¹

This article considers the prerequisites for an anti-racist White feminist theology. Such a theology assumes that serious and honest dialogue between White women and Black women and women of Color is possible and that White women have to learn and challenge a great deal in this process of communication, particularly with regard to the methodologies we² use for doing theology. One step toward such a dialogue is to look at the taken-for-granted prerequisites of our theologies, those assumptions supposedly too ridiculous to be mentioned. I have come to believe that not noticing or footnoting our Color as Whites is one of the greatest obstacles regarding a meaningful dialogue with Black women and women of Color. Therefore, this article is about Whiteness.

White supremacy is a transnational power and although I rely primarily upon the findings from US-American sources I am convinced that many aspects are crucial for the European context as well.

The wounds of racism

We are all wounded by racism, but for some of us those wounds are anesthetized. None of us, black or white, wants to feel the pain that racism has caused. But when you feel it, you're awake.

Toi Dericotte³

¹ With thanks to Charlotte Methuen and Andrea Bieler for their critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² In this article, "we" refers to White women, regardless of class, age, lifestyle, abilities, nationality etc. This does by no means indicate any essentialist position, rather, I use this collective term in the sense of a strategic essentialism indicating existing commonalities among White women but, by the same token, challenging them as preliminary and contestable.

³ Toi Dericotte, *Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company 1997), 18.

For a long time, White feminist theologians, both in the US and in Europe, have anesthetized the wounds inflicted by racist violence, perhaps because the pain caused by sexism has seemed almost overwhelming. But over the last few years more and more White feminist theologians have begun to feel the pain caused by racism – and now they are awake. In the USA, the beginnings of those awakenings and the attempts to start a honest dialogue – for instance between White feminist theologian Carter Heyward and womanist theologian Katie Cannon⁴ – are well documented. However, these dialogues have not led to the creation of a larger body of texts dealing with Black/White communication, its prerequisites and potentials. With a few notable exceptions,⁵ these awakenings have left few traces within White feminist theology. That does not mean that Black women's work is not acknowledged and quoted in the works of White feminist theologians, but more often than not the acknowledgements refer to certain themes rather than to methodologies, to selected paragraphs and concepts developed by Black theologians (for instance wholeness, survival, images of God) rather than to the platform on which these concepts are built.

Platform matters

The platform is the common ground on which both communication partners stand – *and it is not primarily thematic*. Numerous Black women (African-American women, Afro-German women etc.) have criticized the tendency to invite them to speak only when racism is the subject: they are invited to speak, not about their own field of research, but about racism, about being Black. Supposedly they are the experts here as opposed to “innocent” White women. Lamentably, this dynamic form of exploitation is by no means outdated.

Implicitly or explicitly many White feminist theologians who are involved in a dialogue with Black feminist theologians assume that gender is a platform shared by both. As “women” we understand each other. If women have a certain “womanness” in common, then logically other aspects (such as class, “race”, lifestyle) appear to be less important, if not negligible. They are

⁴ Katie G. Cannon and Carter Heyward, “Can We be Different but not Alienated? An Exchange of Letters” in: Katie G. Cannon, Beverly W. Harrison, Carter Heyward, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Bess B. Johnson, Mary D. Pellauer and Nancy D. Richardson, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 1985), 35-59.

⁵ See for instance the work of the WTC (Women's Theological Center) in Boston, Massachusetts.

not understood as differences which have the potential to threaten a coherent feminist theological movement. If a Black feminist theologian creates a term that attracts the attention of a White feminist theologian, it is attractive only insofar it can be transformed into something general, that is, into something that refers to the shared “womanness”. This happens – to name just one example – with Delores Williams’ notion of “survival”.⁶

Williams is a womanist (i.e. African-American feminist) whose theology focuses upon the survival of African-American women and their children. One of the White feminist theologians who has picked up this concept is Mary Hunt. But she changes Williams’ description in a significant way: “One of the salient features of a womanist perspective is the focus on the survival needs of women and their dependant children.”⁷ Hunt is indeed aware of differences between women and refers explicitly to “woman who are exploited economically and discriminated against racially,”⁸ but she goes on: “Their examples highlight the extent to which all women, though to varying degrees due to class, race, age, and sexual preference, struggle to survive.”⁹ To assert that somehow all women struggle to survive it surely a truism; what is lost in Hunt’s appropriation is the Color of survival. Delores Williams is concerned specifically with *Black women* and their survival, not with all women. Williams’ notion of the struggle for survival does not refer to the struggling White “me” with a little Color on it.

If neither topic nor gender can form the platform for a dialogue between White and Black women, what can? I would argue that a shared methodology is a platform that can open avenues for meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. I will refer to the paradigm in the work of Delores Williams, that is, the “race”/gender/class paradigm.

Like other womanist theologians and theologians of Color, Delores Williams insists that “race”, gender, and class are not separate paradigms but inextricably intertwined. Put the other way around: gender is never “colorless” and classless, and “race” is always gendered and classed. Williams focuses upon poor African-American women and it goes without saying that she knows what Blackness means in the lives of these women. The challenge

⁶ See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1993).

⁷ Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad Press 1994), 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*

and the problem for White feminist theologians is that often we do not know what Whiteness means in our lives. “To add race and class is to talk about the racial and class identity of Black women, or of poor women, but not about the racial and class identity of white middle-class women.”¹⁰

A dialogue based on the three-dimensional “race”/gender/class paradigm implies that all participants not only agree that the three aspects cannot be analyzed apart from each other but also that they are aware of the many levels on which these aspects interplay. Since space is limited, I will look first at various discursive repertoires on Whiteness articulated by White US-American women and how class informs their respective positions. Secondly, I will explore dimensions of Whiteness concealed in these discourses and related to both the wages for Whiteness and wages of Whiteness. Thirdly, I will explain the importance of studying Whiteness for European feminist theology.

Whiteness – Now you see it; now you don’t!

There was a time when it was considered obligatory for a feminist theologian to begin an article with a list of all identity facets. I did that as well, and always the enumeration culminated in my lesbian identity. My being White was on the list but in the course of the article it miraculously disappeared. I saw it – and I didn’t. Whiteness didn’t seem to inform my theology in any significant way. I had company. Black feminist critic bell hooks has pointed out: “Many scholars, critics, and writers preface their work by stating that they are white, as though mere acknowledgement of this fact were sufficient, as though it conveyed all we need to know of standpoint, motivation, direction.”¹¹ Stating one’s own Whiteness in a way of an “initial statement ritual”¹² does nothing to contest its status as normal and standard.

Whiteness unfolds its power precisely where it functions as an “unmarked marker,” as the force which had set the racialization project in motion and which now tends racist hierarchies and demarcation lines between power and powerlessness, between inclusion and exclusion, between sameness and oth-

¹⁰ Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press 1988), 167.

¹¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press 1990), 54.

¹² Helma Lutz, “Konstruktion von Fremdheit: Ein ‘blinder Fleck’ in der Frauenforschung?” in: Renate Nestvogel (ed.), *Fremdes oder Eigenes? Rassismus, Antisemitismus, Kolonialismus, Rechtsextremismus aus Frauensicht* (Frankfurt a.M.: IKO-Verlag 1994) 150.

erness. Even the nineteen-nineties with their deconstructionist approaches, their analysis of fragmentation and their emphasis on contexts and differentiation did nothing to challenge the status of Whiteness, its discursive emptiness, its void *and* fullness. According to White sociologist Ruth Frankenberg Whiteness functions “as both norm or core, that against which everything else is measured, and as residue, that which is left after everything else has been named.”¹³ Whiteness is the void, invisible and ubiquitous. We know that the woman I’m talking about is White *because I do not say so*. White people are difficult to analyze *qua* white, because they are always represented as something else instead (middle-class German people, the lesbians who live around the corner, or the young colleague at work).

Ruth Frankenberg wanted to know what White women say about their own Whiteness, and she conducted an interview study with White US-American women of different ages and from different class, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Frankenberg identified three basic discursive repertoires these White women used when asked about Whiteness, “race”, and racism. These repertoires encompass essentialist racism, Color/power-evasive positions, and “race” cognizant reassertion and reorientation of “race” difference. Beside the open racist assertion of White supremacy articulated by some White women, others articulated a Color-evasive standpoint, that is, they refused to acknowledge “racial” difference maintaining that “we are all the same under the skin.” However, their silence on “race” in general and on Whiteness in particular is by no means an expression of passivity, rather “white women have to repress, avoid, and conceal a great deal in order to maintain a stance of ‘not noticing’ color.”¹⁴ According to Frankenberg, White women’s Color evasiveness is often coupled with power evasiveness: even when “racial” differences are recognized the structural hierarchies are ignored. As one White woman maintains:

To me, they are like me or anyone else – they’re human – it’s like I told my kids, they work for a living like we do. Just because they are Black is no saying their food is give to them [sic!]. If you cut them [sic!], they bleed red blood, same as we do.¹⁵

¹³ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143. Frankenberg does not correct grammar or complete part-words in her quotations from interviews.

Within White feminist theology, there is a tendency to perceive and acknowledge differences (whether cultural or “racial”) but the celebration of the theological voices from other contexts doesn’t necessarily exclude power evasiveness. Sometimes images of friendly coexistence are conjured up without any reference to the question of who has access to power positions within the academe and the church. Moreover, seeing the culture and Color of others doesn’t necessarily imply seeing the culture and Color of Whiteness. For some of the White women Frankenberg interviewed being White feels like being cultureless and Whiteness is perceived as a neutral category whereas other cultures are specifically marked “cultural”.¹⁶ Whereas some distance themselves by defining Whiteness as “no culture” or “normal culture”, other White women, namely those who are “race” cognizant, at times perceive Whiteness as “bad culture.” “Race” cognizance implies the conviction that “race makes a difference in people’s lives and... that racism is a significant factor.”¹⁷ “Race” cognizant White women express their own racism including the privilege of Whiteness and the desire not to be racist:

I get torn between being hypersensitive like that and thinking that I just want to be more natural, and that I would wish this had already changed, and that perhaps I can be more a part of changing by just wiping out racism altogether from my mind, but I guess you have to be hypersensitive maybe before you can – you have to know what you are purging... and why.¹⁸

According to Frankenberg’s analysis, the tension these women experience tends to push them back into the desire that characterizes Color- and power evasiveness – the desire not to have to see racism any more. Poet and writer Toi Dericotte emphasizes that whereas Black people have had to live with the wounds of racism for generations, “often white people, when a deep pain with regard to racism is uncovered, want it to be immediately addressed, healed, released.”¹⁹ Interestingly, some of the White women Frankenberg interviewed in her study indeed use metaphors of purging and cleaning themselves from the sin of racism.²⁰

It must be noted that these “race” cognizant women frame both their participation in racist violence and their desire for immediate healing in individ-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁹ Dericotte, *Black Notebooks*, 189.

²⁰ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 168-173.

ual terms. Their complicity with racism is treated as an existential rather than a political question and these women are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and helplessness since “racism [has come] to stand for a static condition of being, possibly even an ‘original sin’ that the white individual could never undo.”²¹ It is not too farfetched to suggest that White women whose “race” cognizance is confined to the sphere of individual life and who therefore perceive Whiteness as the ultimate evil and as personal condemnation will not be responsible partners in a dialogue with Black women or reliable comrades in liberating agency.

Does class inform the perspectives of these White women in particular ways? Interestingly, both most working class and middle-class women Frankenberg talked to tend to agree that Whiteness indeed has to do with money and economic power. For instance, race cognizant middle class White women perceive Whiteness as being “tainted by capitalism” as opposed to the “untainted” cultures of non-Whites.²² As a result, these women often romanticize what they describe as the “street life” of Black people and people of Color without taking into consideration that these “cultural expressions” might well be an outcome of poverty, that is, the lack of privacy and space.

Likewise, for some working class White women “the assertion of middle class status was at times a metaphor for race privilege.”²³ One of the women whose family for month had only flour and milk for food disavowed the image of her family as poor. Rather, she maintained: “There were no rich where we lived. Or rather, no rich, no poor. [...] You were rich if you loved your family.”²⁴ This woman grew up in segregated Alabama, and although she encountered Black people only infrequently she attributed material poverty only to Blacks.²⁵ Supposedly, being White is incompatible with being poor.

The wages for Whiteness: Becoming White

Coming of age as a White person not only implies the introduction into a world of privileges, unearned advantages, or at least the dream that as a White person one can never be “really poor.” Becoming White also involves learn-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

²² *Ibid.*, 199.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143-4.

ing how to repress the yearning for an inclusive community, for friendships beyond boundaries, and for honest and open conversation.

Discursive repertoires on “race” are taught, Whiteness has to be learned. African American Christian theologian and minister Thandeka explored what happens in the process of becoming White. Her book provides important insights into the development of a White identity particularly because she refers to the wounds racism inflicts upon White people. Thandeka distinguishes between the wages *of* Whiteness, that is, privileges and unearned advantages, and the wages *for* Whiteness, the price one has to pay in order to become White.²⁶

Even for those who are perceived as definitely White in a certain historical moment the wages *for* Whiteness are considerable. According to Thandeka, European American children have to learn to act White, that is to act in accordance with White supremacist rules. These actions require the denial and suppression of the yearning for community beyond boundaries. Thandeka relates the story of a teenager and the way her yearning was broken:

At age sixteen, Sarah brought her best friend home with her from high school. After the friend left, Sarah’s mother told her not to invite her friend home again. ‘Why?’ Sarah asked, astonished and confused. ‘Because she’s colored,’ her mother responded. ‘That was not an answer,’ Sarah thought to herself. It was obvious that her friend was colored, but what kind of reason was that for not inviting her to Sarah’s house? So Sarah persisted, insisting that her mother tell her the real reason for her action. None was forthcoming. The indignant look on her mother’s face, however, made Sarah realize that if she persisted, she would jeopardize her mother’s affection toward her.²⁷

Sarah severed her friendship with the girl. When she recalled this incident many years later she started crying. According to Thandeka, what she felt was White shame. Learning to be White involves learning that belonging has its price. Sarah had to “learn how to repress [...] risky feelings of camaraderie with persons beyond the community’s racial pale in order to decrease the possibility of being exiled from [her] own community.”²⁸ Hence, Sarah acted White out of fear and out of the recognition that she was vulnerable within her own community – her mother’s affection was not unconditional.

²⁶ Thandeka, *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York: Continuum 1999), 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

The wages for Whiteness and White shame are not confined to the US American context. For instance, in the nineteen-fifties many White German women who loved beyond boundaries, that is, who had relationships with Black men and gave birth to a Black child, were duped to believe that they could not raise it properly. White German social workers told these mothers that their Afro-German children would be better protected in an orphanage where their “special needs” would be met. Because of White German supremacist control and pressure many White women gave their Black children away. Afro-German writer Ika Hügel-Marshall who was sent to an orphanage by her mother at the age of seven asked: “Where is time for love and tenderness between a white woman and her Black child? Love and tenderness we both need so badly. How can I deal with my mother’s desire to be respected in this society and with her fear to have to discharge me into a racist world?”²⁹ The price for respect and belonging is loss – loss of a friend or even one’s own child.

The more one learns to “fit”, to act White according to White supremacist rules, the more it is possible to buy into the lie of White invulnerability which conveys the message that both is possible, namely, to wield racist violence upon a Black person or person of Color and to remain unharmed, untainted by that violence. African American writer Toni Morrison uses the metaphor of acid on a Black hand: “Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free?”³⁰

Violent self-serving racist acts do not leave the perpetrator acid-free because with each act her or his self-integrity disintegrates. Hence, becoming White has to be analyzed in terms of loss coupled with “feelings of dismay, distress, loss, rage, and anger at one’s own white environment because it prevented the self from retaining a fuller and more inclusive range of its own sentient feelings.”³¹ But these feelings have to be concealed in order to avoid attacks from the White environment. Once the process of concealment is finished White identity comes to signify coldness, frozenness and the lack of being sentient.

²⁹ Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* (Berlin: Orlanda 1998), 43 (translation E.W.).

³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random House 1992), 46.

³¹ Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 75.

In order to function smoothly White supremacy, however, has to offer a compensation for the loss of self-integrity: the wages of Whiteness.

The wages of Whiteness

Although on the representational level Whiteness is always accompanied by middle-class-ness the wages of Whiteness are not necessarily economic. Rather, Whiteness offers a particular mind set of superiority even if the culture and economic situation provide no hint of superiority whatsoever. That is, the wages of Whiteness are first and foremost ideological wages, not always in terms of permission to express racist arrogance but much more often in terms of thinking about myself as “just being a person.” Feeling normal, average, just human, *that is*, being White (or so White supremacy claims) is at the core of White privilege.

Many years ago White feminist Peggy McIntosh wrote:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.³²

It is no coincidence that McIntosh mentions the invisibility of White privilege twice. What remains invisible is that all these tools and guides are specifically White. I am not supposed to think of my attitudes, norms, beliefs, and actions as “typically White” but rather as aspects of my individuality. Moreover, I expect a certain treatment and I take many things for granted without relating them to my Whiteness. McIntosh provides an impressive list of White privileges, for instance:

6. I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented. [...] 7. When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. [...] 15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection. [...] 17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color. [...] 21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group. 22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs

³² Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” in: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1997), 291.

of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion. [...] 45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.³³

Within a racist society mass media, nation, civilization, culture, education, manners, collectives, language, customs, and the arts are framed by Whiteness. The privilege of the White minority is that they/we can/do ignore this as opposed to the world's majority who has to confront and struggle against this fact each and every day.

In Western art for centuries Whiteness has embodied divinity, purity, and innocence. Regarding White feminist theologies (whether US-American or European) Jesus' maleness and his representations as king, master, and lord are fiercely criticized, however, there is few protest concerning representations of Jesus as "a White, middle-class, Euro-American male dressed for a fraternity toga party."³⁴ And it is little wonder that more often than not the feminist Christa looks like his sister on her way to a sorority toga party. That I do not ponder the question why Mary, a Near Eastern Jewish woman, looks exactly like me is the very effect of White privilege.

White bodies – a European skin game

Whiteness is both transnational and specific to particular contexts. Because of this, US American research on this topic is important for the European context, although differences must also be taken into account. Without a doubt, Whiteness is a crucial norm both in the US and in Europe, whether veiled in terms of culture, nationality or mere "difference". Moreover, Europe has a particular position in the historical development of this norm since it was the cradle of racial stratification and thus of the idea of Whiteness. The first racialization project in the history of humankind was an *internal* European project: in 1449 for the first time Spanish Christians defined Jews in "racial" terms,³⁵ a definition which later constituted the foundation for the othering of non-Europeans along Color lines.

European philosophers of the Enlightenment whitened human bodies. They universalized and eternalized Whiteness so that, with good cause, the project

³³ McIntosh, "White Privilege," 293-294.

³⁴ Delores Williams, "ReImagining Truth: Traversing the Feminist Christian Backlash," in: *The Other Side*, May/June 1994, 54.

³⁵ See Leon Poliakov, *Geschichte des Antisemitismus*, vol. 4: *Die Marranen im Schatten der Inquisition* (Worms: Georg Heintz Verlag 1981), 38-40.

of European Enlightenment could be labeled the enwhitening of Europe. According to John Locke and Charles de Montesquieu humanness was Whiteness and, therefore, Blacks were not human.³⁶ Immanuel Kant projected the existence of White people far back into the past, claiming that Eve's and Adam's original Color was White.³⁷

These ideologies constitute a European heritage which we may not ignore. It informs language, Bible translations, Christian anthropology, ecumenics, and images of the divine. One of the tasks of feminist theology in Europe and beyond has been to dismantle gender dualisms and to reject the inscription of inferiority and superiority on gendered bodies. Studying Whiteness critically implies the acknowledgement that today these bodies have always been already racialized bodies. The task of White feminist theology must, therefore, now be the analysis of the manifold dualisms along the axes of "race" and gender multiplied by class and lifestyle.

Given that Whiteness is a profoundly flexible category it is necessary to look at differences in Whiteness, not only between the US and Europe but also between various European states. For instance, Germany has a unique tradition of seeing nationhood through the lens of "race". Despite recent changes to the laws governing dual citizenship, citizenship in Germany is still defined in terms of *ius sanguinis*, that is, in terms of blood lines and descent. In contrast to the United States and many other European countries, where *ius soli* automatically grants citizenship to everyone who is born there, being born on German soil and/or being raised in Germany does not make someone German. "Germanness" is supposedly a matter of biology.

"Germanness" is also "visible." During the last election campaign the Green Party published an election poster which called for more rights for foreigners and changes to German naturalization laws. However, the visualization told a different story: the poster showed the picture of four naked babies – three White babies and a Black one. Representations of "foreignness" as Black and of "Germanness" as White are deeply engrained in dominant German culture and are part of the everyday racist violence perpetrated upon Black Germans, Germans of Color and Blacks and people of Color living in Germany. Abena Adomako, an Afro-German who can trace her German

³⁶ See Eske Wollrad, *Wildniserfahrung. Womanistische Herausforderung und eine Antwort aus Weißer feministischer Perspektive* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn 1999), 261-264.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

ancestry back to 1891,³⁸ has written: “My color is black. Therefore I’m perceived as a foreigner – African or American. I’m always being asked how come I speak German so well, where I come from, etc. This quizzing gets on my nerves. Most of the time I answer provocatively that I’m German. In spite of my unequivocal answer they continue: How? Why? I’m African, but I’m German, too.”³⁹

“As long as you think you’re white there’s no hope for you.”⁴⁰ Long ago African American writer James Baldwin has criticized the desperate attempts of certain groups of people to keep the lie of Whiteness alive. For centuries Blacks and people of Color in Europe and overseas have studied this weird phenomenon of people believing in the fairytale of Whiteness. In doing so, they have created histories and modes of knowledge that have long been silenced in the name of socially constructed norms. What today is called the crisis of Whiteness has been initiated by their voices challenging this fabricated myth of White superiority. Their expertise in exploring Whiteness is crucial for the development of an anti-racist White feminist theology and for comprehending the dynamics of White supremacy in any given country.

Scaling dangerous mountains

Whiteness is not about biology – it cannot be seen or touched. It has to be believed in; it has to be confessed, acted out, and engaged. In the fairytale of the emperor’s new clothes the emperor is told that only intelligent people can see his precious clothes. Things are turned upside down: something profoundly stupid, that is to strut around naked in public, is redefined as the pinnacle of cleverness. And everybody applauds. Well – not everybody. A child shouts: “Look, he’s naked!” More and more people join in saying “Yes, he’s naked!” and they start laughing. At least in the fairytale even a child can dismantle the lie. And (perhaps only) in the fairytale naming the truth is contagious.

But the truth has to be told. As Toi Dericotte has written: “The only way to break the stereotypes is to tell the truth, which causes pain. A black person

³⁸ On her German ancestry see Katharina Oguntoye, *Eine afro-deutsche Geschichte. Zur Lebenssituation von Afrikanern und Afro-Deutschen in Deutschland von 1884 bis 1950* (Berlin: HoHo Verlag 1997), 146-161.

³⁹ May Opitz, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz (eds), *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1992), 199.

⁴⁰ James Baldwin, quoted in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London/ New York: Verso Press 1991), 6.

and a white person are not just two individuals who have to decide whether they like each other, but representatives carrying huge expectations, beliefs that they must scale like dangerous mountains trying to reach each other.”⁴¹ As White women, we have to accept that we are not just individuals but that we have been taught to act as representatives of White supremacy. Naming White expectations and White beliefs *as White* means breaking the taboo upon which White power is built. To spell out Whiteness critically is to assign everyone, not only Black people and people of Color, differentiated places in complex and changing relations of racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies. To spell out Whiteness critically is to colorize feminism and feminist theology.

In the process of analyzing the Color of our lives, experiences, and theologies we may be able to go back to the times when we were not yet White and recall “forgotten” incidents where our yearning for inclusiveness and community was broken. Then, we will no longer be able to turn our feelings of dismay, distress, loss, rage, and anger against ourselves or Black people and people of Color, but against White supremacist society. Unlearning to act White means entering the sphere of uncertainty, of vulnerability, entering borderlands where doubt is welcomed, where identities are acknowledged as preliminary and contestable, where everybody shifts a little bit so that there will be space for many.

L'article de Eske Wollrad est un apport au développement d'une théologie féministe antiraciste, qui nécessite une réflexion sur ce que signifie avoir la peau blanche. L'auteur invoque, à l'appui du paradigme tridimensionnel race-sexe-classe, courant dans la théologie « womaniste » (féministe afro-américaine), l'argument que les théologues féministes blanches se contentent d'étudier le rapport entre les sexes et parfois les rapports de classe, sans analyser ce que signifie pour elles, être blanches. L'article examine des discours traitant de ce que signifie être blanc, exposés par des femmes blanches de divers contextes aux États-Unis. Puis l'auteur explique pourquoi les blancs sont à la fois récompensés (sous forme de privilèges) et punis (sous forme de pertes et de sentiments de honte) d'être blancs. Enfin, elle souligne l'importance de la recherche scientifique sur ce que signifie être blanc pour la théologie féministe européenne.

Der Artikel von Eske Wollrad leistet einen Beitrag zur Entwicklung einer antirassistischen feministischen Theologie, zu der notwendig die kritische Auseinander-

⁴¹ Dericotte, *Black Notebooks*, 148.

setzung mit Weißsein gehört. Auf der Basis des in womanistischer (afro-amerikanischer feministischer) Theologie gebräuchlichen dreidimensionalen Paradigmas „Rasse“/Geschlecht/Klasse zeigt die Autorin, daß Weiße feministische Theologinnen meist zwar Geschlecht und manchmal Klasse, nicht aber Weißsein kritisch reflektieren. Der Artikel behandelt zunächst Diskurse zu Weißsein, wie sie von Weißen US-amerikanischen Frauen verschiedener Kontexte artikuliert werden. Des weiteren erläutert die Autorin, warum Weiße nicht nur einen Preis für Weißsein erhalten (in Form von Privilegien), sondern auch den Preis des Weißseins zahlen (in Form von Verlust und Schamgefühlen). Schließlich wird die Bedeutung der Forschung über das Weißsein für europäische feministische Theologie verdeutlicht.

Eske Wollrad studied Theology in Göttingen, Berlin, and New York. She received her Master of Sacred Theology from Union Theological Seminary (New York City) and her Ph.D. from Kassel University. Her book on womanist theology and a response from a White feminist perspective was published 1999. Eske Wollrad is currently teaching at the theological faculty in Würzburg, Germany.