

**‘The past is not a husk yet change goes on’<sup>1</sup>: Reimagining (feminist) theology<sup>2</sup>.**

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*Abstract*

‘Feminism’ is still often dismissed as an outmoded or discredited concept; out of touch with the feelings and desires of real women and men or antithetical to any proper vision of Christianity. So for the feminist theologian it is as important as ever to find ways of discriminating between truth and falsity and discerning a future path. In this piece I have begun to try articulating one possible feminist approach using insights from the work of philosophers Deleuze & Guattari – particularly on assemblages - and from the work of poet and theorist Adrienne Rich on revisioning. It is my sense that these tools may be able to help provide feminist theologians with the support we undoubtedly need if we are genuinely to be able to acknowledge the weight of our pasts and the risk of our futures without becoming overwhelmed or immobilised in a context which remains decidedly challenging.

Feminism; Liberation; Theology; Revisioning; Nomadic

***1 Why ‘reimagining feminist theology’? Discouragement and Resistance.***

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<sup>1</sup> Rich, Adrienne, ‘For Memory’ in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (London: W W Norton, 1981), pp 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> This paper was given initially at a conference in Glasgow University, Scotland, organised by Julie Clague and Heather Walton. It grew out of some intense and enjoyable encounters. Thank you PSA, SA, JRC, JI, BU, JMW.

In an interview with Matthew Rothschild<sup>3</sup> the poet Adrienne Rich refers him to an article in Harper's Magazine from November 1976, called 'Requiem for the Women's Movement'. Her point is that if you want to attack an idea, a good way to do it is to say that it has already had its day. Rumours about the death of feminism continue to circulate<sup>4</sup>. As a teacher of theology and religious studies, I admit I sometimes get discouraged when students seem dismissive and are unwilling to think about anything 'feminist' on the grounds that although ideas and projects identified with feminism may have been important for their grandmothers or even for their mothers it is no longer an issue of real contemporary relevance. In an undergraduate context of optional modules, many students seem to vote with their feet and when they are forced to address feminist issues in core courses, one or two of them always seem slightly resentful. A little probing, however, usually reveals that although they may be afraid that 'political correctness' has resulted in reverse discrimination against men, or that the advantages feminisms have gained for women have been achieved at the expense of men<sup>5</sup>, they tend to have little real knowledge of the histories of 'the women's movement' or indeed much understanding of what feminisms or feminist theory really are. In other words, they are not reading feminist literature and disagreeing with it so much as reacting negatively to ideas with which they are largely unfamiliar except in stereotypical terms<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Rothschild, Matthew, 'I happen to think poetry makes a huge difference' (Interview with Adrienne Rich), *The Progressive* (1 January 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Joan, 'I'm a feminist, so I suppose I must be dead', *The Independent on-line* (6 July 2003): 'Talk about being late with the news: feminism is finished, *The Guardian* announced last week, devoting a whole page to a new study which apparently shows that the fight for equality is an "outmoded" concept. "The term has been equated with hatred of men", the paper revealed ... Fortunately students of this phenomenon, which I personally have been following for about 20 years, have longer memories. We vividly recall *Newsweek* declaring "the failure of feminism" in 1990; *The New York Times* assuring its readers that the "radical days of feminism are gone" in 1980; and *Harper's magazine* publishing a "requiem for the women's movement" as early as 1976'.

<sup>5</sup> These points of view were expressed to me more than once, at the beginning of courses with feminist content, by students at Stirling University (2001-2005). Of course, I do not want to suggest that students at Stirling University are doing more than reflecting widely held opinions in the population as a whole. It is significant, however, that in extreme cases, such 'opinions' can sometimes be linked to violent acts as, for example, in the case of Marc Lépine. Lépine, blaming 'feminists' for ruining his life by radicalising women, notoriously murdered 14 women, most of them engineering students, at Montreal's École Polytechnique on 6 December 1989.

<sup>6</sup> See Le Doeuff, Michèle, *Le sexe du savoir* (Paris: Aubier, 1998) p. 10. The French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff expresses a similar view of her (male) academic

In general, I have to conclude that few people are actually reading feminist literature at the moment. But I believe it is extremely important for those of us committed to feminist ideas and action to recognize clearly that negative or luke-warm reactions from students, colleagues, publishers or the press are not, on the whole, based on on-going research, the profound analysis of data, or a critical sensibility developed out of reading feminist or women's writing. In consequence the discouragement this lack of enthusiasm produces should not prompt us to think or feel that the work completed so far in feminist theory and feminist theology has either been a waste of time or that nothing remains to be done. What has been done already has helped to crystallise and define the issues. But there is much more for feminist theologians to say and do creatively to help work loose the blockages sexism and its discouragement can bring about. It is in this sense that I set about the task of 'reimagining' (feminist) theology.

## **2      *Resources for resistance: Adrienne Rich's commitment to politics, passion and liberation.***

It seems to me that feminist reflection and education is crucial for the vitality and sustainability of any theological imagining worthy of the name, and not simply *feminist* theological reimagining. Adrienne Rich is not a Christian feminist yet her work is richly rewarding for the Christian feminist reader. She responds to the discouragement of feminist ideas in general by redoubling her efforts, in poetic terms, to reach the surface and breath in the air, to satisfy a thirst and to protect her own life (Rothschild, 'I happen to think poetry makes a huge difference' (Interview with Adrienne Rich)). Committed as a poet and activist to making life more passionate and political her insights remind feminist theologians that we too claim a vocation; to give up conventions and expectations where they prevent us from living our lives on the deepest and most engaged levels possible.

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colleagues (including compatriot, philosopher Jacques Derrida) in typically forthright style. She argues that they generally knew nothing about feminism but that this does not appear to prevent them from attacking it or from publishing their 'antediluvian' views, for example, about women's inability to be both 'intellectual' and 'real' women: '*Des énoncés assurant que les vraies femmes son illettrées continuent d'être publiés et, sous couleur d'attaquer le féminisme – don't ils ne savent rien – de bons apôtres vous livrent des convictions antédiluviennes concernant la sexualisation de l'intellect.*' She goes on to quote Derrida's words to this effect from his book, *Spurs*.

Recognising the political implications and consequences of this intent, we need to notice, to protest and to fight against those forces which prevent us living as fully as we can. For Rich, there is a tremendous urgency which challenges the apathy induced by frustration and discouragement. She sees no option but to find ways to escape counter-feminist obstacles. Otherwise we die. For her, it is that dramatic and there is no room for complacency or resignation. The feminist and political sensibility of her published poetry and critical work reflects her own desire to escape the suffocating obstacles that squeeze the life out of people for reasons very largely at odds with any desire for human transformation or liberation. She leaves her marriage for a lesbian relationship, for example, in spite of disapproval and misunderstanding. She writes about the need to face up to 'the daily mundane anti-Semitism 'of her early life as the child of a mixed Jewish/Gentile marriage in spite of the pain it causes her to remember her relationship with her parents and her own questionable compromises with racism and indifference<sup>7</sup>.

For Rich, political movements – for peace, civil rights, women's and gay rights - are formed and disrupted at the point of intersection with our most intimate desires. Her view of liberation or escape from discouragement is all about acknowledging the power of desire rooted in individually contextualised, embodied experiences. In consequence, Rich's political feminism comes together at the intersection of intensities - as a poet, daughter, daughter-in-law, lover, citizen, mother or teacher - with the practices of social and cultural policing and the material limitations which frame these experiences. What she advocates, indeed pleads for consistently, is the much greater commitment to our lives, to our desires and to our passions for each other. Her work resonates with an anger that what tends to characterise the way we live - both on the broader political front and in individual relationships - is a steady reduction of passion and the limitation of our abilities to understand ourselves. For Rich, to talk about rights is not to collude in this process but to talk about opening ourselves up to the most that we can understand, experience or feel for each other. And this conviction itself is born out of what she knows and feels intimately. It is a conclusion drawn out of her willingness consciously to examine the

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<sup>7</sup> See 'Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity (1982)' in Gelpi, Barbara Charlesworth & Albert Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London: WW Norton and Company, 1993), pp. 224-239.

limitations imposed upon her day to day however painful that may be. It may no longer be quite so controversial, for example, to live with another woman but, for Rich, living with another woman means much more than merely being allowed to do so. It means having the context in which to write and publish words about her feelings and passions for another woman. But in stating so openly, she enters the political arena, looking for the acknowledgement that she is not, as a gay woman, just a statistical anomaly.

Criticism of her work is a response to the dangerous and unsettling new space for transformation that is opened up in creative writing which is itself a response to the poet's lived experiences intersecting within existing social and cultural spaces<sup>8</sup>. Rich's vision and discernment expressed in her poetry enable us, or challenge us, as readers to see and feel differently. And this can be a frightening as well as a genuinely liberating experience since, through seeing and feeling differently, values and goals may themselves be changed and the entire exercise of mapping out who and where we are, may be disconcertingly redirected.

### 3 *The feminist theologian as a working assemblage*<sup>9</sup>:

Rich's work then draws particular attention to the way in which intimate and public experience are related. This has implications for our view of both individual contextuality and cultural history. I believe that the past remains a key element for the future of all feminists but the issue is perhaps more acute for Christian feminist theologians who need to address the sense in which human history is also always regarded as sacred history. As a feminist theologian, I remain connected both to my feminist and my Christian past in important ways. But this connection is complex. Rich, as I have said, is not a Christian feminist theologian but she forces us to acknowledge that we cannot detach ourselves either from the intimate or the

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<sup>8</sup> See Rothschild, 'I happen to think poetry makes a huge difference' (Interview with Adrienne Rich): 'It's not just about me and my work. It's about movements of which I am a part. It's about a whole social structure that is threatened or feeling itself threatened.'

<sup>9</sup> This description makes reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 's use of the term 'assemblage'. Their work evades easy definitions but a useful text for exploring the term is '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming –Imperceptible' in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi, London, New York: Continuum, 2<sup>nd</sup> English edn, 2003) pp. 232-309.

communal and public dimensions of our lives. And this has implications for our view of history. It is a real issue for Christian feminists whose resistance to a history of publicly expressed evaluations and prohibitions – on the grounds that they prevent us living as fully as God wants us to – derives much of its authority from intimate and personal experience and memory. Yet public evaluations and sacred historical narratives remain politically significant as well as potentially life-affirming. As in Rich's work, something is always firing up at the intersections between these different dimensions.

For example, to suggest that the past is normative for Christian theology is both fundamental and highly problematic for the feminist theologian who has learned not merely, in a public sense, about divine revelation and liberation but also in terms of women's stories and their own intimate experience about pain and oppression meted out in God's name. And the past never comes to us unmediated by the power dynamics that structure its transmission, translation and interpretation<sup>10</sup>. The ideas, embodied desires and practices that make up my experience are clearly framed and shaped not merely by my Christian education but also by my education and experience as a woman and a feminist in the third millennium. I have been inducted into a tradition of 'resistant women' who have spoken or endured in silence, quietly subverted or acted politically to challenge the structures and theologies of Christian churches over the last two thousand years. Yet my Christian upbringing and culture and my theological education have also provided me, as a feminist, with relationships, narratives, concepts and a language which frame and shape the things I desire passionately for myself and others. It has determined at least some of the questions I ask.

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<sup>10</sup> Feminist theologians and biblical critics have generally accepted the notion that 'history' belongs to the winners i.e. that it is conditional on the values and weighted perceptions of those who are writing or telling it. See for example, Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. xix. Fiorenza wrote memorably 'Feminists cannot afford ... an ahistorical or antihistorical stance because it is precisely the power of oppression that deprives people of their history'. More recently she notices that, though her work might have made a useful reference point for those scholars engaged on the so-called 'Third Quest' for the Historical-Jesus, it has, in fact, been largely ignored by malestream scholarship who still constitute, in some ways, the 'winners' in this field. See Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 30-55.

Of course, some people would prioritise different aspects or elements of the experience I have described and argue that to take the rich traditions of Christian theology seriously requires that any other discourse must be relegated to a role of secondary importance. But I believe that to take seriously the interconnections between different aspects of lived experience, we have to be aware of their complexity. Rather than prioritise in any simplistic way, I prefer to address this complexity, borrowing for the purpose not simply from Rich but also the term ‘assemblage’ from the sympathetic and subtle work of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. They describe an assemblage as any collection of connected parts which have a ‘consistency’<sup>11</sup>. The parts themselves constitute something that works, moves, flows or ultimately disassembles and they may be wildly heterogeneous, including every kind of attitude, practice, body, institution or words. More intriguingly still, they show how the assembling and disassembling of these components takes place within contexts and circumstances that are themselves continually changing, sometimes completely changing the whole direction of the assemblage. The issues that become important in this way, are concerned with fluidity, movement, give and in my terms, liberation.

#### 4 *Lines of Flight*

The past then is one important dimension of this assemblage. And it is a resource for feminist theologians to draw on when there is discouragement. It shapes and colours their hopefulness. Although this discouragement may be serious, it doesn’t constitute the whole story. Women may see themselves as marginalised and made unaccountably ‘unfamiliar’. But the Christian feminist theologian can also work, like Rich, to find or fashion escape routes or forms of liberation. Deleuze & Guattari use the term ‘Lines of flight’ to describe how assemblages – the interacting and interconnecting features and functions including past experience and inherited frameworks that constitute lived reality at any particular point (Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 88-89), burst out of containment into new formations that alter the parameters of its active parts and may completely change the map or

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<sup>11</sup> See Goodchild, Philip, *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 217.

chart whereby we pilot our way. This seems to me to voice a difficult but hopeful insight that has much in common with the biblical prophetic tradition; escape and movement leading to fluidity, movement and liberating transformations of various kinds are possible. The caveat however, is that this is not likely to be an easy or predictable process and there is risk involved. Stagnation and entropy can be avoided though radical dissolutions can be scary even when we see the possibilities that they open up to us. But then, in the words of the Gospel (Mt. 11.7-10), what did we go out into the wilderness to see anyway? Prophets or prophetic options are rarely safe and predictable and sometimes they appal us or shock us to the core.

Written now twenty years ago, Sharon Ringe's re-reading of Mk 7. 24-30 (Mt. 15. 21-31)<sup>12</sup> remains for me a favourite illustration of different directional lines of flight emanating from a feminist reading of a biblical text inherited from my Christian past. In the story about Jesus' encounter with a Gentile, Syrophoenician woman, Ringe criticises Jesus' exclusivism. The woman is, in Ringe's terms 'uppity', and what she addresses is Jesus' refusal to treat with her and her daughter as non-Jews. In this feminist reading, Ringe points out that it is the doubly marginalised woman who gets to challenge Jesus' limited view of the world, and clarifies for him a broader and more ambitious mission outside a traditional definition of the 'chosen people'. Yet the woman is motivated in the first instance, by desire on the intimate level; by her love as a parent for her child's well-being and health. It is her love for her daughter that politicises her reactions to Jesus and, arguably, evokes his response. What Ringe outlines then is the potentially liberating, freeing up of possibilities for transformation brought about through an interaction between different experiences and expectations. This is a biblical and feminist acknowledgement of needs and desires 'outside the box' which makes reference to differing insights about love and anger that come from our common and different pasts of question and desire. At the same time, this reading puts Jesus' reputation on the line. At best, he emerges, having escaped from strong culturally embedded models of divine and masculine self-sufficiency and shows himself vulnerable, open and responsive to persuasion and subject to change. At worst, he appears abusive and intolerant. And Ringe's reading, of course, reflects a similar interaction or intersection of theological education and training together with

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<sup>12</sup> Ringe, Sharon, 'A Gentile Woman's Story' in Russell, L. M. (ed), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) pp. 65-72.



a personal encounter and feminist ideas in the early 1980s. The methodology delivers a liberating reading of real possibility that incorporates and reveres past tradition, but is radically disturbing.

## 5 *Further Models for creative work*

Rich's models for the political and creative work in which we could be engaged as feminist theologians are expressed through her poetry, critical writing and life choices. She unsettles her readers in order to create new maps that enable us to perceive and thus plan journeys or expeditions on the basis of the new contours or features they reveal. Yet these new maps are as much as ever related to a material existence determined by past and present circumstances. Rich uses the language of women's liberation in this revelatory way, in order ultimately to bring about transformations of both the poet and the social structures within which she lives and writes.

However, I want to give this description of 'women's liberation' yet more resonance by relating it to Rosi Braidotti's notion of 'a political fiction'<sup>13</sup>. Braidotti defines 'the nomadic subject'<sup>14</sup> as one such political fiction. The political fiction – fictional because it is poetic, belonging to the realm of inspiration and creative make believe - helps us to see or feel and to articulate what was previously only sensed and thus to begin the process of transformation. The 'nomadic' subject itself makes reference to a devalued and unfamiliar form of community<sup>15</sup> as well as implying a modality of crossing and recrossing boundaries. This unsettling fiction opens up, envisages, and imagines though its iconoclastic references to instability and openness, new 'spaces where transformations can take place' (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 7).

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<sup>13</sup> Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> The term 'nomadic subject' also makes reference to Braidotti's reflections on the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Philip Goodchild writes 'Whenever there is insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution then a nomadic mode of social existence is constituted' (Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 172.)

<sup>15</sup> European nomads ... Irish Travellers or English and European Roma remain committed to their cultural 'insubordination'. The European Roma Rights Center <http://www.errc.org/> gives examples of what it sees as discrimination against Travellers and Roma by the settled population.

What I am calling a feminist politics of liberation, or ‘women’s liberation’ is comparable to a political fiction of this kind, a necessary move ‘against the settled and conventional nature of theoretical and especially philosophical thinking’ (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 4). It is fictional because it is, I believe, still within the realm of creative make-believe and not yet realised perhaps not even realisable – yet, as Braidotti says, we need to live in the light of these fictions, to live ‘as if’ (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 7). My adoption of the title ‘Women’s liberation’ addresses my own continuing sense of confinement and exile but most of all, my desire to live something better as a woman, just as Braidotti’s ‘nomadic subject’ addresses an equally contemporary sense of boundlessness and uncertainty within the context of post modernity. The political fiction of ‘women’s liberation’, motivates and aids discernment of limitations and possibilities. It imparts energy but does not propose (final) solutions. Instead it opens up new questions. And as Rich says, ‘Women’s liberation is a very beautiful phrase... If we use the phrase women’s liberation, the question immediately arises ‘Liberation from what? Liberation for what?’ (Rothschild, ‘I happen to think poetry makes a huge difference’ (Interview with Adrienne Rich)).

Moreover, used today, years after its first appearance in the 1960s, the notion of ‘women’s liberation’ has an unsettling edge. It is so forty/fifty years ago – so caught up with the ambiguities of the sixties and the ‘sexual revolution’! It has a history, a past engagement with idealisations and lost illusions. Yet as long as women feel imprisoned whether by the social construction of gender or by its manipulation, it remains relevant. In fact, it has the importunity of all who continue to challenge the motivations of patriarchal, capitalistic cultures just by failing to fit (or pay!) the bill whether through age, handicap, sexuality or choice.

Adrienne Rich’s work as a whole expresses this same sense of edgy engagement that is always located in terms of her personal and cultural history. Her complex past of experiences, concepts, ways of thinking, memories, patterns of power and material possessions is not ‘just a husk’, something she can or should shake off easily in the ripeness of time. But of course, she too is aware of ambivalence within the process of transformation. She recognizes herself as connected to past and present networks of power as well as powerlessness, to an on-going hegemony as well as marginality (Gelpi & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 252), she describes herself as a part and not the whole. As a creative writer, she begins from where she is, from lived experience and a strongly

embodied perspective ... a woman sitting at a table, driving a car, looking up at the stars, sweeping leaves ... in circumstances within which we are often both compromised and constrained to some degree. In Octobrish, for example, a poem written in 1999 she writes

A life thrashes/half unlived/its passions  
don't desist/displaced from their own habitat  
like other life-forms take up other dwellings ...<sup>16</sup>

Conflicted and thrashed, as she says, we don't desist or cease to desire but move on, sometimes to new and transformative spaces, sometimes partly jammed or immobilised, to much poorer accommodation where we can have only parasitic, cramped and limiting lives. Liberation can be no naïve unproblematised view of a simple inevitable emancipation.

## **6      *Women's liberation ...***

But, compromised as we are, this is not something that should or can prevent movement.<sup>17</sup>

'.. we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity ...' (Gelpi & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, p. 238)

The title of this piece, 'the past is not a husk yet change goes on' is a quotation from a poem Rich wrote in 1979 called 'For Memory' in which she gives us a sober vision of a creative and liberating process:

Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out  
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers  
of light, the fields of dark –  
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine  
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch  
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.

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<sup>16</sup> Rich, Adrienne, fox: *Poems 1998-2000* (NewYork & London: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Blood Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet (1984)', p. 247 (Gelpi, & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 239-252).

I find this view of liberation persuasive. It is a painstaking process of taking on board and addressing, revisioning in Rich's own term, our pasts, our legacies of debt and gratitude, of oppression, injustice, indifference, sensuality and joy while also having the confidence to open up the space of our presents, to cross the boundaries and resist the splittings of ourselves and others into this or that exclusive singularity (Gelpi & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, p. 245).

In affirming this we have, I believe, a starting point for the practice of a Christian theology which I would characterise as political, feminist, liberationist and post colonial. It is political because, as knowledge practice, it has helped – and will continue – to form the inherited and regulative cultural and social structures in relation to which change goes on. I would also describe this theology as feminist and liberationist because it is located in the still 'unfamiliar' territories of White European women or Asian Indian women or women-identified men who work and long for liberation from what prevents us transforming most completely and creatively. I would describe this theology – in aspiration at any rate – as post colonial, because we need to see ourselves as the necessarily heterogeneous products of our colonial pasts (Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible*, p. 185)<sup>18</sup>. Finally our work is theological and Christian because – in both content and practice – it arises out of and makes repeatedly present our past that is not a husk, in a defining and constraining *anamnesis*.

## **7      *Liberation Theology/Liberation from Theology?***

However, making a case for feminist theology yet alone feminist liberation theology is not easy. We've noted the tendency of publishers, commentators, sometimes students, colleagues and friends to talk about the end of feminism or not to talk about it at all. The fact that, globally, grave inequalities between women and men continue to exist, that glass ceilings in business, violent domestic abuse and the nature of pornography continue to bear a disturbing relationship to gender and that misogyny is still far from uncommon within religious institutions, somehow makes less impact than it

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<sup>18</sup> 'On Color-Coding Jesus: An Interview with Kwok Pui Lan' in Sugirtharajah, R. S. (ed), *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 176-188.

might. 'Feminist theology' and 'women's liberation' suffer the same fate in many cases. They are devalued and sidelined as 'old hat'.

We continue to need to talk up our political fictions. We need to point out the opportunities that might be opened up for transformation if we were to adopt a liberative strategy and take the risk of thinking through what it would mean. We need continually to contest the splittings, the myths of separation to which Adrienne Rich makes reference, that still divide us from ourselves and each other in our most personal or sexual relationships as well as in national and trans-national policy making.<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, I think that the growing complexity within the field of feminist theory and feminist theology is a cause for celebration even when arguments develop, because it is an indication that we are actually doing this work of locating ourselves and revisioning the past that is not purely evil. Were this the case it would be easy enough to cast it off like a husk but, of course, the point is that the experience of engaging with it must draw us into recognition of limitations as well as possibilities. For example, it soon became apparent after the enthusiasms of the 70s and early 80s that there was a universalising process going on that set the concerns of white and western educate women centre stage, and privileged the publication and distribution of their work<sup>20</sup> marginalising the concerns of other groups. The myth of sisterhood was very soon seriously under question. In 1988, Jacquelyn Grant wrote, most memorably:

To say that many Black women are suspicious of the feminist movement, then, is to speak mildly about their responses to it. Put succinctly, women of

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<sup>19</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson offers the following gloss on this paragraph which sums it up well:

'A conflicted self split by the roles or worlds which contradict and so undermine us.'  
(Personal correspondence).

<sup>20</sup> See discussion in, for example, Grant, Jacquelyn, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1989); Kwok Pui-Lan 'The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective' in King, Ursula (ed), *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994), pp. 63-76. In terms of more broadly theoretical work see Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse', *Boundary 2* 12 (3), 13 (1) (Spring/Fall 1984), pp. ; hooks, bell, *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (Boston MA: South End Press, 1990); Bulbeck, Chilla *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the dominant culture are perceived as the enemy. (Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, p. 201)

Grant suggested that white feminists, including theologians, were as much implicated in the suppression of the Black race as their male partners<sup>21</sup>. The actions of white women, in the historical context of slavery, for example, did not inspire confidence in the integrity of any essentially feminine motivations. And as feminist scholars like Paula Giddings<sup>22</sup> and Dolores Williams, reveal, in the nineteenth century, even white women concerned with women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery held racist views. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a woman much revered as a foremother of feminist theology and biblical interpretation, reveals her classist and racist attitudes when she complains that men, former Black slaves, are given the vote in preference to 'the wealth, education and refinement of the women of the republic' (Daly (ed.), 1994, 45). Subsequently Two-Thirds world, postcolonial Christian feminists have had to contest this subjugation of difference<sup>23</sup> whenever and wherever they (continue to) encounter it. Nevertheless these political fictions of sisterhood are a now a part of our past, and our past that is not a husk. We have no future in myths of untrammelled purity. But to address that somewhat discredited fiction and its origins in a genuine desire for solidarity at the most intimate as well as at the political level head on, allows us to reconsider, to escape, flow away from the blockages it might otherwise create.

From another direction, come the associated and equally challenging views of writers like Rita Gross, a feminist scholar of religion who compares the early lack of understanding and credibility experienced by feminist theologians in their conversations with male teachers and colleagues, with the failure of contemporary Christian feminist theologians to engage realistically with feminist scholars of religion. To Gross, much Christian feminist theological reflection seems frustratingly chauvinistic, blind to the real and challenging implications of defining and studying culture, religion

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<sup>21</sup> See also Williams, Delores S, 'The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue' in Lois K Daly (ed) *Feminist Theological Ethics* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 42-58.

<sup>22</sup> See Giddings, Paula, *Where and When I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> For use of these phrases see, e.g. Dube, 'Savior of the World but not of This World: A Postcolonial Reading of Spatial Construction in John' (Sugirtharajah (ed), *The Postcolonial Bible*, pp. 118-135).

or the sacred in a global context (Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, p. 60)<sup>24</sup>. Both of these criticisms – concerned with a failure of a feminist vision within the field of feminist theology and a failure of feminists to locate themselves consciously in particular contexts as a part of the whole and as inheritors of a tradition - have been very largely constructive in intent however critical in form. They have not suggested that feminist discourse is redundant but rather that its scope needs widening to *increase* its liberative potential.

But there are feminist theologians for whom liberation theology remains the sickly offshoot of an unhealthy tradition. Marcella Althaus Reid, for example, tackles the issue in her wonderfully rich and troubling *Indecent Theology*<sup>25</sup>. The problems are still there, she suggests, linked to forms of patriarchy like some malign genetic inheritance – Christian salvation, for example, inescapably marked by fetishism (Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 153) – humankind whipped, so to speak, into soteriological shapes not of their own choosing in the service of western, white patriarchy’s perverse desires. Perhaps Mary Daly was right after all. If God in his heaven is a father ruling his people then it is in the nature of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male, white, heterosexually dominated.<sup>26</sup> And perhaps, in consequence, Audre Lorde was right to protest that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house<sup>27</sup>. Yet, making reference to Adrienne Rich’s definition of revisioning, what a feminist liberation theology might want to do is not perhaps, so much set about dismantling the master’s house, discarding the husk, as remodelling ‘as if’ in an on going response to the locations of our differing desires. Consider Rich’s definition in her 1971 essay, “When we Dead Awaken”:

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<sup>24</sup> Gross, Rita M ‘Feminist theology as theology of religions’ in Parsons, Susan (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 60-78.

<sup>25</sup> Reid, Marcella Althaus, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> This is a phrase adapted from Daly, Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973):

‘If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people then it is in the “nature “ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated’ (Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 1) Daly was, of course, questioning the whole structure.

<sup>27</sup> See Lorde, Audre, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’ in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110-113.

‘Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves’ (Gelpi, & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 167).

What is crucial here is the refusal ultimately to consider liberation as simple disengagement from our location. The past is not a husk. The wreck reveals the treasures that prevail as much as the damage than was done<sup>28</sup>. We are not simple, uncomplicated creatures but sometimes quite contradictory. As Rich writes in 1974 about the scientist Marie Curie dying from overexposure to radiation in a poem called, ‘Power’:

She died. a famous woman denying  
her wounds  
denying  
her wounds came from the same source as her power  
(Gelpi, & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 73)

Yet change goes on and it is in the process of naming it for ourselves and in accordance with those located desires, Rich suggests, that we are able to live afresh (Gelpi, & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 167).

## 8 *The Modern (Feminist) Theologians*

A certain kind of publicly acknowledged. Christian theology has been dominated for quite some time by the concerns of white, male, heterosexual and Eurocentric scholars. But there is continual movement. If we look at Alistair McGrath’s introductory text on Christian Theology<sup>29</sup> as a surface for cultural or political inscriptions, we see that even the 1994 edition acknowledged the silencing of women in the past, a matter which most earlier published commentators did not mention. But in between the

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<sup>28</sup> These words refer to lines within the poem, ‘Diving into the Wreck’, (Gelpi, & Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, pp. 53-55) which could be said to reflect the process of feminist ‘revisioning’ in terms of a metaphor based upon a deep-sea diving expedition.

<sup>29</sup> McGrath, Alistair, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1994, 1997, 2001).



publication of the second and third editions, a comment in the earliest edition on how 'responsible' (McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 112) feminist writers have honoured their Christian foremothers – as opposed presumably to the 'irresponsible' feminists who have not – has been replaced with the more conciliatory, 'many' feminist writers (McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 111). The change is small of course. But it represents an on-going process. We are acquiring a certain sensitivity to the way in which even a single turn of phrase carries a freight of inherited cultural assumptions. This sensitivity, in turn, is changing the very nature of how we write and speak and envision our future liberation.

Our past is unavoidable. Yet I agree that it is never delivered to us from outside in a straightforward manner but is always absorbed or connected in relation to our present context and experiences with all the complexity, for example, of the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of an assemblage. In turn, our actions, practices, thoughts, words and relationships have consequences, are important, and do frame desires, hopes for the future and lines of flight. What we need to develop is a practice of revisioning or discernment that continues to make us sensitive to our Christian theological heritages, but which can also detect the subtlest intersections that aid movement and creativity and help us to escape the oppressive dimensions of our pasts. What we need to avoid are those actions, practises, thoughts, words and relationships which jam the machine<sup>30</sup> trapping us in narrow places or single planes – feminist as well as Christian – sometimes reducing the energies of movement altogether. A practice of discernment, linked to the political fiction of 'women's liberation' for example, will hopefully lead us to acknowledge the sense in which we have been split, for example, from our embodied natures or our emotions as well as the sense in which many women are still denied the most basic forms of empowerment that would allow them to flow more creatively<sup>31</sup>. By revealing the splits more

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<sup>30</sup> Goodchild illustrates Deleuze's notion of antiproduction as a situation in which productive relations cannot form and consistent and mutually affective relations between encountering assemblages are blocked or prevented from producing some kind of flow. He explains this in the violent terms of rape: 'the body of the victim is forced to submit to the drives of the rapist, while being unable to shape or affect them; the drive belongs to the rapist alone, and is not an immanent desire produced in the relation between them'. (Goodchild, *Deleuze & Guattari*, p. 74).

<sup>31</sup> Note, for example, that the United Nations convened conference on women in Beijing, 1995, resolved to provide universal access to, and seek to ensure gender equality in the

thoroughly, discernment and revision may transpose our experiences into an entirely different key, a process that could admittedly turn all to a challenging dissonance. But the alternative is death; real or spiritual as both Adrienne Rich and Deleuze and Guattari recognize<sup>32</sup> Without this discernment and vision which is akin to revision in Rich's terms, we will fail to give ourselves space to explore or experience anything other than our own self-obsessions.

□ Some feminist theologians, like Mary Daly or Daphne Hampson, have felt that the Christian tradition is too compromised by its patriarchal context or masculinist presumptions – they want to discard the husk. And their work undoubtedly continues to inspire many younger feminist theologians even when they choose not to disassociate themselves entirely from Christianity. But it seems important to me that the models we opt for, while motivated by a concern for justice and vitality and rightly critical of our inheritance, need to reflect the full complexity of lived experience and its unavoidable intersection with a past which cannot simply be stabilised as a single – negative - factor. I believe that what we have to do as feminist scholars is to persevere in the business of 'women's liberation'; always bringing our very different, complex, compromised, past and present lived experiences to bear on what we do and resisting the role of tokenistic players in anyone's conventional theological games.

One current and relevant example of this that I find particularly inspiring is an emerging conversation about the nature of truth. It acknowledges that feminist scholars have been uncomfortable with the approach of analytical philosophy in particular, but argues that the question of truth cannot be simply abandoned. Typically, in Eurocentric cultures, philosophy has split bodies and minds, reason and emotions or belief and practice in an attempt to create clean, schematic and recognisably masculine models of human subjectivity, agency and responsibility. Faced with this dichotomised view of humankind, feminist scholars have been 'ambivalent and sceptical about the quest for truth in so far as they conceived of subjects as multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory or incoherent' (Anderson and Clack, *Feminist*

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completion of primary education for girls by the year 2000. In 2005 this had still to be achieved.

<sup>32</sup> D & G compare a situation without lines or flight in terms of '[b]lack holes or lines of death'; They describe the situation of the addict, trying to sustain an intensity of feeling or non-feeling by means of that which is only contributing to their torment or vitrification (Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 285).

*Philosophy of Religion*, p. 75)<sup>33</sup>. However, feminists themselves, and not least feminist theologians, need to ‘work to disclose truth, particularly by exposing unacknowledged partiality and dishonesty’ (Anderson and Clack, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, p. 73). Recently, Anderson’s notion of ‘strong objectivity’ drawing on the earlier work of both Nancy Hartstock and Sandra Harding, has generated some rich and suggestive discussions within the context of the philosophy of religion about the need, in pursuit of truth, to listen to the way it is being framed by those who are normally marginalised by the academic discourse of philosophy<sup>34</sup>. Yet, if Anderson challenges the tendency of contemporary philosophical discourse still to talk in terms of disembodied values and ideals, she remains convinced of the importance of concepts of rationality and truth (Anderson and Clack, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, p. 88)<sup>35</sup>. Similarly the feminist theologian, Sarah Coakley acknowledges a debt to enlightenment thinking and the concept of reason<sup>36</sup> though she follows a rather different path from Anderson, turning away from a foundational reliance on either rationality or faith to highlight embodied spiritual practice such as ‘wordless prayer’ (Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, pp. 130-152) as a route towards significant truth. What is important is that both of these feminist scholars recognize the complex framings of their work that, responsibly, needs to discern within a conflicted and compromised philosophical or theological inheritance, what remains important and fruitful.

## 9 Conclusion

It still suits many interest groups to dismiss ‘feminism’ as an outmoded or discredited concept; out of touch with the feelings and desires of real women

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<sup>33</sup> Harris, Harriet, ‘A Theological Approach’, in Anderson, Pamela Sue & Beverly Clack (eds), *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 73-86.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson defines ‘strong objectivity’ as ‘a socially produced and mediated value; it is characterized by a willingness to think from the lives of marginalized others and by a certain self-reflexivity’. See Anderson, Pamela Sue, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1998), p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, Pamela Sue, ‘An Epistemological-Ethical Approach’ (Anderson and Clack, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 87-102).

<sup>36</sup> See Coakley, Sarah, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2002), p. 97 and Chapter 5 passim.

and men or antithetical to any proper vision of Christianity. So much is still invested in existing patterns relating to gender both within and outside the Christian churches. But men and women struggling to decide exactly how they are to behave as men or women in an era of some real uncertainty, are often quite anxious and unsettled. In this state of mind, we may all be exploited - either encouraged to be complacent about change, and to fall back, with relief, into fundamentally familiar patterns or to ignore any nagging sense of discouragement. But change goes on! For the feminist theologian, sharpening feminist and Christian wits, it is as important as ever to find ways of discriminating between truth and falsity and discerning a future path. In this piece I have tried to articulate the advantages, from a Christian theological perspective, that one feminist approach might offer. I use the terms of both Deleuze & Guattari's notion of the assemblage and Rich's revisioning to help articulate my sense that feminist theologians need support in their work of discernment and discrimination in order to help them acknowledge the weight of their pasts and the risk of the future without becoming overwhelmed. Complacency and discouragement alike will be manipulated by forces at odds with a concern for human liberation and transformation. Deleuze & Guattari provide a model of movement, flexibility and unexpected change with which to address the immense complexity of lived human and – here, female - existence. Adrienne Rich intensifies the importance of acknowledging the space and context – past and present - within which our desires are formed and fire us to speak and act and Pamela Sue Anderson and Sarah Coakley carry on that work, addressing in particular an academic, scholarly inheritance, recognising how it has formed and continues to form us. Rosi Braidotti provides us with a further distinctive model for focusing our creative reimagining in terms of political fictions such as my chosen focus in this piece on 'women's liberation' which grasps the challenge of being 'at odds' or 'unfamiliar' in order precisely to unsettle current complacency and discouragement. Arguably then, we must continue, as feminist theologians, to contend with the past with further folding in of the old texts – the bible, the material, political, sexual body, our Christian and non-Christian notions of self and history. And we need to do this in order to revision the splittings of self in the light of the potential for change and transformation that is offered by the fiction, the 'as if' of 'women's liberation' and all that is implied within an already rich Christian feminist tradition which is not a husk.

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