

**Book reviews.**

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# Reviews



# *Beauty is Saving the World: A Review Essay of Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology, Braiding Sweetgrass, and The Properties of Perpetual Light*

*The Properties of Perpetual Light.*

Mangilao Guam: University of Guam Press, 2021

JULIAN AGUON

*Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns*

Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021

KAREN DENISE CROZIER

*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2015

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

All reviews, like all forms of writing, are to some extent autobiographical, and so the only way I know how to approach the profound truth, persistent goodness, and stunning beauty of the three books listed above is to disclose how they have found me and where I hope they continue to take me. I teach and write for my living, in religious and educational (and religious educational) settings. I am supposed to inspire students and parishioners alike by exposing them to truth, goodness, and beauty. This, it is believed, will equip us all to take up their pursuit for as long as we may live. Yet I cannot deny how often we approach the seminar table, the pews, and our desks with our decks stacked a certain way. Each spring, near the end of my theological aesthetics course, I ask my students to reflect on how Elaine Scarry's discussion of beauty<sup>13</sup> differs from our initial instincts to consider it that which comforts, soothes, or smooths over. We want beauty to be our recipe for feeling good about ourselves, a guarantee of anodyne glibness, anything but what it really is: the driver of gritty, clear-eyed hope—which is to say, the only kind of hope actually available. We want truth, just palatably revised. We want goodness, as long as it agrees to leave us in peace, recommitted to

what we were already doing and who we already were. But if Scarry is right, beauty remains indispensable for education, for spirituality, for politics, and indeed for any and all facets of life because it comes among us to convict us of error, to lead us into truth, and to point us towards justice, which is goodness in action. Beauty thus serves as an emissary of the sacred, though in Scarry's treatment, the sacred does not dance beyond our grasp but rather appears right within the oft-overlooked quotidian features of our day-to-day existence. The sacred continually reveals itself, patiently waiting for us to recognize its illumination. Without Scarry, I do not know if I would have realized how much I needed these three books or been able to be haunted by their accounts of how imperiled we have rendered the sacredness that is the particular. And without Willie James Jennings' descriptions of a colonized church and academy, I do not know if I would have recognized just how much the means of education and spirituality, economics and leisure that make up all the nooks and crannies of my life still churn through a grid of control and mastery. I remain caught within the net that Karen Crozier, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Julian Aguon boldly reveal. By disclosing truth, each in their own way, their works hold out the hope for goodness that surely marks beauty's presence. I will briefly discuss them in order of most technical to most poetic.

To begin, Karen D. Crozier's treatment of Fannie Lou Hamer charges that her legacy has more to say than what it has been allowed to contribute by an academy more often concerned with maintaining control over its borders than with receiving what it most desperately needs. The beauty of Hamer's work remains at risk of being overlooked by structures of faith and education more committed to their own power than to recognizing truth. In *Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns*, Crozier argues that Hamer's life and work exposes the theory-practice binary that continues to plague academic practical theology. Crozier's second chapter in particular details how Hamer's immersion within but work beyond the confines of Christian churches illuminates how the very "Christian practices and beliefs [that] were part of the problem, and not necessarily a solution" were at the same time "not static...open to be experienced and constructed to breathe life into both faith and culture" (54). Later, when Crozier engages Bridget Green's discussion of Hamer

as a protowomanist, she positions Hamer against gatekeeping: “a deeper liberationist imperative is for those who have stolen and assumed power as the gatekeeper to Jesus and the kingdom of God...to get out of the way” (217). Because she neither gatekept nor acquiesced to the gatekeepers, Hamer’s faith practices of going to jail, picketing, confronting police and white violence, speaking, registering voters, and so on challenge white-dominated academic spaces as well as ways Black churches have been co-opted by those structures (53-61ff). Hamer thus exposes the ways white academic theology sets itself up as an expert discipline with “nothing to learn from” the lived experiences of those beyond its predetermined borders (71n66). Of particular interest is the way Crozier connects Hamer’s breaking of boundaries to recent issues such as Black Lives Matter activism and critiques of diversity and inclusion paradigms (225-34, 140-99). The bottom line is that inclusion cast as assimilation into white-dominated institutions is no true liberation. Hamer also sharply corrects all communities that cast themselves as holding exclusive rights to Jesus over and against ‘the secular’. Instead, she wants the church to understand how “the people, places, and spaces that the elite of empire deem to be lifeless, worthless, and lawless” (230) constitute the very places where Jesus is available. If churches sought the Body of Christ in the ones overlooked, the kingdom of God would truly expand. Crozier notes how Hamer’s embodied synthesis of black folk theology and black power ideology, grounded in her promotion of the kingdom of God both in and outside of Christian institutions, far predated academic concerns for such practices (56-8ff). In other words, she lived what the academy and churches are just now catching up to articulate.

Crozier emphasizes that Hamer saw her milieu as a wilderness. Yet this wilderness was not beyond the reach of Christ’s revolutionary, resurrection love. As Hamer steeped herself in that love, she articulated first survival, then reciprocal care, and finally mutual belonging (78-93). Crozier traces Hamer’s initiatives for all three efforts across housing, anti-poverty programs, anti-war action, community development, cooperative land use, education, economic cooperatives, labor rights, farming, healthcare, and politics as one communally expansive vision rooted in her hard-won self-respect. As Crozier documents, Hamer’s approach particularly changes how we consider environmental justice: “People, and their relationship

with one another and the natural order, were drastically altered especially when the biological fallacy of white superiority and black inferiority was created and propagated through ideologies, oppressive policies, systems of slavocracy and segregation, and abusive, inhumane practices” (108). Crozier points out that against the racism that is environmental degradation and the environmental degradation that is racism, Hamer insisted on remaining in the South, remaining in her home, remaining a public figure, remaining “in a place and space that was legally designed to dispose of [her]” and thus demonstrated “a relationship to the environment that has been either overlooked or undervalued by many white environmentalists and creation care advocates” (85). Crozier sees Hamer’s work contributing to a three step liberation process, whereby the white erasure of people of color that has wreaked havoc on all life forms can be acknowledged and repaired, a new anthropology re-centers all people groups around environmental needs, and a new cosmology replaces “individualized, privatized, monopolized and dichotomized ways of relating to the land” with the sustainability that will be possible once indigenous cosmologies of “collective rights, communal, cooperative access and responsibility, and integrated awareness of all life forms” are fully adopted (109). For Hamer, all these issues are wrapped up together in a holistic ethic of care. Crozier quotes Hamer’s 1970 speech where she declares she is not interested in equal rights with oppressors, for this merely perpetuates their same dynamic of exclusion and mastery. What she fights for are human rights where the beauty of mutual interdependence supplies the goal (126).

Writing decades after Hamer’s death, Robin Wall Kimmerer articulates consonant concerns and hopes. Her gorgeous collection of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* includes early on her account of matriculating to forestry school with the goal to “learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together” (39). As with Hamer, Kimmerer quickly experiences the limits of Eurocentric education, having to trade her childhood sense of plants as teachers and companions for the primacy of analytical scientific thought. *Braiding Sweetgrass* supplies the stories of how Kimmerer began “a long, slow journey back to [her] people” and their ethic of mutual responsibility with the land and all its creatures (44). Kimmerer notes that

while her undergraduate and graduate degrees discounted the beauty of the interdependence of aster and goldenrod, she now sees them as a metaphor for the mutual interplay of scientific knowledge and indigenous wisdom. These two ways of knowing call us to understand the world not just with mind and body but with emotion and spirit, so that we can make beauty in response to its gifts (47).

Similarly to Hamer, Kimmerer traces a path forward through the humility of learning from those often shut out of Western educational structures. For Kimmerer, this growth entails loving plant people, the creatures of the land. She advocates “becoming indigenous to a place,” that is, “living as if your children’s future mattered” and accepting Native ways of knowing, where human people are understood as “the younger brothers of Creation” rather than the pinnacle of all life (9). Learning this orientation entails identifying the originating elements of all things: the trees that make the junk mail, the sheep giving wool for the sweater, the cattle whose abstracted and atomized flesh we pick up in portioned parcels at the supermarket (148). It entails transforming education from the colonizing arrogance of believing oneself the teacher into recognizing that “[t]he land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart” (222). Only this sort of attention will change the relationship between science and indigenous wisdom from hostility and colonization into mutual giving and receiving. Kimmerer’s chapter “Sitting in a Circle” gives a glorious account of how the field trip she organizes for her ethnobotany students highlights gift-giving between themselves and the land. As they learn how to harvest materials for a wigwam, for dinner, for torches, and for bug bite treatment, their awareness of and appreciation for reciprocity for the gifts of the land deepens (223-40). Another chapter recounts how a graduate student discovered sweetgrass regeneration increasing *after* it was harvested, not when it was left completely alone (“*Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass*,” (156-66). The plants behave as if they know they are needed by human beings and are thus in need of our need (163). Like Hamer’s practical sense of mutuality, Kimmerer points out that animal harvests also work similarly. In place of vapid platitudes, Kimmerer articulates ways to relate with the land and its gifts out of this grounded gratitude and mutual tending.

The earth and its creatures give presuming we will take what we need. The problem is when we dishonor the gifts or fail to return them to nourish the good of the whole (“The Honorable Harvest,” 175-201).

The chapter on the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address concretizes such reciprocity, with Kimmerer asking “[w]hat happens to nationalism, to political boundaries, when allegiance lies with winds and waters that know no boundaries, that cannot be bought or sold?” (112). She argues, “[c]ultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them...An integral part of a human’s education is to know these duties and how to perform them” (115). Throughout the collection, Kimmerer returns often to meditate on the role of language, of the power of naming and speaking. Our words disclose the education and the allegiances we embody, and so she mourns the loss of indigenous languages, narrates her efforts to learn Potawatomi, and chooses to capitalize Maple or Strawberry when speaking of a plant as a person and not just a category. This grammar of animacy, focused on the being of a bay, or a tree, or a hill, Kimmerer contends, can re-educate us into the grateful reciprocity we so desperately need (48-59). Adding another layer to how Hamer cuts across divides, with Kimmerer’s devotion to plants, we begin to recognize the world around us as our living family.

The most recent of these three works, Julian Aguon’s offerings in *The Properties of Perpetual Light* span poetry, memoir, op-ed, speeches, and an interview. With courage, honesty, and tenderness, Aguon leads his readers into the beauty and struggle of life in a region written off by Henry Kissinger’s callous remark that since nuclear testing there would only affect 90,000 people, “who gives a damn?” (31). Aguon writes to join the host of others who also seek to “save the world one sentence at a time” (1), “to insist on life” (3), and to practice the way of perpetual light, which is to say, love (5). Sounding notes like Hamer and Kimmerer, Aguon questions the logic of militarization, which begins by assuming warfare and from that premise can only consider Oceania as fodder for the machine. “If only superpowers were concerned with the stuff of lower-case earth—like forests and fresh water...If only they were moved by beauty” (9), Aguon writes. He describes the ethos of reciprocity that founds this beauty: the healing medicines for anxiety,

arthritis, asthma that can only be gathered in conditions that respect the land, the water, the ancestors, the air (10-11). Like Hamer and Kimmerer, Aguon points to the strength of story, of slowing down, of being grounded enough to stand in other peoples' rivers, move to their music, and carry their babies (16). Rescuing this world requires recognizing its magic as we encounter it for ourselves, which breaks us out of the folly of leaning only upon our ideas for our energy and affections (16-7).

So also like Hamer and Kimmerer, and pointing to Toni Morrison, Aguon declares that the work of our lives is to turn them into art (98). Such a task asks the artist to embody more than just the characteristics of a self-involved, self-indulged fame-chaser; as Aguon advises the 2009 graduates of the William S. Richardson School of Law, "the most cherished of all things I am taking with me in the new morning is, quite simply, other people" (19-20). Through gleefully hilarious footnotes, as well as in vulnerable essays interspersed with family snapshots, Aguon unflinchingly holds himself to the same call. In writing of his father's death, Aguon admits how much he hated him for dying, hated to miss Halloween while holding vigil in the hospital, hated what was being withheld from him in only the ways a nine year old would (33-4). In struggling with grief in the company of snails, grasshoppers, butterflies, swordgrass, and slopes, Aguon learns not just to pray for his own wings but eventually to pray for the wings of others: for his friend who takes his own life, and for his sister, whose grieving empty eyes he learns to truly see (35-6). Later in the volume, he directs this resolute compassion even to the Missionaries of Charity. During a summer spent volunteering with Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying and Destitute, Aguon at nineteen had discovered the uncomfortable questions of 'charity' work that glorifies suffering and overlooks justice. When he learns twenty years later that two of their members are implicated in a baby-selling scandal, he re-examines photos of that distant summer. Recognizing love present in the children and sisters at play together, Aguon determines that while no hearts are ever pure, allowing them to "break into hundreds of pieces" might just make them good (49, 46).

So he, too, returns to language and to education, joining Hamer (as portrayed by Crozier) and Kimmerer in urging that we rescue language from the butcher (81), that we name things as they are—the good and

the terrible, the sacred and the profane—and that we refuse to accept the dividing assumptions that run our world’s economies. Aguon’s tribute to Teresia Teaiwa suggests that others who learn from her work in spirituality, education, and activism, might also learn how to mother others “from the milk of [our] beautiful mind[s]” (85).

And so, instead of mechanistically working at social justice (96-7) or using resilience as a cover to impose further suffering (29), Aguon tethers himself to joy, to laughter, to attending to the whispers found within ourselves (56), and to forging ties of mutual vulnerability so that “what we love we can save—even ourselves, even each other, even when we are afraid” (67).

As I write, record heat waves and storms are decimating several places across the globe, wealthy Americans are wasting access to Covid-19 vaccines that the rest of the world desperately needs, and I have just watched footage of the remains of indigenous children being returned at last to their families for respectful burial. The interconnectedness of justice for the land and for all people grows clearer. The stakes for speaking truthfully of our histories and our present grow ever higher. And Hamer, Kimmerer, and Aguon remind us that seeking beauty in small, interdependent things is our only reliable guide toward this desperately needed justice.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); I am indebted to Brannon Hancock and Lindsey Eckberg Hankins for first directing me to this lovely compilation of Scarry’s 1998 Tanner Lectures at Yale University.
- <sup>2</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

# *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*

NEW YORK, NY: W.W. NORTON & COMPANY, 2020  
KRISTIN KOBES DU MEZ

The unexpected election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States in November 2016 caused deep soul-searching among Christians and media pundits who would seek to explain what occurred. That white evangelical Christians would support a Republican presidential candidate was no surprise. Given Trump's history, however, it surprised many that an estimated 81 percent of white evangelicals supported him. The release of the "Access Hollywood" tape just days before the election would have derailed almost any other candidacy except, perhaps, for the influence of "militant masculinity" which permitted most white evangelicals to ignore the red flag.

Two historians, both self-described Christian evangelicals, launched efforts to make sense of what seemed unexplainable. Dr. John Fea, professor of history at Messiah University (PA) wrote *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. Dr. Kristin Kobes du Mez, professor of history at Calvin University (MI), authored *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. Both books are highly recommended reading for Christians interested in politics, evangelical or not.

Kobes du Mez establishes a compelling case that Trump benefitted from decades of a movement that promotes robust masculinity as the model for evangelical men. The thesis of the "masculinity" movement is that Jesus has been misunderstood and misinterpreted as a sensitive, meek, gentle man. In the words of Kobes du Mez, "Evangelical support for Trump was no aberration, nor was it merely a pragmatic choice. It was, rather, the culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad." The reality is that white evangelical men voted for Trump in much higher percentages than evangelical women.

How to explain white evangelicals voting for a candidate twice divorced, three times married and unfaithful to each of his wives, who regularly

cursed in campaign rallies (and as president), who indulged in name calling, embellished his credentials as a successful businessman, who bragged that (in the spirit of John Wayne) he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose any votes? The full story of Trump's surprising election and the long-term impact of his presidency on the U.S. and the world will continue to unfold for years to come. Christians should also care about the impact of the Trump phenomenon on the witness of the church. Current indications are that scores of young adults are particularly turned off to the evangelical church albeit for a variety of reasons.

Kobes du Mez identifies dozens of evangelical leaders of the past five decades who promoted "militant masculinity" as the ideal model for male followers of Jesus. Trump was politically astute enough to tap into this ideology (one might call it "theology" except for the disconnect with the New Testament portrayal of Jesus) even as he does not personally embody many of the qualities promoted by the movement. Neither did John Wayne! Neither Trump nor Wayne ever served in the military though the movement praises Christian males who enlist. Neither man articulated traditional religious language long preferred by evangelicals. Wayne was married three times, carried on several affairs, was a smoker, a hard drinker, and openly expressed racism. Kobes du Mez notes that Wayne was not an evangelical Christian and did not live a moral life expected by evangelicals but came to represent a nostalgic return to a mythical "Christian America." The similarity to Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," is impossible to dismiss.

Kobes du Mez quotes extensively from evangelicals such as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Sr., Col. Oliver North, Jack Hybels, Pat Robertson, Bill Gothard, James Dobson, Tim LaHaye, Robert Jeffress, Mark Driscoll, Eric Metaxas, Jerry Falwell, Jr., and Franklin Graham. Ironically, not all promoters of "militant masculinity" are men. Phyllis Schlafly, Marabel Morgan, and other women called on men to stand strong and on women to cater to their husband's needs as "real" men. The feminist movement is antithetical to their understanding of the Biblical ideal for male/female relationships.

Many men and women are profoundly disturbed by the reality that the path from "militant masculinity" to misogyny is relatively short. One wonders

how the goal of militant masculinity actually encourages sexual immorality (it's what "real" men do!) and excuses marital unfaithfulness. At minimum a man can blame his wife for his failures.

In addition to many evangelical leaders who have promoted a "John Wayne" vision of Christian men, numerous social groups have been formed by this movement in recent years, including Promise Keepers and Quiverfull, to name just two. There is evidence that more recent groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers hold similar views.

I live in Virginia where I see evidence of "militant masculinity" on a daily basis. A prominent license plate in the Commonwealth carries the phrase (with the symbol of a striking snake), "Don't Tread on Me." Many of these plates are on pickup trucks that also display Trump stickers, unwavering support for the Second Amendment, and the Confederate flag. I would surmise that many of the drivers would identify as evangelical Christians. The critical question for them and all evangelicals begged by reading *Jesus and John Wayne* is, "How does the vision of militant masculinity correlate to the character of Jesus we see in the Sermon on the Mount?"

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