CHAPTER 4

Stephanie Y. Mitchem

R/evolutionary Acts

> *For the privileged, liberation is indeed seen as oppression.*
>
> – Mitchem (2019, 168)

ROSALIND HINTON

Every now and then, I take a phrase and let it circle in my head for months as a needed guide or a centering mantra, animating my disposition, thoughts, and actions. My current phrase, "For the privileged, liberation is indeed seen as oppression," comes from Dr. Stephanie Y. Mitchem's most recent book, *Race, Religion, and Politics: Toward Human Rights in the United States* (2019, 168). At the beginning of her book, Mitchem calls it a platitude, but, by the end, this expression stands as a proverb in African American theological parlance; to be studied, passed down to children, and lived by in daily life. This is how Mitchem's writing often leaves me. Her writing circles in my head for months and gives me new insights about my own privilege and place in the world. Her writings enable new understandings of American life and the deeply interconnected world around us. She reframes African American life and overturns old

tropes, revealing new truths about our history along the way. The above proverb, circling in my head after reading her book, is one reason why I chose to make Mitchem the subject of this essay. I often have to live into the texts and contexts that she explores in her books. Her work also resonates for me because she is very clear that her anti-racist and justice-oriented work is tied to her personal story. Mitchem, born in the North before segregation legally ended, shows how personal story shapes a life but does not predetermine it. Mitchem's work demonstrates that there are many stories in the ethos of a time and culture that we can borrow from, utilize, and transform to make a life of meaning for ourselves and others.

Dr. Mitchem earned an undergraduate degree in interdisciplinary studies and was the first woman graduate from Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit in 1985. She earned a Master in Theological Arts degree from St. John's Provincial Seminary in Plymouth, Michigan in 1989, and her doctorate in philosophy from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1998. Mitchem is currently a full professor at the University of South Carolina, where she has a joint appointment in the Women and Gender Program and the Department of Religious Studies. She served as chairperson of the Religious Studies Department from 2008 to 2014. With the university threatening to abandon religious studies as a field, Mitchem led religious studies faculty in a strategic planning process that moved the department from a denominational and proselytizing Christian mission characteristic of early-twentieth-century Southern White universities to a multidisciplinary department. Under her guidance, the department incorporated cross-cultural perspectives and critical analysis of people's lives in light of the sacred with an emphasis on the analysis of complex social issues. In addition, she was the director of the African American Studies Program from July 2008 to July 2010. She is currently the undergraduate coordinator in the Women and Gender Program. Before teaching at the University of South Carolina, she was an associate professor at the University of Detroit Mercy, teaching there from 1993 to 2005. At Detroit Mercy, she founded the African American Studies Program, was Director of the Women's Studies Program, and Chairperson of the Religious Studies Department. Mitchem's approach to scholarly research is at the intersection of African American feminist and womanist theology, anthropology, history, and post-colonial thought. As of this writing, she is the author of four books, one edited volume, and numerous articles. She is a sought-after panelist, keynote speaker, and guest lecturer, most recently on the subjects of

"Democracy Now" and "Anti-Racist Teaching" at the American Academy of Religion, "Race Religion and Spiritual Resistance" at Northern Arizona University, and "Religion and Public Life" at Rice University (Mitchem, pers. comm, March 31, 2020). She has been on the editorial board of the peer-reviewed journal *CrossCurrents* since 2001, where she edited ten of their quarterly publications. She was named president of the Association of Religion and Intellectual Life (APRIL, formerly ARIL) in 2020 (S. Brent Rodriguez, pers.comm., April 20, 2021). She was editor of the September 2006 volume of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religions*. In 1999, she was named an ARIL Coolidge Fellow and a Lilly Foundation teaching consultation participant. In 2002, she was given the Wise Woman Award from the National Association of Women in Catholic Higher Education (Mitchem, pers. comm., March 31, 2021).

Reading back through Mitchem's impressive curriculum vitae makes her route to the academy appear well marked and inevitable. However, I am reminded of the remarks of a colleague that women's careers are seldom planned and often interrupted (B. Willinger, pers. comm., nd). Women, especially women of color, often have a circuitous path to success. No step forward was a guaranteed foothold on a ladder of success so thoroughly shaped by White expectations. In her book *African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Healing*, Mitchem (2004a, viii) states:

> Thirty years ago I was homeless. Twenty years ago I was an unemployed single African American mother. Fifteen years ago, I was beginning a master's program earning the grand sum of $14,000 a year. Each of these moments of my life story carried sets of stereotypes that also indicated my social value in the United States. Today my life experiences form an important personal basis for this study of African American women's spirituality and healing."

Early Life

Mitchem was born in 1950 in Cook County Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, to Barbara Jean Crews Mitchem and Thomas Theodore Mitchem. She is the oldest of three children, with two younger brothers Thomas (deceased) and Timothy (Mitchem, pers. comm., January 15, 2021).

She moved with her family to Detroit at an early age, where she attended St. Theresa Catholic grade school and Mackenzie public high school. Mitchem's early life was tightly controlled by her mother—a Detroit police officer who, with extended family members, raised her children in the ethos and politics of respectability. As Mitchem states,

> An elderly Aunt practically vibrated with rage, "Ladies wear gloves to church." This incident could have happened to any adolescent girl in the United States in the early 1960s, but for me, a Black girl-child, the implications were tied to my family's history of leaving Southern lands, separating from "lower" classes, and demonstrating that we were now part of the "better Negroes. (Mitchem 2004a, 73)

Mitchem points out that she was born before legal segregation had ended. "I remember my parents were fearful of Martin Luther King, Jr., portraying him as a threat to the progress they had made. There was turmoil through the 60s that only heightened after Civil Rights Laws were passed" (Mitchem 2021). In addition, her mother's dashed expectations, trauma, and marriage to an alcoholic she would later divorce caused her to keep her daughter Stephanie very close to home and to monitor her behavior in terms of respectability. Mitchem reflected, "through 12th grade [I] was really tied to the dysfunction in my family home. . . . I left my mother's home completely ignorant of life." Her Catholic grade school did not have extracurricular activities such as music, band, or theater, and when she snuck out for Girl Scouts or volunteer work, her mother stopped her when she found out. The Catholic grade school gave her a good foundation in academics, which meant she was advanced in her public high school, but, when she was asked to be in the Honor Society, her mother would not allow it because there were extra meetings. Her mother kicked her out of the house at 16, and she went to live with her father.

> I moved in with my father, and then I ended up coming back because my father's life was . . . He was still an active drunk at that point, and it was just totally chaotic. She [her mother] pushed me out at 17. . . . I had wanted to go to Oberlin, and again, my mother had said, "No, you can't go to Oberlin, it's too far away."

Mitchem went instead to Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan—called Ypsissippie in the Black community—at her mother's insistence and majored in pre-med, also at her mother's insistence (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 6, 2020).

The arts, literature, and dance—not science and math—fed Mitchem's soul, so she began to take her life into her own hands. During one college break, she recalled going home with an Angela Davis afro, after which her mother did not speak to her for two years. Undeterred, she started taking classes that she enjoyed. Mitchem's mother had a dance background and put her daughter in classical ballet classes when she was young. Mitchem built on this background and pursued dance classes at Eastern Michigan. She said, "Dance was one of the things that helped me to get together, especially African dance. And so when I was in college, I actually worked with another young woman, and we had a community dance program . . . one of the jobs I had was with the YWCA" (oral history interview with author, April 6, 2020).

Eventually, Mitchem switched her major at Eastern Michigan to education. However, her early years working in the community rather than going to pre-med classes like her mother wanted caught up with her. She described it as both flunking out and dropping out. "I was so dispirited, depressed at the school, I stopped attending classes. So not actively leaving. Passively getting kicked out" (Mitchem, pers. comm., November 22, 2020). Reflecting on this chaotic period, Mitchem identified the formative influence on her later career in academia. Her classes in education gave her an advantage over many academics who had no systematic teacher training. This background helped her to organize, think about, and plan her teaching and prepared her to deal with classroom interactions complicated by issues of race. For example, while student teaching, she witnessed the detrimental effects of institutional assumptions that permanently labeled Black students as problems even after a first infraction. She dealt with this in a practical way by saying to her Black students, "'. . . if you mess up in this room, I will not send you to detention, whatever it was called. I will call your mama.' And then they were fine." Looking back, she could see that her struggle and the messy, practical solutions to issues of race and identity that helped her make her way through the chaos influenced both her teaching and theoretical worldview in academia (Mitchem, pers. comm., November 22, 2020).

Eventually, Mitchem made her way to Detroit to pursue other options. The city of Detroit, like a living, breathing friend, would also become a significant part of Mitchem's formation. Mitchem commented,

> I never had a real sense of connection with Detroit as Detroit until I left Detroit and then I came back . . . I got into . . . all the things that had been denied me. And I'm not being funny when I say things that have been denied me. . . . It was a whole different scene. Motown was there so it had an edge of glamour in the Black community that you could get into which I did. You were with glamorous people. You were around Eddie Kendricks or you know any of the Temptations, and you would date some of these guys. It was that kind of thing. (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 6, 2020)

Mitchem describes her experience of Detroit in the early 1970s as "living a split screen." She was working as a drug counselor and becoming a community organizer by day and mixing with the glamourous of Detroit by night.

Straddling borders, she became adept at making connections.

> I was, for all intents and purposes, someone who knew a lot of people in town and could help people connect with each other, in a sense, a power broker. I was working with activist Black people based in unions. Detroit was a union town. Everybody knew that they had rights. Everybody knew that if you don't get what you want that you fight for it.

Mitchem explained that her roots in Detroit meant that she did not see oppressive situations as limiting. "It meant I had to learn how to work around it, or through it or under it, or over it in some kind of way. . . . I often joke about being institutionalized. And by that I mean I've gotten a lot of information about how to make systems work, which makes me annoying" (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020).

Mitchem moved briefly to New York and had a disastrous and short-lived marriage, returning to Detroit early in 1980 with a newborn baby girl. Barbara H. Lowe was born in New York on December 28, 1979 (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020). Her mother would not have an unmarried mother in her house, so Mitchem moved in with Aunt Maggie Mitchem, whom Mitchem called "the mother of her heart," and with whom she spent many summers as a child. During this period, and with a child in tow, Mitchem secured her undergraduate degree at Sacred Heart Seminary in 1985 while working within the Catholic Diocese of Detroit as a mediator in parish conflicts. She eventually went to work in student affairs at the University of Detroit Mercy.

After obtaining her master's degree at St. John's Provincial Seminary in 1989, Mitchem moved from administration to teaching in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM). One of her significant contributions at UDM included realigning the disparate African American courses to allow inner-city students the opportunity to take a concentration in African American studies. While working at UDM, she also decided to enter a doctoral program. As a single mother in the Detroit area, Mitchem was leaning toward pursuing her doctorate at Wayne State University, which houses a rich archive of Black oral histories she would later use in her research. However, her colleague Jane Schaberg, a feminist biblical scholar, noticed Mitchem carrying around Delores Williams' book *Sisters in the Wilderness*—a seminal book of womanist biblical scholarship published in 1993. Schaberg offered to put Mitchem in touch with Williams. Mitchem remembers being amazed that she was on a phone conversation with Delores Williams, saying, "[It] wasn't that she had any great answers, but that she was living with the same questions." It was a simple exchange with Williams that confirmed her desire to study womanist theology. "I said, I'm tired of having to explain myself." Williams replied, "Honey, so am I." Mitchem says it was Williams' "openness to that reality that helped me to say, 'Okay, I'll go to Northwestern and Garrett and pursue the doctorate there.'" Mitchem continues:

> Despite my history of having been involved in Catholic institutions, I wasn't interested in doing Catholic theology. That was not my interest. I wanted to explore what was happening with Black women and I didn't know what that meant. So I needed Garrett Northwestern to help me frame that discussion. And so I ended up saying that I wanted to talk about African American Women's spirituality, because that's religion neutral. Um, but, but also to tie it in with embodiment. I don't think the word embodiment was hot then, but you know what I mean. I had wonderful [dissertation] resources in Detroit, with the Black Women's Health Project. (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020)

Womanist Theology

It is hard to convey the excitement that womanist theology generated in the mid-1990s among many of us in the academy. In her book *Deeper Shades*, Stacey Floyd-Thomas (2006, 1) describes womanist constructions as a revolutionary, paradigmatic shift away from the hierarchical and conquering individualism produced by White theologians, dead and living. Turning René Descartes' (1596–1650) famous statement on the foundations of knowledge on its head, Floyd-Thomas characterizes the shift by the African proverb "I am because we are."

My personal interest in womanist theologies took shape in my own history of growing up in the deep South. As an Alabama girl growing up under the specter of George Wallace, I was compelled to steep myself in womanist writings. For me, it was not about restorative justice—a concept not yet born—but about survival. Womanist theologies made demands on me and helped me more fully enter and examine my own worldviews.

In the 1990s, womanism was the most intellectually challenging research around. In 1990, at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual meeting, scholars of every ilk fought their way into the overflowing rooms holding womanist sessions. The presentations and discussion in these sessions were heated, and speakers were fanning themselves and each other as they shared searing critiques of White feminists, the Black Church, the Western Canon, and the domination of White culture. Womanists were critics from within the Black Church. Many of these women were among the first women ministers in their denominations. It was an honor to be present at these sessions and to be in the presence of intellectual giants such as Katie Geneva Cannon, Delores S. Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant—the women who crafted womanist theology as an intellectual field in the 1980s as students at Union Seminary (Grant 2020). Other early womanists, such as sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, found their way to womanist thought because "I had data in search of a method" (Grant 2020). Renita J. Weems was the first African American woman to gain a doctorate in Hebrew Bible. Shawn Copeland and Diana Hayes were Catholic systematic theologians deploying womanist methodologies. Marcia J. Riggs wrote the groundbreaking "Awake, Arise, Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation" in 1994, the same

year as Kelly Brown Douglas wrote her groundbreaking work, "The Black Christ." The writing and intellectual achievements of these women were and are prolific.

Mitchem, who graduated from Northwestern in 1998, cannot really be considered a second-generation womanist. Womanist scholar Emilie Townes (2003, 159) attributes the beginning of the use of the "term womanist in religious disciplines" to ethicist Katie Cannon, in her 1985 article "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," only thirteen years before Mitchem's graduation. By the time of Mitchem's graduation from Northwestern in 1998, we see this first wave of womanists fanning out across the academy in religious studies departments as well as denominational seminaries. In Northwestern-Garret's multidisciplinary doctoral program, Mitchem focused on feminist and womanist theology with Drs. Rosemary Ruether and Toinette Eugene at Garrett Methodist Seminary. She also worked with anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo and historian Josef Barton at Northwestern University (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020).

Mitchem graduated the same year and with a similar background as another womanist theologian, Linda E. Thomas, who finished with a degree in cultural and social anthropology from American University. Both women pursued a framework and methodology that included the voices and perspectives of present-day women. In her 1998 article, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," Thomas (1998, 5) argues for the inclusion of ethnography in womanist theology, saying, "I urge that we examine further our procedural tools of analysis. We must view books written about poor black women as secondary sources and employ anthropological techniques to collect stories and publish ethnographies of women who are still alive." Mitchem validates this approach, saying that anthropology gave her tools to interview African American women because "so much had yet to be written that wasn't based on the past." Mitchem added that, as late as 1994, the so-called "experts" on African Americans were Southern White men. Harkening Zora Neal Hurston, Mitchem said, "Anthropology gave me a structure and a set of tools to overcome biological race theories. . . . There was no real watermelon gene or Black acting gene in my body. . . . I didn't want to write about African Americans as tragic victims of systems they can't control . . . waiting around until a white person rescues them" (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020).

Mitchem builds upon and contributes to the rich womanist dialogues that evolve with the times. Characteristic of Mitchem's oeuvre is its attention to historical contextualization and thick descriptions from anthropology combined with ethnographic interviews. Her intersectional approach tackles women's sexuality, misogyny, and homophobia in the Black Church and in the larger White world. She addresses systemic causes of poverty and racism. She sees value in African American communities that are often dismissed by White and Black scholars and presents imaginative and alternative ways of understanding Black life. She challenges oppressive institutions, systems, and concepts that limit African American lives. She shares her experiences of how to navigate White institutions and a White world. "I guess, [I'm] stubborn or determined depending on your definition. So traversing a white world didn't mean . . . Well, I've learned to work in it, but I didn't have to be it" (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 20, 2020).

On Being Catholic

Mitchem was raised within the Black Catholic communities of Detroit, often reckoning with people's astonishment that there are Black Catholics in the US. From childhood through her seminary education, on to teaching at the University of Detroit Mercy, like members of Black Catholic communities in Baltimore and New Orleans, she has experienced Catholicism as a culture and a way of life as well as a religion. She has, therefore, drawn inspiration from this Catholic upbringing, though not in a way that most Catholic bishops today would admire.

> I think the greatest influence on my own religious, spiritual formation was Catholic spirituality, the bells and smells. It shaped my understanding, my sense of connection to earth, my sense of connection to spirit, my sense of connection. That actually, at this point in my life, has led me to African traditional religion. But obviously that's a long journey. . . . At that time that sense of ritual, I didn't realize, it really did help that aspect of my formation. (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 6, 2020)

Her Catholic church experiences have led her to a more sacramental and embodied understanding of divinity as deeply relational and rooted in humanity. The term "Black Catholic" is another term not easily placed on Mitchem, despite her long career and education in Catholic institutions. Mitchem says, "Because I never wanted to go the minister route. I'm not, I am not Christian. I grew up Catholic, but by the time I was at Northwestern, I was just, I was trying to find a way to get out of the Catholic [way of being]" (Mitchem, oral history interview with author, April 20, 2020).

Over a lifetime, Mitchem's interactions with the Catholic Church made her a witness to enough systemic and institutional oppression that it could warrant an additional chapter in her book, *Race, Religion and Politics*. Many of her experiences could be classified as "anti-racism racism"—a term coined by Ronald Hall, whom Mitchem (2019, 92) quotes: "Anti-racism racism is a pointed but logical construct able to withstand the scrutiny of scientific investigation. . . . Anti-racist racism manifests as the need to dominate by anti-racist rhetoric in whatever venture being considered." As a child in a Catholic grade school, she recalls,

> While the nuns were well meaning, I can look back and realize how much racism we encountered. We didn't have a name for it when we were kids, but it was there that sense of disconnect, that sense of, "She said what?" Like a nun walking in the classroom, saying, "Oh, I'm very happy. I've never taught you people before." (Oral history interview with author, April 06, 2020).

In Mitchem's master's program at St. John's Provincial Seminary, she asked a White woman professor, "'Why aren't [we] talking about any Black women's writings?' And the response I got was something to the effect of 'Black women just don't write anything.'" Mitchem writes about a similar, or perhaps the same, incident in an early article, "No Longer Nailed to the Floor,"

> During master's level studies, I had begun to research African American religious thought on my own as it was not part of the approved curriculum. I included some of that unauthorized material for one assignment and the professor for whose class I was writing, harshly critiqued both the paper and me personally. The work was not scholarly and was of poor quality. Wasn't it unoriginal, just a compilation of several other papers I had written for other classes? Perhaps the writ-

> ing was not even mine? In my view, the paper represented the most honest, creative work I had ever done. I had begun to make some connection within the thought and lives of African Americans and spirituality. I had begun, in other words, to step outside the status quo. Such stepping was not allowed; I was vulnerable. The instructor's critique, as part of a cultural binding I could not recognize at that time, immobilized me, nailed me to the floor. (Mitchem 2003, 67)

This and other acts of erasure committed Mitchem to mining the experiences of African American women saying, "So, after that degree . . . I decided that I would only read Black women's writings and was introduced to this whole other world, which is why when I was going for my doctorate, I wanted to focus on womanist theology" (oral history interview with author, April 20, 2020).

At one point, Mitchem explored an education at Catholic University in Washington, DC. "And I called there and was basically told 'you want to do womanist stuff? Oh No! You do that on your own free time. We do real theology here.'" Mitchem said, "Thank you. Goodbye." Mitchem said it was probably a good idea that she gave up the Catholic route to a PhD. Around this time, she also had a conversation with Black Catholic and womanist theologian Shawn Copeland, who had studied systematic theology at Boston College. "Oh, I remember, I had a conversation with Shawn Copeland . . . I wanted to know about her experience in Boston . . . At first, she just started laughing." Mitchem, reflecting on her own experiences, said,

> That type of rejection of ideas outside of Canonical Literature and research has made me more open to graduate students. I am so excited for these people who are thinking their way through. And I know that there are other people in the Women and Gender Studies Program [at the University of South Carolina] who try to shut them down. And that makes me crazy. Don't shut these people down. Let them explore. This is how we go forward. This is how research develops. This is how we expand as human beings. (Oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020)

Mitchem could easily embrace the title "womanist" and "Catholic" because of her background and training. However, she resists external labels and moves into teacher mode as she explores labels in relation to the contexts, geographies, and disciplines within which she finds herself,

> I am conscious of myself as a feminist until I run into some of those white feminists who only understand feminism in terms of biological sex, so if you're not talking about women as women, then you can't be a feminist. Black feminism enters into intersectionality where its race, class, and gender. Womanism moves in that space but even expands it to talk about areas Black feminists often don't want to, which is African American and African women's spirituality and its impact. There are many Black Feminists who only want to call themselves Black feminists or feminists. So when I go to the African continent, they don't use womanist, they use Feminist. When I talk to historians, for the most part, they don't use womanist, they use Black Feminist. Younger students who are Black found FEMME and are adding the queer factor a lot more intentionally, moving beyond feminism. (Oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020)

Mitchem is a pragmatist, using what she has gained over the years to work with many types of communities. She says, "Yeah, I know that's where it comes down so it's really practical. It's pragmatic, it's like okay . . . But the underlying belief system is still there" (oral history interview with author, April 13, 2020).

On Teaching

Dr. Mitchem's experiences within the Catholic Church and other predominantly White institutions have directly impacted her teaching. Dr. Mitchem writes and teaches with her students' questions on her mind. She understands teaching and learning—as one of her mentors and role models, Grace Lee Boggs from Detroit, said—"as r/evolutionary acts." Mitchem engages graduate and undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina, [Columbia] in "the radical art of thinking" and nurtures students who have original ideas that have been rejected or deemed inappropriate (Mitchem, pers. comm., April 1, 2020). In an invited lecture with Villanova University faculty, Mitchem (2021) commented on her teaching philosophy, which is deeply connected to her own story,

> I aim to encourage students to question, followed by a pursuit of answers; I aim to promote students to act with justice; I aim to enter honest conversations with students, my act of co-learning; I aim to

> promote scholarship that is solid, forward- and backward-looking in order to achieve the groundbreaking; I aim to encourage networking and community but not ideology and not tribalism; I aim to foster enjoyment in the tasks of scholarship.

Mitchem added, "That's it. In the process I've also learned to trust myself and my skill as a teacher. And I do not shy away from difficult discussions."

Mitchem recently became the undergraduate coordinator of the Women and Gender Studies Program because "I have been alarmed at how the program is whitening up, so white girls find a home in Women and Gender Studies, Black girls do not." Mitchem is most disappointed in women who call themselves feminists yet have unrecognized patriarchal and racial scripts. "I'm seeing a lot of scholars who call themselves feminists not even being aware of how they are scripting out discussions of race" (oral history interview with author, April 20, 2020).

Mitchem claims that one teaching technique she adapted from Dr. Rosemary Ruether was to push herself to teach from new materials all the time. Unlike some professors teaching their dissertations after thirty years, Ruether kept on top of the literature reviews and incorporated the latest publications into her coursework. Curiosity and mutual exploration with students are central to Mitchem's constructive pedagogy.

Books and Essays

Mitchem understands African American communities as her priority. She mines the everyday life of African American women for the ways these women empower and heal themselves, resist oppression, and hold their communities together against a White American society that does not value their full humanity. As she states in *Introducing Womanist Theology*, "Womanist theology is based on the complex realities of Black women's lives. Womanist scholars recognize and name the imagination and initiative that African American women have utilized in developing sophisticated religious responses to their lives" (2002, 3). As a womanist and prolific writer, Mitchem is passionately committed to using an intersectional race, class, and gender analytical lens that allows her to surface the embedded the-

ologies and embodied meaning systems in Black women's everyday lives. However, this mining of Black women's lives comes at a price. In an early article, "No Longer Nailed to the Floor," Mitchem reflects,

> As I discovered womanist thought, I encountered teachers who encouraged me to speak in my own voice. When I began writing in earnest, these teachers challenged me to write only from the honesty of my own experiences. Reaching back for the level of creativity that two seminaries had worked to immobilize brought on a level of anxiety and fear that surprised me. I thought, as the illusion of "freedom" invited, that I had achieved a level of immunity from brainwashing. But putting words on paper, aiming to speak the words of Black women brought on pain . . . My experience is not unique. The professional world is one of the places that finds multiple ways to nail the feet of people of color, and women in particular, to the canonical Western-culture floor. (Mitchem 2003, 67)

Part of Mitchem's own journey as an academic is to put pen to paper and name Black women's pain and show how Black communities transform pain into personal and communal power that defies erasure. She states, "Black women are not born strong, but become so through our lives" (2003, 70). Black women know where the boundaries are laid by the status quo and choose to cross these boundaries despite the pain that it will cause. They do this for the self and for the larger community. Mitchem notes that Black women often answer the question of how they achieved success in spite of the pain by saying, "I prayed." Using anthropological methods and an intersectional lens, Mitchem maps this journey identifying a "spiritual and intuitive dimension" to claiming power when women of color move outside the boundaries of the status quo where there are few roadmaps and fewer mentors.

In her second book, *African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness* (2004a). Mitchem explores the varied and extended relationships that help African Americans survive and even thrive—the auntie, the granny, the midwife—who strengthen African American communities. The book is grounded in her experiences of resilience that were enabled by the grace of extended family and intentionally created support networks. As Mitchem (pers. comm., March 31, 2021) states, "The book was inspired by Aunt Maggie and friendships and the good people I have met in my life that provided guidance and support and humor and recipes. For instance, my little

dog stays with a neighbor who lives down the street when I am out of town, and she came down tonight to see how he was." In *Tapping Power*, Mitchem finds that it is not always the grand gesture but the small acts of kindness that build communities of resistance and hope.

Health and healing are particular concerns of Mitchem's. She devotes two books, *Tapping Power* (2004a) and *African American Folk Healing* (2007a), to this topic. She also has an edited volume on this topic with Dr. Emily Townes—*Faith, Health, and Healing among African Americans* (2008)—and numerous articles with this focus. In *African American Folk Healing*, Mitchem historically contextualizes and reframes the denigrating and dismissive ideas of the dominant culture surrounding African American cures, dialect, conjuring, and healing. She traces the deeply relational and often unselfconscious healing practices within various African American communities from slavery through the 20th century. Body, soul, spirit, personal and communal relationships combine and factor into wellness and sickness. Healers and self-healers balance individual and social energies to bring communities and individuals into relationships of well-being. She insists that health is a limited concept of Western medicine and points out the many disjunctions between Western and African American understandings of medicine and healing. African American women often practice, pass down, and conjure up other, more holistic, psychic, and social forms of resistance and well-being.

Mitchem addresses the popularity and impact of prosperity churches on Black communities, the Black church, and Black theologies in *Name It and Claim It: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church*. She states that there is not just one type of prosperity church. Rather, there are basic tenets lived out in multiple ways that undergird the idea of prosperity. First, prosperity churches espouse a benevolent and generous God that desires believers' socio-economic prosperity. Second, "members hold to positive confession," stressing the idea that they can "name it and claim it." Tithes and unwavering belief in God are part of this confessional faith and "doubts prevent blessings." Finally, designer clothing and conspicuous consumption become symbols through which God is understood (Mitchem 2007b, 69–70).

One of Mitchem's notable, scholarly contributions in this area is her differentiation between three types of prosperity churches that she finds in Black communities. There are the prosperity gospels derived from within African American communities preached by leaders such as Sweet Daddy Grace, Father Divine, Marcus Garvey, and even civil rights leader James Forman, who penned *The Black Mani-*

festo. These leaders and preachers espouse an inventive and exciting Black cultural response to racism and poverty. There are 20th-century Black prosperity megachurches such as Creflo Dollar in Georgia that flow from White "Word of Faith'' preachers Kenneth Hagen and Kenneth Copeland. Mitchem suggests these theologies of prosperity are firmly wedded to a view of America's world dominance and to capitalism that is exclusively and unapologetically patriarchal (71). The third category is Unity- and Religious Science-rooted churches that emphasize the "mind's power to control the perception of a situation" (88). Mitchem sees the appeal of these churches in their "belief in possibilities beyond the seeming limits of the moment" (102). Mitchem adds credibility to her writing by using ethnographic interviews with church-goers. In this way, she attempts to respectfully capture the appeal of these churches. One woman she quotes, named Sakoura, reminded her that many African American beliefs that have been labeled as White-derived were originally appropriated by White culture from African, Asian, and Native beliefs and practices (Mitchem 2007b, 69–102).

In a review of Mitchem's book, Sandra Barnes (2012, 52) notes that Mitchem "describes the existential wounds that years of segregation and institutionalized racism have had on blacks, as well as the resulting 'spirituality of longing' for personal fulfillment, equality, social justice, and societal acceptance." Reviewer Carol Troupe (2009, 125) states, "The work Mitchem has done is accessible and, I think, valuable. She has taken care not to simply disparage prosperity churches without first exploring them and considering their value from the perspective of their congregations." As in all her works, Mitchem uses an intersectional lens to explore prosperity churches' impact on race, gender, and social justice. Her critique is that many of these churches reinscribe rather than illuminate the more complex social and economic causes of injustice, often do not deal with racism, and do not benefit all church-goers when it comes to gender roles and sexual orientation (Mitchem, 2007b).

According to Robin Fretwell Wilson's (2020, 181) review, Mitchem's book, *Race, Religion, and Politics: Toward Human Rights in the United States*, "chronicles the slow march of hate across American history long before white nationalist groups became increasingly brazen and dangerous." Written after Donald Trump took office in 2016, Mitchem explains how "concepts of race, like kudzu, [an invasive Southern vine] have invaded the religion and politics of a growing nation's consciousness" (Mitchem 2019, 2). In this volume,

Mitchem introduces the intersectionality of race, religion, and politics as a methodology and analytical lens to be placed alongside other womanist and Black feminist concepts that focus on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as formulated by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (2003) or by Anglea Davis in her seminal work *Woman Race and Class* (1983). Using her own intersectional framework, Mitchem demonstrates how race, religion, and politics intertwine, justify, and reinforce the reality of systemic racism in the US and across the world.

Returning to the beginning of this biography, I note how this example of Mitchem's work allows us to see just how it is that liberation looks like oppression to the privileged even as it also illuminates a path forward where liberation might be restorative for all. Her expert analysis leaves no doubt that systemic racism is part of our founding myth and is reinforced by religious and political institutions throughout US history. I use the word "myth" to refer to our deepest stories that propel every word and deed, every law and institution, and every cultural, political, and economic exchange. However, Mitchem's work in *Race, Religion, and Politics: Toward Human Rights in the United States* does not leave us hopeless in the face of this realization. She calls for an introduction of human rights from below, at the neighbor-to-neighbor level, as a form of restorative justice, healing, and community building that interrupts the founding myths that support and sustain racism in the US. Mitchem asserts that restorative justice frees all Americans because we are all captive to these founding systems of oppression. Part of the genius of this book is the many examples of how systems of oppression and acts of liberation are embodied in experiences of everyday life. There are no simple answers, absolute demons, or perfect saints. Instead, there are questions that open us up to other possibilities. This book allows us to see just how it is that liberation looks like oppression to the privileged. We have only seen glimpses of alternative ways of living that are driven by human rights from below. In our vision of the nation, we have yet to even partially embrace communities of color as full citizens or even as fully human (Mitchem 2019).

Mitchem continues to refine her conceptual framework and broaden her reach into global contexts. This move is not a new phenomenon. Katie Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant were in Ghana at the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians in 1989 (Grant 1989). Mercy Oduyoye, one of the founders of the Circle, has

nurtured common cause with womanists throughout the Circle's history. Anthropologist Linda E. Thomas makes South Africa a context for her research in *Under the Canopy* (2007). Traci C. West's most recent book—*Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion Racism and Ending Gender Violence*—looks to the African continent for resources in healing gender violence (2019). Mitchem reflects on the deep-seated need in the world to adopt what she calls human rights from below.

> I am still committed to the issue of racial justice . . . and justice for women and gender justice. But I moved it all to a place where I think in terms of human rights, which I think incorporates everything I've ever done. Whether it's community work, African American studies, women and gender studies, religious studies, ethics, all of that kind of balls up together for me in an understanding of human rights and this idea of personhood: Who is defined as a person and how are they defined as a person. And I see this being reenacted now [during the pandemic] as people are saying, "Well, we should just go back to work." Well, the people who are on the front lines of all of this, are people of color and they're the ones who are dying most and it's almost like an unspoken in my head. This kind of, "Hey they don't count." (Oral history interview with author, April 20, 2020)

Mitchem's current research context is Nigeria, with a focus on transnational decolonial thought and human rights. This research builds upon connections she is making in Nigeria through the Ile Aresa Diaspora to Africa Cultural Exchange for the Arts and Sciences (Mitchem, pers.comm., March 31, 2021). In speaking of Africa and the Americas, scholars have historically struggled with balancing relevant unifying themes with the particularities of a specific context. Mitchem's nuanced writing style and research methods, including her focus on ethnography and the particular lives of Black women, provide a way to address this difficulty. Furthermore, Mitchem is interested in joining post-colonial dialogues and global frameworks that "may (currently) exclude black American women and men." Including US Black women into these postcolonial conversations will, she believes, "create an opening to re-encounter the global reach of colonization" (Mitchem 2016, 61).

Does Liberation Feel Like Oppression?

Dr. Mitchem's scholarship will exist far beyond her own time as a respectful model of inquiry and dialogue and as a form of truth-telling about the history and legacy of racism in our nation. Her work recovers the stories and restores the dignity of African American women, not just for themselves, but as "a way out of no way" for all of us. Her work also marks the history of a moment in time—a style and way of writing that will be built upon by later scholars. Her teaching and mentoring inspired a new generation of scholars and encouraged those students who felt they had nothing to offer to carry on with productive and creative lives. Mitchem's skill at making systems work to her benefit and the benefit of other marginalized people has made those systems of White privilege more inclusive for all. This success is another manifestation of a womanist applying personal pain to community action, answering the question, "how do you work for justice?" (Mitchem, 2001, 90)

Dr. Mitchem has invested her time, energy, and career into the task of recording and celebrating the alternative epistemologies, theological methodologies, healing practices, and ways of being in the world of Black women and their communities. Informed by her use of ethnographic methodologies, including oral histories, she has worked passionately to critique dominant paradigms that support oppression. Using these qualitative methodologies, she has helped her students and readers to see the benefit of other paradigms and ways of seeing operative in the lives of Black women and the communities in which they live. Where are we on the scale of examining our own paradigms and locations of privilege? Does liberation feel like oppression?

Postscript: Author's Reflections On Oral History

When I look back at my own dissertation, which was substantiated with ethnographic research methods in the 1990s, I was frustrated by the lack of resources available about African American communities. I went to a librarian in Crystal Springs, MS, to ask about African American churches in the area (Hinton 2001). I was told there weren't any from before the 20th century. A Black librarian pulled me over and told me about a Black Church founded before the Civil War that was still in existence. The only way to get information about this community was through interviews with the oldest living members, who were descendants of the founders. I later discovered that, during Jim Crow, Black neighborhoods across the South remained unincorporated and were not part of the nearest White town—in this case, Crystal Springs, MS. The purpose of this was to deny resources, public services, voting rights, and true US citizenship to African American communities. These communities were intentionally erased on official maps but still live on in African American family stories. Information can be gleaned about these communities from the ever-important census records. If you want to know the history of these Black communities, which are often centered around the founding of Black churches, you find the home of the person where church bulletins and church minutes are gathered and stored. If you are lucky, church history was written up and saved by one of the elders of the community, usually a woman. No White "public library" ever bothered to collect these types of papers or record these histories. More is available in urban environments, especially where there is a historically Black college or a research center focused on Black history. However, if you want to tap the collective memories of elders, creating oral histories is an important methodology that provides information beyond what is recorded in the limited, available records.

Oral histories are a powerful way to document what I would call "living history," especially for communities that are marginalized and have been erased and immobilized by history's winners. When William Barr, attorney general under President Trump, was asked about his legacy, he replied confidently, "History is told by the winners" (Barr 2020). Oral history is a methodology that resists this type of impoverished and imperial record. It does not necessarily aggrandize the winners. Rather, it offers fuller, more communal accounts of how lives are lived and how pain is transformed into collective

action that can heal even the creators and guardians of oppressive systems of power. Histories from below show how communities are organized beyond the winners' understanding. These narratives explain how marginalized communities partake in the march of history and offer alternative ways of organizing power. Only by including these histories can we rewrite the conquering narratives of American Christian exceptionalism.

The pandemic of 2020–21 expanded virtual technologies along with the ability to record oral histories over the Internet. These technologies generate poor but manageable transcripts. At the beginning of the pandemic, one of the nicest things that I gave myself was a call to a colleague, Dr. Mitchem, who lives on the other side of the country. We had three long conversations about her life. In this process, I learned that oral histories freely offered are valuable to the teller as well as the interviewer. They offer poignant affirmations of decisions, help unpack unexamined trauma, and help us reflect and make meaning and connections out of often disparate events. For these interviews, I followed the guidelines of the Oral History Association (OHA, n.d). I also collaborated with Mitchem on the article—not in its writing but in her approval that it honestly reflected her understandings and life story. This type of oral history is not adversarial, overly critical, or a type of journalism, but a type of co-construction.

Importantly, publishing oral histories like this one about Dr. Mitchem turns these traditional primary sources into valid secondary sources for future researchers. I did not feel it was my place to compose material with the critical eye of someone writing a dissertation. Thankfully, someone else can do that. But these materials do become a critical resource and context for Mitchem's oeuvre and intellectual thought. This essay does not exhaust the oral histories that I gathered from Mitchem. The oral histories and transcripts will exist for others to review. African American women's intellectual thought is still not as central to the narrative of the nation or to American religious thought as it should be. Our current world is organized around narratives that glorify acquisition, conquest, and even citizenship as the privilege and legal right of White people. I am reminded of an alternative possibility, paraphrased here, that writer Gloria Naylor (pers. comm., 1990) left with me in a lucky conversation. "What if, instead of investing in men and machines to go to the moon, we had invested in understanding the physics, healing remedies, intellect, and experiences of Black grannies . . . What would we know about ourselves and our world?"

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