Liberative Learning:
A Look at CPE through the Lens of Black Feminist and Womanist Theology

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Liberation theology is a Christian theological perspective that is grounded in the belief that God stands in solidarity with the poor. Liberation theology was birthed in Latin America in the 1950s in response to poverty and social injustice experienced by economically lower-class persons. Liberation theology's most notable and recognized theologian and author is Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian priest who wrote *A Theology of Liberation*, which some deem the sacred text of liberation theology and the liberation theology movement.[1] Liberation theology's influence gave rise to other forms of liberation theology, including Black liberation theology.

Black liberation theology is understood as a Christian theological perspective that highlights how God sits on the side of marginalized Africans and African Americans. This particular theology is rooted in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 60s in the United States. Whereas Latin American liberation theology highlights classism, Black liberation theology examines racism. Noted theologian and author James Cone is considered the father of Black liberation theology based on his groundbreaking work *A Black Theology of Liberation*.[2] Black liberation theology was the first theology to give voice to specifically African and African American

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persons, but critics argue that Black liberation theology does not speak to the oppression experienced by heterosexual women and/or same-gender-loving women, thus underscoring sexism, patriarchy, and heterosexism. As a result, Black liberation theology inspired Black feminist liberation theology and, later, womanist liberation theology. The most noted Black feminist theologian is educator bell hooks.[3] Much of hooks's education theory is informed by educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which seeks to establish a new relationship between teacher and student based on mutuality and respect whereby both teacher and student equally teach and learn from each other in the learning environment.[4]

In this brief essay, I want to reflect upon Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) from the vantage point of Black feminist and womanist theology by referencing several key Black feminist and womanist theologians and scholars. My thesis is that Black feminist and womanist theology offers a helpful framework for understanding the work of CPE, which is largely a process of adult transformation and learning.

Openness And Vulnerability In The Praxis, Action, And Reflection Process Of Liberative Learning

bell hooks is a social analyst and educator who connects her theory and praxis to liberation and empowerment. She studies the educational school system at all levels—elementary, college, and graduate school. Liberative education as defined by hooks is a freedom-seeking pedagogy for self and society, meaning that learning frees individuals from the bondage of past woundedness, shame, guilt, and growing edges and, at the same time, frees society from experiencing and inflicting oppressive structures. Through self-reflection, students free themselves from past woundedness, shame, guilt, and limitations that impede the development of their pastoral identity and competency. Self-reflection helps students gain self-awareness, which leads to their personal transformation and to societal transformation.

In CPE, students self-reflect through reading, written presentations, and extensive dialogue with peers and a supervisor about clinical experiences. The reading, writing, and dialogue format helps students think through their experiences and responses. This process gives students the opportunity to learn from each other and the supervisor in their group. The level at which students engage their peers determines the level of self-awareness and competency they gain. Persons learn from their experiences and the

experiences of others. Hooks categorizes this process as praxis, action, and reflection. It parallels the action-reflection-action clinical method of learning utilized in CPE.

Openness and vulnerability are key components that students embrace when sharing their personal and professional experiences with their peers and supervisor in the group. The supervisor utilizes students' life experiences, their experiences in ministry, and their experiences relating to their peers and facilitates/guides the process. Trust and empathy create a safe environment in which students feel comfortable sharing personal and professional experiences. Sometimes students bring to group their deepest struggles and challenges, which creates wonderful learning opportunities for everyone, including the supervisor. Evidence of this can be seen in the following case of Ted.

The Case Of Ted

Ted[5] was a middle-aged African American male student whom I supervised during my work as CPE supervisor at a level 1 trauma center on the north side of Chicago. Near the end of the unit, Ted found it difficult to remain emotionally present during CPE group sessions after his ex-wife had him summoned to court regarding the custody of their twelve-year-old son. Our supervisory-student relationship was tense because of Ted's resistance to exploring the dynamics of his frustrating relationship with his mother, which, I believed, would expand his pastoral functioning. I was disappointed when Ted experienced this personal hardship that kept him from trusting the process. I hoped that Ted would finish the unit because he was the only African American in the group and his peers expressed that they were gleaning much insight from his experiences. I did not avoid confronting Ted, because accountability is important. I encouraged Ted to trust the process. I did this by, first, providing Ted with empathy through a listening presence. This also helped us establish a mutual relationship. Ted shared his disappointments and sadness about his personal conflicts with his ex-wife. I self-disclosed similar feelings I had experienced in past encounters with my ex-husband as a way to keep me connected with Ted. After sharing stories with each other, I invited Ted to trust the process by staying engaged in the unit. I informed him that his anxiety, whether personal or professional, is a normal part of the learning process. His response was affirmative! Ted stayed engaged in the unit, reflecting on his clinical visits with patients and issues that arose during group sessions.

Liberative Learning Through Self-Reflection
And Receiving Care From The Community

Nancy Boyd-Franklin, an African American clinical psychologist and educator, highlights Black feminist liberation education. She draws attention to how liberative learning occurs, first, when persons self-reflect on their life experiences, particularly difficult ones.[6] These difficult experiences shed light on their' growing edges. When growing edges are revealed, persons reflect on healthy methods of growth or else pastoral deficits develop. For example, I supervised a student, Kevin, who developed the pastoral deficit of enjoying negative criticism by others. He presented verbatims during group sessions that demonstrated him doing something inappropriate in his patient encounters so that the group and I would challenge him. However, he disliked hearing positive affirmations of things he did well in his verbatims. Throughout the unit, I invited Kevin to reflect on his personal history by posing reflective questions for him to consider during group and individual supervision sessions. By the end of the unit, Kevin had gained some initial self-awareness that he had developed this pastoral deficit due to his parents' continuous negative feedback and limited affirmations of his behavior as a child. I also offered Kevin continuous positive affirmations about his work. When his peers realized this supervisory strategy, they followed suit. Throughout the rest of the unit, Kevin expressed his anxiety and difficulty due to only hearing positive affirmations from myself and his peers, but he tried his best to trust the process and learn. Eventually, by the end of the unit, Kevin was able to feel more comfortable hearing affirmations and even affirming his own pastoral identity and competency.

In addition to self-reflection, liberative learning also occurs when persons experience care. Most persons desire or long for care, meaning most persons desire that their voice be heard.[7] Furthermore, most persons want to receive care or support from others whom they share community with who, most of the time, are outside their immediate biological family. For example, according to Boyd-Franklin, African and African American–centered psychology says that extended relatives and/or non-biological members of one's community provide a network or support system to help persons learn.[8] Support systems foster a safe space and environment where persons can grow.

In CPE, the supervisor can take several steps to exhibit care by creating a safe environment for students. First, when prospective students inquire

about the program, the supervisor can respond in a timely manner with utmost professionalism. Second, after receiving an application, the supervisor can follow up with applicants with an email or phone call, acknowledging receipt of their application. Next, after reviewing their application, if the supervisor is interested in the applicant then he or she can schedule an interview as soon as possible so the person does not have to wait a long time after submitting their application. During the prospective student's interview, the supervisor can display hospitality. After accepting students for the program, the supervisor can offer a solid, structured orientation to limit the students' anxiety. During orientation, the supervisor can build a covenant with students by having all sign a learning agreement that emphasizes that one of the program's goals is to offer an educational learning program based on trust, mutuality, and respect. These initial phases of group life foster a safe environment.

After trust and expectation is established, the supervisor can continue to demonstrate care through an empathic presence. African and African American–centered learning understands an empathic presence as a respectful, noncondemning, and noncondescending attitude that values the other person.[9] First, the supervisor, along with the group, provides a noncondemning, respectful presence with students as they share stories from their personal history through verbatims, story theology papers and other written materials. Supervisors can provide an empathic listening ear, especially when students share difficult experiences.

Next, liberative learning occurs through accountability/education. When a person is held accountable, he or she is educated. Confrontation occurs with empathy at the same time. The method of how one employs empathy and accountability/education is like a sandwich. Empathy is synonymous with the bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and onions of the sandwich, and accountability/education is the meat of the sandwich. In most sandwiches, the meat is the most filling and nourishing ingredient. However, the meat, or accountability/education, can be difficult to chew and swallow all by itself. Therefore, the bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and onions, or care, offers other flavors to offset the meat and make it easier to consume.

Last but not least, human beings desire affirmation. Persons want their gifts, skills, and talents to be acknowledged. Boyd-Franklin notes that persons need continuous affirmation to combat life stressors in the learning process.[10] Continuous encouragement also helps persons maintain emo-

tional and psychological healthiness, deterring them from developing and retaining psychopathic tendencies. In the supervision of CPE students, the supervisor can continuously offer encouragement, particularly after having offered constructive feedback. The supervisor should always attempt to end constructive criticism of students on a positive note, highlighting their gifts, skills, and talents so that students are not left feeling wounded by supervisory feedback.

Utilizing Womanist Liberation Theology To Assist CPE Students With "Remythologizing" Their Theological Narrative

Helping students remythologize their theological construct is one of the primary aims of CPE supervision. Why is this? This is because students entering CPE had ideas and beliefs about the Divine imparted to them early on in life. These views have the potential to both help and hinder persons' understandings of their pastoral identity and competency. Most students enter CPE with limited pastoral authority and confidence in their pastoral competency. Supervision in CPE affords students an avenue for enhancing their pastoral voice and skills. Thus, CPE is an educational resource with a supervisor and peer group that helps students reinterpret their relationship with the Divine so that students can fully embrace their pastoral identity along with their pastoral strengths and growing edges. In other words, supervision, along with peer inactions, helps students experience the Divine's love. Womanist liberation theology undergirds this belief.

Birthed from Alice Walker's definition of "womanism,"[11] womanist theology holds the controlling and dominating powers of the world accountable, calling into question African American and other women of color's suppressed role in the church, the community, the family, the larger society, and world. Womanist theologian, ethicist, and social critic Katie Geneva Cannon promotes an ethic of care towards Black women and other women of color who experience racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia—in essence, those who feel they are the most powerless on the scale of power dynamics. Thus, although womanist theology addresses the experiences of African American women and other women of color, it can be a universal theological construct because it speaks to any person experiencing powerlessness and lack of confidence. Therefore, womanist theology helps supervision in a multicultural and multifaith atmosphere because most students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexual orientation, strug-

gle with feeling powerless and have difficulty embracing their pastoral authority at least once during their lifetime.

One way to demonstrate care is to assist oppressed persons in understanding that the Divine has given them a unique voice. For example, many African American theologians mention that white Christian slave masters used the Bible as a method to justify Black inferiority and promote African and African American enslavement. An ideological myth needed "to legitimize the hermeneutical circle of Christian slave apologists was the understanding that the law of the Divine and the law of the land gave them an extraordinary right to deprive Black people of liberty and to offer Blacks for sale in the market like any other articles of merchandise."[12] This myth caused enslaved Africans and African Americans to understand the Divine as outside or away from their experience, meaning on the side of white Christian slave masters. Thus, enslaved Africans and African Americans internalized the value of their humanity as less than that of white persons. In light of this myth, many African American theologians argue that the most helpful method of demonstrating care to enslaved Africans and African Americans is to help them remythologize their understanding of divine will by reinterpreting oppressive biblical passages—thus causing enslaved Africans and African Americans to experience the presence of the Divine as being "Emmanuel" or "with" them instead of against them.

The concept of remythologizing is interfaith and multicultural. Various religious traditions and cultures utilize the concept of remythologizing to experience the presence of the Divine as a being who loves, cares about, and values them. For example, the Torah's story of Esther is a golden nugget that many Jewish theologians turn to in order to remythologize their understanding that Yahweh is one who journeys with them and is on their side against oppressive persons. The young heroine of the story, Esther, is an orphaned Jewish teenage girl who rises to power as the wife and queen of a notable king and subsequently stops a devilish plot by the king's confidant and military chief, Haman, that would have killed all the Jewish persons currently living in the area. In the face of Jewish cultural and ethnic oppression, the narrative of Esther helps Jewish persons remember that Yahweh cares about and loves them. The narrative of Esther provides Jewish persons with hope, encouraging them with the message that Yahweh supports their longevity and fruitfulness despite others' attempts to exterminate them. For example, survivors of the tragic Jewish holocaust,[13] facilitated by Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime that caused the genocide of roughly six million Jews from

1941–1945 under the guise that it was God's will, value and deeply hold the story of Esther as a reminder that Yahweh stands in solidarity with their victimization.

Remythologizing is similar to narrative theory and the concept of "restorying" in that persons redefine or reinterpret negative stories to discover positive meanings. Remythologizing pushes the concept of restorying a bit further in that remythologizing asserts that aspects of the story that the person has internalized are actually false.[14] For example, if one was told as a child that the sky is red, then restorying helps one understand and learn that at some points in the day it is in fact the case that the sky *appears* to be red, such as when the sun is in the process of rising and setting. However, remythologizing helps one understand and learn that it could never have been the case that the sky was red because at all times the sky is blue or gray even when the sun is in the process of rising or setting. Remythologizing asserts that most of what persons have been taught has been based primarily on untruths or myths, and hence persons are invited to debunk the myths. The understanding of remythologizing can be used as a model in CPE to help students discover and value their own unique pastoral voice—a voice that has been oppressed, hampered, or even told doesn't exist through each student's family system's theological narrative.

How Does It Work?: An Example Of "Remythologizing" In The Practice Of CPE Supervision

Norma was looking forward to graduating in May of 2013 with a Master of Divinity degree from a seminary located in a northern suburb of Chicago. Ministry is a second career for Norma, who is in her mid-forties. She had a lucrative first career in social services, working as a hospital social worker. Norma is a married African American who is the mother of four small children. Norma, along with her husband and children, are Baptist. During her interview, Norma reported that she is very conservative and evangelical. Hence, she desired to learn in CPE how to be open and gain working relationships with persons from various faith traditions and cultures.

Upon entering CPE, Norma formulated goals related to self-care, interfaith ministry/pluralism, and time management. She expressed a call to pastoral counseling and she believed these goals would strengthen her ministry. One of Norma's peers asked her about her call and specifically why she felt called to pastoral counseling. Norma responded by saying that most of

the time women in her particular faith community are limited to working in pastoral care/counseling ministries because of sexism. My supervisory goal for Norma was to help her discern what is her authentic, genuine pastoral identity and call. Thus, after I established trust with Norma during the initial stages of group and individual supervision, I asked her to reflect on the messages that were given to her as a child about women in ministry. Near the beginning of the unit, Norma reflected during one group session that her mother died when she was a child and, as a result, her father primarily raised her, and he unknowingly called on her to help care for and serve him along with her younger siblings. Norma also spoke about how her father held strict evangelical and conservative views, and Norma believed her father transferred those beliefs to her. Hence, because she was called on to serve her father and siblings as a child, she struggles with time management and self-care because she is always taking care of other people; in addition, the conservative views imparted to her early on impede her ability to work with others in a multicultural context.

My next supervisory strategy entailed inviting Norma to work in certain environments around the hospital where she would interact with persons from non-Christian, liberal traditions. For example, I asked Norma to lead our hospital's interfaith prayer services that our spiritual care department routinely hosts every Sunday. This gave Norma an opportunity to experience and learn about other faith traditions. Next, I invited Norma to partner with our Jewish and Muslim community pastors and visit our Jewish and Muslim hospital patients. This gave Norma an opportunity to witness and experience the humanity of various persons instead of labeling and projecting her assumptions onto them. Norma's pastoral care grew to be phenomenal. She maintained openness and vulnerability. She was able to journey with patients and allow them to guide the encounter.

By mid-unit, another growing edge surfaced for Norma. She became so enthralled with visiting patients that sometimes she would keep working past the end of her shift. When I brought this up for Norma to consider, she reflected and informed me that she believed she wrestled with perfectionism because of her father's belief that the Divine rewards hardworking, submissive Christian women. My supervisory intervention was to challenge Norma to practice self-care. I provided her with a list of sixty self-care practices, which included journaling, exercising, meditating, gardening, and sleeping. My supervisory goal was to also help her develop trust in her pastoral voice and authority so she wouldn't work so hard to prove herself. Thus, I asked

her to read liberation theology materials. Based on my theological and spiritual perspective, my goal was to help Norma "remythologize" her view of women clergy and her understanding of herself as a pastor.

As a result of her journaling, reading, and meditating time, Norma talked about her desire to develop her pastoral leadership skills. During a CPE group session, Norma happily announced to her peers that she believed she had the gifts, skills, and talents to pastor. She began expressing the goal of being ordained. At the same time, Norma expressed being scared that she did not know how to be a clergywoman. From her experience of watching male pastors in her Baptist faith tradition, she assumed clergywomen are leaders who are waited on "hand and foot" and served by others. This assumption conflicted with her desire to want to serve. Norma had developed such a strong love to serve others that she struggled with confronting people. This surfaced in her relationships with her CPE group; she rarely challenged her peers.

Before entering CPE, Norma seemed to value the voices of male authorities in her Baptist faith tradition. I wondered if she valued the voices of Baptist clergywomen, too, and whether it would be helpful for Norma to have relationships with clergywomen. In that way, even after CPE ended, she could still benefit from the voice of a clergywoman encouraging her to continue walking in her own pastoral authority and speaking her voice. My supervisory strategy, which I believed would develop into a long-term strategy for Norma, was to invite Norma to collaborate with Baptist clergywomen. I referred her to three local Baptist clergywomen who are well respected and justice oriented, and I encouraged Norma to meet with them. Norma was open to my invitation. My supervisory strategy also centered on the narrative approach. I hoped that in her encounters with these clergywomen, they would share stories from their ministerial journey that would help Norma find encouragement and strength for her own journey.

I also used the narrative approach during individual supervision with Norma by sharing my own story about the strengths and challenges I experienced in finding my own voice as a clergywoman. I also shared my joys and concerns about my ordination process in my Baptist tradition. I encouraged Norma to care for herself in this process as well by striving hard to break barriers and, at the same time, exercising self-care by not sacrificing her own health and wholeness for the sake of achieving a milestone. I am aware of my own transference that arose in my supervisory relationship

with Norma. To combat this, I engaged in an appropriate use of self and countertransference as described by Pamela Cooper-White.[15]

Throughout the rest of the unit, I also utilized role-playing as another supervisory strategy with Norma to teach her the importance of self-care and time management. For example, I intentionally arrived late to two individual supervision meetings to show Norma how it felt when someone did not honor their time commitment.

As the unit ended, Norma spoke about finally finding her voice. She demonstrated much joy and pride to her peers and me whenever she reflected on her future ministerial call. She expressed an interest in pastoral care and counseling, not because she could not become a pastor but because she wanted to help other persons in ministry, particularly women, find their pastoral voice. Norma announced to her peers and me that she felt like a tiger, and she loved the idea of having a roar because that meant she had power. More than anything, Norma garnered power by discovering her pastoral identity and authority. She informed her peers that she would keep roaring. I expressed my own supervisory fears. In the spirit of honesty, I encouraged Norma to keep roaring even after CPE had ended because I feared she would go back to being a caretaking, submissive Christian woman with no voice. I applied continuous affirmation and empowerment to Norma's roar until the last day of the CPE program.

Liberative Learning Does Not Happen Overnight Or Inevitably

Unfortunately, learning is not always possible in CPE. Although CPE invites students to gain awareness of their unique pastoral identity and competency through self-reflection, some students don't want to critically self-reflect and gain liberation, opting to be told answers rather than reflect on them. This concept is what Freire termed the "banking" theory.[16] A CPE student I supervised during an extended unit, Barney, struggled with understanding the concept of self-reflection. Barney informed the peer group and myself that his family of origin had taught him to honor the voice of authority. Thus, he constantly looked to me for validation, and he frequently asked me to tell him how to provide pastoral care instead of experimenting, practicing, and trusting what he believed was the appropriate method of providing pastoral care. Toward the end of the unit, I observed Barney constantly demonstrating this type of behavior and exhibiting an inability to move and honor his own pastoral practice. To meet Barney's

need, I informed him that as the supervisor, I had decided to tell him what to do, which immediately sparked his interest. I informed Barney to visit the units and employ the pastoral approach of guiding. When Barney came back to my office, he talked about his experiences of when guiding was helpful and when it was harmful. He also discussed other pastoral strategies he would use instead, thus self-reflecting on his own pastoral identity and competency. Whereas I would normally refrain from telling students what to do and giving directions, in this case, utilizing the banking theory that Barney was raised to believe in was the catalyst for Barney to embrace self-reflection.

I am also aware that education is a lifelong process. Learning does not occur overnight. For example, it may occur after CPE ends. Students may have future experiences that lead to self-awareness about constructive feedback said to them in the past during their CPE experience. The supervisor is called to trust the process of learning, too. Students do not necessarily have to learn during the supervisory time in CPE because they will have future opportunities to learn and gain insights through experiences with others that clarify points made in CPE. Thus, learning is a continuous circular motion where we move forward by constantly looking backward.

I am also aware that there are some students whom I cannot reach. Remythologizing may not work in all instances. There are also instances where students may remythologize in a negative direction or to a negative extreme. For example, I supervised a student, Thomas, who was a bit narcissistic and arrogant and struggled with being a team player in the spiritual department. Unfortunately, Thomas utilized my theory of remythologizing to further distance himself from his departmental colleagues and peers by suggesting that he was set apart or different in his relationships with colleagues when colleagues tried to hold him accountable and educate him to be a team player.

In conclusion, utilizing Black feminist and womanist theology can be helpful in CPE, specifically supervision. Black feminist and womanist theology offers a helpful framework for understanding the work of CPE, which is largely a process of adult transformation and learning. Utilizing Black feminist and womanist theology in supervision, through the caring methods of empathy, accountability, and affirmation, can help CPE students remythologize their theological narratives. Thus, students can better embrace their unique pastoral identity and gifts, leading to liberation and freedom.

NOTES

1. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

2. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

3. Gloria Jean Watkins is better known by her pen name "bell hooks," which she intentionally does not capitalize to signify her rage against what she believes is domination and oppression. She is an American author, feminist, and social activist. Her writing has focused on the interconnectivity of race, capitalism, and gender and what she describes as their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination. She has published over thirty books and numerous scholarly and mainstream articles, appeared in several documentary films, and participated in various public lectures. Primarily through a postmodern perspective, hooks has addressed race, class, and gender in education, art, history, sexuality, mass media, and feminism.

4. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45.

5. This student's name, along with the names of other students mentioned in this article, have been changed in order to respect confidentiality.

6. Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 204.

7. Cari Jackson, *The Gift to Listen: The Courage to Hear* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 11.

8. Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*, 296.

9. Jackson, *The Gift to Listen*, 11.

10. Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*, 276.

11. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983), xi.

12. Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995) , 43.

13. Donald L. Niewyk and Francis R. Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 45–52.

14. Please note that I am not using the term *myth* in the same sense that biblical scholars use this term. What biblical scholars mean by myth is "spiritual truths" but not necessarily "historical facts."

15. Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 6–7.

16. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 45.