

# Challenge & Response

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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*Faith on the Ground  
in Ferguson.*





# Melanie Jones

This past July, I attended the 2014 African & African Diasporan Women in Religion and Theology Conference at The Talitha Qumi Center home to the Institute of African Women in Religion & Culture in Legon, Ghana. The purpose of the conference was to engage critical issues concerning violence against African Diasporan women and girls and to strengthen collaboration of African and African Diasporan women scholars and activists in religion and theology. Entitled, "Texts of Terrors, Texts of Empowerment: Reimagining Sacred Canon in Africana Womanhood," the conference featured scholarly paper presentations and roundtables resisting disempowering interpretations of ancient sacred texts (including Bible and Quran) and oral traditional narratives while also reimagining empowering readings and interpretations of ancient sacred texts and embracing familiar writings within a broader sacred canon. Participants gathered from across Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Cote D'Ivoire, United States, and the Caribbean.

Liz Alexander, a CTS M.A.R.L. student, and I presented a paper entitled "When Caged Bodies Testify: African and African Diasporan Women's Memoir as Sacred Texts." The origin of this research developed from my coursework with CTS Professor Dow Edgerton on Reading Trauma and Theory this past Spring 2014 where I analyzed ways memoir and self-accounts embody release and recovery for those who have experienced trauma and open pathways for personal testimony and communal witness. Memoir, acts as a "living space" for the recognition of lived experience; serving as a platform for testimony, "the act of telling" one's story which enables African and

African Diasporan women to "love self... regardless" and reclaim the body.

One of my most memorable experiences of the trip to Ghana was our visit to the Elmina Castle on the Gold Coast of Ghana, which is believed to be the first European slave trading post in sub-Saharan Africa built by the Portuguese in 1482. This was a heavy day. A range of emotions filled the group of diverse women as we walked the corridors together. Some cried. Some kneeled. Some held the arms of others. Some listened for the cries of ancestors. Most of us were quiet. Elmina felt familiar to me because of the photographic introductions and lecture presentations from Professor Lee Butler in courses like *Religion, Terror & America* and *Intro to the Study of Black Faith & Life*. Yet and still, as I stood in the tiny, body-hugging opening of the Castle, known as the Door of No Return for many enslaved Africans who were shipped out into the Atlantic and never saw their homeland again, this place became more than a destination on a map. Elmina remains a historical marker of the devastation of human trafficking and devaluing of certain bodies.

In many ways, the trip to Ghana renewed my passion for the work of womanist theological ethics and my emphasis on Black women's body politics. Through dialogue with African women of Nigeria who shared insight on the status of Nigerian schoolgirls abducted earlier this year, I learned that violence against women and girls across continents is deliberate and ongoing. Moreover, systems of oppression have sought to discourage conversation and collaboration between African and African Diasporan women. This conference gave me the opportunity to listen and share stories with other women, to hear about the powerful work that is happening across the globe, and to become more aware of the work that needs to be done both at home and abroad. I was

pleased to locate CTS alum, Tiauna Boyd (M.Div. 2012) who is serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ajumako village located in central Ghana. For the past two years, Tiauna has worked to create better opportunities as it relates to technology in her village. Just this past September, Tiauna celebrated the opening of a computer lab in the village with a chief cutting ceremony. Tiauna's work demonstrates the extraordinary outcomes that are possible when we translate our CTS education toward greater justice and mercy in the world.



Throughout the conference, during heavy and light-hearted moments, the women gathered found a sense of our communal purpose in the refrain of one unity song, introduced by the African Muslim women present. I think the message of the chant speaks to the community of CTS today as

we seek to create space for interdependence that recognizes difference, celebrates diversity, and cultivates harmony. Unity does not mean uniformity. Difference does not mean division. Meaningful work happens through sacred conversation and collaboration.

- All Christian Women, we are all one.**
- All Muslim Women, we are all one.**
- All African Women, we are all one.**
- All American Women, we are all one.**
- It's U-N-I-T-Y, we are all one!**

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