



feral feminisms

Black British Feminisms
and Performance

issue 16 • winter 2025

We the Liturgists: The Womanist Liturgical Soundscapes of Black British Women

Medomfo Owusu

*This article examines the womanist liturgical soundscapes curated by Black British Christian women. By analysing womanist liturgical soundscapes, we can assert the ways in which Black British women view God and themselves as Imago Dei (the image of God), and Vox Dei (the voice of God). To structure the article, I use a womanist liturgical framework coined by Yarborough in her 2022 article, “A Practice of Weaving: The Life and On-Going Legacy of Womanist Liturgical Praxis.” The “rituals of resistance” section, examines the literary and sonic contributions of womanist theologian Selina R. Stone’s (2023b) book *Tarry Awhile: Drawing on the Riches of Black Spirituality for the Whole Church* as it pertains to asserting the transnational insights of Black British Christian women’s spirituality. In “Embodiment as Protest,” the contributions of multi-genre musician Marsha B. Morrison’s and gospel music pedagogue Karen Gibson’s to the *Easter Project* by gospel choir *The Spirituals* display are analysed. Finally, the work of singer-songwriter Annatoria in her 2024 EP *Full Circle* is evaluated in light of the third tenet, “aesthetic disruption.”*

The 2024 Premier Gospel Awards show, hosted by the British Christian radio station Premier Gospel, is a testament to the ways in which Black British Christianity invites the African diaspora to express their devotion to God through music. Amongst this year’s winners were African American gospel singer CeCe Winans, Zimbabwean British singer Annatoria, and Black British gospel choir *The Spirituals*, each demonstrating what Black Catholic liturgist Thea Bowman (2001, 213) defines as “soulful,” the myriad soundscapes of Black Christians. Unlike the specific sonic terms of music and preaching, soundscapes connect the meaning of the sonic expression to the occasion and/or place of its occurrence (Shelemay 2015). For artists at the Premier Gospel awards show, the curation of soulful soundscapes in Britain is not limited to one country but includes artists across the African diaspora. There is a liturgical element to soulful soundscapes in that they are “embodied theology” (Chan 2006, 62), not confined within the Eurocentric liturgical conventions of specific geographies or liturgical themes (Maynard-Reid 2000). The application of liturgy as embodied theology is holistic, connecting the mind, body, and spirit through multi-sensory means such as imagination, sound, and even memory (Bowman 2001). Thus, the liturgical concept of soulful soundscapes aligns with the tenets of womanism.

In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), African American author and poet Alice Walker defines a womanist as:

A black feminist or feminist of colour... Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless (Walker 1983, xi).



Since womanism connects the arts, spirituality, community and Black women's voices, womanist liturgical scholarship therefore seeks to evaluate the ways in which Black Christian women across the African diaspora experience God through their communities and senses. African American womanist scholar-practitioners including Lisa Allen-McLaurin, Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, and Khalia Jelks Williams have constructed frameworks to explore the liberating liturgical experiences Black Christian women across the diaspora create whilst resisting Eurocentric liturgical frameworks that historically have not considered celebrating the cultural and spiritual identities of marginalised people (Allen 2021; Williams 2020; Yarborough 2022). Although the womanist thinkers mentioned so far are African American, the core themes of Black feminism and spirituality make womanism applicable in the Black British community, with political theologians like Selina R. Stone (2023a) analysing womanist thought amongst Black British Christians. What is more, while Bowman's (2001) theory of embodied theology and soulful soundscapes is not limited to the Black Catholic tradition in the USA, womanist liturgical frameworks are also applicable in transnational and interdenominational conversations.

To understand what can be incorporated into a womanist liturgical soundscape, it is important to consider how womanist liturgical scholarship prioritises the body of Black women (Williams 2020; Yarborough 2022). Notably, Williams' (2020) writings illuminate the body, as she brings her identity as a liturgical dancer into the conversation. Williams (2020) uses her lived experience as the springboard for a womanist epistemology through which she engages with Allen (2021) and Yarborough (2022) to articulate womanist liturgical thought in academic settings. Thus, the pioneering frameworks of Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, Khalia J. Williams and Lisa Allen create an invitation for womanist scholars across the African diaspora to evaluate the womanist liturgies in their communities. My lived experience as a British Ghanaian Christian woman well-versed in Black sacred music enables me to analyse the womanist liturgical soundscapes of Black British Christian women.

This article will examine the womanist liturgical soundscapes curated by Black British Christian women. By analysing womanist liturgical soundscapes, we can assert the ways in which Black British women view God and themselves as *Imago Dei* (the image of God), and *Vox Dei* (the voice of God). In essence, we see how Black British Christian women view the divinity that is displayed through their soundscapes and sonic curation. To structure the article, I will use a womanist liturgical framework coined by Yarborough in her 2022 article, "A Practice of Weaving: The Life and On-Going Legacy of Womanist Liturgical Praxis." In this article, Yarborough cites Lisa Allen, Melva Costen, Khalia J. Williams and other womanist liturgical scholars in considering three tenets of womanist liturgical praxis: rituals as resistance, embodiment as protest, and aesthetic disruption. With each tenet, creativity is considered an outlet for the theological idea of Black women being image-bearers of God. As a result, soundscapes can be engaged as another outlet for Black women to be image-bearers and also voice-bearers of God. In this article, three case studies of Black British Christian women's liturgical soundscapes in the form of playlists, sermonettes and albums, will be analysed. In the "rituals of resistance" section, we examine the literary and sonic contributions of womanist theologian Selina R. Stone's (2023b) book *Tarry Awhile: Drawing on the Riches of Black Spirituality for the Whole Church* as it pertains to asserting the transnational insights of Black British Christian women's spirituality. Continuing the theme of creating space, we next consider the ways in which multi-genre musician Marsha B. Morrison's and gospel music pedagogue Karen Gibson's contributions to the *Easter Project* by gospel choir The Spirituals display the



second tenet of “embodiment as protest.” Finally, we listen to singer-songwriter Annatoria by analysing her depiction of God and herself in her 2024 EP *Full Circle* under the third tenet of “aesthetic disruption.”

Rituals of Resistance

Throughout the year, many mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches follow a liturgical calendar of Biblical readings paired with art and music as they reflect on the ministry of Jesus Christ. Theologians JoAnne Marie Terrell (2005) and James H. Cone (2011) assert the liberated and even revolutionary behaviour of Christ, echoing the liturgical practice of expressing justice that has prevailed in communities of Global Southern ancestry. Cole Arthur Riley, an Episcopalian and African American, became a liturgical voice of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement through her justice and humanity-oriented liturgical on her social media handle, *Black Liturgies* (Black Liturgies 2024). Through the work of *Black Liturgies*, Riley provided Christians across denominations with material to create rituals of resistance against racism, sexism and other forms of marginalisation. Following suit with her voice in womanist liturgical thought, theologian and liturgist Selina R. Stone was invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, to write the designated 2024 Lent book for the Anglican Church. Welby’s invitation resulted in Stone writing *Tarry Awhile* (2023b) and curating a Black music-infused playlist which is a Black British celebration of the legacies of womanism, Pentecostalism, the Windrush generation, and Black sacred music. As a womanist and Black British Christian woman, Stone uses her creativity to create and voice her position of authority in the predominantly white and male spaces of the Church of England and academia.

Black British Christian women create liturgical soundscapes with authority through “creative disruption,” which Yarborough defines as:

Creative disruption uses Black women’s stories as a means to shift the narrative ways from patriarchal norms, such as singular understandings of Black women’s identities, and for folks to consider the nuances experienced by Black women such that they too are included in the *Imago Dei* (2022, 37).

The *Imago Dei*, a Latin term for the image of God, is a lens through which we can understand the ways God’s divinity manifests in the human body based on the Creation story of Genesis 1:27 (Harrell 2008). A musicological response to the idea of the *Imago Dei* would be to acknowledge that divinity can be carried through the sounds and voices of Black women. Whilst sound is strictly aural, voices can be expressed through multi-sensory mediums. Regarding Stone’s work, she utilises the mediums of writing and playlist curation to affirm the holistic spiritual authority that she possesses within her voice. Unlike the former Archbishop of Canterbury’s Lent books, Stone’s *Tarry Awhile* (2023b) draws from the wealth of theological knowledge embedded in Black Pentecostal traditions, Black/Caribbean British culture, and womanist thought. By asserting her voice as a Black British woman with interdenominational influences in the Anglican Church, Stone implements the womanist practice of “loving the folk, loving the spirit and loving herself (Walker 1983, xi).” Cementing her presence in a patriarchal liturgical canon of Lenten reflections, Stone provides a playlist of Black religious and non-religious music to enhance the Black cultural and spiritual experience of *Tarry Awhile*. Her



religious selections are primarily African American gospel singers, revealing the transnational nature of Black British liturgical expression and the womanist ethic of loving music.

In Stone's carefully curated creative disruption, through her playlist, is the song "Alabaster Box" by Grammy Award winner and gospel musician CeCe Winans. Winans' discography incorporates multiple genres such as R&B, Contemporary Christian music, and Gospel music to cultivate an intergenerational and global following, including those in the UK (Nelson 2018). Upon initial listening to "Alabaster Box," we hear a soulful narration of the biblical figure Mary of Bethany who anoints Jesus with her precious alabaster oil. This act of worship was considered culturally inappropriate by onlookers due to how expensive alabaster oil is (John 12: 1-8). Jesus corrects the onlookers by pointing out that Mary's choice revealed her priority to honour who she believed to be the Son of God over cultural expectations to use her cloth (John 12: 1-8). Further listening to the song through a womanist lens reveals nuances that portray a creative disruption (Yarborough 2022). The sparse texture of piano and strings alongside a slow tempo sets the atmosphere for Winans to voice her unapologetic desire to worship God by any means necessary. Particular attention should be paid to the lyrics: "Don't be angry if I wash his feet with my tears, and I dry them with my hair..." (Winans 1999, 02:04-02:16). What is striking about this song is that it highlights the need for marginalised voices in society to carve out worship for God on their terms. For Mary of Bethany, this involved sacrificing perfume that was deemed culturally precious, causing a cultural and creative disruption.

As I connect "Alabaster Box" back to *Tarry Awhile*, the theme of creative disruption as a womanist liturgical ritual of resistance is prevalent. Stone's playlist and book affirm the idea that the creative and theological expressions of Black British Christians, specifically Pentecostal, are divine. Resultantly, her playlist points back to God even when not all soundscapes within the playlist are explicitly religious. Furthermore, Stone provides Black British Christian women the permission to view themselves as image-bearers of God, and also voice-bearers of God through singing and other means.

The grounding of the divine nature of Blackness shifts to questioning what liberating spaces entail for Black British women. Yarborough defines dreaming of liberation as "redemptive reconstruction," writing:

Redemptive reconstruction investigates what is possible now and highlights what it means to create more liberating spaces in a world where Black women can flourish (2022, 37).

Stone's blending of religious and non-religious music in her Lent playlist not only provides a glimpse of "redemptive reconstruction," but it also alludes to the practices of early African American Christianity. Although songs such as "Feeling Good" by multi-genre artist Nina Simone and "Battle" by UK garage artist Wookie are not as explicitly religious as "Alabaster Box," Stone is informing others that her Christian faith, nurtured in Black British Christian spaces, can be expressed explicitly and implicitly with music across the African diaspora. Costen (2010) noted that enslaved African Christians did not distinguish between religious and non-religious music, much like the spirituality of their West African ancestors. The binaries of religious and non-religious practices were popularised by religious historian Mircea Eliade (1961), who primarily researched European religious practices. Although Eliade penned this theory of sacred-secular binary in academic contexts during the 1960s, many communities across the African diaspora contested this binary in various ways during the colonial enslavement and post-colonial years. The reason for this binary, as observed by Black Catholic



liturgist Cyprian Lamar Rowe (1997), lies primarily in the cultural superiority complex of Westerners, missionaries and non-missionaries, when engaging with the nuanced cultures that did not conform to Western Christian ideologies. Stone's playlist consequently resists the Western dichotomy of separating religious and non-religious music by reconstructing the liberating and Africana-affirming Christian faith her ancestors experienced on the African continent and continued to experience under enslavement.

One non-religious song from Stone's playlist that portrays "redemptive reconstruction" is "Get It Together" by African American multi-genre singer-songwriter India Arie Simpson, professionally known as India.Arie. Known for expressing spirituality in her music outside of religious conventions, the Grammy award winner has been consistent in not remaining in religious conventions (Eldridge 2023). In a similar vein to Winans, India.Arie embraces a sparse texture, intentionally placing light violins or breathy homophonic R&B soprano-alto harmonisations over the neo-soul guitar to emphasise points of structure or certain lyrics. The chorus lyrics of "Get It Together" are affirmative of the connection between the body and the spirit, saying:

Get it together (You wanna heal your body)
Get it together (You have to heal your heart)
Whatsoever you sow you will reap
Get it together
You can fly, fly, fly
(Simpson 2002, 01:00-01:27)

The womanist liturgical ear recognises the theme of sacred self-care in these lyrics accompanied by calming textures. In her book *Sacred Self Care: Daily Practices for Nurturing Our Whole Selves*, psychologist and minister Chanequa Walker Barnes (2023) advocates for the holistic practice of taking care of one's body, mind and soul, reasoning that each human being is a "good and perfect gift from God." Echoing the womanist essence of the *Imago Dei* in formulating a "ritual of resistance," India.Arie's lyrics and Barnes' writings both voice a healing outlook towards the season of Lent, instead of focusing on the suffering Christ endured when he was tempted by the devil and crucified on the cross.

Focusing on the healing of Black women in liturgical practices echoes the final thread of Yarborough's womanist liturgical exploration of rituals as resistance, which is womanist celebration. She writes:

Womanist celebration is the act of gratitude toward God and the community, bringing together our whole selves and giving us space to consider the joy of what it means to participate in a liberating community (2022, 37).

Gratitude and participation go hand in hand, with the Psalmist of Psalm 150 instructing an embodied praise to God with all materials that can be found (Psalm 150). Embracing a person's intersectionality echoes the pattern seen in the Judaeo-Christian Creation story, where God fills the earth and universe with many elements (Genesis 1-2). In the traditional Lenten thought, it is appropriate to prepare for the solemn occasion of the crucifixion of Christ (Stone 2023b). Through a womanist framework, the coexistence of joy and pain along with bodies and spirit is welcomed (Yarborough 2022). In ethicist Emilie M. Townes' edited volumes *Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (1993) and *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (1997) she, alongside her



womanist colleagues, voiced the importance of not negating the joy that Black women experience amidst pain. In this context, music serves as a medium to express their experiences. Theologian and musicologist Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (1993), a contributor to both volumes, also explores the joyous nature of Negro Spirituals. Jones (2024) highlights that Black music researchers use the term “Negro Spiritual” for a socio-political and pedagogical reasons; thus, this article uses the term Negro Spirituals to acknowledge the suffering that enslaved Africans were subjected to.

Additionally, the practice of joy amongst Black women can be seen as a form of resistance to systematic oppression, confidently voicing God’s presence in and through their lives. The very first song in Stone’s playlist is the song “Optimistic” by the African American religious multi-genre group Sounds of Blackness. Founded in 1969, with the current choir director Gary Hines, the group’s Grammy award-winning songs continue the tradition of joy and lament that was spearheaded by the Negro Spirituals (Harold 2021). Due to their engagement with disco and R&B soundscapes, alongside the traditional gospel choral soundscape, Sounds of Blackness cultivated the space to dance; a liturgical practice amongst enslaved Africans that liturgist Kathleen S. Turner (2021) observed was monitored and legally suppressed in the State Codes across the United States of America. When listening to “Optimistic,” we hear how celebration is displayed as a form of resistance in lyrical and textural layers.

The opening lyrics of “Optimistic” affirm the presence of Black people in worship spaces, with a baritone speaking voice repeating the utterance over a dance-R&B blend: “The Blackness, keep, keep on, never say die” (Sounds of Blackness 1991, 00:00-00:44). The value of Black bodies, as explored by Stone in *Tarry Awhile* (2023b), has been subjected to various forms of policing in religious and non-religious settings. Having these lyrics uttered in speech as a recurring textual motif indicates the authority of Black people in culture and spirituality consistently asserted amongst themselves and others. The power of dignifying Black bodies amidst suffering is also reinforced by two solo mezzo-soprano vocals who continue the theme by focusing on being affirmed by God, rather than oppressors, in the lyrics of verses 1 and 2:

When in the midst of sorrow
You can't see up when looking down
A brighter day tomorrow will bring

You hear the voice of reason
Telling you this can never be done
No matter how hard reality seems
Just hold on to your dreams, yeah
(Sounds of Blackness 1991, 00:47-01:20)

In the act of womanist celebration, the two different vocal textures accompanied by hip-hop/R&B instrumentation celebrate the divinity that manifests within the myriad of Black creative expression, Black bodies and voices. In consequence, they enhance Stone’s argument that Black people’s embodiment and vocalisation of the Christian faith and Christian God need to be studied as a way of protesting Eurocentric liturgical practices that have not accommodated an array of liturgical expressions (2023b).



Embodiment as Protest

When citing womanist liturgical literature for her article, Yarborough highlights the following sentence from the article “Love Your Flesh: The Power and Protest of Embodied Worship” (2020) by Reverend Doctor Khalia J Williams:

Therefore, my knowledge of God is embodied, and the expressions of my faith in worship are deeply embedded in the entirety of my being—in my body. This knowledge calls me to engage in worship from a perspective that brings about a liberating dynamic for my personhood.

Yarborough echoes the idea of “embodied knowledge” in liturgical practices when she defines her second tenet of womanist liturgical praxis as “embodiment as protest:”

The womanist liturgical scholarship requires honesty about how we engage the body, whose body and the necessary impact of centring marginalised bodies. It enfleshes our work, prioritising lived experiences and the impact of the rituals and practices on the material conditions of those participating (2022, 37).

Upon initial investigation, the works of The Spirituals provide insights for prioritising Black bodies and soundscapes in liturgical settings by using music and voices. Founded in 2020 by Marsha B. Morrison and Junior Garr as a response to the murder of African American George Floyd, the Black British gospel choir came to prominence during UK Black History Month for their interpretation of Negro Spirituals; notably their rendition of “Wade in the Water” (The Spirituals 2021). Their EP *Easter Project* was released in music video format in 2021 during the second British pandemic lockdown, before being released on streaming services in 2022 (The Spirituals Choir 2021a; The Spirituals 2022). For The Spirituals to arrange Negro Spirituals, that originated from United States of America, demonstrates the transnational nature of soulful soundscapes in Britain. Within their music videos, the choir demonstrate how testifying to God’s glory from a Black body and voice provokes a form of protest. In addition to this, unlike the recordings, the music videos prioritise the speaking voice of Karen Gibson MBE, the founder of the 2018 Royal Wedding Kingdom Choir, as she provides scripture readings and theological interpretations that strengthen the liturgical meaning of the songs (Tapper 2018).

The liturgical event of Easter encourages Christians across the world to meditate on the suffering that Jesus Christ’s body endured. Cone (2011) argued that the crucifixion of Christ on the cross was akin to the lynching of Black bodies in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone previously explored the spirituality of Black bodies in Christianity by analysing the Negro Spirituals of enslaved Africans in his earlier book, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1992). As the European enslavers policed the spirituality and body movements of enslaved Africans, Negro Spirituals were formed as a vocal ritual of resistance and embodied protest in the clandestine hush harbour meetings, where illegal expressions of Christianity were practiced (Costen 2010). Theologian Yolanda Y. Smith (2010) analyses the theology of Negro Spirituals further in her book *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education*, arguing that it can be used as a form of intersectional education in Christian spaces. The sonic transnational connection that The Spirituals share with African Americans indicates that their perceptions of *Imago Dei* and *Vox Dei* involve the entire Christian history of the African diaspora, rather than the Black British context alone.



One sub-genre of Negro Spirituals focuses on the crucifixion, with song lyrics packed with embodied lament such as “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?;” this song is included in The Spirituals’ repertoire. Other notable examples performed today include “Crucifixion” and “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” which have been sung by the likes of internationally acclaimed Black opera singers Marian Anderson and Jessye Norman (Jones 2023). Marsha B. Morrison, who is The Spirituals’ songwriter/arranger and choir director, engages the body and Negro Spiritual “Were you there?” in the music video of a medley titled “The Crucifixion” (The Spirituals Choir 2021d). Using the instrumentation of West African drumming, church bells and European strings, with the choir dressed in blue, heightens the sonic intensity by beginning with unison texture and ending the song with three-part homophonic harmony. The listener is prompted to have a more emotional reaction to the lyrics, with attention to repeated lyrics such as “tremble;” the physical phenomenon that “Were you there” portrays as a reaction to seeing Jesus’ crucified body on the cross (The Spirituals Choir 2021d, 05:15-22, 06:07-06:14). Morrison, in the second verse of “Were you there when they crucified my Lord,” directs the choir to move their hands and subtly sway their hips. The combined usage of West African and Eurocentric composing techniques not only invites embodiment, but it also points to the reclamation of Eurocentric musical features being utilised in Black liturgical freedom. Thus, a womanist liturgical analysis of this moment calls for further examination of what ways Black bodies have been monitored in liturgical spaces globally.

One example outside of the Black British and African American contexts occurred during British colonial rule of Ghana. Liturgist Ephraim Amu noted in an interview with the BBC that Ghanaians were forbidden to wear traditional clothes or sing religious songs with indigenous soundscapes (BBC Sounds 1993). Amu protested this by wearing *ntama* to service and composing choral music in Indigenous soundscapes, which resulted in him not being able to complete his ordination process in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Connecting Amu’s story with The Spirituals’ choir rendition of “Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)?,” some themes of engaging with the body emerge. First, engaging with the body not only involves the agency to vocalise experiences, but also how bodies are presented with forms of clothing and their movements. Second, each behaviour by a person of African ancestry in liturgical practices is connected to a history of liberation and control. As image-bearers and voice-bearers of God, Black British women join other people of African ancestry by seeking ways for their bodies to express the coexistence of creativity and divinity.

The recognition and hyper-visualisation of Black women’s bodies align with what ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman (2013) describes as a womanist ethic of incarnation. Continuing the conversation of Christology’s relation to Black bodies from James H. Cone, Delores Williams and Joan Marie Terrell, Marshall Turman also offers an intervention that enables the body and the treatment of the body of Jesus Christ to be examined in her book *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* (2013). By analysing how Christ’s physical body has been perceived over Christian history, she connected her analysis with case studies, investigating the impact various cultural rituals had on the bodies of African American women and men. Listening to The Spirituals’ *Easter Project* EP through a womanist lens, it becomes important to evaluate the extent to which a womanist *ethic* of incarnation manifests in the choir’s soundscape. The spoken contributions of Black British gospel foremother, and founder of The Kingdom Choir, Karen Gibson in the *Easter Project* prove that a womanist ethic of incarnation is expressed in the lyrics of “Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)?” When introducing the song “Calvary,” Gibson, dressed in blue with golden hoops and silver hair, gives her sermonette with no accompaniment:



It is Jesus the divine who had the courage, understanding and discernment to utter those words. But it is Jesus the man who begged the Father to free him from the torture to come as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus the Son who cried out to his Father in his anguish and abandonment at Calvary. Jesus desires to flee yet commits to obey, demonstrating not only his humanity but the understanding of divine purpose...Because of the example of Jesus' submission and sacrifice, we are given the strength to also confess, "not my will but yours be done" and trust that our Father in all situations, knows what he is doing in our lives, even when we feel confused and alone (The Spirituals 2021c, 01:41-02:15, 02:40-02:59)

What Gibson articulates in speech is a Christology that affirms the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. The rituals of torture and crucifixion on Christ's body are experienced by listeners of Gibson's emphatic and theological reflection. Christ's dehumanisation reveals how human suffering is divine suffering, echoing the sentiments of theologian Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (1992, 100) who calls Jesus the "liberator of the sufferers." Considering that Black British women were publicly subjugated to dehumanisation during the pandemic, for example Olympian Bianca Williams was stopped and arrested by the Met police alongside her partner and newborn, the concept of a liberating Christ whose body has also been dehumanised makes the Easter season of the liturgical calendar more visceral (Siddique 2020). The resonance of suffering then spills out into emotion-infused expressions from the voice and the body.

Voices used in the manner of speaking (singing or other vocalisations) become radically expansive vehicles to showcase God's essence and theological insights. When reflecting on what radical expansion means in a womanist liturgical context, Yarborough (2022, 37) creates an invitation to "think about a wide range of bodies and to be inclusive in how we discuss the multiplicity of bodies in liturgical scholarship." Gibson's sermonette invoked homiletical qualities, despite not being within the liturgical conventions of a church service. The solemn nature of her theological reflection with tones of hope aligns with what homiletic and singer Luke A. Powery identifies in his book *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (2012) as the homiletic practice of death hope embedded in Negro Spirituals. These Negro Spirituals, often sung after sermons, or at times classified as sermons in their entity, in the hush harbours of enslaved Africans could be considered one of the earliest womanist liturgical soundscapes (Costen 2010; Powery 2012). Enslaved Africans used their voices as embodied vessels to protest the confining theologies of the plantations and carve out space and time to ritually sermonise and sing together. To liturgy as "embodied theology," all aspects of giftedness carried within the body must be celebrated, including spoken and sung dimensions of the voice. Karen Gibson's sermonette occurred during a pandemic lockdown that forbade in-person gatherings for church and monitored national protests against the dehumanisation of Black lives. Her words transcend the bittersweet emotions of Easter, a liturgical event, and speak to the intersectional pain experienced by Black British Christians and many. Thus, Gibson's authority as a "preacher" and foremother in Black British gospel music sets the aesthetic precedent for The Spirituals Choir to respond accordingly with various vocalisations and texts that depict their belief in a liberating God.



Aesthetic Disruption

A concept echoed throughout this article is the expansiveness of aesthetics. Aesthetics, with its multi-sensory considerations, undergird the reasons for Black British women like Selina R. Stone, Marsha B. Morrison and Karen Gibson to engage in their creativity and curate liturgical spaces that can be experienced across all geographies. What might initially appear and sound like simple creative expression within liturgical soundscapes is what Yarborough (2022, 38) considers to be “aesthetic disruption.” Yarborough elaborates her third and final tenet as a continuous practice “to reconsider how we are unpacking God in scholarship through examples and aesthetics (Yarborough 2022, 38). What has been depicted in this article so far, is a yearning to listen to God in everyday life. Soundscapes used by Black British women that abide within and out of the liturgical calendar, and liturgical aesthetic conventions, are disruptive in liturgical scholarship that has been dominated by Eurocentric scholars of mainline denominations.

Whilst the works of Stone, Morrison, and Gibson align with the liturgical calendars, the Zimbabwean British gospel singer-songwriter Annatoria’s EP *Full Circle* pushes us to consider what “aesthetic disruption” means. Released in July 2024, the season nine winner of *The Voice UK* penned six songs across a range of R&B, pop, and amapiano soundscapes to reflect the various experiences of Christians (Annatoria 2025). In an interview with Zimbabwean radio station *The Ignition*, Annatoria provides a breakdown of each of her six songs:

In the first song called ‘Circles’... I was talking about the two things that kind of inhibit a Christian from pursuing the things of the Lord...your community, and it’s also yourself. In one of the songs [Packed Up], I’m talking about moving on, doing something new, a new adventure. In one of the songs, called ‘Till It Gets Dark’, ... I’m talking about how I’m just a girl who likes simple things, and if I were to go on a date...one song is called ‘Calling,’ and... I’m basically saying there’s somebody calling for you. You’re saying you’re not hearing him, but you know he’s calling you, and in the Bible, it even talks about how people are without excuse because God’s visible traits are seen through nature, through creation ... I’m kind of alerting everyone that somebody’s calling for you, his name is Jesus, and it’s a bit vibey, but at the same time, I’ve got a really strong message (ZimFm 2024, 05:11-07:12).

Annatoria’s reasonings behind the inclusion of these songs in her EP reveal that her relationship with God is intertwined with her relationship with other human beings. When looking at explicitly womanist liturgical scholarship from the last ten years, a priority for Black women to have an expansive and liberating perception of God presents as a central concern. Black women’s writings display their encounters with God, themselves and others; this resonates with Annatoria’s EP *Full Circle*, which cannot be confined to the conventions of the liturgical calendar.

One scholar who examines the coexistence of women’s relationships with each other and with God is Biblical scholar and preacher Renita Weems. Within her womanist canon, her texts *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible* (2005) and *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom and the Blessings of God* (2008), reinforce a theme that aids in recognising the aesthetic disruption of Black women in liturgical spaces: how do women voice their experiences of God and others? Are those who hear the marginalised able to listen for what pain and pleasure sound like in their accounts? With these womanist epistemologies from Weems, it is possible to



recognise how Annatoria utilises pleasurable sounds from R&B and pop to create her own liturgical experience through the format of an EP, instead of a conventional church service or liturgical event. With these textures, Annatoria emphasises the theme that God and people are responsible for her spiritual growth as a Christian, including moments of doubt and romantic relationships.

In addition to Annatoria's inclusion of human relationships in her lyrics, her reference to God is also intriguing. Yarborough (2022, 38) asks a simple question: "How do we depict the God we worship?" Womanist systematic theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher writes in her book, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (2006), that the Holy Spirit is a core aspect of Black women's theological liberation. Baker-Fletcher writes this not to ignore Christ or God the Father (or as some feminist and womanist theologians offer to us, God the Parent), but to highlight the Holy Spirit as a marginalised figure in the Trinity. Interestingly, Annatoria doesn't explicitly mention God's name in her songs but emphasises the figure of Christ in her promotion campaign for *Full Circle*. Using her artistic agency to be implicit, Annatoria invites her listeners to depict the presence of God with their various imaginations. In the only music video for the *Full Circle* EP, Annatoria's song "Fountain" contains two types of imagery that implicitly indicate God. One is a lamp held by a young Black woman and a young Black man, which glows with light as they walk in the dark. The lamp alludes to the biblical references of God and God's Word being a source of light and truth (Psalm 119: 105). Another interpretation of the lamp is the biblical idea of being the "salt and light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-16). Ethnomusicologist and theologian Alisha Lola Jones uses this biblical text in her 2019 Baccalaureate at Spelman's sermon to encourage the Spelman students to recognise how their lived experiences as Black women and people can be a multi-sensory medium for others to encounter God and Black people's giftedness (Spelman College 2019). Through her understanding of "light," Jones advocates, in a similar vein to Annatoria, that our conversations about God must go hand in hand with how God's essence is shown through our bodies and various expressions. In effect, discussions about depictions of God must consider the manifestation of the *Imago Dei*, including sound and voice. Jones' hermeneutic of light provides a gateway to observe another angle of divinity to analyse the "Fountain" song through the imagery of a fountain in the music video. The chorus lyrics are vocalised by Annatoria's mezzo-soprano tessitura "I found it, flowing in me like a fountain, didn't know I could feel like this, we prayed for times like this" (Annatoria 2024b, 01:04-01:15). Visualised as a bright blue fountain flowing within a statue of a praying Black woman, and later mirrored with a statue of a praying Black man, aesthetic disruptions of how God is showcased are presented in the music video.

In Selina R. Stone's *Tarry Awhile* (2023b), she critiques the theologies that demonise the idea of darkness, which has resulted in the dehumanisation of Black bodies. By embracing the divinity carried in darkness, Stone joins other womanist scholars in protesting the Eurocentric aesthetic ideals of light, and therefore whiteness, in theological and liturgical discussions. When considering the image of the praying young Black woman, the blue fountain flowing from the statue enhances Annatoria's lyrics and vocalisations. The fountain flowing from the statues references the theological concept that the Holy Spirit dwells amongst the bodies of Christians (1 Corinthians 6:19). Within the multi-sensory experience of the music video, the scalic runs in Annatoria's vocalisations enhance the biblical imagery of the Holy Spirit as living water (John 7:37-39). The multi-sensory aesthetic of pairing sight and sound in liturgical experiences, conventional and otherwise, affirms the daily encounters Black British



sensory approach enables liturgical scholars to expansively view the applied faith of Black Christian women, which is important in recognising the ways in which dominant and marginalised cultures inform perceptions of God, and thus, relationships with God.

Conclusion

This article identifies the various ways in which Black British women curate womanist liturgical soundscapes. The case studies of scholar Selina R. Stone's book *Tarry Awhile*, The Spirituals choir's performances, and singer Annatoria's EP demonstrate different sonic expressions to showcase womanist themes of being image-bearers and voice-bearers of God. Selina R. Stone uses the playlist that accompanies her book *Tarry Awhile* to assert that God's voice can be heard in Black religious and non-religious music, with Black people being image-bearers of God. By doing this within the liturgical calendar, Stone contests the Eurocentric colonial mindsets that Black people of African ancestry are not worthy of dignity to create a "ritual of resistance." In addition, two women from The Spirituals choir, Marsha B. Morrison and Karen Gibson, embody the protest of the dehumanisation of Black bodies in different ways. Morrison directed her choir to sing arranged Negro Spirituals and to move their bodies as expression speaks to God's voice creatively manifesting through their bodies. God's voice can also be heard in the homiletical practices of Black women, as Gibson reveals in her theological interpretation of Christ's body, affirming a womanist ethic of incarnation. Finally, the singer Annatoria not only disrupts the aesthetics of liturgy by aligning her music with the everyday experiences of Christians instead of the Western liturgical calendar, but she also presents the ways in which multi-sensory expressions both showcase God's voice as well as the Black woman's body. As sound and the African diaspora are woven throughout this article, womanist liturgical scholars can continue to expand their perceptions of Black women flourishing in a multi-sensory manner within and outside of conventional liturgical settings.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible with the help of conversation partners including Sarah Adagbite, Emma Mason, Carsyn Shirk, the academic advice from Dr. Samantha Ege, Dr. Keri Day, Dr. Ambre Dromgoole, Rev. Dr. Alisha Lola Jones and Rev. Dr. Khalia J. Williams, the editing team at *Feral Feminisms*, the soulful faith of my parents Dr. Gilbert Owusu and Mrs. Baaba Owusu, the encouragement of the Styberg Library student workers and the Northwestern Community Ensemble.



Works Cited

- Allen, Lisa M. 2021. *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*. Orbis Books.
- Annatoria. 2024a. "Calling." *Spotify*. 2024.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2bSNePFmPxxSnLQp9o1YRq?si=7o-poaZYT3GZ-l-oUu5SvQ&context=spotify%3Asearch%3Afull%2Bci>.
- Annatoria. 2024b. "Annatoria Ft. Joe L Barnes - Fountain (Visualiser)." *YouTube*. March 22, 2024.
<https://youtu.be/GtbGJhg-jyo?si=wIbUSqsZCrIbV39E>.
- Annatoria. 2024c. "Full Circle." *Spotify*. July 21, 2024.
<https://open.spotify.com/album/5NOrX7sIbqclPUxez3aO5n?si=Mb-Kmi2AR6KAW9A2E3XZxw>.
- Annatoria. 2024d. "ANNATORIA 🌈🔥 on Instagram: "Fountain Ft @Iamjoe_1 Is out TONIGHT 🌈🔥." *Instagram*. March 21, 2024.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4yRe8rsu5h/?igsh=MWVqNmhbDhrcHlqdg==>.
- Annatoria. 2024e. "ANNATORIA 🌈🔥 on Instagram: 'It's Time to Danceeee 🌈🔥.'" *Instagram*. July 24, 2024.
https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9oIo6vs_Ia/?igsh=NG1keG9iaGNlaHU2.
- Baker-Fletcher, Karen. 2006. *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective*. Chalice Press.
- BBC Sounds. 1993. "African Perspective - Dr Ephraim Amu - BBC Sounds." *BBC Sounds*. November 13, 1993. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p034s4zx>.
- Black Liturgies. 2020. "Black Liturgies (@Blackliturgies) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/blackliturgies?igsh=MTd6bjZvNXNzeHNpaA==>.
- Bowman, FSPA, Thea. 2001. "The Gift of African American Sacred Song, from Lead Me, Guide Me, Published in 1987." In *Readings in African American Church Music*, edited by James Abington, 209–16. Gia Publications.
- Chan, Simon. 2006. *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community*. Intervarsity Press.
- Cone, James H. 1992. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Orbis Books.
- Cone, James H. 2011. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis Books.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. (1993) 2010. *African American Christian Worship*. Abingdon Press.
- Crawley, Ashon. 2016. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. Fordham University Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1961. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Brace and World.
- Eldridge, Tocarra. 2023. "India Arie Exclusive Interview - Consciousness Magazine." *Consciousness Magazine - Entertainment and Lifestyle Magazine*. May 15, 2023.
<https://consciousnessmagazine.com/indiaarie/>.
- Harold, Claudrena N. 2020. *When Sunday Comes: Gospel Music in the Soul and Hip-Hop Eras*. University of Illinois Press.
- Harrell, Joan R. 2008. "A Womanist Perspective: Imago Dei in Black and White." *Liturgy* 23 (3): 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04580630802003537>.
- Jones, Alisha Lola. 2024. "Alisha Lola Jones, PhD, MDiv on Instagram: 'The Popular Genre of Orally Transmitted African American Religious Folk Music Derived from Bible Narratives That Emerged before the 20th Century Is the "Negro Spiritual". Please Subscribe to My Website DrAlisha.com for My Latest Research, Consultant Services, and Other Content on Black Music Excellence. #CiteBlackWomen #Negrospiritual #Blackmusic #Music #Bhm #Musicology.'" *Instagram*. February 19, 2024.



- <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3iIcvxIzW9/?igsh=MWJpbWRtaWtzbThpMw==>
- Jones, Randy. 2023. "Browse Items - the Spirituals Database." *Spirituals-Database.com*. 2023.
<https://spirituals-database.com/omeka/items/browse?tags=Crucifixion>.
- Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. 1993. "African-American Spirituals: Confronting and Exorcising Evil through Song." In *A Troubling in My Soul: Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, edited by Emilie M. Townes. Orbis Books, 150–171.
- Marshall Turman, Eboni. 2013. *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*. Springer.
- Maynard-Reid, Pedrito U. 2000. *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives*. Intervarsity Press.
- Nasimiyyu-Wasike, Anne. 1992. "Christology and an African Woman's Experience." In *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Curt Cadorette, Orbis Books, 92–103.
- Powery, Luke A. 2012. *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*. Fortress Press.
- Riley, Cole Arthur. 2024. *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human*. Convergent Books.
- Rowe, Cyprian Lamar. 1977. "The Case for a Distinctive Black Culture." In *This Far by Faith: American Worship and Its African Roots*, edited by Robert W Hovda. The National Office for Black Catholics and the Liturgical Conference, 20–7.
- Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. 2015. *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Siddique, Haroon. 2020. "Athlete Stopped by Met Police Says It Feels like 'Being Black Is a Crime.'" *The Guardian*. July 6, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/06/bianca-williams-athlete-stopped-by-met-police-being-black-is-a-crime>.
- Simpson, India Arie. 2001. "Get It Together." *Spotify*. September 24, 2001.
<https://open.spotify.com/track/66QhdvUcKkgvNjVBjIHKGv?si=O6egizs4Sn-2P6jRfX5APA&context=spotify%3Aalbum%3A5gnsCHk9Y77xaVARBDovwf>.
- Smith, Yolanda Y. 2010. *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Sounds of Blackness. 1991. "Optimistic." *Spotify*. January 1, 1991.
https://open.spotify.com/track/7Mb7jOst43wPQELas93ARE?si=VQf7_jGUQbW4R7f-xDW1eQ.
- Spelman College. 2019. "Baccalaureate 2019." *Facebook*. May 18, 2019.
https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2057124737747204
- Stone, Selina R. 2023a. *The Spirit and the Body: Towards a Womanist Pentecostal Social Justice Ethic*. Brill U Schoningh.
- Stone, Selina R. 2023b. *Tarry Awhile: Drawing on the Riches of Black Spirituality for the Whole Church*. SPCK.
- Tapper, James. 2018. "'It Brings the Spirit Joy:' Britain's Godmother of Gospel on Why Her Choir Stole the Royal Wedding." *The Guardian*. May 26, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/26/kingdom-choir-karen-gibson-royal-wedding>.
- Terrell, Joanne Marie. 2005. *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- The Spirituals. 2022. "Easter Project." *Spotify*. 2022.
https://open.spotify.com/album/09ofZQBvHv1cQoFJDdrTB?si=Zf_ReyoZQf-RrnsGmmLAXA.
- The Spirituals Choir. 2021a. "Easter Project." *YouTube*. 2021.
http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRtAWd4nocVbf7Pa_NNH2A4O5FaVScmPW.
- The Spirituals Choir. 2021b. "Wade in the Water: Live | the Spirituals (Official Music Video)."



- YouTube*. February 14, 2021. https://youtu.be/fxZ4H-gq_lc?si=aDmOZ-DqaV8OCWed.
- The Spirituals Choir. 2021c. "Calvary Ft. Jason Nicholson-Porter | Easter Project | the Spirituals." *YouTube*. April 4, 2021. https://youtu.be/okrQ4ylBoXA?si=y_E93SRIa3kqzkYG.
- The Spirituals Choir. 2021d. "The Crucifixion Ft. PJ Greaves | Easter Project | the Spirituals." *YouTube*. April 4, 2021. <https://youtu.be/RnAa9WvA9jo?si=-7bAouo5vSSH1psZ>.
- Townes, Emilie M. ed. 1993. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*. Orbis Books.
- Townes, Emilie M., ed. 2015. *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*. Orbis Books.
- Turner, Kathleen S. 2021. *And We Shall Learn through the Dance: Liturgical Dance as Religious Education*. Pickwick Publications.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Women's Press.
- Walker-Barnes, Chanequa. 2023. *Sacred Self-Care: Daily Practices for Nurturing Our Whole Selves*. Harper One.
- Weems, Renita J. 2005. *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women of Today and Women in the Bible*. Warner Books.
- Weems, Renita J. 2008. *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, and the Blessings of God*. Walk Worthy Press.
- Williams, Khalia J. 2020. "Love Your Flesh: The Power and Protest of Embodied Worship." *Liturgy* 35 (1): 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063x.2020.1701889>.
- Winans, CeCe. 1999. "Alabaster Box." *Spotify*. January 1, 1999. https://open.spotify.com/track/7FLPCH6fx9gJgrRJB0o5U5?si=_92KY6d4TKG54co9v6kO8Q.
- Yarborough, Chelsea Brooke. 2022. "A Practice of Weaving: The Life and On-Going Legacy of Womanist Liturgical Praxis." *Liturgy* 37 (4): 35–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063x.2022.2121101>.
- ZimFm. 2024. "Annatoria Exclusive Interview on #TheIgnition | Gospel Music Calling, Music & Future Plans Revealed!" *YouTube*. July 16, 2024. https://youtu.be/_OLnK_ny1Mo?si=zA1hbcW5i_cZaa8K.

MEDOMFO OWUSU is a soulful ethnographer and practical theologian. Under the supervision of Doctor Alisha Lola Jones during her music undergraduate studies at the University of Cambridge, she prioritised researching the soulful soundscapes of Africana Christianities. She has continued centring soulful soundscapes in her research and praxis as a Master of Divinity student at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Recently, she was a correspondent at Dr. Samantha Ege's 2024 AMS CWG Endowed Lecture "She Proclaimed a Chicago Renaissance": Mapping Black Women's Classical World-Making, where she presented on Florence Price's music within the framework of womanist spirituality. Her current research continues to prioritise womanist, Afrocentric and soulful epistemologies and the ways in which soulful soundscapes holistically inform theological imaginations.