

## *Traci C. West*

### *Disruptive Activism, Ministry, and Scholarship*

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“**D**isruptive” is a fitting word to describe the activism, ministry, and scholarship of Rev. Dr. Traci C. West. The author of several prominent theology texts, including *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, West is known for her distinctive incorporation of personal narratives from individual women into her analyses of the dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality in the dynamics of intimate violence. Her feminist theological analysis of these issues has a prophetic character that prioritizes justice-making in the real world. This biography will explore Prof. West’s ministerial and academic accomplishments and trace her trajectory towards becoming the noted scholar-activist she is today. Dr. West’s work attends to the essential feminist question of the tension between the particular and the universal. Her work explores and celebrates the importance of individual lives, intersecting identities, and women’s subjectivity. This biog-

raphy celebrates her noteworthy contributions with an exploration of what it means to place the experience of one woman—one Black, queer woman—at the foundation of one’s analysis.

## *Early Life*

Traci West’s mother—Paula F. West—was a central figure in her early years, influencing young Traci through her political engagement and intellectual inclinations. Paula was raised in Harlem by aunts who brought her to Abyssinian Baptist Church. There, her deep faith and spirituality were formed at a young age in the atmosphere of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s desegregation activism. Before Traci was born in 1959, Paula moved to Stamford, Connecticut, where she married Traci’s father. The family began attending First United Methodist Church in Stamford; thus, Traci was poised to become a lifelong Methodist from infancy in a household with deep Methodist and Baptist roots.

In a series of videoconference conversations with the author in June of 2020, Traci West recalled several childhood memories, including attending church services twice on Sundays and savoring private devotional moments with her mother in their backyard. Energetic and bookish, Traci’s mother worked several jobs, including one as an assistant in a school where she advocated on behalf of children of color. After church, her mother led study groups, reading Black power books with friends (West, pers. comm., June 24, 2020). West reflects that her mother’s leadership and intellectualism helped her “to understand how formal higher education degrees do not always produce intellectuals, and how people without formal higher education degrees . . . should be recognized for the ways in which they are intellectuals.” Yet Traci’s mother also felt strongly that her children should receive an excellent education and put them through private school. In this environment, Traci became imbued with a deep sense of justice-work rooted in study. The youngest in the house among her artistic and high-achieving elder siblings, she felt a need to distinguish herself academically.

As a high school student at New Canaan Country School in Connecticut during the 1960s, Traci’s classmates were predominantly White and affluent. She collaborated with other Black students to raise awareness about issues of racism and became known as a vocal advocate for justice among her classmates. She recalls her early in-

terest in activism, partly informed by the growing Civil Rights Movement, which she witnessed daily in the news as a child. She shared that, “Every single evening, we watched the news. It was mandatory. We didn’t talk at the dinner table until we had watched the evening news.” She was strongly influenced by social justice as a central aspect of Christian clerical leadership and felt called to a career in the United Methodist Church. Early on, she identified herself as playing a care-taking role in her family, even though she was the youngest, comforting relatives during times of grief. By the time she graduated high school, she had begun actively taking steps towards ordination.

### *Key Career Influences*

As an undergraduate majoring in religious studies at Yale in the late 1970s, Traci West continued to develop her skills in social-justice organizing. Her freshman year, she served as the Black Student Alliance’s representative to the newly-formed Grievance Board for Student Complaints of Sexual Harassment. This board was created in the wake of the lawsuit brought against Yale by Ronni Alexander and others in *Alexander v. Yale*, the first instance of Title IX to support charges of sexual harassment against an educational institution (National Organization of Women 2007). In her position on the board, West helped create the first policies and procedures around sexual harassment at Yale University.

As a junior, West was quoted in a 1979 *New York Times* article marking ten years since women were first admitted to Yale. She argued that, although women had long been admitted, they were far from being accepted or free from sexism there (Robertson 1979). West recalls college as a time of early exploration with her gender and sexuality and a period of politicization. In the *New York Times* article, she is pictured wearing a tie. She explored the works of lesbian feminists with her classmates, and she fondly recalls times when her women’s groups invited influential figures such as Audre Lorde and Angela Davis to speak on campus. West was an energetic college activist, and her activism did not go unnoticed. West recalled that, at her graduation ceremony, university President Dr. A. Bartlett Giamatti stood shaking hands with the graduates and their parents. When he reached for her mother’s hand, he leaned over and whis-

pered genially, “Your daughter has been a pain in my ass for four years” (West, pers. comm., June 24, 2020).

Following her graduation from Yale in 1981, West enrolled in seminary. She graduated from the Pacific School of Religion in 1984, studying to become a parish minister in the United Methodist Church. West recalls her journey towards ordination and being called to her first church in 1984 in her book *Disruptive Christian Ethics* (2006, 246). Her journey was not without setbacks; West was met with resistance from communities considering her appointment because of her race and gender. When she received her first pastoral assignment at the Bloomfield United Methodist Church in Connecticut, the church initially responded that they “did not want” a Black pastor (West, pers. comm., June 24, 2020). They said they had previously had a pastor who was Black, and they wanted someone older and more experienced.<sup>1</sup> West challenged their initial response and advocated for herself with the bishops, cabinet, and superintendents who saw to her assignment. Ultimately, her superiors supported her assignment to the church. In reflecting on the experience for this biography, she indicated that she “learned a lot.” It was overall a positive time in her life. Some who initially rejected her because she was a woman and Black eventually became some of her biggest supporters.

During her early career at Bloomfield United Methodist Church, West reengaged with her call towards activism—a decision that brought both notoriety for her commitment to justice and conflict with her church community. In her second year as minister, she was involved in a nonviolent direct action in the anti-apartheid movement, intentionally blocking the South African embassy entrance in New York City, where she was arrested. She is beaming in a photograph that appeared in the *Bloomfield Journal* that day, showing her wearing her clerical collar. She told the reporter, “My congregation is very caring and very much against racism,” indicating her confidence in the growing support of her community (Jones 1985).

In the late 1980s, she left her pastorate in Bloomfield to take a position with the Christian Conference of Connecticut (Chriscon) as a staff associate and leader of programming for Criscon’s newly-formed Center for Peace and Justice Ministries (Renner 1988). In this position, she vocally opposed the ecumenical organization’s “institutionalized racism and sexism” in a memorandum to the conference’s executive leaders. At that point, West and her fellow staff associate Jean Peacock were asked to resign (Renner 1988). Many individuals, particularly women associated with the conference, were outraged. Barbara

DeBaptist, president of Impact—one of the justice-focused organizations affiliated with Chriscon—was quoted in a local newspaper: “All of them [the conference board] need to have their hands slapped . . . You got a white male organization talking the good talk and talking God’s word and not living the word” (Renner 1988).

In the aftermath of her experience with Chriscon, West sought new ways to integrate her ministerial calling and her commitment to justice-seeking. In the late 1980s, she shifted towards the academic arena, becoming a campus minister to students at Hartford College for Women, the Greater Hartford Community College, and the University of Hartford. Eventually, she was named director of the Greater Hartford Campus Ministry (Neyer 1991). West ran prayer and support groups, raised funds for students, spoke in ethics classes, and set up special programs. In a 1991 profile in the *Hartford Courant*, one of the students West counseled said that she kept students “on the right track when they discuss[ed] issues such as parental control, sexism or racism” and encouraged them in their political activism (Neyer 1991). West was vocally passionate about, in her words, “working through education to infuse the values of justice into society” (Taylor 1991). To that end, she began pursuing her academic interest in ethics.

Through her campus ministry, West encountered many students who had faced sexual abuse in the past. She was startled by the extent of abuse reported by students of all ages and economic backgrounds at all three of the schools where she worked. She was particularly struck by the case of one Black female student who had been assaulted by a male family member at a young age. The student’s pastor had told her to just forgive her assailant. The student sat completely silent for their entire first counseling session. West knew she held a position of power as this student’s counselor, not unlike that young woman’s pastor. It took a great deal of time and effort for West to navigate this dynamic and cultivate enough rapport to counsel the student. West recalls desperately seeking resources to support her work but finding little in the published literature:

The resources are so completely siloed. Psychological resources don’t mention anything about issues of race and racism; the Christian resources don’t mention anything about race and racism, and nothing about the deep emotional kinds of trauma inflicted is mentioned in the sociology; and the sociological analyses and legal analyses and psych analyses are completely separate. And this Black woman’s ex-

perience is not existing, in all these separated places. (West, pers. comm., June 2020)

This desperate need for resources was a major catalyst for West's interest in how ministers can and should respond to experiences of sexual assault for Black women in particular. It informed her decision to pursue her ministry as an academic. She applied to the PhD program at Union Theological Seminary, knowing that there would be strong support for her identity as a Black feminist. West characterized this period preceding her arrival at Union as "a golden moment for Black women students" (pers. comm., June 24, 2020). Indeed, West arrived at Union to begin her doctoral studies in 1991 amidst a swelling interest in womanist theology, just a few years after a cohort that included Katie Cannon, Jacqueline Grant, and Linda Thomas—trailblazers in the field of womanist theology. West's principal advisor at Union was Beverly Harrison, a groundbreaking Christian social ethicist considered the "mother" of feminist ethics. In addition to West, she mentored a generation of prominent feminist, womanist, and mujerista ethicists (Snarr, 71). In 1993, while West was a doctoral candidate, Union Professor Delores Williams would publish the groundbreaking foundational text in womanist theological scholarship, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. That same year, leading womanist ethicist Emilie Townes, current dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, published her Union doctoral dissertation, *A Troubling in My Soul* (1993). It was in this heady and fertile academic atmosphere that West began to hone her scholarly voice. With Prof. Williams on her dissertation committee, West received her PhD from Union in 1995 (West 1995). Her dissertation, titled "Deconstructing Violation: A Moral Interrogation of the Psycho-social and Spiritual Consequences of Violence against Afro-American Women," would become her first major book, *Wounds of the Spirit*.

## *Academic Works*

### *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*

West's major books, including her doctoral dissertation published in 1999 as *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*, focus on the project of addressing Black women's experiences

with intimate violence from a theological perspective that explores its racial and gender dimensions. In *Wounds of the Spirit*, West develops a resistance ethic meant to draw attention to intimate and societal violence. Through this work, she addresses the harmful structures that perpetuate assaults on Black women's lives. She coins the term "victim-survivor" for her subjects on the very first page of *Wounds of the Spirit*, hyphenated to address the twain aspects of their relation to intimate violence. Victim-survivors are neither solely passive nor solely triumphant, but a combination of both. This hybridized neologism, used throughout the book, is perhaps one of West's most significant and most well-known contributions to feminist scholarship. Régine Michelle Jean-Charles (2014, 41) notes that West's term "victim-survivor" has been taken up in both theological scholarship and the wider non-academic lexicon. A search using the Google Ngram word-frequency charting tool shows that the term's appearance in print has notably skyrocketed since the book's publication in 1999. In this inaugural book, West also establishes her methodological focus on individual narratives, primary sources, and interviews. She writes, "the 'truth' of social reality can best be approached from personal reflections by individuals as well as insights from systemic social analysis" (West 1999, 4). With her analysis firmly grounded in individual women's particular narratives, West's feminist framework draws strength from and empowers her subjects and their lived experiences.

The book's first two chapters poignantly lay out testimony from historical slave narratives, as well as interviews with anonymous modern and contemporary victim-survivors. Alongside these narratives, one might expect to find statistics on instances of sexual assault to illustrate its prevalence.<sup>2</sup> Instead, West expounds on the myriad reasons statistical evidence is hard to come by. There are compelling reasons women may not disclose assault, such as self-blame, invisibilization and shame, harmful theological frameworks, and socio-economic struggles (55–6). West seeks to demystify and combat each of these by identifying and deconstructing their racialized and gendered dimensions. She calls for "a nuanced, feminist, and antiracist understanding of how and why particular cultural norms reproduce the women's trauma" (91). Ultimately, her objective is to "give theoretical precedence to women's right to have lives free from the torment of intimate violence and how to expose the cultural obstructions which deny that right" (110).

In *Wounds of the Spirit*, West bridges the interdisciplinary gaps she first recognized in her campus ministry around the lack of clinical resources available to counsel young Black victim-survivors. She critiques White woman-centered frameworks that obscure and invisibilize the particularities of violence against Black women, represented by the work of Susan Brownmiller (93–5) and Catherine MacKinnon (115–16). Her interdisciplinary analysis draws from theoretical resources within sociology, history, law, gender studies, and Christian social ethics. West calls for the development of community resources and heightened church responses to social and intimate violence, invoking the womanist frameworks of Delores Williams. She builds to a holistic “ethic of resisting violence against women” that identifies resistance strategies both in church communities and civil society (192–5). She closes with a quote from one of her interview subjects vowing her commitment “to live and to resist this world’s oppression” (207). Notably, in keeping with the value she places on her subjects’ voices, West literally gives her interview subjects the last word in all her major books.

*Wounds of the Spirit* was well-received, and its legacy has held sway in recent decades. Michele Dumont (2003, 229–30), writing in *Hypatia*, called the book “intense,” “ambitious,” and “impressive,” praising the complexity of West’s treatment of difficult subjects and her ability to navigate subtle dynamics, such as praising the contributions of some White feminists while critiquing their distortions and inadequacies. Shondrah Nash (2006, 252–3) called *Wounds of the Spirit* an “intense read” in the journal *Feminist Teacher* but praised the breadth and nuance of West’s poignant and “microscopic” analytical critiques. *Wounds of the Spirit* has been cited over two hundred times in published scholarly literature, including references in major feminist works like Sara Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Sexual Politics* and *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (Google Scholar 2020). In 1999—the year *Wounds of the Spirit* was published—Dr. West joined the faculty at Drew University Theological School, where she remains Professor of Christian Ethics and African American Studies to this day.

## Pedagogy

Dr. West is also well respected for her pedagogical expertise. At Drew, she has received numerous teaching awards, notably the Teacher of the Year Award (2003), the Scholar-Teacher of the Year Award (twice: 2002 & 2014), and the Excellence in Teaching Award from the Graduate Division of Religion Student Association (twice: 2012 & 2020). Her many awards are enumerated on her professional website (West, n.d.). Her doctoral advisees at Drew have included Rev. Dr. Cari Jackson, Prof. Leah Thomas, and ethicist and artistic creative Dr. Elyse Ambrose. Each of them recognizes West's kindness and generosity in her mentorship, as well as her doggedly persistent motivation and fastidious attention to their academic rigor. "Get it done" are the words Dr. Ambrose most clearly associates with her period of dissertation-writing under West's mentorship; they stuck with her, she recalls, because:

They reflect the urgency of this vocation as a Christian social ethicist, and in my particular case, as a Black queer ethicist. At the same time, they were words of assurance that I could, in fact, get the work done, and setting my will and intentions toward that end is what was needed. They also spoke to the rigor that Dr. West brings to her work and that she expects from her students, a rigor that does rest, but does not dally, because lives are frequently at stake. This may sound like an overstatement, but when thinking about violence against women, queer lives, sexism and heterosexism in the church—the statement is true. (Ambrose, pers. comm., August 2020)

West has also contributed actively in the arena of scholarly literature as a prolific author for, and a member of, the editorial boards of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, the T&T Clark *Studies in Social Ethics, Ethnography and Theology*, and the New Room Books editorial board of the United Methodist Publishing House.

## Black Feminism and Womanism

West has been a leading figure in ongoing discussions in academic circles about the intellectual differences and links between Black feminism and womanism. At the American Academy of Religion

Annual Meeting in 2006, West spoke on a panel led by Monica Coleman addressing the question, “Must I Be Womanist?” in response to a call to examine this relationship in the professional lives of Black women in theological scholarship (Coleman et al. 2006). The central issue: while many scholars use Alice Walker’s original description of a *womanist* as a “Black feminist or feminist of color” (Walker 1983), some 21st-century scholars oppose labeling all Black feminists as womanists. Many acknowledge that this dated definition of womanism does not fully encompass the methodological framework that many Black feminists—and even some self-described womanists—seek to promote today. Yet, Coleman (et al. 2006, 93) posited that identifying with womanism has become an “academic job market necessity.” This phenomenon is most visible in seminaries and divinity schools—spaces where there is often an assumption of womanist theological positioning for Black female professors. As well, some would say there has been a commodification of the term “womanism” in publishing and academia. Coleman laid out the issue, asserting that womanism is like “a house with not enough furniture” for her and her colleagues’ multiple belongings. She insists the term pays insufficient attention to gays and lesbians and lacks the strong political and advocacy associations ascribed to Black feminism (86).

In response, West emphasized the practical urgency of liberative thought, arguing that scholars should not spend too much labor on the dichotomy between womanism and Black feminism. She asserted that such a dichotomy was, in her words, “bogus” (Coleman et al. 2006, 29). In contrast to Coleman’s assertion that womanism lacks a political edge, West argued that political edginess is not found in arguments about who is and is not a womanist. Instead, it lies in scholarship that combats discrimination, violence, and homophobia. “It is not the nature of a study but the choices the author makes about which questions to explore that create ‘edginess’ with regard to political issues that are present in the material” (132). That same year, West published her second major monograph, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (2006), which indeed took on a profoundly political, ethical project within theology.

### *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter*

In her second major book, West broadened her scope beyond intimate violence to explore anti-violence resistance itself. She notes that she

drew on “a range of dissimilar sources, perspectives, and methods for addressing moral problems in our society and creating strategies that can help bring about radical social change” (West 2006, xi). West begins and ends *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* with individual women’s narratives as she did in *Wounds of the Spirit*. The book opens with an intimate profile of a woman who applies for welfare, is assigned to a workfare program, is sexually harassed on the job, refuses her supervisor’s advances, and, in retaliation, is verbally abused and called a “lesbian.” In response to her complaints, the city invalidates her experience and does nothing to shield her from the abuse, saying she is not a city employee and therefore has no legal right to protection (xiii–xiv).

In laying this woman’s story at the foundation of the book, West calls for an approach to ethics grounded in women of color’s lived experiences. In this methodology, there is a fluid dialogue between theory and practice and between the particular and the universal. “Some social ethicists,” West writes, “emphasize concrete practices because theory seems tedious and irrelevant. Others emphasize theory because concrete practices seem too idiosyncratic and transitory. I contend, however, that both theory and practice, and a fluid conversation between them, are most fruitful for conceiving Christian social ethics” (xvii). West critiques universal claims about “man” and the “will to power” made by Reinhold Niebuhr—a towering figure in Christian social ethics at Union, her alma mater. She suggests that Niebuhr demonstrated a paternalistic ignorance of the conditions experienced by Black people and the working poor in nearby Harlem (9–24). The Harlem of the 1930s and 40s was where West’s mother resided and attended Abyssinian Baptist Church. In West’s critical treatment of Niebuhr, one can infer both analytical insight and an appropriate degree of personal rapprochement.

For West, it is necessary on both a scholarly and a political level to consider universalizing ethical concepts in light of individual lived experience. Centering each point of analysis on the lived experiences of individual Black women is essential in the liberative goals of her work. West’s insistence on this point is one of the most uniquely disruptive qualities of her work and one of the most profoundly revolutionary. She aligns herself with the interruptive fundamentals of feminist theory that hold that no universal precept or ethical standpoint can be explained or developed without analyzing its impact and examining it within the context of an actual, living person’s life. The ultimate goal of theorizing, for West, is the mitigation of the

harm and violence experienced by that particular woman within the social frameworks being analyzed.

West's complex logic and prophetic voice are most evident in her development of theoretical resources for addressing racialized, sexist violence. West builds up an extensive overview of the experience of those women whom she terms victim-survivors of intimate violence, tracing the spiritual constructions of guilt alongside an analysis of patriarchal Christian teachings (60–83). West moves through a comprehensive socioeconomic analysis, with an overview of social scientists' approaches to intimate violence, taking issue with scholars who prioritize either the dimension of race or sexism without sufficiently addressing the nuances of both. West calls for a methodology that “simultaneously attends to racial realities in its method and directly seeks the empowerment of Black women in its goals”:

[T]o merely locate a Blackwoman-authored analytical discussion that focuses upon Black women victim-survivors must not be mistakenly seen as a sufficient goal . . . The objective to be reckoned with here is how to give theoretical precedence to women's right to have lives free from the torment of intimate violence and how to expose the cultural obstructions which deny that right. (109–10)

West outlines what she calls an “ethic of resistance” in opposing violence on the personal, political, and spiritual levels in an effort toward a “broad-based movement for social change” (160). *Disruptive Christian Ethics* has become an influential text and a source of inspiration in both scholarship and activism. In 2016, West's resistance strategies were highlighted in *Sojourners'* “A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence.” This compendium of activist voices, including Howard Thurman and Dorothee Sölle, highlighted those who “wrestle[d] with what it means to live out the biblical call to justice amid the complexities of ever-changing political, social, and moral situations” (Cramer 2015).

### *LGBTQ Ethics & Advocacy*

By far, the bulk of West's writing has focused on addressing the entwined race and gender dimensions of intimate violence. However, a significant subset of her scholar-activist authorship has concerned the treatment of gays and lesbians in Christian denominations, es-

pecially the United Methodist Church. West's chapter in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (2004), is an early example, in which she called for an end to heterosexist shaming culture and a welcoming attitude towards gay and lesbian clergy. This, she writes, is part of "an open and affirming church sexual ethic eschewing the notion of shameful, closeted, secret sexual orientations" (31–50). She has been an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ Christians in civic, political activism and the United Methodist Church's ongoing denominational discourse over marriage equality and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy (Hahn 2019). Leaders of the United Methodist Church have struggled to find common ground in bitter debates about homosexuality, marriage, and the ordination of openly gay clergy for years (Zauzmer n.d.). Openly queer and affirming LGBTQ allies within the United Methodist Church have faced numerous challenges to their spiritual well-being and livelihoods. It takes courage like Dr. West's to rise up and assert oneself in public debate.

Queer readers who encounter West's work are drawn to her prophetic LGBTQ-affirming voice. West has self-identified as bisexual for numerous years, though she is relatively private about her personal life (West, pers. comm., June 24, 2020). Her husband, the late Prof. Jerry Watts, who died in 2015, holds a place of honor in the acknowledgments in each of her major books—he was both an intellectual life partner and a huge supporter of her work (West 2006, x). Jerry passed away while West was completing her third and most recent monograph (West, pers. comm., June 24, 2020).

### *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality*

West's most recent and far-reaching book addressing violence against women of color, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence* (2019), is the sweeping culmination of years of international research. It adopts a transnational approach, exploring the social and cultural forces that perpetuate colorism and violence against women and girls globally and offers cultural, spiritual resources for opposing those violent forces. Her research is based mainly on interviews with activists and scholars in Ghana, Brazil, and South Africa. There is a collusion, West writes, "between anti-Black racism and misogynistic violence" across cultures (45). She calls for an awakening drawn

from women's experiences across an array of settings. The book is also part travelogue and is perhaps West's most introspective work; it contains by far the most "I" statements of all her books. Using her personal perspective, West narrates her thought processes in varied places and moments, from crowded transit depots to her hospitalization for dehydration. In one instance, she muses on her tendencies toward skepticism at local remedies and customs. In this anecdote, she challenges her own biases and expounds upon the need for greater cross-cultural communication and interreligious understanding in anti-violence work (66–7). The academic study of religion in the US negotiates the fine lines between religion, mythology, spirituality, medicine, science, custom, and tradition. This area of academic study and research has a complicated and often troubling past. Approaches like West's methodology, where scholars narrate their personal struggle with their own biases and convictions, is a step forward in the academy's gradual progress with a global reckoning.

While still relatively new, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality* has been well-received by mainstream activists as well as academics. One review in the *Christian Century* (2019, 43) called the book "eye-opening, heartbreaking, and prophetic." Most notable is West's introduction of the term "defiant spirituality" in the title and throughout the book. Initially, she uses it to refer to Black lesbian activists in South Africa, confronting religious leaders about their silence concerning rape and violence directed against women and gender-nonconforming people. She subsequently applies this term broadly throughout the book to explore "spiritually resourceful communal practices" of resistance (194).

## *Recognition & Recent Activism*

West has consistently paired her scholarship with engaged activism and a defiant spirituality. As a celebrated scholar-activist, West is committed to bringing about social change through concrete action. She has been notably recognized for her achievements within the United Methodist Church (UMC). The UMC New York Annual Conference Methodist Federation for Social Action awarded West the Gwen and C. Dale White Social Justice Award in recognition of her outspoken protests on behalf of LGBTQ equality (Reconciling Ministries Network 2013). At the American Academy of Religion Annual Meet-

ing in 2015, West received the inaugural Walter Wink Scholar-Activist Award, established by Auburn Seminary to honor “God’s troublemakers”—those “courageous individuals who dedicate their lives to advocating for justice and peace in our world” (Auburn Seminary 2015). When she received the award, West gave a speech in which she proclaimed that “scholarship needs activism, and activism needs scholarship,” elaborating:

Scholarship needs activism because it’s an opportunity to recognize and name the politics of knowledge production—the politics of intellectual commitment. There are certain kinds of values and intellectual commitments evident in scholarly texts and scholarly performance. There are certain kinds of politics that are operative. Activism is a way of highlighting, naming, and confronting those commitments. Activism needs scholarly inquiry to broaden—to bring a focus on how acts are conceptualized so to deepen understanding of the historical and moral understanding that informs the movement’s vision and way of conceptualizing who and what it is. (Drew Today 2015)

Her activism even extends to the realm of mainstream media culture; West made a brief appearance in a major documentary entitled *NO! The Rape Documentary*, directed by Aishah Shahidah Simmons in 2006, about sexual violence in Black communities. In the film, she is seated, speaking to an interviewer off-camera about the invisibilization of rape in churches. She compares the experience of women who are silenced to being “sacrificed” for the sake of the spiritual community. The film premiered at the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles in 2006, and the film’s website ([notherapedocumentary.org](http://notherapedocumentary.org)) features a testimonial from Alice Walker herself, asserting that “If the Black community in the Americas and in the world would heal itself, it must complete the work this film [*NO!*] begins.”

With her numerous books and articles in publication, awards, and a film appearance, Dr. West has achieved preeminent status as a theological scholar-activist. She continues to teach at Drew Theological School (remotely via web conferencing, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, for the time in which this biography has been researched and composed). The unique entwining of her activism, ministry, and academic work is a testament to her commitment to furthering knowledge and seeking justice. From her early years as a student activist to her career as a trailblazer, mentor, and scholar, her focus on uplifting the lives of those real-life individuals impact-

ed by violence transcends the often all-too-theoretical tendencies of the academic profession. In her complex and subtle analysis, West has contributed to disrupting the norms of ministry and scholarship through a uniquely hybridized professional practice centered on Black women's stories and through her tenaciously defiant activism. One hopes she continues doing so for years to come.

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## Endnotes

- 1 West also wrote about this incident in *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), see especially p. 246.
- 2 In the quarter century since the publication of *Wounds of the Spirit*, newfound evidence and recognition of the overwhelming pervasiveness of sexual assault lends credence to the premise. According to research published by the Centers for Disease Control in 2017, approximately one in three women in the US has experienced contact sexual violence in their lifetime (including rape, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual contact), and nearly one in four has experienced severe physical intimate partner violence. See "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) 2010. [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datasources/nisvs/summaryreports.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datasources/nisvs/summaryreports.html).