

Womanist Sass and Talk Back



Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation

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CHAPTER THREE

Race, Gender, and The Politics Of "Sass"

Reading Mark 7:24–30 Through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality[1]

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old black female activist, was stopped by a Texas trooper for allegedly switching lanes without signaling. Three days after her controversial arrest, Texas authorities claimed that Sandra Bland hanged herself in her Waller County jail cell.[2] Many people on social media, across race, gender, and class, blamed Ms. Bland for her own death, arguing that she had the audacity to sass or talk back to a police officer. For some people, it is acceptable for people of color and black women in particular to be illegally detained, tried on the streets, and executed in our jails for sassing or talking back to a trooper or police officer. Therefore, black women's sass is viewed as a capital offense and of having no intrinsic value or meaning.

1. This chapter is reprinted here with permission of the copyright holder. It was originally published as Mitzi J. Smith, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass': Reading Mark 7:24–30 Through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse, eds.* Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016) 95–112.

2. Sanchez, "What We Know About the Controversy in Sandra Bland's Death."

In this chapter I read the story of the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30; cf. Matt 15:21–28) through a womanist hermeneutical lens of sass (sometimes referred to as talk-back).[3] I interpret a biblical text as a black woman who embodies sass. Womanist sass is a legitimate contextual language of resistance. It is a mother tongue, a subversive, defiant, grown woman's speech. It is also what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* (a "social diversity of speech types").[4] I read with sass and embody sass as an African American womanist biblical scholar who, like other women of color and women generally, has been labeled as "argumentative" and sassy by men and women alike, simply for persistently expressing a desire to know more than is "good" for a black woman to know, seeking clarification, or refusing to be silenced and dismissed. As a sassy womanist biblical scholar, I construct dialogue inter(con)textually, critically engaging and sassing/talking back to the story of the Syrophoenician woman. I also construct a dialogue between my readings of the biblical text and talk-back derived from the black community, including the talk-back of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

A WOMANIST LENS: BLACK WOMANISH SASS

According to Alice Walker a "womanist" is a woman of color who speaks and acts *womanish*. She behaves and talks like a grown and capable woman who assumes responsibility for her own well-being, and she is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female."[5] A womanist's commitment is manifest in her audacious, vocal, and vociferous pursuit of justice and freedom from disease and oppression. Silence in the face of injustice and oppression can be complicit in those very forces and systems that diminish life and wholeness while giving the illusion of survival. A womanist understands her survival and freedom to be interconnected with the well-being of the community. Sassy women who talk back to systemic injustice and oppression know these truths. Like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, and so many others before her, Sandra Bland embodied a black womanish sass; she spoke

3. I chose Mark's version of the story because it is the shorter earlier version, and it emphasizes the power of the Syrophoenician woman's word (*logos*) as opposed to Matthew who explicitly emphasizes her faith, presumably in Jesus.

4. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 253.

5. Walker, "Womanist," xi.

and acted womanish. Texas authorities called her "argumentative and uncooperative."[6] Sandra's mother believes Sandra "should be remembered . . . as an "activist, sassy, smart . . . she knew her rights."[7]

A womanist prioritizes and highly values black women's epistemology (ways of knowing), agency, experiences, lives, and artifacts, rather than accepting them as peripheral to white feminist thought. Womanism centers black women as forethought and not as a theoretical addendum or critically provoked afterthought of white women's and black men's collective political awakening, activism, and God-talk. Womanism is feminism's sister and not its child. Black women's proto-womanism was seldom televised or legitimized, except, for example, in writing their autobiographies. Yet black women have always been improvising and creating as well as resisting slavery, lynching, disenfranchisement, racism, sexism, classism, sexual violence, and other oppressions inflicted upon black women, the black community, and others. Womanism, as a political movement, seeks to eradicate hegemonic interlocking systems of oppression, including sexism, classism, and racism, and their impact on the lives of black women and their communities.

For black women, talk-back and/or sass has been and remains in some situations the only means of agency, of being heard and of combating an other-imposed invisibility; it is resistance language that children, women, people of color, and black women in particular, speak and embody, inside and outside black communities and institutions. Sass is often defined as mouthing off, talking back, back talking, attitude, a woman not backing down to a man, or a child determined to have the final word in response to a real or perceive injustice or wrong. A sassy person is said to be impudent and insolent and is regarded as one who fails to show another person, a presumed superior, the respect or submissive behavior he or she has been socialized to expect within patriarchal systems, normally served up with so-called "arrogance" and "rudeness." Wives, children, slaves, and others of inferior social or economic standing can be guilty of sassing their husbands or significant others, fathers, masters, patrons, or employers.

The term is usually applied to the behavior of persons considered inferior or subordinate, by race, gender, position, class, or age to the person toward whom the talk, back talk, gesture and/or attitude is addressed. Black

6. Sanchez, "What We Know."
7. Silva, "Sandra Bland's Mother Speaks Out."

feminist scholar bell hooks defines "back talk" or "talking back" as "speaking as an equal to an authority figure . . . daring to disagree . . . having an opinion."[8] Sass or talk-back can refer to verbal and nonverbal behaviors, like placing one's hands on one's hips, rolling one's eyes. A person can sass, be sassy, or talk back without saying a word, by simply doing the opposite of what is expected or asked of him or her and in an in-your-face sort of way.

I use sass or talking back interchangeably, since sass consists of verbal and nonverbal gestures of defiance and resistance. Sass is when the oppressed name, define, call out, and sometimes refuse to submit to oppressive systems and behaviors. More specifically it is black women's refusal to remain silent about, or in the face of, oppression and violence committed against black women's bodies and minds and their families and communities.[9]

During slavery, Jim Crow, and the disenfranchisement of black people, it was expected that black people and women would happily defer to all white people regardless of age, gender, and position. Some believe this societal norm should never have changed; that sass or being sassy is never appropriate behavior for black people when directed at white people, even if one holds the most powerful office in the world. Ariana Dickey's comment about President Obama's appearance on the Internet talk show "Between Two Ferns" is at least reminiscent of a past and its refusal to die. Dickey wrote, "and boy, did Obama sass Zach [Galifianakis] back."[10]

Sass or talk-back are unacceptable behavior when directed at men, particularly white men. The "Opie and Andy" radio talk show posted a video entitled "Sassy Fat Black Girl Witness at Trayvon Martin Trial," in which Gregg "Opie" Hughes and Anthony Cumia berated nineteen-year-old Haitian-American Rachel Jeantel's hair, weight, physiognomy (lips, eyes), sexuality, "incoherent" speech (her *heteroglossia)*, and her audacity (in their eyes) to become angry, frustrated, and finally to talk back to the prosecutor during her testimony.[11] Apparently, Ms. Jeantel's race, class, and gender made her sass even more unpalatable and intolerable at best and an object of comedic humiliation at worst.

8. hooks, *Talking Back*, 5.

9. Stover, "Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography," 133–54.

10. Dickey, "Obama 'Between Two Ferns.'"

11. Opie and Andy, "Sassy Fat Black Girl Witness."

"Sass" is an Americanism; it is slang created in the context of a patriarchal, gendered, and racialized society. America has always been and remains a racialized, patriarchal society. Yet the black woman, as the subject of Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise," survives and thrives despite the history of lies and oppression that objectify and demonize her; her rising is a talking back and sass/sassy. The second verse of that poem begins with the first of a series of rhetorical questions: "Does my sassiness upset you?/ why are you beset with gloom?/cause I walk like I've got oil wells/ pumping in my living room."[12] Angelou's poem, dedicated to her mother, Vivian Baxter, is sass/talk-back and testifies about the experience of many other sassy black women who preceded her and follow her. The poem's rhetorical questions imply that the black woman's oppressors would rather see her broken and submissive ("bowed head and lowered eyes") than sassy and haughty. She rises as "the dream and hope of the slave" abandoning the past, its terror and fear.[13]

In reading Mark's story of the Syrophoenician Woman (7:24–20; cf. Matt 15:21–28) through a womanist lens of sass, I examine this sassy woman and her speech as *heteroglossia*. Bakhtin defines *heteroglossia* as the broad range and possibilities of "social diversity of speech types" embedded in a narrative through the speech of characters, narrators, authorial voice, and genres.[14] The Syrophoenician woman's speech represents a social diversity; it is a culturally determined and subversive improvisation. I read her speech as resistance language. It is a contextual, subversive mother tongue. I read as a sassy woman talking back to the text from a place of anger and pain at the senseless deaths of black women like Sandra Bland and Natasha McKenna who sassed and died.[15] I read in remembrance of the sassy black women who preceded Bland and McKenna. And I read also with those oppressed women who could not muster the courage to be sassy, to talk back to their oppressors and oppressions. I also "read darkness," which is "viewing and experiencing the world in emergency mode, as through the individual and collective experience of trauma."[16] I stand in solidarity with

12. Angelou, "Still I Rise," 7.

13. Ibid., 8, 9.

14. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 263.

15. Natasha McKenna was an African American woman diagnosed with schizophrenia, who died in police custody after being shocked four times with a stun gun. Weil, "Death of Woman."

16. Wimbush, "Introduction: Reading Darkness," 21.

Sandra Bland. I read because of her and other sassy womanists. Knowing Sandra Bland's story has changed me in the way that the murder of Ta-Nehisi Coates's friend Prince Jones, killed by a Prince George's County police officer, changed him: "The entire episode took me from fear to a rage that burned in me then, animates me now, and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days. . . . My response was, in this moment, to write."[17]

I read the story of the Syrophoenician woman intentionally as a black woman, consciously aware of my solidarity with Sandra Bland, Natasha McKenna, and with black women before her who have experienced the same or a similar fate and those after her whose stories will be read similarly. I read knowing that my sisters, nieces, nephews, brothers, and other family and community members could face a fate similar to these black women. We might, at any time, resist our oppressor, our oppression as sassy black women, but we might not survive.

BORDER CROSSINGS: PLACE, RACE, AND GENDER

Before she died, Sandra Bland had relocated from Chicago to Texas, having accepted a position at her alma mater, Prairie View A&M University. In Texas, Sandra Bland planned to continue her work as an activist in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM). Chicago is a city plagued by violence, but it was in Waller County, Texas, which is infamous for a different kind of violence, where Sandra Bland was so unfortunate to be stopped. Former Waller County Judge DeWayne Charleston describes Waller County as "the most racist county in the state of Texas which is probably one of the most racist states in the country."[18] Hempstead, a city in Waller County, still has separate cemeteries for white and black residents. Between 1882 and 1968 Mississippi had the highest lynchings with 581; Georgia was second with 531, and Texas was third with 493.[19] Violence, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression transcend boundaries.

Such boundaries are evident in how Jesus moves from place to place in his ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Although this is the first time in Mark's narrative that Jesus himself crosses over into Tyre (7:24), people from Tyre and Sidon had come to him in Galilee for healing (3:7–8). Once word traveled that Jesus was healing people of diverse illnesses and casting

17. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 82.
18. Toh, "Sandra Bland Death."
19. Chestnutt, "Lynching Statistics."

out demons or unclean spirits, the crowds seeking his help increase exponentially. The people whom Jesus healed from Tyre and Sidon likely went back home. And maybe it is in the home of someone whom Jesus previously healed that he finds refuge. This is the first time Jesus enters a house for the purpose of being alone. At other times Jesus sought relief and respite from the press of the crowds, but he never successfully avoided people or the crowds in anybody's house. Why should this house be any different just because it is in Tyre?

In this house in Tyre, Jesus's disciples are conspicuously absent from the narrative (cf. Matt 15:23, where the disciples are present in the house and aggressively oppose the Canaanite woman). Perhaps Jesus thought that by crossing the border into Tyre he could finally escape the crowds, that people would not be so needy. But people need help and deliverance from unclean spirits on both sides of the border. The human need for wholeness transcends borders; it transcends gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class. The reader has been prepared for the resolution of the tension created by Jesus' desire to escape notice.

What is different about this place is Jesus' encounter with a solitary woman who locates Jesus despite his desire to be left alone. The narrator does not think it significant to inform his readers how the woman gained entry into the house, or whether she experienced resistance at the door. Mark does not say whether the master of the house is Jewish, Gentile, part Jewish and part Gentile (like Timothy, Acts 16:1), Godfearer, or what? Maybe it does not matter. Racial and gender biases are impactful and efficacious when practiced by people who have power and authority to limit or deny access to resources. We know that somehow the Syrophoenician woman gains an audience with Jesus, but we don't know whether the interaction takes place inside or outside of the house. But this place, Tyre, should be neutral and friendly territory for her. It is either home or close to home. But oppressions, like sexism, racism, and classism, transcend place and transgress borders because defiled, fallible human beings are carriers of oppression, and Jesus is no exception.

Mark's Jesus enters and exits houses, but each threshold tells a new story. The narrator explicitly informs his readers that the woman who finds Jesus is Greek (*Hellēnis*). Many Greeks in Palestine and southern Syria shared collective identities that distinguished them from Jewish people (and vice versa). Nathanael Andrade asserts that, "despite their internal ethnic and cultural disparities, the citizen bodies of Iamnia, Caesarea, Scythopolis, and

other such cities constituted Greek collectivities, to be distinguished from Jewish ones."[20] Jewish people claimed certain civic states as their own based on the previous conquest of Greek cities, like Tyre under the Hasmonaeans, despite subsequent Roman colonization. Syria was annexed to Rome in 64 BCE and Judea the previous year in 63 BCE. Prior to Roman annexation, the Hasmonaeans had conquered both Syria and Phoenicia.[21]

More precisely, the woman is racially a Syrophoenician; she is possibly mixed race. In the first century BCE and CE "the terms Greek and Syrian could be used to describe intersecting civic categories, not mutually exclusive ethnic ones."[22] While the term *Greek* could describe the Syrophoenician woman's language, "it is just as possible that it framed her in civic terms as a gentile member of a Greek polity, whether she spoke Greek or a near Eastern language," such as Aramaic.[23] "As a Tyrian, she belonged to what by [Mark's] lifetime were the regional *koinon* or *eparchaeia* of Phoenicia (or Tyre), the Syrian *ethnos*, and the Greek city-state of Tyre, which was of course Phoenician by origin."[24]

The woman is impure in relation to Jesus. Jesus is what she is not, a Jewish man. In the immediate narrative context (7:1–23), Jesus had previously taught his disciples at someone's house. He taught them it is not what goes into the body that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of him that defiles (7:14–23). Did this teaching only apply to hand washing and food or does it apply to people as well (cf. Acts 10:28)?

The other thing that we are told about the woman is that she has a daughter with an unclean spirit. This Greek Syrophoenician woman bears a triple stigma because of her race, gender, and as the mother of a demon-possessed daughter. Like African American women and other women of color she experiences racism, sexism, and classism as interlocking forms of oppression. All three forms of oppression are highlighted in the narrative and they impact how Jesus responds to the woman.

In Mark, the diagnosis of being demon possessed or having an unclean spirit seems to be a blanket category. An unclean spirit is a stubborn visitor that will not willingly leave the body it has called home; it will throw a temper tantrum when commanded to leave (3:26); unclean spirits recognize

20. Andrade, "Ambiguity, Violence, and Community," 370.
21. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 208–10.
22. Andrade, "Ambiguity, Violence, and Community," 353.
23. Ibid., 254.
24. Ibid., 354.

Jesus and each call him by a different name or title (Holy one of God, and Son of the Most High God, 1:24; 5:7). Perhaps, the labeling of someone as demon possessed was a way of explaining behavior that was otherwise considered abnormal, objectionable, and threatening. For example, when Jesus went home to get a break from the overwhelming crowds, the crowds were so needy and intrusive that he couldn't even enjoy a meal with his family (3:19–20). Exhausted and unable to get a break from the overwhelming crowds, Jesus reacted in a human way; his family had to constrain him (3:21). Consequently, some wondered whether he had lost his mind, accusing Jesus of having an unclean spirit (3:30), a demon like the one's he had been exorcising from other folks (3:23). This Syrophoenician woman's daughter, like Jesus, has been diagnosed as having an unclean spirit. Impurity is socially constructed. What is constructed can be deconstructed.

Significantly, Jesus never touches people that are said to have unclean spirits; they are the untouchables. Jesus touches a leper who is considered unclean but his uncleanliness is not viewed as demon possession (1:40–41). The only person with an unclean spirit that Jesus touches is the boy from whom the disciples failed to exorcise the demon; however, it is only after the unclean spirit is expelled that Jesus touches the corpse (9:14–29). Even a corpse is touchable, but not people with unclean spirits.

It is out of ignorance that people are labeled as having "unclean spirits," as demon possessed because society finds something about their behavior unacceptable, abnormal, distasteful, threatening; they are out of order and different. Mary Douglas puts it this way: "where there is dirt there is system";[25] there is a normal way of being and behaving. We can respond to perceived anomalies in two ways. We can ignore them as if they don't exist or we can acknowledge their existence and condemn them.[26]

In relation to Jesus, the woman as a Syrophoenician experiences triple stigmatization even in her own neighborhood. She has no ontological existence outside of her colonized, racialized, and othered group identity. Frantz Fanon wrote that, "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. . . . In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. . . . Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man [or woman]

25. Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* 36.

26. Ibid., 39.

. . . the black man [or woman] has no ontological resistance in the eyes of [white people]."[27]

THE POLITICS AND POWER OF SASS

The Syrophoenician woman bowed and begged for Jesus' attention and help. But Jesus responded to her deference and her submissiveness with these words: "Permit the children (*tekna*) to be fed first, for it is not good (*kalos*) to take the bread from the children (*tekna*) and to throw it to the dogs," 7:27 (my translation). Jesus responded to her in a way that betrayed his Jewish male bias. As Emerson Powery states, Jesus has triply marginalized this woman: She is female, a Greek, non-Jewish foreigner, and she is, if implicitly, a dog.[28] In Jesus' reasoning, to give bread to the dogs requires taking it from the children; that to give food to the "dogs" will result in short changing the children who deserve priority. In other words, "all lives matter," despite the fact that all people do not experience disease and oppressions to the same degree as others. In this moment, the mother pleading the imminent, urgent case of her sick child should matter most. (The slogan "all lives matter" in response to "black lives matter" dismisses the impact of racism on people of color in a racialized society.) The woman is likened to the "dogs" that have no place at the table. Generally, ancient Semitic peoples did not care for dogs as household pets.[29] If there happens to be any leftovers they will be thrown at her, like a dog in an alley. She must behave like a Greek, a Syrophoenician and a woman in relation to this Jewish man. She is impure and subordinate to Jewish people, despite their shared geopolitical status as colonized peoples. Fanon writes, "I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger" while a man should behave like a man.[30] Similarly black women must be black women in relation to white men. In a racialized society, black women are not viewed

27. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 109–10.

28. Powery, "The Gospel of Mark," 136.

29. Lazenby, "Greek and Roman Household Pets," 245; see Gosling, "Pets in Classical Times," 109–13. This does not mean that all Semitic peoples shared the same negative feeling toward dogs as household pets any more than one could say all Greeks and Romans, without exception, loved dogs as pets and welcomed them under their tables. The story of the rich man and Lazarus implies the presence of dogs under the rich man's table; the dogs lick Lazarus' wounds as he hopes to catch some of the crumbs that fall from the table (Luke 16:21).

30. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 114.

and treated as women on equal footing with white women. Black women's skin color trumps their gender; they are seen and treated as black persons first and secondarily as flawed females inferior to white women. Sojourner Truth so poignantly responded to this racist ideology in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech (at a Women's Rights Convention in Akron Ohio in 1851), disrupting, with her sass and back talk, the racist ideology that questioned her womanhood because of her race and her former enslavement. With thunderous voice, Truth asserted that nothing she experienced or that was withheld from her nullified or changed the fact of her identity as a woman.

Jesus' words signify a tradition and ideology of racial priority, an "unreasoned" reason, justifying his denial of the woman's request. The woman can either submit to her oppression or she can challenge and resist affirming her own humanity. Colonization does not encourage unity among the colonized; it encourages them to guard the crumbs. The oppressed are expected to achieve wholeness on the crumbs, to be treated like dogs and yet remain civil and silent.

But the Syrophoenician woman will not be silenced; she will resist. She resists this triple marginalization with her *logos*, her word, her sass; she draws upon "inner resources" left to the reader's imagination.[31] She resists as a woman, as a mother with a sick child. Jesus invoked a text, an oppressive text—oppressive for mother and child. So the woman resists with sass and talk-back: "she answered and said to him, 'Master even the household table dogs eat from the crumbs of the children (*paidia*)'" (7:28; my translation). I propose that the noun "crumbs" metonymically signifies the children's plates. In the woman's sass, the dogs don't have to wait until the children are fed first; the dogs are treated with compassion as beloved household pets. Many ancient Greeks and Romans, unlike many Semitic peoples generally, did not abhor animals like dogs but welcomed them into their houses. In fact, dogs and other animals were "dedicated to gods or goddesses."[32] Homer's *Iliad* mentions "dogs I raised in my halls to be at my table" and "nine dogs of the table that had belonged to the lord Patroklos."[33] As early as 600 BCE ancient vase paintings show dogs in houses under tables. Rich and poor alike loved their dogs. An ancient Gallic relief depicts "a boy reclining on a couch and giving his pet dog his plate to lick clean."[34]

31. Powery, "The Gospel of Mark," 136.
32. Lazenby, "Greek and Roman Household Pets," 245.
33. Homer, *The Iliad*, 22.69; 23.173.
34. Lazenby, "Greek and Roman Household Pets," 246.

Because of the woman's experiences, her context as a Greek, Syrophoenician woman, she embodies sass from her unique epistemological context. Her sass is *heteroglossia*. The woman resists with the only thing she has, her reason (*logos*), her sass; she was up against something unreasoned. "For a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason."[35] To be despised because of one's race (gender, sexuality, or class) is to be "up against something unreasoned."[36]

The fact that we can seek liberation from one form of oppression while thoroughly entrenched in another is the beast of socialization absent conscientization. Surekha Nelavala argues that the woman in her response to Jesus says "yes" but "no"; she plays it smart by "pretending she was accepting" Jesus' argument and used it to her own advantage and by not behaving as if Jesus insulted her.[37] But the woman's deference to Jesus demonstrated by her addressing him as master would be typical behavior of most women socialized in a patriarchal society. Besides, her initial genuflecting and pleading do not result in a positive outcome, but an oppressive word.

The Syrophoenician woman did not let the differences in their ethnicity or status, Jesus' reputation as a healer, or any stigma associated with her having a daughter possessed by an unclean spirit hinder her from sassing or talking back to Jesus. She questioned Jesus and the authoritative tradition he quoted that could have stopped her in her tracks and denied her daughter the healing she sought and needed, and which he had so freely bestowed upon others. Clearly, all lives don't matter equally. Jesus had no right to treat her as less than a dog in her hour of motherly desperation. Her life matters; her daughter's life matters—at least as much as the "dogs under the table." Syrophoenician lives matter! Syrophoenician women's lives matter!

The Syrophoenician woman went toe to toe with Jesus. The woman "uses his own argument."[38] "More than anything else, the personal narratives that formerly enslaved black women wrote are products of their resistance to various oppressions, and each writer uses the language of the oppressor to express that resistance."[39] The woman counters Jesus' speech with her *heteroglossia*. She engages in subversion and improvisation: (1) she speaks from her own cultural context, recontextualizing and substituting

35. Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 118.
36. Ibid.
37. Nelavala, "Smart Syrophoenician Woman," 68.
38. Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," 485.
39. Stover, "Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography," 137.

Jesus's words with her sass. In her sass, *tekna* becomes *paidia*. In her sass, her people sit at the table; (2) the *paidia*, unlike the *tekna*, demonstrate compassion for the table dogs, allowing them to eat crumbs off their plates; and (3) she eliminates the language of priority. "An African American vernacular has always been recognized as a black way of speaking, and like all vernaculars, it grew out of a need to speak subversively, to speak in a 'language' that was shared by other members of one's 'community' but that confounded those outside of it."[40]

Significantly, Jin Young Choi argues that the Syrophoenician woman "embodies tactic." However, I disagree with Choi's assertion that it is the "art of the weak;"[41] it is more complex. Given this cultural linguistic shift, the Syrophoenician woman has flipped the script. It is *heteroglossia*.[42] With *paidia*, hers is a mother's tongue or language for her people and her child. Stover argues that, "African American forms of expression such as black folktales, signifying, playing the dozens, and an infinite variety of subversive use of language—sass, invective, impudence, back talking, just to name a few—demonstrate Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* criteria, forming the base for what I call an African American 'mother tongue.'"[43] bell hooks writes that in her community where she grew up in the south talking back was risky and daring and satisfied the craving (or need) to "have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to" her.[44] The Syrophoenician woman improvises at the axis of her need and Jesus' denial, constructing her own *heteroglossia*, a language that resists oppression and claims her own humanity.

Jesus' consciousness is raised as a result of the woman's sass. Mark's Jesus uses the grammatically neuter Greek noun *teknon* (child) when he addressed the man-child, whose friends lowered him through the roof so that Jesus might heal him (2:5). Mark's Jesus used *teknon* the second time in this conversation with the Syrophoenician woman to refer to the Jewish people (7:27). In between these two instances of *teknon*, we find one occurrence of the Greek noun *paidion* (child) referring to Jairus's fatally ill daughter (*thugatarion*) whom Jesus resurrects (5:39). Perhaps, when Mark's Jesus calls Jairus' daughter (*thugatarion*) a *paidion*, it signifies her putative

40. Ibid., 140.
41. Choi, *Postcolonial Discipleship of Embodiment*, 94.
42. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 262–67.
43. Stover, "Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography," 139.
44. hooks, *Talking Back*, 5.

subordinate status as a female. She is an outsider belonging to an insider (Jairus).

The Syrophoenician woman's sass mattered, tugging at and tapping into Jesus's humanity and compassion. She was an advocate and an activist for her child and for other mothers and their children who could be denied justice and wholeness based on biased traditions and Rabbis who have been socialized to value those traditions. The Syrophoenician mother challenged what Jesus labeled good or fair (*kalos*, 7:27). That is what sass does; it challenges those systems, traditions, and people that are neither just nor moral, but deleterious and deadly to one's self, one's people, and to the human race. "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is . . . the liberated voice."[45]

After Jesus' encounter with her, Mark's Jesus uses *paidion* as a more inclusive term. He embraces a *paidion* and admonishes that anyone who welcomes any *paidion* like this one welcomes him and God (9:36–37). Also after his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, people bring their children (*paidion*) to him; it is such children (*paidion*) as these to whom the kingdom of God belongs (10:13–16). Jesus only reverts to *teknon* when speaking directly to his circle of disciples, referring to them as *teknon* (10:24, 28; cf. 12:18–21 where *teknon* is put into mouth of Sadducees; 13:12).

IT IS BECAUSE OF YOUR WORD (*LOGOS*)/SASS

In response to the woman's sass, Jesus acknowledges the power of her word (*logos*) and her reasoning. Choi acknowledges that it is the woman's *logos* that engenders healing for her daughter, but she further asserts that the woman consumes the crumbs partaking of the mystery of Jesus' body.[46] In Mark, when Jesus casts a demon or unclean spirit out of an individual, the language is clear that Jesus has cast out the demon/unclean spirit (1:21–28, 34; 3:21–28; 6:13; 9:25). These exorcisms are expressed with the Greek verb *ekginomai* in the second aorist imperative when Jesus is the agent (3:25; 5:8; 9:25), with the Greek verb *ekballō* when the narrator or other characters refer to Jesus's exorcism activities in the third person (1:34; 3:22, 23); or when Jesus commissioned the twelve apostles to perform exorcisms, the

45. Ibid., 9.

46. Choi, *Postcolonial Discipleship of Embodiment*, 100.

present infinitive of *ekballō* occurs (3:15; cf. 6:13), usually translated "cast out." In Caesarea Philippi, despite Jesus having given his apostles power over unclean spirits, they were unable to expel the spirit from a young boy (9:17–18), which suggests being one of Jesus' followers and being commissioned by him does not guarantee successful exorcisms. The twelve apostles were disturbed that in Capernaum somebody who was not one of them was casting out demons in Jesus' name (9:38–41; cf. Luke 9:49–50). Mark demonstrates that perceived others/outsiders can exorcise demons or unclean spirits; I argue that this Syrophoenician woman becomes one of them. When she seeks Jesus' help for her daughter, she does not know the power of her sass, but she is about too.

Here Jesus says, "on account of this word (*logos*), go [home]; the demon has gone out of your daughter" (7:29). He does not command the demon to leave, but directs the sassy mother to go home. Jesus knows that the demon has left her child's body. Nelavala argues that Jesus has been transformed; that this is "the miracle" when the oppressed can "persuade their oppressor for a change."[47] The assertion that, "without the oppressor's readiness to change, the voice of the oppressed is in vain"[48] contributes to a hopelessness that too many oppressed feel, a hopelessness that keeps too many away from the ballot box and assures complicity in their own oppression.

In his book, *Between the World and Me,* Coates advises his son about the intrinsic value of struggle and resistance against oppression: "you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable sane life."[49] Jesus simply affirms the power of this Greek Syrophoenician woman's sass. Her word, her sass, has power. But Jesus casts no spell; there is no *ekballō*. And the Greek syntax differs from the other Markan exorcism episodes. Jesus gives his twelve disciples the authority to cast out demons, but they don't; instead he affirms the authority embodied in this woman's sass. It is *her* word, *her* sass, that brings restoration and relief to her child. Her daughter is no longer one of the untouchables.

Sass gushes up from a place of pain and anger, of being "sick and tired of being sick and tired," of living with "unclean spirits" that claim one's body, mind, and soul. One might say, therefore, that it is truth-telling with an attitude, and for good reason. Sass explodes on the scene, talking back

47 Nelavala, "Smart Syrophoenician Woman," 68.

48 Ibid., 66.

49. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 97.

to racism, sexism, classism, and other isms that persist and refuse to desist; that refuse to be expelled without leaving its mark on one's body, soul, and mind. The power of sass is the power of truth-telling, the power of breaking the silence that oppression inflicts upon its victims. Sass is often a woman's last resort. A sassy woman takes a risk, a possibly fatal risk, in confronting oppression. The last stanza in Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival" reads: "and when we speak we are afraid/our words will not be heard / nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid / so it is better to speak /remembering / we were never meant to survive."[50] Women like Sandra Bland sass or talk back not because of the absence of fear, but because they know history and current events show that, "we were never meant to survive." But we use our "mother tongues," our sass and talk-back, for our children, at least hoping they will have a better life and not have to be constrained and demonized by the unclean spirits of racism, sexism, and classism.

Certainly, sass and talk-back can have fatal outcomes when the person to whom it is directed has more regard for unjust traditions or for his own ego and authority than for human freedom and life, as in the case of Sandra Bland and others. The biblical writers were selective regarding the stories they chose to preserve and narrate. Life is a lot messier and does not wrap up in tidy salubrious and felicitous denouements. The empire always strikes back. For unjust systems to fall, it takes a movement of women and men willing to sass and talk back, risking retaliation and even life. Unjust systems and the people who prosper from them don't just wake up one day and decide that they are tired of the benefits and implode. What we also know for sure is that the utter silence of the oppressed (and their supposed allies) will never topple the master's house.

The story of the Syrophoenician woman provides an antithesis to the silent submissive woman who dares not sass or talk back to male authority figures, regardless. This story can assist in constructing a more empowering and freeing theology of sass or talk-back that demonstrates the impact and value of women's sass or talk-back. The Syrophoenician woman stands in the tradition of biblical predecessors like Queen Vashti. Sandra Bland stood that fatal day in the tradition of proto-womanists like Ida Wells Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, and other activists. However, she did not choose to be memorialized in a similar tragic fashion with Emmett Till, Miriam Carey, Natasha McKenna, Yvette Smith, Tanisha

50. Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," 32.

Anderson, Rekia Boyd, Kindra Chapman, and too many others who were murdered because of their race. The abuse and illegal arrest of Sandra Bland and subsequent attempts by Trooper Encinia and his department to cover up the "truth," at the very least precipitated her untimely and unnecessary death and at most constitutes a modern-day lynching (with a plastic bag and a large quantity of marijuana while in custody?!!). Bland would be alive today had Trooper Encinia not singled her out for harassment and escalated the situation because she dared to sass and talk back, to resist his oppressive ways.

Women continue to be taught that they are to be good "footstools" for men. When a woman "acts up" or refuses to be that footstool, a "biblically" submissive woman, then she deserves any violence inflicted upon her. Too many women remain shackled to this type of thinking and so they do all they can to be "good girls." (I even heard a female minister not long ago at a breast cancer event promoting the book she wrote about how women can be little girls again and thus become good marriage material), always submissive to male authority and abuse. And sass or talk-back are certainly not the qualities of submission.

The story of the Syrophoenician woman shows that sass can call our attention to and challenge unjust, biased, and oppressive traditions, laws, and expectations. The power of sass can reveal and question the destructive forces at work in or against our communities. Too often when many women of color have sassed or talked back, confronting unfair practices, biased policies, racist behaviors that they have witnessed or experience in church, society, or the academy, they have been labeled as trouble makers, castigated, marginalized, and ostracized by men as well as by their sister feminists and womanists. This practice of silencing the sass of women of color hinders womanism/feminism from being the political and self-critical movement it is meant to be. We need to celebrate sass and talk-back in women of color as well as in white women as a legitimate form of agency and method of truth telling rather than punishing women for speaking truth boldly in the face of corrupt, biased, life-threatening and denying authority. Sass and talk-back are legitimate forms of resisting oppression and exploitation. It can be considered a language ("mother tongue") of black women seeking to expose their exploitation and to dismantle the master's house built from and on the sands of racism, class, sexism, and domination. We must celebrate sassy sisters and tell their stories.

I travel alone for long distances relatively often. I am black and female. And on some days I am fed up, and I might just be courageous enough to assert my right to know, to be sassy, if I should be stopped by a cop. And that cop might be like Trooper Encinia. He might refuse to tell me why I am being stopped and yet expect my full unmitigated compliance. Or I might comply but be bullied and provoked—everyone, most people, have a breaking point. Like other black women and men in this country, my life could be cut short by one trivial, unnecessary encounter with the wrong police officer. Black people's fears are real. Sandra Bland, Kindra Chapman, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and many others who died as a result of interactions with the police, in marked and unmarked graves, were real people who are mourned and missed by family and friends. For some it won't be real—the fear, the facts—until it happens to them or to someone they know. But now is past time to name and oppose this insidious brutality of people of color, women ,and men and demand "never again." #SayHerName #BlackWomensLivesMatter.