

Chapter 7: Talking God and Talking Cancer: Why Womanist Ethics Matters for Breast Cancer Prevention and Control among Black Women

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Elizabeth Williams, first, articulates a Womanist approach that denounces the racial disparities and inequities in access to preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic services for Black women in the United States. Second, she highlights how grassroots organizations empower women and allow them to take back their health. Moreover, Womanist theology and spirituality, and particularly Womanist ethics, serve Black women in making sense of and responding to breast cancer by promoting breast cancer control and prevention for Black women and by supporting Black women in dealing with the crises breast cancer brings in their lives and in society.

The activist, feminist, and poet Audre Lorde, who herself died of breast cancer, once said, “Each woman responds to the crisis that breast cancer brings to her life out of a whole pattern, which is the design of who she is and how her life has been lived. The weave of her every day existence is the training ground for how she handles crisis.”¹ This in many ways describes how Black women with breast cancer respond to the troubles breast cancer brings, as well as how Black women respond to a broader world that does not value their Blackness or femaleness.

Black women, particularly those who subscribe to Womanist theology, respond to breast cancer out of a whole pattern of their constructions of God and how God responds to them and the troubles they face. Black women’s lives and how they live their lives in struggle against breast cancer disparities are reflected in Black women’s breast cancer control and prevention activities. These activities reflect Black women’s ethics, and

¹ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, special ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997), 7.

how their identities as Black women provide the training ground for handling troubles Black women face. This chapter describes breast cancer disparities experienced by Black women in the United States. It further examines how Womanist theology serves Black women in making sense of and responding to breast cancer. Womanist ethics as an outgrowth of Womanist theology and spirituality will be considered. Lastly, this chapter highlights how Black women employ Womanist ethics in addressing breast cancer control and prevention for Black women and the crises breast cancer brings.

Black Women and Breast Cancer Disparities

In 2020, it was estimated by the World Health Organization that 2.3 million women were diagnosed with breast cancer globally.² Of these newly diagnosed cases, Black women comprised more than 33,000 of these cases, making breast cancer the most diagnosed cancer among Black women in the United States.³ Furthermore, of the more than 600,000 deaths that occurred in 2020 from breast cancer around the world,⁴ more than six thousand were among Black women in the United States.⁵

While advances in medical technologies to detect and treat breast cancers have occurred, these advances do not fully reflect the breast cancer experience of Black women in the United States. Black women have a lower breast cancer incidence rate than their white counterparts.⁶ However, Black women under 45 years of age have a higher breast cancer incidence rate than other ethnic groups, and on average experience a 40 percent higher breast cancer mortality rate than white women.⁷

² World Health Organization, "Breast Cancer," *World Health Organization*, March 26, 2021, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/breast-cancer.

³ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021," 2019, www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/research/cancer-facts-and-statistics/cancer-facts-and-figures-for-african-americans/cancer-facts-and-figures-for-africanamericans-2019-2021.pdf.

⁴ World Health Organization, "Breast Cancer."

⁵ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

⁶ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

⁷ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

The overall mortality rate from breast cancer among Black women in the United States is significantly higher than that of white women.⁸ From 1989 to 2012, total breast cancer death rates decreased by 36 percent, which amounts to approximately a quarter of a million breast cancer deaths averted over this period in the United States. The decrease in death rates were experienced among all ethnic groups in the country, except for American Indians/Alaskan Natives and African Americans. The disparity in breast cancer age-adjusted mortality has continued to widen between Black women and white women, with more than six thousand Black women succumbing to breast cancer in the United States in 2020, representing more than 18 percent of cancer deaths among Black women that year.⁹

Although not fully understood, several risk factors are cited as explanations for higher breast cancer mortality among Black women in the United States. Among these factors, Black women are at greater risk of being diagnosed with advanced stage breast cancers.¹⁰ Contributing to these advanced stage breast cancers is the higher risk Black women experience from specific cancer types, particularly triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC). Black women have a twofold greater risk for being diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer versus white women.¹¹ Triple-negative breast cancer refers to those cancers that lack estrogen, progesterone, and the human epidermal growth factor receptor.¹² Due to the invasive makeup of the triple-negative breast cancer tumor type, fewer options are available for treating triple-negative breast cancers.¹³ Due to this risk factor and others, the overall 5-year survival rate for Black women

⁸ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

⁹ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹⁰ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹¹ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹² American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹³ Tomi Akinyemiju, Justin Xavier Moore, and Sean F. Altekruze, "Breast Cancer Survival in African-American Women by Hormone Receptor Subtypes," *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment* 153, no. 1 (2015): 211–218.

is lower at 81 percent compared to 91 percent for white women (2008–2014).¹⁴

While the statistics regarding breast cancer survival among Black women in the United States are sobering, there remains a ray of hope on the cancer front in the United States. Based on 2020 estimates, nearly 1.3 million Black people were cancer survivors in the United States.¹⁵ This is encouraging news. Nevertheless, there are not enough Black women counted among these cancer survivors. Therefore, the factors that put Black women at increased risk for breast cancer incidence and mortality are important to examine.

Advances in cancer treatment have resulted in breast cancers being treated at earlier stages. However, too many Black women in the United States continue to experience disparities in access to quality breast cancer care. These healthcare disparities increase Black women's susceptibility to poorer breast cancer outcomes. Compared to white women, Black women are more likely to have lower insurance rates or have inadequate healthcare insurance coverage even with increased access to healthcare under the Affordable Care Act.¹⁶ Although the Affordable Care Act has increased access to cancer treatment, uninsured and underinsured women are less likely to receive core biopsies, lumpectomies, adjuvant therapy, and hormonal treatment.¹⁷ Women lacking health care insurance and underinsured are also more likely to be diagnosed with later stage breast cancers and have diminished rates of breast cancer survivorship compared to those with insurance.¹⁸

¹⁴ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹⁵ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Facts & Figures for African Americans, 2019–2021."

¹⁶ Jie Chen, Arturo Vargas-Bustamante, Karoline Mortensen, and Alexander N. Ortega, "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care Access and Utilization under the Affordable Care Act," *Medical Care* 54, no. 2 (2016): 140–146.

¹⁷ Shaofei Su et al., "The Quality of Invasive Breast Cancer Care for Low Reimbursement Rate Patients: A Retrospective Study," *PLoS One* 12, no. 9 (2017): e0184866, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0184866.

¹⁸ Yefei Zhang, Luisa Franzini, Wenyaw Chan, Hua Xu, and Xianglin L. Du, "Effects of Health Insurance on Tumor Stage, Treatment, and Survival in Large Cohorts of Patients with

Beyond diminished access to quality care, poverty puts Black women at increased risk of negative breast cancer outcomes in other ways. Lower socioeconomic status puts Black women at increased risk for breast cancer by making these women more susceptible to forms of structural racism, including living in communities with more dilapidated housing, increased concentrations of environmental pollutants, and limited opportunities for high-quality education and employment with living wages and benefits.¹⁹ Identified risk factors for breast cancer—including lack of physical activity, smoking, poor nutrition, and obesity—also tend to be more prevalent among those living in poverty.²⁰ Because of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity Black women are particularly susceptible to weight gain, which has been linked to the development of breast cancers and diminished breast cancer survival rates.²¹

Black women are also exposed to racism and other forms of bias, including sexism in the broader society. This situation also has an impact on their breast cancer risk. Higher levels of exposure to discrimination function as chronic stressors, which alter immune function and endogenous hormone levels, thereby increasing breast cancer risk among Black women.²² Black women constitute a socially marginalized group in

Breast and Colorectal Cancer,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 26, no. 4 (2015): 1336–1358.

¹⁹ Zinzi D. Bailey, Nancy Krieger, Madina Agenor, Jasmine Graves, Natalia Linos, and Mary T. Bassett, “Structural Racism and Health Inequities in the USA: Evidence and Interventions,” *Lancet* 389, no. 10077 (2017): 1453–1463.

²⁰ Philippe Irigaray, John A. Newby, Richard Clapp, Lennart Hardell, Vyvyan Howard, Luc Montagnier, Samuel Epstein, and Dominique Belpomme, “Lifestyle-Related Factors and Environmental Agents Causing Cancer: An Overview,” *Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy* 61, no. 10 (2007): 640–658.

²¹ Melinda Stolly, Lisa Sharp, Anita Wells, Nolanna Simon, and Linda Schiffer, “Health Behaviors and Breast Cancer: Experiences of Urban African American Women,” *Health Education and Behavior* 33, no. 5 (2006): 604–624.

²² Irigaray et al., “Lifestyle-Related Factors and Environmental Agents Causing Cancer: An Overview.”

the United States, who as a result of their intersecting identities of race, class, and gender face social disempowerment and violence.²³

Controlling Images

One of the ways Black women have been disempowered and victimized is through “controlling images” or negative constructions of Black womanhood and femininity.²⁴ These controlling images erase Black women’s complexity and reduce them to gendered tropes that impact their health. One of these controlling images is the “Strong Black Woman” schema.²⁵ According to this schema, Black women are expected to be fearless, silent, and emotionally unaffected in the face of adversity or everyday challenges. Reinforced by their faith in God, Black women who conform to this controlling image are perceived as unaffected by traumas or emotional upheavals.²⁶

The “Strong Black Woman” schema serves as double-edged sword for Black women. Whereas the image may serve as a source of pride and strength for many Black women within their communities, the image is also problematic. Black women who subscribe to this schema are less likely to seek support from others or be emotionally vulnerable for fear of being perceived as weak. The inability of Black women to be themselves or seek help increases Black women’s risk for psychological distress, depressive symptoms, obesity, and cardiovascular disease.²⁷ Black women with breast cancer may be further at risk of the negative health consequences of this

²³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, rev. 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4–5.

²⁴ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.

²⁵ Jasmine A. Abrams, Morgan Maxwell, Michell Pope, and Faye Z. Belgrave, “Carrying the World with the Grace of a Lady and the Grit of a Warrior: Deepening Our Understanding of the ‘Strong Black Woman’ Schema,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2014): 503–518.

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer: A Cultural Theology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 9–10.

²⁷ Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Listening Past the Lies That Make Us Sick: A Voice-Centered Analysis of Strength and Depression among Black Women,” *Qualitative Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2008): 391–406.

image because breast cancer culture at large further reinforces concealment of survivors' true feelings about cancer out of fear that these feelings may be considered socially unacceptable or contrary to societal ideas about how cancer survivors should behave.²⁸ Breast cancer survivors, including Black cancer survivors, are often expected to be brave and strong in the face of breast cancer, not fearful or vulnerable.

Challenges and Resources

Breast cancer presents numerous challenges for Black women. These troubles include the racial, economic, and social vulnerabilities Black women face that increase their risk of disease and types of the breast cancer they are more likely to be diagnosed with. Breast cancer brings troubles to Black women due to poverty and discrimination increasing the likelihood they will receive poorer quality care and die at higher rates from breast cancer. Breast cancer is also trouble for Black women because it forces them to remain silent about what hurts them, further compromising their health to live up to controlling images of their humanity.

Yet, instead of succumbing to the troubles breast cancer presents, Black women do not give into these challenges. Instead, Black women use their reliance on God as a source of strength and resolve in dealing with breast cancer. This reliance on God is evidenced among Black women by their spirituality. Drawing on a deep cultural tradition of spirituality drawn from the history of Black people in the United States, Black spirituality is about faith in a transcendent force that is both felt internally and externally as an interconnected relationship with God, a higher power, and others. This faith is evidenced as transformative power and freeing succor for handling life's adversities. Strength and inspiration are drawn from belief in the unlimited potential of this benevolent source.²⁹

²⁸ Annette Madlock Gatison, "The Pink and Black Experience: Lies That Make Us Suffer in Silence and Cost Us Our Lives," *Women's Studies in Communication* 38, no. 2 (2015): 135–140.

²⁹ Kelley Newlin, Kathleen Knafl, and Gail D'Eramo Melkus, "African-American Spirituality: A Concept Analysis," *Advances in Nursing Science* 25, no. 2 (2002): 57–70.

Black women use spirituality to cultivate hope in times of despair and challenge. For Black women with breast cancer, adversities highlight the tension between reality and desire, the way things are, and the way things can be. Black women breast cancer survivors' spirituality functions as a transcendent counterweight that gives them the capacity to create alternative conceptualizations of life's possibilities.³⁰ While Black women are aware of social, economic, and medical limitations they face confronting breast cancer (even their own mortality), through their faith in God, Black women transcend life circumstances by using their relationship with God to (re)appraise their thoughts and experiences and (re)envision and (re)create their destinies.

Black women's relationship with God is part of their Christian theology.³¹ Christian theology is a story about those who are in trouble. God intervenes and responds to those in trouble. God not only intervenes. God prevails over trouble. Black women with breast cancer see themselves in this theological narrative. They see the triune God as active with them to overcome the troubles breast cancer brings. As a creative, transcendent, and ever-present force, the triune God works with Black women to reappraise the situations they face and influences how they respond to breast cancer.³² How Black women with breast cancer think about God and who they are in relationship to God form Black women's constructive theology.³³ This constructive theology also informs Black women's theological anthropology or how they respond to breast cancer and others in practical, everyday ways.³⁴

Black women's reappraisal of the breast cancer experience results in intentionally using their agency to make situations better for themselves and others.³⁵ This purposeful desire to improve situations is what the Womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas refers to as "moral anthropology"

³⁰ Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 9–10.

³¹ Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 9–10.

³² Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 9–10.

³³ Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 19–21.

³⁴ Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 19–21.

³⁵ Williams, *Black Women and Breast Cancer*, 99.

or the “epistemological privilege of Black women knowing themselves and [that] their world stands under the moral imperative of making themselves and their world morally better.”³⁶

Womanist

The Womanist ethics Black female breast cancer survivors enact is an outgrowth of “Womanist” first defined by the writer Alice Walker.³⁷ Serving as a counterpoint to white feminism, a Womanist is “a black feminist or feminist of color,” whose intersectional identities as Black and female create a unique cultural and social standpoint, particularly in relation to oppression. The experience of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, and breast cancer disparities) allows Black women to see the world through a prism called double consciousness, an awareness of how they are viewed by the larger, white, and patriarchal world and how they view themselves within a Black cultural ethos.³⁸ Using their Black female standpoint as an epistemological lens to understand the world, Womanists are “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.”³⁹ Black women with breast cancer struggle against the troubles breast cancer brings and reject the suffering caused by it through a Womanist ethics of love.⁴⁰

This commitment to survival and wholeness indicative of Womanist ethics views Blackness and femaleness as valuable and the starting point for

³⁶ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, “Womanist Ethical Language Handout,” April 19, 2019. Personal communication.

³⁷ Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. J. H. Cone and G. S. Wilmore, Vol. 1: 1966–1979, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 339–348.

³⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings*, The Library of America (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, distributed by Viking Press, 1986), 357–548.

³⁹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

⁴⁰ See Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology*, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 71.

love in action.⁴¹ This love in action is distilled into a Womanist ethics which includes radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement.⁴² Radical subjectivity involves Black women taking themselves seriously enough to exert their agency and craft lives in response to (and even beyond) a world that repeatedly limits and pigeonholes Black womanhood.⁴³ Traditional communalism stresses that Womanists are Black women who unapologetically love and prefer Blackness in its varied forms and use cultural assets to affirm and support each other.⁴⁴ Redemptive self-love is the purposeful act of Black people reclaiming stereotypes used to shame Black people by loving aspects of Black culture that Black people possess.⁴⁵ Finally, critical engagement describes using one's intersectional identities as a Black woman to understand and critique all forms of intersectional oppression with the intent of achieving survival and wholeness.⁴⁶ As a consequential ethics that seeks the greatest good over what harms life, this Womanist ethics offers a helpful framework to consider Black women's organized breast cancer control and prevention activities.

Cancer Control

As the World Health Organization defines it, "Cancer control aims to reduce the incidence, morbidity, and mortality of cancer and to improve the quality of life of cancer patients in a defined population, through the systematic implementation of evidence-based interventions for prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment, and palliative care."⁴⁷

⁴¹ See Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. S. M. Floyd-Thomas, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–16.

⁴² Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 7.

⁴³ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 8.

⁴⁴ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 9.

⁴⁵ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 9–10.

⁴⁶ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 10.

⁴⁷ World Health Organization, "Cancer Control Knowledge into Action: WHO Guide for Effective Programmes: Prevention," *World Health Organization*, 2007, iv, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK195368/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK195368.pdf.

Effective breast cancer control activities include basic principles like leadership, which entails creating clarity and unity of purpose, by encouraging team building, ownership of the process, and continuous learning, as well as responding to people affected by breast cancer, in order to meet their physical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs.⁴⁸ Through the Womanist ethical principles of radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, and redemptive self-love, Black women with breast cancer are engaged in cancer control activities to support the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs of Black women with breast cancer. Sista Strut is as an example of a breast cancer control intervention that employs the tenets of Womanist ethics.

Sista Strut is a cause marketing campaign to raise awareness about breast cancer among women of color in the United States.⁴⁹ The campaign includes an organized walk which provides information about community resources and benefits local non-profit breast cancer organizations. Organized twenty years ago in Louisiana to bring attention to breast cancer disparities among Black women in the state, the event has spread to cities across the country including New Orleans, Memphis, Jacksonville, St. Louis, Chicago, and Louisville.⁵⁰

In addition to raising awareness about community resources, Sista Strut explicitly draws on the strength of survivors and their families and friends to heighten awareness, promote early detection, and work for breast cancer cures.⁵¹ The walk encourages breast cancer survivors and supporters to walk as a health promoting activity that reduces breast cancer risk.⁵² Survivors wear brightly colored t-shirts to highlighting they are survivors.

⁴⁸ World Health Organization, "Cancer Control Knowledge into Action."

⁴⁹ Sista Strut, "Sista Strut," *Sista Strut: Breast Cancer Walk*, 2021, www.sistastrut.org.

⁵⁰ LSU Health Foundation New Orleans, "Sista's Strut against Breast Cancer," *LSU Health Foundation New Orleans*, 2021, [www.lsuhsf.edu/newsroom/Sistas Strut Against Breast Cancer.html](http://www.lsuhsf.edu/newsroom/Sistas%20Strut%20Against%20Breast%20Cancer.html).

⁵¹ Sista's Strut, "Sista Strut."

⁵² National Cancer Institute, "Causes and Prevention," *National Cancer Institute*, 2021, www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention.

The walk is a tangible display of strength in unity for Black breast cancer survivors and cancer survivorship.

The campaign's walk subverts the "Strong Black Woman" image by challenging what "strength" as a cultural attribute means. Redefining Black women's strength reflects radical self-love by reclaiming the strong Black woman stereotype used to hurt Black women to save Black women's lives from breast cancer. Rather than "strength" meaning Black women suffer in silence, the Sista Strut encourages Black women to love and take themselves seriously as breast cancer survivors as an act of radical subjectivity.⁵³ By dressing in bright colors for the walk, Black women affirm their collective identities as cancer survivors and supporters by coming out of the shadows to celebrate cancer survivorship as an act of traditional communalism.⁵⁴

Bringing cancer survivors and supporters together, the walk additionally reinforces critical engagement by demonstrating that breast cancer is a threat to all Black women. Therefore, it is a matter that Black women, those with breast cancer and those at risk, must collectively struggle against for Black women's survival and wholeness.⁵⁵ The walk supports cancer survivors' physical, psychosocial, and spiritual well-being by reinforcing that Black women do not face breast cancer alone. Instead, the strength of Black women to survive breast cancer is found in Black women's organized efforts against disease.

Cancer Prevention

Cancer prevention, defined as action taken to lower the risk of getting cancer, includes engaging in activities that lessen cancer susceptibility, including supporting medical research for cures.⁵⁶ Practical ways this occurs for Black women is through organized efforts to educate Black women about breast cancer disparities and by reducing stigma around the

⁵³ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 8.

⁵⁴ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 9.

⁵⁵ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 10.

⁵⁶ National Cancer Institute, "Causes and Prevention."

disease.⁵⁷ Reflective of radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, and critical engagement, Sisters Network Inc. is an example of these type of cancer prevention activities.

Sisters Network Inc. (SNI) was founded in 1994 and serves as a leading voice and the only national Black breast cancer survivorship organization in the United States. Governed by an elected board of directors and informed by an appointed medical advisory committee, SNI has a membership of 3,000 and includes more than 25 affiliate survivor-run chapters nationwide.⁵⁸ The organization's purpose is to save lives and educate the Black community and others about the breast cancer crisis affecting Black women around the country.⁵⁹ As a leading advocacy organization, SNI serves as a source of information for Black women affected by breast cancer and promotes cancer prevention in Black communities.

In 1999, SNI hosted the nation's first national breast cancer conference to examine the impact of breast cancer disparities among Black women. The conference, now in its twelfth year, attracts hundreds of participants, including nationally recognized medical experts. Given the pervasive nature of breast cancer disparities among Black women, the conference has been hosted in metropolitan cities including Houston, Atlanta, Detroit, and Chicago.⁶⁰ The organization has several trademark community outreach programs, including "STOP THE SILENCER"—a national branding campaign which challenges resistance to discussing cancer or life-threatening conditions in Black communities. SNI's efforts focus on raising breast cancer awareness and increasing survivorship in Black communities.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Diana Price, "Black American Women and Breast Cancer Disparity," *CancerConnect*, September 2020, news.cancerconnect.com/breast-cancer/black-american-women-and-breast-cancer-disparity.

⁵⁸ Sisters Network Inc., "Sisters Network Inc. History," *Sisters Network Inc.: A National African American Breast Cancer Survivorship Organization*, 2020, www.sistersnetworkinc.org/history.html.

⁵⁹ Sisters Network Inc., "Sisters Network Inc. History."

⁶⁰ Sisters Network Inc., "Sisters Network Inc. History."

⁶¹ Sisters Network Inc., "Sisters Network Inc. History."

Karen Eubanks Jackson, Founder/CEO of SNI, a 28-year four-time breast cancer survivor, founded the organization in 1994 during her personal journey with breast cancer.⁶² As she sought support, Jackson recognized a lack of “sisterhood” in traditional organizations, namely the lack of Black breast cancer survivors or distinct Black cultural esthetics in these organizations.⁶³ Additionally, Jackson learned during her breast cancer treatment about the higher breast cancer mortality rate of Black women and breast cancer disparities Black women experience.⁶⁴ What additionally prompted Jackson to establish SNI was the limited availability of culturally sensitive materials for Black women with breast cancer.⁶⁵

Jackson’s actions in founding SNI reflect radical subjectivity because Jackson took seriously her need as a Black woman with breast cancer to exert her agency to create breast cancer resources for Black women that did not exist.⁶⁶ Wanting resources for herself and other Black women affected by breast cancer, Jackson took her advocacy to the next level, thereby reflecting the ethics of traditional communalism and critical engagement by creating an organization that uses the intersectional identities of Black women with breast cancer to critique oppressions that put Black women at risk for higher breast cancer mortality.⁶⁷

As Jackson’s biography further underscores, as a breast cancer champion, Jackson’s primary motivation for creating SNI was to “break through the silence and shame of breast cancer that immobilizes African American women, restricts their ability to receive support services, interferes with early detection, and ultimately affects their survival rates.”⁶⁸ Jackson’s actions further reflect the ethic of redemptive self-love in that

⁶² Sisters Network Inc., “Sisters Network Inc. Founder and Ceo Karen Eubanks Jackson,” *Sisters Network Inc.: A National African American Breast Cancer Survivorship Organization*, 2020, www.sistersnetworkinc.org/founder.html.

⁶³ Sisters Network Inc., “Sisters Network Inc. Founder and Ceo Karen Eubanks Jackson.”

⁶⁴ Sisters Network Inc., “Sisters Network Inc. Founder and Ceo Karen Eubanks Jackson.”

⁶⁵ Sisters Network Inc., “Sisters Network Inc. Founder and Ceo Karen Eubanks Jackson.”

⁶⁶ Floyd-Thomas, “Writing for Our Lives,” 8.

⁶⁷ Floyd-Thomas, “Writing for Our Lives,” 9, 10.

⁶⁸ Sisters Network Inc., “Sisters Network Inc. Founder and Ceo Karen Eubanks Jackson.”

Jackson reclaimed the stereotypes of silence and shame in the Black community about discussing cancer and confronted them head-on in one of the organization's signature initiatives, "STOP THE SILENCER®" This signature initiative encourages Black breast cancer survivors to use their survivorship stories to educate and encourage other Black women to have mammograms and engage in early detection activities.⁶⁹ Again, redefining what strength means for Black women, SNI's national creed emphasizes "In Unity there is Strength, In Strength there is Power, In Power there is Change."⁷⁰ For both the Sista Strut walk and Sisters Network Inc., strength for Black women is in unity and organizing in service of love, survival, and wholeness for Black women. This is where the transcendent power to struggle against breast cancer comes from for Black women.

Conclusion

Black women face troubles of which breast cancer is but one. Christian theology tells Black women that trouble does not last always. Troubles necessitate a response. Grounded in the primacy of Black women's lives, experiences, thoughts and creative action, Black women have developed a Womanist theology and Womanist ethics in response to troubles. Womanist ethics matters to breast cancer control and prevention because it provides a framework for understanding the ways Black women use the weave of their lives by putting their faith into action to address breast cancer disparities and meet the practical control and prevention needs of Black women with breast cancer.

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⁶⁹ Sisters Network Inc., "Sisters Network Inc. History."

⁷⁰ Sisters Network Inc., "Home," *Sisters Network Inc.: A National African American Breast Cancer Survivorship Organization*, 2021, www.sistersnetworkinc.org.

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