

Chanequa Walker-Barnes

21st-century Womanist Advocate

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Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes is an African American scholar, preacher, and psychologist currently serving as associate professor of practical theology at Mercer University. She is newly appointed as professor of practical theology and pastoral care at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, starting the fall semester of 2021 (Mercer University 2021; Columbia Theological Seminary 2021). She has a BA in psychology and African American/African studies from Emory University (1994), an MS and PhD in clinical child/family psychology from the University of Miami (1996; 2000), and an MDiv from Duke University (2007). Her mission is to liberate women of African and African American descent by using her educational training and ministerial insight to uncover systems that disproportionately harm African American women. Dr. Walker-Barnes has authored several books, including *I Bring the Voices of*



Image 1: Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes

My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation (2019). Her focus on bringing awareness and solutions to racial inequalities makes her work crucial in racial and social justice work. Dr. Walker-Barnes is a prophetic voice paving the way for healing in the African American community in the twenty-first century (Mercer University: McAfee School of Theology n.d.; Walker-Barnes n.d.).

Beginnings

Walker-Barnes is two generations removed from sharecropping in both her maternal and paternal families. Like most modern-day African American professionals, her kinfolk come from humble and marginalized beginnings in the deep South. She attributes her strong work ethic to the example of her parents' and grandparents' tenacity and hard work. Her mother, Laquitta, worked several white-collar jobs over the course of her career and retired as a financial aid administrator at a community college. Her father, Wali, had a career as a bricklayer. Their commitment influenced her own work ethic (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., July 7, 2020).

Hearing stories of the not-too-distant Jim Crow segregated past, however, is a contributing factor that led her to her path of becoming a modern-day social justice activist. “Both of my grandfathers grew up on sharecropping farms; both of them escaped. My paternal grandfather escaped with his father when he was seven years old”. Walker-Barnes shared, “they literally had to run away and move out of the state. When her grandfather was only seven years old, he moved with his father from South Carolina to Florida to flee racism and sharecropping. And this happened in the early 1900s” (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., July 7, 2020).

Walker-Barnes’s father, Wali Sharif, converted to Islam when she was a small child. Her witness of her father’s conversion experience caused her to grapple with profound and intense existential questions around good and evil, what is permissible according to God, and other deeply philosophical questions. Further, her father’s authentic embodiment of sincerely held religious convictions spoke a sermon of its own. These events influenced Walker-Barnes’s pursuit of advanced degrees and academic engagement, leading her to question the Christian church’s deeply held practices and beliefs. These experiences led to questions such as, “Do these practices help to liberate us? Do they help us to live into the values of peace, justice, kindness, love, or not?” (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., July 7, 2020).

Walker-Barnes concluded that “quite frankly we have a lot of things in Christianity that do not help us in that regard.” As a response to this dissonance, she blended her understanding of psychology with her knowledge of Christian theology to draw conclusions and critiques of the modern church. Most of these critiques centered on her own experiences as an African American Black woman and in her understanding of the experiences of those she has pastored and helped through clinical psychology work. Together, her unique childhood experiences, education, and professional expertise have formed her into a powerful advocate and activist.

During an interview with *Her Story Speaks* podcast, hosted by Andrea Miller on September 24, 2020, Walker-Barnes (2020) shared aspects of her childhood that shaped her present-day work and interests. Walker-Barnes grew up in a family that talked extensively about racism. So much so that she assumed it was customary for everyone’s family to talk openly about racism and the desperate need for change. She also witnessed family members that were activists in the fight against racial injustice. As well, she attended a historic African American church steeped in racial justice traditions. Her

childhood church often spoke about social justice issues related to race, but not as it related to gender. What her church did well helped form her into someone aware that her life had to matter for her people. Through her church, she learned that being a Christian meant serving the poor and the marginalized in her community. However, women in ministry were not something that she saw as an example.

Journey

Walker-Barnes's educational trajectory was unique since she did not intentionally set out to obtain a Master of Divinity degree and pursue a career in theology. Nevertheless, she does not regret her circuitous path because it shaped who she is today. "My first career and my career plan were in clinical psychology; I was not thinking about seminary at all. If anything, I thought I was going to do a PhD in clinical psychology and then possibly [go] . . . for a second doctor in African American studies, since it [African American studies] had actually been a part of my training at one point." However, there were times when she wished that she had pursued her Master of Divinity degree before obtaining a PhD. "But I think that would have put me on a different trajectory, right. So, I would tell myself to be open to the journey, and not to be attached to any particular title or position, and always be open to change." Her advice to her younger self would be to enjoy the journey. Another piece of practical advice that Walker-Barnes would tell her younger self "is to learn how to prioritize myself, over my allegiance to institutions, learn how to put myself first" (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., July 7, 2020).

During her interview with Andrea Miller, Walker-Barnes (2020) indicates that her active career in clinical psychology began when she engaged in post-doctorate work. Her interest in psychology centered around the study of racial disparity and behavioral health, especially in adolescents. Eventually, her focus shifted to the plight of mothers. During this time, she also encountered her own difficulties with issues of race. Walker-Barnes assisted a Black male student experiencing discrimination in the clinical psychology program. She felt the need to try to protect her student. However, in her advocacy work, she realized that she was also unsupported and at risk, personally and professionally, because she was the only Black person in her work context. As a result, she started experiencing health problems

and realized that she was giving too much of herself to others. She decided to shift her focus to include more self-care, which became a focus of her work as a clinical psychologist.

In the midst of this struggle, she started to sense a call towards ministry, and she decided to pursue seminary education and training. She finished a meditation session and noticed how much her health and life had changed for the better as she embraced self-care. She knew these changes improved her life and wondered to herself if it could work for other women. That is when she heard a voice answer her back that said: “Yes, it can.” From there, she started working with her church, and she transitioned into ministry.

Walker-Barnes’s battles with breast cancer were significant life events that further propelled her into her current advocacy ministry. Becoming an advocate for herself as she dealt with breast cancer diagnoses and treatment caused her to become more vocal about her personal experiences of racial and gender-related injustice. She knew that she would never be the same person she had been after dealing with this life-or-death battle complicated by the racial disparities in healthcare. Walker-Barnes became uncompromising and unapologetic. Once she encountered cancer, she started “demanding more for herself and from the world around her.” During this time, she felt the need to “make sure that her life mattered.”

Focus Area

Informed by her circumstances and her understanding of African American and Black cultural norms, psychology studies and practices, and her theological work and knowledge, Walker-Barnes coined the unique term “StrongBlackWoman.” By this term, she means “a legendary figure typified by extraordinary capacities for caregiving and suffering without complaint” (Walker-Barnes 2014, 3). In her book, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (2014), Walker-Barnes explains how destructive and rampant this example of womanhood tends to be in the African American community. She argues that “If, as a Black woman, you do not display these attributes, you are treated with disdain and made an outcast. But ‘strong’ is a racial-gender code word,” often used to dictate the self-sacrificing actions of Black women in service to others (3). In her critique, she analyzes the adverse effects of the “StrongBlackWoman”

trope, which results in disparities between African American and Black women's health compared to other groups of people. Her work is essential to both the church and secular institutions, since African American women actively participate in both types of organizations.

Walker-Barnes's personal experiences with being a "Strong-BlackWoman" led to her realization that this concept needed to be further explored and developed. She writes, "Ten years ago I came to a startling realization: I was a 'StrongBlackWoman,' and being one was not working for me" (1). Walker-Barnes goes on to explain that turning thirty was a catalyst for change since, in relation to this milestone, she was experiencing a personal crisis that included, "a state of physical and emotional crisis: high blood pressure, weight gain, chronic self-doubt, fear of making mistakes, insomnia, fatigue, headaches, frequent illnesses, low self-esteem, mood swings, and feelings of rage" (1).

Walker-Barnes sheds light on the Christian Church's role and responsibilities to its Black female congregants. Secular disciplines had studied the effect of the "StrongBlackWoman" trope (3) on Black women's health, but the church had not begun to study this phenomenon. In *Too Heavy a Yoke*, Walker-Barnes uses her understanding of both psychology and theology to bridge this gap and shed light on the church's role in the creation and the perpetuation of the "Strong-BlackWoman" (3). Walker-Barnes asserts that "the church reinforces the mythology of the "StrongBlackWoman" by silencing, ignoring, and even romanticizing the suffering of Black women" (5).

Walker-Barnes poses solutions to this seemingly unsolvable problem of burdening Black women with unrealistic and unhealthy expectations in service of their community and the evils of racism. She suggests possible resolutions and uses her understanding of womanist approaches, her understanding of pastoral care, and her personal experience as a Black woman to outline six methodologies. These solutions include: "the credibility and accountability of the pastoral caregiver; honoring lived experiences; empowerment for self-definition; cultivating critical consciousness; developing self-awareness; and community building" (163).

First, Walker-Barnes suggests that "Effective pastoral care with the 'StrongBlackWoman' begins by adopting a womanist approach to care" (162). She compares this to conventional counseling: "in contrast to traditional counseling, which stresses the importance of therapist affective and cognitive neutrality, the work of pastoral caregivers is firmly rooted within their life experience and their own sense of

Christian identity and values” (163). She emphasizes the importance of understanding that Black women have a unique set of needs that conventional medical and mental health practices have not often acknowledged; “whereas traditional counseling places stringent limits on therapist self-disclosure, pastoral care and counseling recognize that the relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient, rooted in their joint membership in the church universal, is bidirectional, such that each influences and is influenced by the other” (163).

Second, Walker-Barnes claims “Honoring Lived Experiences” as an essential aspect of a womanist reframe. “[A] crucial role of pastoral caregivers is to facilitate the storytelling, or ‘coming to voice’ of StrongBlackWomen by providing an environment of unconditional positive regard in which they can narrate their lived experiences and by recognizing the influence of structural conditions in their struggles” (167). This methodology is an essential way to honor the lived experiences that Black women often cannot express.

Next, Walker-Barnes explores “Empowerment for Self-Definition” as an indispensable factor in empowering Black women to enact both self and community care. “To the extent that African-American women find that oppression continues to render the ‘StrongBlackWoman’ necessary, they must be empowered to choose—consciously, self-critically, and, perhaps most importantly, temporarily—its performance” (171). In other words, Black women need the freedom to choose to either operate as a “StrongBlackWoman” to combat racial oppression or reject the burden of strength in favor of self-care.

Walker-Barnes states that “the challenge for pastoral caregivers is to help African-American women appropriate the life-giving properties of the ‘StrongBlackWoman’ in a way that does not also activate its death-dealing attributes” (171). This needed resolution can be tied into voice and expression since they both have to do with naming oneself and experiences. For example, allowing Black women the freedom to validate and define their own experiences free from the judgment and the backlash that often accompanies their self-expression is a way to allow them the use of the more positive attributes of the “StrongBlackWoman.”

Walker-Barnes explores “Cultivating Critical Consciousness” as another factor in pastoral care that aims to develop critical consciousness. She reminds the church that the defense of African American womanhood should not solely burden Black people, “rather, it is the call of the church universal to take up the burdens of African-American women” (174). By engaging in the social justice and redemptive

work of protecting and nurturing Black women, the church will help to reverse the damage caused by the church's complicit role in the African slave trade. The caring of Black women by the church, particularly in America, could potentially assist in building bridges between the Black Christian and White Christian church communities. This context is especially segregated in America.

In a natural sequence, "Developing Self-Awareness" follows. Walker-Barnes writes that a Black woman "must learn to notice, rather than ignore or minimize, the signals of distress that her body and mind transmits . . ." In other words, an important mindfulness practice for "StrongBlackWomen" is learning to recognize one's healthy limits and honoring those limits. "Mindfulness practice can help StrongBlackWomen to recognize the realistic 'load' limits that they can bear while maintaining health-sustaining behaviors. This is an essential element of self-awareness" (176, 179). Since African American women have not been allowed to function in a way that allows for self-awareness and self-care, this step can be viewed as a radical rebellion against the cultural norms set in place. Actively rebelling against destructive cultural norms used to continue the legacy of harmful "StrongBlackWomen" practices is a necessary step to ensure freedom from this particular bondage. Personally, I have followed the practice of setting healthy boundaries for myself, including my workload. I have experienced both peace and better sleep at night since I have been able to operate from a more relaxed state.

Walker-Barnes identifies "Community Building" as the last component necessary to engage a counter-cultural approach to womanist pastoral care. "First, community provides space for the dialogue that is necessary for self-realization and self-definition. Within the context of community, StrongBlackWomen are given sanctuary and rest; they are released from their roles as caregivers and burden bearers" (184). Next, this safe community "fosters interdependence . . . Further, within communal spaces, women form relationships that model an important balance between relational engagement and healthy boundaries . . . Finally, the community provides accountability" (184). Community is key in the healing process and maintenance of Black women's care. For example, certain communities have been a place where I have been able to be heard, validated, and supported in my growth.

Walker-Barnes holds that each of these components is vital to the health and rejuvenation of Black women. Through her academic research aimed at practical solutions, Walker-Barnes increases aware-

ness for myself and others that Black women should no longer bear unreasonable burdens and die early deaths in the twenty-first century. Walker-Barnes helps us to see that we have the tools, resources, and advocacy needed to counteract messages that support a toxic burden for Black women. Informed by Walker-Barnes's work, I have found that we have to give ourselves permission to act in ways that support our well-being. Also, we have to be willing to be an outcast for a while, as others who are accustomed to Black women bearing unnecessary burdens adjust to our newfound self-care routines. This act often entails being labeled "lazy," which has been used to control African American women in America for centuries. This accusation is an attack that comes from those nearest to us as well as strangers. However, for those genuinely interested in relieving the burdens carried by Black and African American women, Walker-Barnes's book is a source of practical insight and understanding of Black women's struggles. Further, her suggestions for womanist approaches are necessary to alleviate the unique burden African American and Black women bear.

Bringing the Voices of Her People

Walker-Barnes's most recent book—*I Bring the Voices of My People* (2019)—is a timely analysis of the unstable racial climate in the United States. In this much-anticipated follow-up to *Too Heavy a Yoke*, she offers a sharp critique of both White supremacy and the Christian Church's role in maintaining the institution of slavery. Walker-Barnes (2019, loc. 2390) asserts that "White supremacy, in all its variations, is an evil ideology that relies upon brute power to enforce and maintain itself." Her analysis of racism and White Supremacy identifies that "the church, unfortunately, was neither an innocent bystander nor conscientious objector to the horrors of White Supremacy" (loc. 2409). Instead, the church advanced and perpetuated many atrocities by engaging in slave trading and preaching a warped theology that supported White supremacy practices (loc. 2409). Furthermore, Walker-Barnes holds that since the American church was complicit in this horrible act, it is most certainly the church's job to heal the wounds inflicted on the victims. Her vocal stance on this matter is vital at the racially charged and divisive crossroads we find ourselves at at this point in history. Black women scholars and theo-

logians are needed to speak to oppressive systemic powers that seek the continual silencing of Black women. Walker-Barnes brings a needed academic and pastoral legitimacy to the fight for racial equality, equity, and social justice since her work has been both academic and practical.

Walker-Barnes draws on critical race theory to confront various assumptions around race in America. She suggests this movement was born from recent events related to the election of Barack Obama as our first Black president. Questions regarding the legitimacy of his presidency and the backlash from the political right-wing have intensified the unstable racial climate and the unresolved sin of slavery in America (loc. 648). Walker-Barnes causes her readers to go beyond a surface approach to racial reconciliation in our current climate of seemingly irreconcilable differences. She confronts her readers with hard questions. Will it be on the oppressor's terms, or does true racial reconciliation need to happen on the terms of the persecuted? Often the church has shied away from inviting the oppressed group into the reconciliation process. This approach fails to build an authentic community between the oppressed and the oppressor and does not provide adequate closure. The failure to reconcile past oppressive sins is evident in the current relationship between Africans of the diaspora in America and the American White evangelical church. Walker-Barnes boldly addresses this miscarriage of justice in her writings by naming these atrocities and boldly proclaiming a demand for their end.

However, Walker-Barnes does more than surface issues and offers critiques in *I Bring the Voices of My People*. As she does in her book, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, she provides practical tools for the journey. She concludes with a hopeful, practical delineation of “six spiritual commitments that enable and sustain our participation in God’s mission: being held captive, confessing and lamenting, standing in solidarity, keeping Sabbath, cultivating grace, and watching God” (loc. 3934).

Walker-Barnes suggests that the first tool in true racial reconciliation is being held captive. She opens up our understanding of this tool by explaining that,

For me and many others, only one thing keeps us on a journey in which we are destined to encounter people who devalue our personhood: captivity. . . . That is, we are held captive by the understanding that reconciliation is core to the gospel, that it reflects God’s intention for humanity, and that it is central to our identity as Christians.” (loc. 3943)

This first instrument of change requires an unwavering commitment to our participation in God's plan. Further, Walker-Barnes informs those who would participate that, as captives of Christ, this Christian journey involves other people as well as our own active and willing participation. She describes it as "an eschatological movement whose outcome we can neither predict nor control" (loc. 3981). Our active role in building relationships and being in community with believers that do not share the same race is mandatory for this work. However, when we create these communities, we can not afford to shy away from the painful legacy of slavery in America and how this has shaped our interactions, particularly between Black and White people.

The second tool for successful racial reconciliation is confessing and lamenting. "[B]oth practices counter the ahistorical tendencies that privilege White supremacy. . . . Confession and lament are our acknowledgment that reconciliation is God's journey, and thus we expect God to act" (loc. 4036). This is a necessary, inescapable step toward healing the atrocities committed against Black people and a way to display true humility and intent. Walker-Barnes describes the tendency of Americans to fail to confess when we are wrong as an unwillingness and strong disdain for accepting responsibility for our actions (loc. 4003). She goes on to write that "If we have difficulty confessing mistakes, then we are even more resistant to confessing sins, especially those that involve the complicity with systemic racism that we have been conditioned not to notice" (loc. 4000). However, "racial reconciliation requires precisely that: confession, that is, the capacity and willingness to notice, name, and accept specific responsibility for one's active participation in and passive complicity with White supremacy" (loc. 4000). Without this step of honesty, racial reconciliation remains an ideal, since healing for the grieved party requires that the offender owns their part. White supremacy has been too harmful for this confession of responsibility to be dismissed. This vital step moves the reconciliation process forward towards healing and justice.

Third, to successfully move toward reconciliation requires standing in solidarity. Walker-Barnes writes, "in solidarity, people run together toward a greater objective. In racial reconciliation, that objective is threefold: the destruction of White supremacy, the healing and repair of the historical wounds of racism, and the establishment of a racially just society" (loc. 4054). After her definition of this act, she proceeds by stating that

with solidarity, however, the privileged make an outward movement. In racial reconciliation, this means that White people must move from the center to the margins because they finally realize that the White supremacy that lies at the center of the human imagination is not actually divine; it is an idol. (loc. 4101)

Once this idol is removed, White people can genuinely see how the “idolatry of White supremacy” (loc. 4103) has been vital in shaping their lived experiences. At this point, White people start decentering themselves and allow oppressed people to move from the margins so that both groups, the oppressed and the oppressors, can work together to dismantle the center (loc. 4103). This step in the reconciliation process may be difficult for some White people to apply since it requires removing themselves and their perspectives from the centered position. Decentering requires making room for oppressed people to be heard and demands much sacrifice since acknowledgment and confession personalizes the process.

Keeping the Sabbath is another tool in the quest for racial reconciliation. Walker-Barnes writes that “it is countercultural, then, to sustain a practice of ceasing our doings. This practice is even more difficult for individuals with an activist personality, who are deeply aware of systemic injustice and motivated to dismantle it” (loc. 4129). Nevertheless, although difficult, “Sabbath is the antidote to our hypervigilance and state of constant activity” (loc. 4138). “Further, it is vital that we hold our role as ambassadors of God’s mission of reconciliation together with our obedience to God’s commandment to rest” (loc. 4184). Keeping the Sabbath is a countercultural response to being a “StrongBlackWoman.” It is a way to display self-care in a world that has been dehumanizing Black women and our need for self-care both during slavery and continuing into the twenty-first century. Dr. Walker-Barnes models this keeping of the Sabbath in the self-care rituals she uses in her everyday life; she engages in walking and gardening and notes that “Meditation is profoundly important as I double down on self-care. . . . This summer [self-care] has to be a focus, so already this morning, I have meditated, done yoga, and walking.” Even more, she is mindful of her news and media consumption and has boundaries around the times when she watches the news. “As a strategy, I watch no news in the evenings . . . I can’t do this because it is too close to the time when I want to go to sleep.” She also shared that she has been training to become a mindfulness teacher and that her training “has been an anchor because it is helping me stay grounded.”

She is “learning how to prioritize these things” (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., May 20, 2021).

Cultivating grace is a fifth tool recommended by Walker-Barnes. She writes that “Grace is a multivalent term that includes dimensions of compassion, accountability, and humility. It shapes how we view the racial/ethnic other, how we understand and demand accountability for racism, and how we view ourselves” (Walker-Barnes 2019, loc. 4190). Grace is a complicated step since “for White Christians, grace means that the debt they pay may not be one that they personally incurred” (loc. 4239). Understanding that White supremacy and social injustices are generational and have unfairly impacted Black descendants of slavery would be vital for this step. However, “for people of color, it means that the payment we receive is far less than what we are owed” (loc. 4239). Cultivating grace can be seen as “a paradox that creates profound tension, which can be soothed only by focusing our attention on the Three-in-One who makes even the hope of reconciliation possible” (loc. 4239). The act of cultivating grace is needed for both Black and White Christians since one party needs to be willing to correct injustices, and the other party has to decide that this correction is enough. This ongoing process can be challenging because the precursor to restorative justice would include having hard conversations around the sensitive issues of racial injustice, the history of race in America, and true racial reconciliation.

Walker-Barnes describes her last recommendation as “watching for God.” She uses a line from the book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937) to describe what this means for Christians seeking racial reconciliation in the twenty-first century. She identifies how seeking racial reconciliation often starts as an exciting journey. However, both White and Black Christians may become fatigued, disillusioned, and apathetic over time. It is then that “we sit in the dark, watching for God,” much like the main characters Janie and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* did while a hurricane raged in front of them. This step shares similarities with the idea of keeping the Sabbath. Both require ceasing from labor and waiting for God as an act of faith.

Walker-Barnes holds each of these methodologies as counter-cultural social justice acts, since they require that participants humbly retrain themselves to better serve the cause of healing racial injustice. Each step is necessary as they build, one on the other, toward the ultimate goal of racial reconciliation.

Modern-Day Advocacy

A potential side effect of upward mobilization in African American communities is the loss of ethnic or Indigenous ways of knowing that get left behind in favor of knowing that advances professional careers. Walker-Barnes shared some of the ways she and her family have experienced. “When my family [moved] from the deep south to Atlanta, which was the urban area, we jettisoned our connection to the land.” Thankfully, there has been an urgent and fresh movement igniting among African Americans to get back to their roots and organic ways of knowing and living predominant among our ancestors. Although her grandfathers were farmers, Walker-Barnes has expressed a disconnection from the land that happened over time as her family pursued upward career mobility and freedom. “I realized the damage that they had done to me . . . that [the] disconnect from the land and nature was doing to me. Thus, part of my own process, I think, a healing of some of the wounds of slavery and oppression, was actually reconnecting to the land.” Now Dr. Walker-Barnes and her husband have started gardening together. They view this time spent gardening as a way to “heal some of the wounds of slavery.” They see themselves enacting a modern-day advocacy that connects them back to their roots in the land and the organic practices of their ancestors (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., July 7, 2020).

Walker-Barnes also identifies time in the garden, connecting to the earth and her roots, as part of her self-care ritual. She shares her personal journey of taking time to engage in self-care: “Because I am so busy, right, that I can’t care for myself. For me, that is part of self-care, but it is even more significant than that. [It] is about getting back to nature, getting back to God’s creation.” Dr. Walker-Barnes is an active participant in this reverential movement of living in harmony with self and the earth. She uses various communication platforms to disseminate her message about connecting with nature as a form of self-care.

As an example of her advocacy for self-care, Walker-Barnes uses social media platforms and her website to share her vulnerability and personal journey with cancer and other life-informing experiences. She is intentional about using her platforms to share publicly. Walker-Barnes’s “own commitment to transparency” fuels this public sharing (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., May 20, 2021). By sharing the lifestyle changes required for her full recovery from cancer, she

is furthering her message about the importance of self-care as a form of healing and activism for Black women that resists mainstream messaging. Walker-Barnes also uses yoga to combat “the impacts of oppression for women of African descent.” She promotes it as a form of personal healing, meditation, and a way to overcome trauma. She emphasizes that “one of the impacts of oppression, for women of African descent, is that we can be very disconnected from our bodies. We’re often very outward focused, because of the pressures that we are under, that our families are under.” She elaborates further by stating, “we are always paying attention to someone else, something else whether it is something that we need to take care of, some danger we need to look out for but we tend to stay outward focused” (pers. comm., July 7, 2020). Her yoga practice and willingness to share her journey via social media are active ways that she sets an example to other African women to engage in self-care rituals.

She uses social media outlets like her personal website, Twitter, and Instagram accounts for engaging in advocacy for self-care. She promotes self-care as a decolonizing form of reframing for African American and Black women who have been steeped in destructive and self-negligent practices. Walker-Barnes’s advocacy on social media for Black women is followed by many. For instance, she has over 17,000 Twitter followers (www.twitter.com/drchanequa, accessed May 25, 2021), over 7,000 Instagram followers (www.instagram.com/drchanequa, accessed May 25, 2021.), and over 16,000 who subscribe to and follow her blog posts (www.drchanequa.com/blog, accessed May 25, 2021). Walker-Barnes’s work provides a noteworthy example of fusing her academic accomplishments with popular culture and public activism. She has been blogging online since 2015, and her posts have covered controversial issues. She uses social media and online platforms to get her message into the world beyond the academy. For Walker-Barnes, the work and results of advocacy are not reserved for the privileged few but can be shared with the masses thanks to the Internet. She is a modern-day womanist and social justice warrior whose social media presence makes her an accessible role model for those beyond the halls of academia.

Dr. Walker-Barnes’s message of self-care and advocacy for revitalizing nurturing ways of living is evident across formal, academic platforms and informal social media platforms. In both settings, she develops and spreads the message that Black women deserve to be treated with respect, dignity, and care. This advocacy is controversial in a country that is still unhealed from its participation in the

transatlantic slave trade. It makes her work critical, necessary, and bold at a time when self-advocacy and advocacy for others can be viewed as a threat.

Backlash over “Prayer of a Weary Black Woman”

In the spring of 2021, Dr. Walker-Barnes found herself at the center of a heated, public controversy over racism in the United States after the 2020 publication of a meditation she composed for the New York Times bestseller, *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*, edited by Sarah Bessy (2021). Her contribution, entitled “Prayer for a Weary Black Woman” (69), took the form of a lamentation. In her prayer, Walker-Barnes lays her rage about the racism that is the context of her everyday life before God, as Job did when his family, friends, and possessions were taken from him. However, she asks God to save her from her anger and hatred toward the White people who overtly and inadvertently support the evil of racism. It is the heartfelt lament of a Black woman who has suffered the oppressive evils of systemic oppression and spent a lifetime working to heal the wounds of others who have suffered. This top-selling book was available at popular outlets like Target and Barnes and Noble. By mid-spring 2021, its popularity had caught the attention of right-wing social media sites. Screenshots of Walker-Barnes’s prayer were shared via Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Fallert 2021). Walker-Barnes found herself in the midst of a media backlash that was intense and personal. She shares that she experienced “an avalanche of new emails, direct messages on social media, voice mails mainly through her work phone. . . . One person called every department on her university’s campus demanding her termination.” She even received threatening messages telling her to die and messages containing the use of the n-word. Walker Barnes worked closely with law enforcement regarding her safety and the safety of her family. Ultimately, she and her family had to leave home for a week due to the intensity of the hateful attacks on her work and her family (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., May 20, 2021).

Walker-Barnes considers her dependence on and affinity for the psalms and lamentations in the Hebrew Scriptures and her choice to model her prayer on this biblical format. “As a two-time breast cancer survivor, they are my prayer books. At the start of Covid, I had so

much anxiety, I turned to the Book of Psalms.” She also shared that, during hard times, “I’ll read through the psalms as my morning devotion.” When writing “Prayer of a Weary Black Woman,” her thought in writing the prayer was, “Let me do it as they [biblical psalmists] do it, let me pour out my heart” (Walker-Barnes, pers. comm., May 20, 2021).

Dr. Walker-Barnes shared that she takes her platform and opportunities to speak against injustices seriously, so “I’m intentional about using my occupational privilege” to speak up on behalf of those who may not have the same opportunities to speak up and out against injustices. For Walker-Barnes, speaking up on behalf of the marginalized includes “a lot of Black people, women, people of color who could relate.” Another important aspect of this controversy to note is that, for Walker-Barnes, “the most meaningful support has been black women speaking out.” Finally, she shared that “this period is a lot. I hope we will give ourselves time to grapple with it, even over the next year or couple of years” (pers. comm., May 20, 2021).

Amid the extreme backlash against her, Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, announced her appointment as the professor of practical theology and pastoral counseling. The appointment had been planned since the beginning of the year (Columbia Theological Seminary n.d.), but the timing of the announcement was an interjection of good news. Walker-Barnes shared that when people spoke up in support of her as a writer and theologian during this controversy, it helped her and her family’s anxiety. “For me as a writer, I’m always wanting to make sure the message I intended to get across actually came across. I questioned myself by asking myself, ‘was I careful?’” Having the public support of so many allies helped her understand that she had not done or said anything wrong in her now-famous “Prayer of a Weary Black Woman.” Also, people speaking up on her behalf, particularly on social media, helped mitigate the negative backlash. She feels that “when people are being attacked, those of us that support them need to speak up and be loud.” It makes a difference to the individual, and it makes a difference to the presence of the conversation on social media.

Walker-Barnes spoke about this current moment in the history of our country and the potential that it holds. “We have a moment, and we have an opportunity, and we need to take advantage of it. I think there is a moment of growth here in our country.” She had recently been ruminating on a quote from the esteemed activist Angela Davis—“Freedom is a constant struggle.” Walker-Barnes came to a

conclusion that “we’re always going to have setbacks. Freedom is not linear, and evil is real.” In her understanding from reading the Bible, she shared that “the spirit of division has always been here and it will always be here. It brings with it “Hostility and turning humans against each other.”

Impact and Conclusion

Walker-Barnes’s work, particularly on the health of Black women, has been essential and critical for several reasons. First, she gave voice to an otherwise overlooked and voiceless segment of the American population—African American women. As an advocate for and a Black woman herself, she embodies and relates personally to the struggles and often misunderstood plight of African American women in America generally and in the Christian church specifically. She has cultivated a genuine voice through her studies and advocacy. Her work as a womanist theologian and psychologist has shaped her into a crucial voice for the twenty-first century. Walker-Barnes manages to hold the often-hard balance of advocating for Black women and being an authentic and active Christian in the twenty-first century. Her work stands as an exemplary representation for African Americans and those interested in social justice advocacy in both the academy and the church.

Dr. Walker-Barnes’s academic and social justice activism is influential beyond the academy with an impact and relevance that extends to the public square. She inspires audiences from academia to religious settings and across popular culture platforms. With her strong sense of self-confidence, unique insight, and personal convictions, Walker-Barnes is an exemplary twenty-first-century African American scholar and activist. Since Black women hold a unique and critical position at the intersections of Black embodiment and female experiences, Walker-Barnes—known to many as Dr. Chaniqua—has made it her personal mission to make sure that they are respected, understood, and healed.

Walker-Barnes is changing the world through the art of authentic living, written words in academic and pastoral work. Because of her unwavering dedication to representing their unseen lives, African American and Black women’s issues are being placed front and center and deemed vital through her work. Moreover, Dr. Chaniqua

Walker-Barnes is an applauded modern-day prophetic advocate for social justice and a voice crying out in the wilderness on behalf of disenfranchised Black and African women. Through her hard work, dedication, and relentlessness, Walker-Barnes's noteworthy legacy is secured and respected. Her achievements will continue to be celebrated by both the academy and those whom she is called to serve for many generations to follow.

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