

Article

Womanist Ethics and the Semiotics of Religious National Power: White Authority and the Politics of Unknowing

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Abstract

This article theorizes a womanist semiotics of advocacy by reading the unnamed Shunammite woman of 2 Kings 4—renamed Polet (defender)—alongside Ida B. Wells’ anti-lynching crusade. A womanist semiotics decodes how Black women’s bodies and voices signify within systems of White patriarchal power that simultaneously demand their advocacy while denying them protection. Through close readings of biblical narrative and historical archive, the article identifies five components that structure Black women’s resistance: communal grounding, strategic alliance-building, trauma witness, prophetic truth-telling, and sacred self-preservation. Both women embodied kenotic love—a paradoxical self-emptying that becomes fierce self-assertion—confronting prophetic and political authority to demand accountability for life against death. This framework exposes how contemporary democratic systems exploit Black women as “democracy’s backbone” while marginalizing their policy priorities, and offers theological authorization for strategic withdrawal from exploitative contexts. By centering Black women’s epistemological standpoint, this womanist ethic reframes rest and disengagement not as abandonment but as revolutionary self-love essential for sustainable justice work.

Keywords: womanist theology; Black women’s resistance; biblical interpretation; advocacy; social justice

1. Introduction—The Sacred Architecture of Advocacy: A Womanist Ethic

There is a peculiar violence in being the unnamed. It is a cruelty that strips away not just identity but the very possibility of being remembered, consigning the bearer to the liminal space between presence and absence. The Old Testament’s Shunammite woman (Coogan et al. 2018, 2 Kgs 4:8–37)¹ traverses scripture without nomenclature, her existence demarcated solely by geographical coordinates and relational positioning—wife, mother, hostess to prophets. Yet her narrative pulses with such fierce advocacy, such ossified determination to shield and shelter, that to permit her continued anonymity becomes complicit with the very erasure she resists. And so I invoke her as Polet (פּוֹלֵט)—defender, advocate, champion—because womanism demands that we rupture the silences that have been deliberately constructed around Black women’s agency.

The Hebrew root פּוֹלֵט (polet) carries within it the urgent force of deliverance, escape, and preservation—the active work of saving life from destruction. To name her Polet is to acknowledge that names carry ontological weight, that they anchor identity in ways that roles and relationships cannot. For those whose names were systematically erased during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade—reduced to inventory numbers, plantation designations, and owner surnames—the act of naming becomes both recovery and resistance.



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When enslaved Africans were stripped of their birth names, they lost not merely linguistic markers but connections to ancestral lineages, cultural identities, and spiritual power. The plantation system understood what contemporary scholarship confirms: names are not mere labels but repositories of memory, dignity, and belonging. To restore a name to the Shunammite woman is to participate in the larger womanist project of reclaiming what Hortense Spillers calls “the flesh” from systems that would reduce Black women to anonymous function (Spillers 1987, p. 65). Her name becomes both historical retrieval and prophetic declaration—she who delivers, she who preserves, she who advocates for life against the forces that would diminish it.

This is not sentiment. This is the ontological work of survival.

In the topography of Black women’s lives, where subjectivity confronts the dual menace of erasure and appropriation, the praxis of naming becomes revolutionary. The epistemological boundaries of Blackness remain contested terrain, a discursive battleground where Black women must navigate currents that simultaneously seek to obliterate their humanity and expropriate their essence. Yet within this dialectical struggle emerges something profound—a womanist ethic of advocacy that illuminates the trajectory toward agency, dignity, and collective liberation.

The narratives of Polet and Ida B. Wells unfold like parallel currents, flowing across temporal boundaries yet carrying the same urgent momentum: the protection of community, the fierce insistence on life, the categorical refusal to permit death its final declaration. Both women demonstrate what I theorize as the sacred architecture of advocacy—constructed upon five foundational components that generate sustainable, transformative resistance.

But herein lies the paradox that haunts their stories: their extraordinary capacity to advocate for others, particularly for the masculine and juvenile members of their communities, while their own necessities remain unspoken, unmet, unacknowledged. This pattern reveals the urgent imperative for a fifth component in our womanist ethic—one that honors the sacred dimensions of self-preservation and strategic withdrawal, recognizing that the courage to retreat, respire, and choose life constitutes itself a form of advocacy.

A womanist semiotics examines how Black women’s bodies, voices, and actions function as signs within systems of religious and national power—signs that are simultaneously read, misread, deployed, and resisted. This article argues that White patriarchal authority operates through what I term the “politics of unknowing”: the systematic refusal to recognize Black women’s full humanity, agency, and epistemic authority. Polet’s unnamed status in scripture and Wells’ forced exile exemplify this erasure. Yet Black women create counter-signs through their resistance: Polet’s grasp of the prophet’s feet refuses prophetic distance from accountability; Wells’ lynching statistics re-signify Black death from individual tragedy to systematic terrorism. The five components of womanist advocacy that follow represent practices of re-signification—transforming Black women from objects of power’s gaze into subjects who decode and challenge the systems that would exploit them. To engage in womanist advocacy is to practice semiotic warfare: claiming authority to name oneself, to interpret one’s experience as an epistemic resource, and to signify one’s departure as prophetic judgment against exploitation.

This article contributes directly to the study of nationalisms and religious identities by examining how religious authority and national power collude to erase and exploit Black women’s bodies, voices, and civic participation. The religio-national nexus that this Special Issue seeks to interrogate is nowhere more visible than in the experience of Black women in the United States, whose relationship to democratic citizenship has always been mediated—and often denied—by interlocking systems of racial, gendered, and theological power. The Shunammite woman’s confrontation with prophetic authority in

ancient Israel and Ida B. Wells' confrontation with White nationalist terrorism in post-Reconstruction America are not merely parallel stories of individual resistance: they are case studies in how religious legitimacy is wielded as an instrument of national belonging and exclusion. Reading them together through a womanist decolonial lens, this article challenges the binary accounts of nationalism and religious identity critiqued in this issue's call, centering instead the transnational and transgenerational epistemologies of Black women as a counter-discourse to the nation-state's ordering of sacred and civic life. In doing so, it engages the intersection of gender, race, and class within religio-national phenomenology, and theorizes womanist strategic withdrawal as a postcolonial act of sacred self-determination.

The Five Components of Womanist Advocacy Ethic

A womanist ethic of advocacy emerges from the understanding that survival is communal labor, yet it must simultaneously honor the individual dignity and agency of Black women themselves. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is "a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl 3:1–8; Coogan et al. 2018)—a wisdom that includes knowing when to advance and when to withdraw, when to speak and when to remain silent. This ethic operates through five interconnected components:

1. Grounded in Communal Survival: Understanding that individual well-being is inextricably linked to collective flourishing;
2. Strategic Alliances: Forming partnerships that transcend individual interests while maintaining ontological integrity;
3. Trauma Awareness and Witness: Bearing witness to both personal and collective trauma while transforming it into epistemic resources;
4. Speaking Truth to Power: Boldly challenging systems and structures that perpetuate harm;
5. Sacred Self-Preservation and Strategic Withdrawal: Recognizing when environments become toxic and having the courage to choose life through strategic departure.

As Emilie Townes observes, the specter of violence against Black bodies remains "a daily reality for womanist ontological reflection." This consciousness creates both the urgency and the framework for advocacy that refuses to sacrifice the advocate on the altar of others' expectations (Townes 1993, pp. 93–115).

These five components do not exist as abstract principles awaiting application but emerge organically from the lived experiences of Black women who have navigated systems designed for their erasure and exploitation. To understand how they function, we must first encounter them in the narratives of women who enacted them—women like Polet, whose ancient story continues to speak prophetic truth to contemporary struggles, and whose advocacy demonstrates what womanist praxis looks like when embodied in contexts of patriarchal oppression and life-threatening crisis.

2. Polet's Sacred Defiance

2.1. The Kenotic Transformation: From Self-Abnegation to Self-Articulation

In the ancient text of Second Kings, we encounter Polet as a woman of material substance and social influence, yet rendered vulnerable by her husband's senescence and her own reproductive absence. Her encounter with the prophet Elisha and her subsequent actions exemplify her unwavering commitment to advocating for her son's vitality—a commitment that ultimately challenges the boundaries between the possible and the impossible, between kenosis and self-assertion.

When Elisha promises that Polet will conceive within a year, her response carries the accumulated weight of a woman who has learned to protect herself against the cruelty of

false hope. “Oh my Lord, do not deceive your servant,” she declares—words that, in the vernacular of contemporary Black women, resonate more as “Don’t fool with me.” This is not disbelief; this is womanist sass,² the protective armor of a woman who has learned to shield her heart against the violence of broken promises.

Yet here, in this moment of promise, we witness the beginning of Polet’s kenotic transformation. The theological concept of kenosis—divine self-emptying—takes on new meaning when viewed through the lens of Black women’s experience. For Polet, kenosis becomes not self-abnegation but self-articulation. She surrenders her internalized lack of self-regard and fiercely articulates her own need. Her response to Elisha’s promise marks the moment when she begins to speak not merely as a grateful recipient but as an agent with legitimate demands.

Once her son is born and subsequently dies, Polet’s response reveals the profound metamorphosis that has occurred within her understanding of her own worth. Her approach to the prophet carries accusation, demand, and accountability: “Did I ask you for a son? Didn’t I say, ‘Don’t fool with me’?” This is not the voice of a deferential supplicant but of a woman demanding divine accountability—a woman who comprehends that advocacy sometimes requires confronting even the sacred.

2.2. *The Kenotic Paradox: Self-Emptying as Self-Assertion*

This theological transformation from grateful recipient to demanding advocate reveals what becomes central to understanding Polet’s entire narrative arc. The traditional understanding of kenosis as divine self-emptying finds new expression in her story, operating not as diminishment but as expansion of her full humanity.

The theological dimensions of Polet’s transformation become particularly significant when we consider the traditional understanding of kenosis as divine self-emptying. In Phil 2:7, Christ “emptied himself” (ἐκένωσεν) of divine privileges to assume human form (Coogan et al. 2018). For Polet, however, kenosis operates inversely—she empties herself of self-abnegation to assume her full humanity.

This kenotic love manifests when Polet speaks for her son. Her advocacy becomes simultaneously an act of maternal protection and self-advocacy. When she confronts Elisha about her son’s death, she articulates not merely her pain as a mother but her pain as a woman whose future has been compromised, whose identity has been threatened, whose very existence hangs in the balance. Her speaking for her son becomes her speaking for herself—her pain, her loss, her future.

This represents what I term “kenotic advocacy”—a form of self-emptying that paradoxically becomes self-assertion. Polet surrenders her learned patterns of deference and self-minimization to claim her full humanity. Her advocacy for her son becomes the vehicle through which she discovers her own voice, her own agency, her own capacity to demand justice from the divine realm itself.

2.3. *The Architecture of Connection and Recognition*

Yet Polet’s advocacy cannot be understood solely through theological categories. It must also be situated within the material and relational networks that give her life meaning and shape her understanding of what is at stake when her son’s life hangs in the balance.

For Polet, her son represents more than a biological connection—he embodies her personal link to legacy, futurity, and ontological security. The text offers no nomenclature for her son, no description of his suffering. But Polet speaks with boldness, demanding accountability from the divine realm itself. Her understanding of community reflects what Lady Mae articulates in the Netflix drama *Greenleaf*: “She is me and I am you—pull the thread of one and we all come apart.”

This interconnectedness provides Polet with a framework for passionate engagement within a relationship while simultaneously revealing her own ontological worth. Through her advocacy for her son, she discovers her own voice, her own agency, her own capacity to challenge systems that would diminish life. The kenotic love she demonstrates transcends traditional notions of self-sacrifice to become a form of self-recovery.

2.4. *The Political Economy of Maternal Survival*

The spiritual and relational dimensions of Polet's advocacy gain additional complexity when we examine the economic structures within which her maternal bond operates. Her fierce protection of her son emerges not from sentiment alone but from a sophisticated understanding of how patriarchal systems determine women's survival.

Polet's advocacy for her son transcends the boundaries of immediate family to embody a profound understanding of communal survival and the intricate web of community connection. When Elisha inquires what he might do for her, Gehazi's response reveals the juridical and economic framework: "Well, she has no son, and her husband is old" (2 Kgs 4:14). Her son's life protects her own life within the patriarchal structures that determined women's access to property and social standing.

This economic dimension of advocacy reveals how individual and communal survival intertwine. Polet's fierce protection of her son becomes, simultaneously, her own self-preservation—a recognition that in systems of domination, strategic advocacy for others often becomes the pathway to personal agency. Her kenotic love operates within these material constraints while simultaneously transcending them.

These preliminary sections of Polet's narrative—her initial transformation from deference to demand, the theological paradox of her kenotic advocacy, the relational and economic stakes of her son's survival—establish the foundation for understanding how the five components of womanist advocacy function in concert. Having observed the beginnings of her journey, we can now examine how her narrative demonstrates the sophisticated integration of communal grounding, strategic alliance, trauma awareness, truth-telling, and ultimately, the wisdom of strategic withdrawal. Her story becomes not merely ancient history but a template for understanding how Black women have always navigated systems designed for their exploitation, creating spaces for agency even within structures meant to constrain them.

2.5. *The Womanist Framework in Praxis*

Polet's narrative demonstrates not merely the abstract possibility of womanist advocacy but its concrete instantiation within the constraints and possibilities of her particular historical moment. Her story reveals how the five components of womanist advocacy function not as discrete theoretical categories but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a lived praxis—a way of being in the world that transforms systemic violence through strategic resistance grounded in fierce love. To witness Polet's actions is to observe womanist theology enacted rather than merely articulated, to see how theory emerges from the exigencies of survival and the imperatives of protecting life against forces that would diminish it.

The power of Polet's example lies precisely in its specificity. She is not everywoman or an abstracted symbol of maternal devotion. She is a particular woman navigating the particular constraints of ancient Israelite patriarchy, leveraging her particular economic resources and social positioning to create space for advocacy that would otherwise remain unavailable to women of her time. Yet the particularity of her context does not limit the relevance of her praxis. Rather, it reveals how womanist advocacy always emerges from the concrete realities of Black women's lives—shaped by specific historical moments, con-

strained by particular systems of oppression, yet generating insights and strategies that transcend their immediate contexts to illuminate ongoing struggles for justice and dignity.

2.5.1. Grounded in Communal Survival: The Intersections of Family, Economy, and Community

Polet's advocacy for her son cannot be disentangled from the complex web of relationships and systems within which her life unfolds. When we observe her fierce insistence on her son's life, we witness not merely maternal instinct but a sophisticated understanding of how individual survival interconnects with familial continuity, economic security, and communal flourishing. Her actions reflect what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as Black women's distinctive epistemological stance—knowledge generated from the matrix of domination where gender, class, and family intersect to create both vulnerability and possibility.

The text's explicit naming of her husband's age—"her husband is old"—signals more than biographical detail. Within the juridical and economic frameworks of ancient Israel, a woman's security depended upon male relationships: father, husband, son. Polet's aging husband represents not merely the natural progression of time but the approaching vulnerability of widowhood. Without a son to inherit property, to provide protection, to maintain her position within the community, she faces the prospect of becoming what biblical texts repeatedly identify as among the most vulnerable: the widow without male protection or advocacy. The Hebrew scriptures return to this figure repeatedly as a marker of extreme social precarity: Naomi, returning to Bethlehem without husband or sons, cries out "I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21; Coogan et al. 2018); the widow of Zarephath faces starvation with her son before Elijah's intervention (1 Kgs 17:8–16); and Lamentations personifies the devastated city itself as a widow: "She who was great among the nations is now like a widow" (Lam 1:1; Coogan et al. 2018). Widowhood in these texts is not merely a domestic condition but a theological and political one—a state of disinheritance from the covenantal protections that ordered Israelite society.

Yet Polet's understanding of communal survival extends beyond mere individual or familial preservation. Her initial hospitality to Elisha—the construction of a room on the roof, the provision of furniture and amenities—demonstrates her comprehension that her household's flourishing connects to broader networks of spiritual and social power. She recognizes the prophet as "a holy man of God" and acts upon this recognition by creating space for his ministry. This is not transactional piety but strategic wisdom that understands how individual generosity can create relational capital, how material resources can be leveraged for spiritual connection, how household hospitality can generate prophetic attention.

When Elisha offers to speak to the king or commander on her behalf, Polet's refusal reveals even deeper sophistication about the nature of communal survival. "I dwell among my own people," she declares (2 Kgs 4:13)—a statement that asserts her sufficiency within existing community networks while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of her ambition. She does not seek to transcend her community through royal patronage but to flourish within it. This reflects what Townes identifies as the womanist commitment to community-based rather than individually oriented transformation. Polet's grounding in communal survival does not lead her to pursue personal advancement at the expense of community connection but rather to strengthen her position within the very networks that give her life meaning.

The birth of her son represents the convergence of individual desire, familial necessity, and communal contribution. This child secures her own future within patriarchal economic structures, continues her husband's lineage, and adds to the community's demographic strength. When the child subsequently dies, the threat extends across all these reg-

isters simultaneously. Polet's fierce advocacy for his restoration reflects her understanding that his death threatens not merely her maternal bond but her economic security, her social standing, her very ontological grounding within the community that defines her existence.

This grounding in communal survival manifests most powerfully in Polet's refusal to inform her husband of their son's death. When the child dies in the field and is brought to his mother, she lays him on the prophet's bed and tells her husband only that she is going to Elisha. This strategic withholding of information reflects womanist wisdom about when to include and when to protect, when to share burden and when to carry it alone. Her husband's age and the patriarchal constraints on women's movement mean that informing him would likely result in either his attempt to control her response or his inability to act effectively. By keeping her own counsel, Polet maintains the agency necessary for advocacy while protecting her husband from the paralysis that might result from knowing the crisis before solutions can be pursued.³

Her actions demonstrate the kenotic dimension of communal grounding—she empties herself of the need to share burden or seek approval, filling herself instead with the singular focus necessary for effective advocacy. This kenotic love operates through the recognition that communal survival sometimes requires individual action, that protecting the community includes protecting individual members from information they cannot productively bear, and that grounding in collective well-being does not require consensus before action.

2.5.2. Strategic Alliances: Navigating Power Through Relationship

Polet's relationship with Elisha exemplifies what might be termed the sacred art of strategic alliance—the capacity to leverage relational networks for advocacy while maintaining one's own dignity, agency, and moral authority. This component reveals itself across multiple moments in her narrative, each demonstrating increasing sophistication in how she navigates the power differentials inherent in her engagement with prophetic authority.

The initial alliance emerges from Polet's material generosity and spiritual discernment. She recognizes Elisha as “a holy man of God” who “passes by us continually” (2 Kgs 4:9), and she proposes to her husband that they build a room for the prophet's use. This proposal reveals several dimensions of strategic wisdom. First, she correctly identifies the prophet's status and regular presence as an opportunity for cultivating a relationship. Second, she frames the proposal to her husband in ways that highlight benefits to their household rather than potential costs—providing hospitality to a holy man carries both spiritual merit and potential material return. Third, she specifies the details of what should be provided—bed, table, chair, lamp—demonstrating that her generosity is neither careless nor unlimited but carefully calibrated to create appropriate space for the prophet's needs.

When Elisha responds to this hospitality by seeking to reciprocate, the negotiation reveals the sophistication of Polet's alliance-building. Through his servant Gehazi, the prophet offers to speak to the king or commander on her behalf—an offer that represents significant potential benefit given the access to political power it implies. Yet Polet's refusal demonstrates her understanding that strategic alliances must serve her own purposes rather than obligating her to purposes defined by others. She needs neither royal favor nor military protection because she has something potentially more valuable: security within her own community networks. Her refusal preserves her autonomy while maintaining the alliance with Elisha, demonstrating that strategic partnership does not require accepting every offer of assistance.

The alliance takes on new dimensions when Elisha, seeking to provide some benefit to repay her hospitality, learns through Gehazi that “she has no son, and her husband is old.” The prophet’s promise—“At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son”—represents a unilateral extension of the alliance into the realm of miraculous intervention. Polet’s response—“No, my lord, man of God; do not lie to your maidservant”—reveals the vulnerability this promise creates. She has not requested this intervention, has not solicited this promise, and therefore has no control over its fulfillment. Her plea reflects the danger of false hope, the violence of unfulfilled promises, and the cruelty of raising expectations that may not be met.

Yet despite her protest, the promise is fulfilled. She conceives and bears a son “at that season, about the time of which Elisha had said to her” (2 Kgs 4:17). This fulfillment deepens the alliance while simultaneously creating new obligations and vulnerabilities. The child represents both the materialization of prophetic power and the potential for prophetic accountability. When the child subsequently dies, Polet’s response transforms the nature of her alliance with Elisha from a gratitude-based relationship to an accountability-demanding partnership.

Her journey to Mount Carmel to confront the prophet demonstrates the full maturation of a strategic alliance. She does not send a messenger or wait for the prophet’s next visit. She goes directly to him, refusing to be deterred by geographic distance or social protocol. When Gehazi attempts to push her away—enforcing the boundaries that typically separate prophets from desperate women—she grasps Elisha’s feet in a gesture that combines supplication with demand, respect with accusation. Her physical grip on the prophet enacts the relational claim she makes verbally: you promised, you created this situation, you bear responsibility for addressing it.

Elisha’s response—“Let her alone, for her soul is bitter within her, and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me” (2 Kgs 4:27)—acknowledges the validity of her claim and the limits of his prophetic knowledge. This moment reveals the sophisticated power dynamics of a strategic alliance. Polet has successfully transformed a relationship based on her provision of hospitality into one where the prophet himself recognizes obligation and limitation. She has leveraged material generosity into spiritual claim, hospitality into accountability, and gratitude into demand.

The kenotic dimension of strategic alliance manifests in Polet’s willingness to empty herself of the safety that comes from deferential distance. She surrenders the protection of keeping prophetic power at arm’s length, the security of maintaining merely a transactional relationship, and the comfort of gratitude that expects nothing further. Instead, she fills herself with the courage to make demands, to hold the prophet accountable, to insist that power carries responsibility. Her kenotic love operates through a strategic alliance that refuses to permit the relationship to become another mechanism of her powerlessness.

2.5.3. Trauma Awareness and Witness: Transforming Suffering into Moral Authority

Polet’s encounter with her son’s death reveals the epistemological productivity of trauma—the capacity to transform devastating loss into moral authority and prophetic speech. Yet this transformation does not happen automatically or inevitably. It requires what might be termed womanist alchemy—the deliberate work of refusing to permit trauma to produce only paralysis, bitterness, or despair, choosing instead to forge suffering into tools for resistance and advocacy.

The narrative provides minimal detail about the child’s actual death. We know only that he goes to his father in the field, complains of head pain, is carried to his mother, sits on her lap until noon, and then dies. This sparse account focuses attention not on the medical details of his death but on Polet’s response to it. The text reports her actions with

almost clinical precision: “She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God and shut the door behind him and went out” (2 Kgs 4:21). This is not the keening grief of dramatic mourning but the focused determination of a woman who has already decided what must be done.

Polet’s placement of her son’s body on Elisha’s bed represents a profound theological and symbolic act. She positions the dead child in the space she herself created for prophetic presence—the room on the roof, the bed she provided. This action declares that the prophet’s power must address the crisis it helped create, that the space of divine presence must become the space of divine accountability, that the prophet who promised life must confront the reality of death. Her trauma awareness includes understanding that suffering creates claims, that loss generates moral authority, that pain authorizes speech and action that might otherwise be unavailable.

Her interaction with her husband reveals further sophistication in how she navigates trauma. When he asks why she is going to the prophet on a day that is “neither new moon nor Sabbath” (2 Kgs 4:23)—questioning the appropriateness of her travel on an ordinary day—she responds simply “Shalom” (translated as “It will be well” or “Peace”) (2 Kgs 4:23). This response reveals multiple layers of trauma awareness. She protects her husband from knowledge he cannot productively bear. She refuses to explain or justify her actions to patriarchal authority that would likely attempt to constrain her response. She maintains the singular focus necessary for effective advocacy by not dispersing her energy in explanation or negotiation.

The journey to Mount Carmel itself enacts trauma awareness as embodied witness. Polet’s urgency communicates through her insistence on speed: “Saddle the donkey for me, and drive ahead; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you” (2 Kgs 4:24). Her body carries the knowledge of her son’s death, her mind focuses on confronting the prophet, and her will drives forward with desperate determination. She becomes a living witness to the crisis, her very movement declaring the urgency of her need.

When Elisha sees her coming from a distance, he sends Gehazi to inquire about her well-being: “Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?” Her response—“It is well”—represents either protective silence or bitter irony, refusing to disclose the crisis to a servant when she needs direct engagement with the prophet himself. This strategic withholding reflects trauma awareness that understands the importance of controlling who receives information when and how, that recognizes the difference between those who can act effectively on knowledge and those who cannot.

The climactic confrontation reveals how Polet transforms trauma into moral authority. When she grasps Elisha’s feet and Gehazi moves to push her away, the prophet’s intervention—“Let her alone, for her soul is bitter within her” (2 Kgs 4:27)—acknowledges her right to grief and her right to demand response. Yet Polet does not speak her grief in sorrow but in accusation: “Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me’?” (2 Kgs 4:28). These words carry the accumulated weight of her earlier protest against the promise she did not request, the fulfilled hope she had tried to protect herself against, the devastating loss that has vindicated her initial resistance.

This transformation of trauma into accusation represents the heart of womanist trauma awareness. Polet refuses to internalize her suffering as individual pathology or to spiritualize it as divine mystery. Instead, she names it as the consequence of prophetic intervention, demands accountability for pain caused by promises made, and insists that the prophet address what his power has wrought. Her trauma awareness includes the recognition that suffering authorizes particular forms of speech, that those who have experienced loss gain the right to demand response, and that pain creates epistemic authority that cannot be dismissed or minimized.

The kenotic dimension of trauma awareness manifests in Polet's willingness to let grief break her open rather than close her down. She empties herself of the protective numbness that might insulate her from pain, the denial that might permit her to avoid confronting the prophet, the resignation that might lead her to accept loss as inevitable. Instead, she fills herself with the fierce determination to demand restoration, the moral courage to hold divine power accountable, the prophetic boldness to insist that death does not deserve the final word. Her kenotic love operates through trauma awareness that transforms suffering into resistance, loss into moral authority, and grief into prophetic speech.

2.6. *Speaking Truth to Power: The Prophetic Dimension of Maternal Advocacy*

Polet's confrontation with Elisha represents the full flowering of womanist truth-telling—speech that challenges even sacred authority when life and dignity demand it. This component builds upon the foundation of trauma awareness to demonstrate how suffering authorizes particular forms of prophetic speech, how loss generates the moral authority necessary to demand accountability from those in positions of power, and how maternal advocacy can become theological resistance.

The physical dimension of Polet's truth-telling matters. She grasps the prophet's feet—a gesture that simultaneously expresses supplication and creates physical claim. This touch bridges the gap between prophet and petitioner, establishing a bodily connection that cannot be easily dismissed. When Gehazi attempts to push her away, he seeks to enforce the social boundaries that typically separate desperate women from powerful men, maintaining the hierarchy that protects prophets from the urgent demands of those who need them most. Yet Elisha's intervention—"Let her alone, for her soul is bitter within her" (2 Kgs 4:27)—acknowledges that Polet's grief trumps social protocol, that her suffering authorizes her presence and her touch, that trauma creates claims that supersede conventional boundaries.

Polet's actual words demonstrate remarkable theological audacity. "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me'?" These sentences accomplish multiple rhetorical purposes simultaneously. First, they remind the prophet that she did not request his intervention, that the promise was his initiative rather than her petition. This establishes that the responsibility for the outcome lies with the prophet rather than with her expectations. Second, they recall her initial resistance to his promise, her attempt to protect herself against false hope, her wariness about divine or prophetic assurances she had not sought. This demonstrates that her current grief was precisely what she feared, that his promise created the very vulnerability she had tried to avoid. Third, they frame the child's death as potential deception—suggesting that the prophet's promise, if unfulfilled through restoration, becomes a form of lying, that miraculous birth followed by ordinary death represents cruelty rather than blessing.

The theological implications of calling the prophet's actions potential deception cannot be overstated. Within the logic of prophetic authority, prophets speak for God. To suggest that the prophet has deceived is to suggest that God has deceived, that divine promise lacks integrity, that sacred power cannot be trusted. This borders on blasphemy, yet Polet's grief and her status as the victim of the very promise she resisted authorize speech that would otherwise be unthinkable. Her speaking truth to power operates through the moral authority that suffering confers, the epistemic privilege that comes from experiencing the consequences of others' actions, and the prophetic voice that trauma makes possible.

Elisha's response demonstrates the effectiveness of Polet's truth-telling. Rather than defending himself or explaining divine purposes, he immediately mobilizes for action. He sends Gehazi ahead with his staff, instructing him to lay it on the child's face—an initial attempt at restoration through proximate power. When Polet refuses to leave the prophet

himself—“As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you”—she extends her truth-telling into insistence on his personal involvement. She will not accept mediated solutions, delegated responses, or substitute interventions. The prophet himself must confront the crisis his promise created.

This insistence reveals further dimensions of speaking truth to power. Polet demands not merely miraculous intervention but personal accountability. She refuses to permit the prophet to maintain distance from the consequences of his actions, to address the crisis through intermediaries, to preserve his own comfort while she confronts devastating loss. Her kenotic love operates through the willingness to make uncomfortable demands, to refuse easy solutions, to insist on direct engagement with those responsible for her situation.

The subsequent narrative of Elisha’s resurrection of the child demonstrates that Polet’s speaking truth to power achieved its purpose. The prophet goes to the child, lays upon him mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands, warming the cold body with his own warmth until life returns. This intimate engagement with death—the prophet’s body pressed against the child’s corpse, his breath entering lifeless lungs, his warmth combating the cold of death—represents the kind of direct intervention Polet demanded. The prophet cannot maintain prophetic distance from the crisis he helped create. He must embody the restoration he promised, physically enacting the power his words invoked.

When the child is restored and presented to his mother, the text reports simply: “She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she took up her son and went out” (2 Kgs 4:37). This conclusion reveals the transformation Polet’s speaking truth to power has accomplished. She bows in gratitude, acknowledging the restoration the prophet has achieved. Yet she does not linger in prolonged thanksgiving or renewed relationship. She takes her son and leaves—her advocacy accomplished, her demand met, her truth-telling vindicated. The kenotic love that enabled her to confront prophetic power now enables her to receive restoration with dignity and depart with her purpose fulfilled.

2.7. The Integrated Praxis: How Components Function in Concert

Polet’s narrative demonstrates not merely the presence of individual components but their sophisticated integration into holistic praxis. Her grounding in communal survival provides the foundation for her advocacy—understanding that her son’s life connects to her own survival, her family’s continuity, and her community’s well-being. This grounding motivates her fierce resistance to his death and her determination to pursue restoration regardless of social protocol or personal risk.

Her strategic alliance with Elisha creates the relational infrastructure that makes her advocacy possible. Without the prior hospitality she extended, without the relationship she cultivated, without the access her generosity created, she would have no claim on prophetic attention or power. The alliance transforms individual need into relational obligation, personal crisis into prophetic responsibility, maternal grief into demand for accountability.

Her trauma awareness enables her to transform devastating loss into moral authority. Rather than being paralyzed by grief, she mobilizes it for action. Rather than internalizing suffering as individual pathology, she names it as a consequence of prophetic intervention. Rather than accepting death as inevitable, she demands restoration as the only adequate response to the promise that created her vulnerability.

Her speaking truth to power brings these components together in prophetic speech that demands accountability, insists on restoration, and refuses to permit death to have the final word. Her truth-telling operates through all the previous components—grounded

in communal survival, leveraging strategic alliance, authorized by trauma awareness—to create a transformative intervention that restores life and vindicates her advocacy.

The cyclical relationship among these components reveals the ongoing nature of womanist praxis. Successful advocacy strengthens communal survival, which in turn enables further alliance-building. Alliance-building creates relational capital that can be leveraged during a crisis. Trauma awareness transforms suffering into wisdom that informs future resistance. Speaking truth to power generates change that benefits not only the individual advocate but the entire community witnessing and learning from her resistance.

What emerges from Polet's narrative is not a static model to be replicated but a dynamic praxis to be adapted. Her story demonstrates how Black women facing different forms of oppression can draw upon communal resources, build strategic alliances, transform trauma into moral authority, and speak truth to power in ways that generate life-giving transformation. The womanist framework she embodies transcends her particular historical moment to illuminate ongoing struggles for justice, dignity, and the fierce insistence that life deserves protection against all forces that would diminish it.

Her praxis reveals that advocacy is ultimately about kenotic love—love fierce enough to confront even divine power, strategic enough to navigate complex power dynamics, grounded enough to serve communal flourishing, and bold enough to demand that promises be kept, that death be resisted, that life be chosen. This kenotic love operates through the paradox of self-emptying that becomes self-assertion, surrender that generates power, vulnerability that creates moral authority. It is love that refuses to accept death's finality, that insists on restoration as the only adequate response to loss, that will not permit the powerful to escape accountability for the consequences of their actions.

In Polet's story, we witness not merely ancient history but living tradition—a womanist ethic of advocacy that continues to inspire, instruct, and empower those who resist oppression in all its forms. Her fierce maternal love becomes a prophetic model, her strategic wisdom becomes a theological resource, her bold confrontation becomes sacred permission for contemporary Black women to demand accountability, to refuse death's dominion, and to insist that life—their own lives and the lives of those they love—deserves fierce, unrelenting, transformative advocacy.

The richness of Polet's enacted praxis—her strategic navigation of power, her transformation of trauma into moral authority, her bold confrontation with prophetic authority—provides the biblical foundation for womanist advocacy. Yet her story finds powerful echo and expansion in the life of a nineteenth-century Black woman whose advocacy emerged from different historical circumstances but demonstrated remarkably similar theological commitments and strategic wisdom. The journey from Mount Carmel to Memphis, Tennessee, from ancient Israelite patriarchy to American white supremacy, reveals the enduring nature of womanist resistance and the consistent patterns by which Black women have advocated for life against systems designed for death.

3. Ida B. Wells and the Kenotic Courage to Speak

If Polet's story demonstrates how womanist advocacy operates within the constraints of ancient patriarchal structures, Ida B. Wells' life reveals how these same principles function within the context of American racial terrorism. Wells' transformation from schoolteacher to anti-lynching crusader mirrors Polet's evolution from deferential woman to demanding advocate, yet the scale and scope of Wells' advocacy expanded beyond individual crisis to address systemic violence threatening entire communities.⁴ Her story demonstrates how the five components of womanist advocacy can be mobilized not merely for personal survival but for collective transformation.

3.1. The Genesis of Kenotic Advocacy

Ida B. Wells' transformation from schoolteacher to anti-lynching crusader began with personal loss and communal trauma. The lynching of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart in Memphis in 1892 shattered her assumptions about Black safety and white justice. Her response demonstrates how individual trauma can become the foundation for collective advocacy through a form of kenotic self-emptying that paradoxically becomes self-assertion.

Thomas Moss had been more than a friend to Wells; he was a successful businessman whose People's Grocery Store represented Black economic self-determination and prosperity. His murder—along with those of his business partners McDowell and Stewart—revealed the fundamental lie undergirding American racial violence: that Black respectability, economic success, and moral virtue provided protection against white supremacist terrorism. The Memphis lynchings exposed what Wells would spend the rest of her life documenting: lynching functioned not as punishment for actual crimes but as systematic terrorism designed to maintain white economic and political dominance.

Wells' initial investigation into the Memphis lynchings revealed the economic motivations often disguised as moral outrage. Her editorial in *Free Speech* declared: "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women." This statement transformed personal grief into public truth-telling, individual trauma into collective resistance. Like Polet, Wells emptied herself of conventional feminine deference to claim her full humanity as truth-teller and advocate.

The personal cost of this truth-telling came swiftly. While Wells was traveling in the North, a white mob destroyed the offices of *Free Speech*, threatening to kill Wells if she returned to Memphis. This forced exile might have silenced a lesser advocate, but for Wells it became the catalyst for expanded advocacy (Wells 1970, pp. 47–52). Her kenotic love—the willingness to empty herself of safety and comfort for the sake of truth—paradoxically filled her with moral authority and prophetic voice that would resonate nationally and internationally.

3.2. Anti-Lynching Campaign: Truth as Kenotic Weapon

Wells' anti-lynching campaign demonstrates the sophisticated interplay of all five components of womanist advocacy, undergirded by a kenotic love that refuses to sacrifice truth for safety. Her work grounded itself in communal survival through meticulous documentation that transformed individual tragedies into statistical evidence of systematic terrorism.

Her pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (Wells 1892) and her book *A Red Record* (1895) compiled lynching statistics with devastating precision. Wells documented not merely the numbers of Black men murdered but the economic circumstances surrounding their deaths, the false accusations used to justify violence, the complicity of law enforcement and civic leaders in mob violence (Wells-Barnett 2002, pp. 14–26). Each statistic represented not merely a number but a family destroyed, a community traumatized, a network of relationships severed by white violence. Her advocacy recognized that individual murders accumulated into collective genocide, that personal grief reflected communal trauma, and that her friends' deaths threatened the ontological security of all Black people.

This grounding in communal survival provided the foundation for Wells' strategic formation of alliances—with T. Thomas Fortune, who published her work in the *New York Age*; with Frederick Douglass, who wrote the introduction to *Southern Horrors*; and with international supporters who invited her to speak in Britain. These relationships transcended personal networking to become collaborative resistance against white supremacist violence.

Wells' British speaking tours (1893 and 1894) demonstrate the strategic sophistication of her alliance-building. By taking her advocacy international, she accomplished multiple objectives simultaneously. First, she exposed American racial terrorism to global audiences, creating external pressure that domestic advocacy alone could not generate. Second, she formed alliances with British reformers who could amplify her voice in ways that American audiences might dismiss. Third, she reframed lynching within global contexts of human rights and colonial violence, connecting American racism to broader patterns of imperial exploitation and racial hierarchy.

Perhaps most significantly, Wells' collaboration with Black women's clubs created sustainable institutional bases for ongoing resistance. Her work with organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) demonstrated her recognition that individual advocacy, however powerful, required institutional support and collective organization. These alliances preserved her radical voice while providing the infrastructure necessary for sustained resistance. Her kenotic love operated through partnerships that honored both individual dignity and collective goals, recognizing that the work of transformation exceeds individual capacity while requiring individual moral courage.

3.3. *The Political Economy of Truth-Telling*

The material dimensions of Wells' advocacy reveal how speaking truth to power requires both moral courage and economic strategy. Her exile from Memphis cost her livelihood and community, yet she transformed these losses into new forms of economic and political power through her writing and speaking.

Wells' journalism demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how truth-telling must be coupled with economic independence. After losing her newspaper in Memphis, she became a paid lecturer and journalist, transforming her advocacy into a sustainable profession. Her speaking tours commanded fees that supported her work while expanding her influence. Her books generated income while documenting the systematic nature of racial terrorism. This economic strategy reflects womanist wisdom about the necessity of a material foundation for sustained advocacy—one cannot speak truth to power indefinitely without resources to sustain the speaker.

Her willingness to name the economic motivations behind lynching—the elimination of successful Black businesses like Thomas Moss's grocery store, the intimidation of Black voters, the control of Black labor—reveals how individual advocacy can expose systemic patterns of exploitation and violence. Wells understood that lynching served white economic interests by preventing Black economic competition, maintaining cheap labor through terrorization, and preserving white political dominance through voter suppression. Her truth-telling operated not through sentimental appeals to white morality but through hard economic analysis that exposed the material interests undergirding racial violence.

Wells' meticulous documentation of lynching cases provided irrefutable evidence that contradicted white supremacist narratives. She investigated individual cases, interviewed survivors and witnesses, examined coroner's reports when available, and published findings that systematically debunked the rape myth used to justify lynching. This creation of counter-memory—what Townes would recognize as the cultural production of resistance—preserved Black truth against white historical erasure. Her kenotic advocacy operated through her willingness to empty herself of personal comfort to fill the void of public accountability.

Yet Wells also understood the limits of truth-telling without political power. Her advocacy extended beyond documentation to political organizing—campaigning for anti-lynching legislation, supporting Black political candidates, participating in suffrage move-

ments, and building coalitions that could translate moral truth into political change. This evolution from individual advocacy to institutional organizing reveals Wells' mature understanding that kenotic love requires not just personal sacrifice but systemic transformation.

3.4. *Strategic Withdrawal and the Limits of Individual Heroism*

Perhaps the most overlooked dimension of Wells' advocacy—yet the most relevant for contemporary Black women facing similar exhaustion—is her strategic exile and eventual withdrawal from frontline activism. When Memphis became too dangerous for her continued presence after her anti-lynching editorial, she could have interpreted departure as defeat, abandonment of her community, or failure of courage. Instead, she reframed leaving as strategic rather than cowardly, recognizing that her advocacy could continue and even expand from new locations.

Wells' establishment of new bases of operation in Chicago and later internationally demonstrates how geographic mobility can become a form of self-recovery and renewed effectiveness. Her exile enabled her to see American lynching within global contexts of human rights and colonial violence, ultimately strengthening her advocacy through expanded frameworks and international pressure. Her speaking tours in Britain brought international attention to American racial terrorism, creating external pressure that domestic advocacy alone could not generate. Her strategic withdrawal from Memphis paradoxically expanded rather than limited her influence, preserved rather than diminished her capacity for advocacy.

Yet Wells' story also reveals the limitations of individual advocacy without systemic transformation. Despite her extraordinary efforts, lynching continued for decades after her initial campaign. The NAACP's eventual success in reducing lynching through legal advocacy and public pressure campaigns built upon Wells' groundwork but required institutional resources and collective organization that exceeded any individual's capacity. This reality prompted Wells' later focus on Black women's organizing through the National Association of Colored Women and her participation in broader coalitions for racial justice.

This evolution represents a form of collective kenosis—the recognition that individual self-emptying must be supplemented by communal self-emptying, that personal sacrifice must be balanced by institutional change. Wells' mature advocacy recognized that kenotic love requires not just individual transformation but systemic metamorphosis. Her later years, marked by continued activism but also by attention to family and community-building, demonstrate the integration of the fifth component of womanist advocacy—sacred self-preservation alongside continued commitment to justice.

The wisdom of Wells' strategic withdrawal and her evolution toward collective organizing provides crucial precedent for contemporary Black women facing similar exhaustion from endless demands for their advocacy. Like Polet's seven-year sojourn in Philistine territory, Wells' strategic relocations and eventual focus on sustainable institutional organizing rather than frontline journalism demonstrate that advocacy without self-preservation becomes martyrdom, and martyrdom without choice becomes sacrifice on the altar of others' expectations.

Wells' legacy, like Polet's, becomes not merely historical precedent but living tradition—a resource for contemporary Black women navigating similar tensions between individual advocacy and collective transformation, between speaking truth and strategic withdrawal, between fierce resistance and necessary rest. Her story insists that effective advocacy requires not just moral courage but strategic wisdom, not just individual heroism but sustainable organization, not just self-sacrifice but self-preservation in service to ongoing struggle.

Having examined how both Polet and Wells enacted womanist advocacy within their particular contexts, we can now turn to the theoretical framework that emerges from their

stories—articulating the five components that structure their praxis and providing conceptual tools for contemporary engagement with ongoing struggles for justice and dignity.

4. The Theoretical Framework—Five Components of Womanist Advocacy

The womanist ethic of advocacy that emerges from the interwoven narratives of Polet and Ida B. Wells cannot be reduced to a simple methodology or prescriptive formula. Rather, it constitutes what Emilie Townes might recognize as a “cultural production” of resistance—a sophisticated praxis born from the crucible of Black women’s historical encounters with systemic violence, erasure, and the relentless imperative to protect life against forces that would diminish it. This ethic operates through five interconnected components that function not as discrete stages but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a holistic approach to advocacy. Each component carries within it the paradox of kenotic love—the simultaneous emptying and filling, the surrender that becomes assertion, the self-giving that paradoxically recovers the self.

These components emerge organically from Black women’s lived experiences rather than being imposed by external theoretical frameworks. They represent what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as the epistemological privilege of the oppressed—knowledge generated from the particular standpoint of those who must navigate multiple systems of domination simultaneously. Yet this standpoint produces not merely survival strategies but transformative wisdom capable of reimagining the very structures that necessitate such strategic navigation.

4.1. Component 1: Grounded in Communal Survival

The foundation of womanist advocacy rests in the recognition that individual well-being cannot be extracted from the matrix of collective flourishing. This is not the liberal individualism that occasionally gestures toward community as an afterthought, nor is it the oppressive collectivism that erases individual dignity in service to group cohesion. Rather, it represents what Townes theorizes as the ontological reality of Black women’s existence—a recognition that “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am.”

Both Polet and Ida B. Wells understood intuitively what contemporary womanist scholarship articulates explicitly: their personal struggles reflected broader patterns of systemic oppression that could not be addressed through individual solutions alone. When Polet advocated for her son’s life, she was simultaneously advocating for her own survival within patriarchal economic structures, for the continuity of her household’s contribution to community stability, and for the broader principle that Black women’s maternal bonds deserve divine recognition and protection. Her advocacy transcended the boundaries of individual grievance to address what Townes identifies as the “production of evil” through systemic violence and neglect.

Wells’ anti-lynching crusade similarly emerged from the recognition that the murders of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart represented not isolated incidents of mob violence but systematic terrorism designed to destabilize entire Black communities. Her meticulous documentation of lynching statistics—the cold accounting of bodies, the geographic mapping of terror, the economic analysis of white supremacist violence—grounded her work in communal survival. Each statistic represented not merely a number but a family destroyed, a community traumatized, a network of relationships severed by white violence. Her advocacy recognized that individual murders accumulated into collective genocide, that personal grief reflected communal trauma, and that her friends’ deaths threatened the ontological security of all Black people.

This grounding in communal survival creates what hooks describes as the epistemological foundation for “revolutionary self-love”—the understanding that caring for oneself becomes inseparable from caring for one’s community because the self cannot be disentangled from the communal matrix that gives it meaning (Hooks 2000a, p. 13). The kenotic love manifest in this component empties itself of the false consciousness of radical individualism to embrace the fullness of communal interdependence. It recognizes that survival is collective labor, that flourishing requires collective resources, and that liberation demands collective transformation.

Yet this component also guards against the exploitation that occurs when communal survival becomes the justification for individual sacrifice. The womanist insistence on communal grounding does not permit the erasure of individual Black women’s needs in service to community expectations. Rather, it insists that genuine communal survival requires the survival of each member, that collective flourishing demands individual dignity, and that liberation remains incomplete until it includes those who have been doing the labor of liberation all along.

4.2. Component 2: Strategic Alliances

Effective advocacy requires what might be termed sophisticated relational intelligence—the capacity to form partnerships that transcend narrow self-interest while maintaining ontological integrity and personal agency. This component addresses the womanist recognition that resistance requires resources, legitimacy, and protection that no individual can generate alone, yet it simultaneously insists that alliances must not come at the cost of one’s own voice, dignity, or vision.

Polet’s relationship with the prophet Elisha exemplifies this strategic alliance-building. She provides material hospitality—constructing a room on the roof, furnishing it with a bed, table, chair, and lamp—creating space for the prophet’s ministry while simultaneously establishing her own household as worthy of prophetic attention. This is not a mere transactional exchange but a strategic partnership grounded in mutual recognition. She leverages her economic resources to gain access to spiritual power, yet she does so in ways that preserve her own agency and voice. When Elisha offers to speak to the king or commander on her behalf, she declines, asserting her sufficiency within her own community networks. Her alliance with the prophet serves her purposes without requiring her to abandon her own sources of power and protection.

The sophistication of this alliance becomes particularly evident when her son dies. She does not approach Elisha as a deferential supplicant grateful for past favors, nor does she abandon the relationship in bitter disappointment. Rather, she holds the prophet accountable to the implications of his own promises, demanding that he address the crisis he helped create. Her strategic alliance includes the moral authority to make demands, to express anger, to insist on accountability—precisely because the alliance was grounded in mutual recognition rather than hierarchical dependence.

Wells’ anti-lynching campaign demonstrates even more extensive alliance-building across multiple registers of power and influence. Her strategic partnerships with T. Thomas Fortune and Frederick Douglass provided her with access to established networks of Black political leadership and journalism. Her formation of alliances with white reformers like Jane Addams and British anti-lynching activists expanded her platform beyond the constraints of American racism. Her collaboration with Black women’s clubs created sustainable institutional bases for ongoing resistance. Each alliance served specific strategic purposes while requiring Wells to navigate the complex terrain of maintaining her own radical voice within partnerships that sometimes demanded moderation or compromise.

The kenotic dimension of strategic alliance-building manifests in the willingness to empty oneself of the desire for sole credit or complete control in service to more effective resistance. Wells understood that her individual voice, however powerful, required amplification through collective organization. She surrendered the simplicity of individual action for the complexity of collaborative struggle, yet this surrender paradoxically enhanced rather than diminished her influence. Her kenotic love operated through partnerships that honored both individual dignity and collective goals, recognizing that the work of transformation exceeds individual capacity while requiring individual moral courage.

Yet this component also acknowledges the dangers of alliance-building that sacrifices Black women's interests for broader coalitional goals. The womanist insistence on strategic alliances includes the wisdom to recognize when partnerships become exploitative, when collaboration requires silencing one's own truth, and when unity demands the erasure of Black women's particular experiences and needs. Strategic alliance-building includes the capacity to say no to partnerships that would diminish Black women's humanity in service to ostensibly collective goals.

4.3. Component 3: Trauma Awareness and Witness

The third component of womanist advocacy addresses what might be called the epistemological productivity of suffering—the capacity to transform encounters with trauma, loss, and violence into sources of knowledge, moral authority, and prophetic vision. This is not the romanticization of suffering that would suggest trauma itself produces wisdom, nor is it the minimization of pain that would deny the devastating impact of violence on Black bodies and psyches. Rather, it represents the womanist insistence that while trauma should not happen, when it does happen, it can become what Morrison describes as a “site of memory”—a location from which to speak truth that would otherwise remain invisible (Morrison 2019a, pp. 17–35).

Polet's transformation from a woman protecting herself against false hope to a woman demanding divine accountability emerges directly from her encounter with the trauma of her son's death. Her earlier response to Elisha's promise—“Do not deceive your servant”—reveals the protective mechanisms of a woman who has learned to guard her heart against disappointment. This caution reflects accumulated trauma, the internalized knowledge that hope can itself become a weapon of violence when it remains unfulfilled. Yet when her son dies, this very trauma becomes the foundation for her moral authority to confront the prophet. Her pain authorizes her voice. Her loss legitimates her demands. Her trauma transforms her from grateful recipient to truth-teller who refuses to permit prophetic power to escape accountability for the suffering it has caused.

Wells' anti-lynching crusade similarly emerged from the transformation of personal trauma into collective resistance. The lynching of Thomas Moss shattered her assumptions about the possibility of Black safety within white supremacist America. Moss had been her friend, a successful businessman whose grocery store threatened white economic dominance. His murder—along with those of his business partners—revealed the futility of Black respectability politics, the irrelevance of Black economic success to white supremacist violence, the systemic nature of terrorism masquerading as individual moral outrage. This trauma could have produced paralysis, despair, or withdrawal. Instead, Wells transformed it into investigative journalism that exposed the economic motivations behind lynching, the sexual politics of white supremacy, and the systematic nature of racial terrorism.

Her famous editorial declaring that “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women” represents the epistemological productivity of trauma awareness. This statement emerged from her witness to the

lynching of her friends, her investigation into the patterns of violence, and her recognition that the rape myth functioned as a justification for economic and political terrorism. Her trauma awareness produced knowledge that challenged the dominant narrative, the truth that exposed the lies undergirding white supremacist violence. She bore witness not only to the deaths of individuals but to the systemic patterns those deaths revealed.

4.4. Component 4: Speaking Truth to Power

The fourth component addresses what might be termed the prophetic dimension of womanist advocacy—the willingness to challenge authority, whether prophetic, political, or social, when life and dignity are at stake. This component transcends the politeness that often functions as a mechanism of social control, moving beyond respectability politics to embrace what Audre Lorde identifies as the transformative power of anger. It recognizes that speaking truth to power requires both moral courage and strategic sophistication, that effective challenge demands both passionate conviction and tactical intelligence (Lorde 1984).

Polet's confrontation with Elisha exemplifies this prophetic boldness. When she arrives at Mount Carmel and grasps the prophet's feet, Gehazi attempts to push her away—a gesture that reveals the normative boundaries of prophetic accessibility and the gatekeeping that protects powerful men from the demands of desperate women. Yet Elisha recognizes something Gehazi cannot perceive: "Her soul is bitter within her, and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me" (2 Kgs 4:27). This admission of prophetic limitation creates space for Polet's truth-telling. Her words carry accusation, demand, and accountability: "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me'?" (2 Kgs 4:28).

This is not the voice of deferential gratitude but of righteous indignation. Polet speaks truth to prophetic power by holding Elisha accountable to the implications of his own promises. She refuses to allow gratitude for past blessings to silence her present grief. She demands that the prophet address the crisis his promise created. Her speaking truth to power includes the willingness to name the harm caused by those in positions of spiritual authority, to insist that power carries responsibility, to demand accountability even from those who claim to speak for God.

The theological audacity of this moment cannot be overstated. Polet challenges not merely human authority but the prophetic mediation of divine power itself. Her words suggest that the prophet's promise, if unfulfilled, becomes a form of divine deception—an accusation that borders on blasphemy within the logic of prophetic authority. Yet her truth-telling emerges not from arrogance but from the kenotic love that refuses to permit death to have the final word. She empties herself of deference and self-protection to fill the space with truth-telling that demands life-giving response.

Wells' speaking truth to power operated across multiple registers of white supremacist authority. Her editorial condemning the rape myth directly challenged the ideological foundation of lynching, exposing the sexual politics that made white women's bodies the justification for Black men's murders. This truth-telling came at tremendous personal cost—the destruction of her newspaper office, threats against her life, and forced exile from Memphis. Yet Wells refused to allow these costs to silence her. She transformed exile into an expanded platform, speaking truth to power from Chicago, from Britain, from wherever her voice could reach those who needed to hear it.

Her willingness to name the economic motivations behind lynching—the elimination of successful Black businesses, the intimidation of Black voters, the control of Black labor—revealed the systemic nature of white supremacist violence. She spoke truth not only to individual perpetrators but to the entire structure of Jim Crow terrorism. Her meticulous

documentation of lynching cases provided irrefutable evidence that contradicted white supremacist narratives, creating what Townes would recognize as “counter-memory” that preserved Black truth against white historical erasure.

The kenotic dimension of speaking truth to power manifests in the willingness to sacrifice personal comfort, safety, and social acceptance for the higher calling of truth-telling. Both Polet and Wells emptied themselves of the desire for approval from those in power to fill themselves with the courage to speak truths those in power did not want to hear. Their kenotic love operated through their willingness to risk everything—relationship, reputation, physical safety—for the sake of the truth that could preserve life and dignity.

Yet this component also acknowledges that speaking truth to power requires strategic wisdom about when, where, and how to speak. The womanist ethic recognizes that reckless truth-telling can become self-destructive martyrdom, that effective challenge requires reading the terrain of power accurately, and that prophetic voice must be coupled with prophetic discernment. Speaking truth to power includes knowing when direct confrontation serves justice and when strategic silence or an indirect approach better preserves life while maintaining integrity.

4.5. Component 5: Sacred Self-Preservation and Strategic Withdrawal

The fifth component represents perhaps the most counter-intuitive dimension of womanist advocacy—the recognition that sometimes the most loving, prophetic, and transformative act is the willingness to leave. This component challenges the martyrdom narrative that would demand Black women’s endless sacrifice, the respectability politics that would shame those who choose their own survival, and the theological frameworks that equate faithfulness with staying in toxic or death-dealing environments. It insists that advocacy without self-preservation becomes complicit with the very systems of violence it ostensibly resists, that sustainable resistance requires sustainable advocates, that the work of justice demands those who do justice live to continue the work.

The theological foundation for this component emerges from multiple scriptural precedents that authorize strategic withdrawal as a faithful response to threatening circumstances. Jesus’ frequent withdrawal to pray (Luke 5:16) models the spiritual necessity of stepping away from the demands of ministry to preserve connection with the divine source that sustains ministry. Elijah’s rest under the juniper tree after fleeing Jezebel’s threats (1 Kgs 19:4–8) acknowledges the reality of prophetic exhaustion and the need for divine provision before renewed engagement. Paul’s strategic escapes from Damascus (Acts 9:23–25), Jerusalem (Acts 9:29–30), and other cities demonstrate that preservation of the messenger sometimes takes precedence over immediate confrontation with opposition.

Yet the most compelling biblical precedent for this component emerges from Polet’s own story. In 2 Kgs 8:1–6, Elisha counsels her: “Arise, and go with your household, and sojourn wherever you can, for the Lord has called for a famine, and it will come upon the land for seven years” (2 Kgs 8:1; Coogan et al. 2018). This prophetic counsel to leave challenges any simplistic equation of faithfulness with staying, of commitment with endurance in place. The prophet himself authorizes her departure, recognizing that remaining in a context of divinely ordained famine would constitute not faithfulness but foolishness, not commitment but complicity with death.

Polet’s response demonstrates the sacred wisdom of strategic withdrawal. She “arose and did according to the word of the man of God. She went with her household and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years” (2 Kgs 8:2; Coogan et al. 2018). This departure required tremendous courage—leaving familiar territory, venturing into traditionally enemy lands, trusting that preservation lay in movement rather than rootedness. Her willingness to leave reflects what bell hooks theorizes as “revolutionary self-love”—

the recognition that caring for self becomes a prerequisite for sustained advocacy, that self-preservation serves not only individual interests but communal well-being.

The text reveals that Polet's strategic withdrawal ultimately enables her restoration. When she returns after seven years, she successfully advocates for the return of her property, arriving providentially at the moment when Gehazi is recounting her story to the king. Her kenotic love extended to herself, recognizing that self-preservation through strategic departure positioned her for eventual restoration and renewed advocacy. The seven years in Philistine territory did not represent defeat or abandonment but wisdom that chose life over death, future possibility over present loyalty to place.

Wells' exile from Memphis to Chicago similarly illustrates the power of strategic withdrawal. When Memphis became too dangerous for her continued presence after her anti-lynching editorial, she could have interpreted departure as defeat, abandonment of her community, or failure of courage. Instead, she reframed leaving as strategic rather than cowardly, recognizing that her advocacy could continue and even expand from new locations. Her establishment of new bases of operation in Chicago and later internationally demonstrates how geographic mobility can become a form of self-recovery and renewed effectiveness.

The kenotic dimension of strategic withdrawal manifests in the willingness to empty oneself of the need for others' approval, of the fear of being perceived as abandoning struggle, and of the internalized shame that would equate self-preservation with selfishness. Both Polet and Wells had to surrender the expectations that would demand their presence regardless of cost, emptying themselves of false obligation to fill themselves with genuine commitment to justice that included their own survival. Their kenotic love operated through the recognition that they could not advocate effectively for others if they themselves became casualties of the systems they resisted.

This component finds contemporary expression in what Toni Morrison describes as maintaining one's "source of self-regard"—the internal reservoir of dignity and worth that cannot be contingent upon others' recognition or environments' affirmation. Morrison writes of the necessity of having "a little creek" that flows within, providing sustenance independent of external validation or approval (Morrison 2019b). Strategic withdrawal becomes the practice of protecting this internal source, recognizing when environments become so toxic that they threaten to poison the very wellspring of one's capacity for continued resistance.

The integration of this fifth component with the previous four creates a holistic ethic of advocacy that honors both individual dignity and collective liberation. Strategic withdrawal enables the restoration necessary for renewed communal survival. It preserves the advocate's capacity for strategic alliance-building by preventing the depletion that would undermine relational engagement. It acknowledges trauma awareness by recognizing when environments become retraumatizing rather than healing. It practices speaking truth to power by refusing to remain in contexts that demand silence or complicity. The kenotic love that operates through all five components extends to the self, recognizing that self-preservation serves not only personal interests but the interests of justice itself.

Integration Across All Components

These five components operate cyclically rather than linearly, creating what might be envisioned as a spiral of increasingly sophisticated advocacy that continually returns to foundational principles while expanding in scope and depth. They are unified by the thread of kenotic love that empties itself of false consciousness to embrace full humanity—a love that paradoxically fills through emptying, asserts through surrender, and recovers through sacrifice.

The kenotic love threading through all five components represents the theological heart of womanist advocacy. This love empties itself of the false consciousness that would separate individual flourishing from collective liberation, that would sacrifice Black women's dignity for ostensibly communal goals, that would demand endless martyrdom without reciprocal care and protection. Yet this emptying paradoxically fills the advocate with moral authority, prophetic vision, strategic wisdom, and the courage to both stay and leave as justice demands.

This womanist ethic of advocacy emerges not as a prescriptive formula but as a descriptive framework for understanding the sophisticated praxis that Black women have developed across generations of resistance to systemic violence. It honors the wisdom encoded in their stories while providing conceptual tools for contemporary engagement with ongoing struggles. It insists that advocacy is ultimately about love—kenotic love fierce enough to confront evil, strategic enough to build alliances, enduring enough to sustain communities across generations, and wise enough to know when choosing life requires choosing to leave.

These five components, illustrated so powerfully in the narratives of Polet and Ida B. Wells, establish the theoretical framework for womanist advocacy. Yet theory without application remains merely an abstraction. The urgent question facing contemporary Black women is not simply whether this framework accurately describes historical examples of resistance but whether it provides practical wisdom for navigating current systems of exploitation and violence. The challenge becomes translation—taking insights generated from ancient texts and nineteenth-century activism and applying them to twenty-first century contexts where Black women continue to face demands for their advocacy while receiving minimal protection or reciprocity. This translation requires examining specific contemporary applications where the five components of womanist advocacy illuminate paths forward for those who find themselves exhausted by endless demands yet committed to justice.

5. Contemporary Applications—The Burden of Being Democracy's Backbone

The theoretical framework of womanist advocacy—grounded in communal survival, building strategic alliances, transforming trauma awareness, speaking truth to power, and practicing sacred self-preservation—finds urgent application in contemporary contexts where Black women continue to navigate systems that exploit their commitment while failing to protect their dignity. The current political moment reveals with particular clarity how the patterns identified in Polet's and Wells' narratives persist in new forms, demanding womanist wisdom for sustainable resistance.

5.1. *The Current Moment: Black Women's Political Exhaustion*

Contemporary Black women face what might be called the “mule of the world” syndrome in democratic politics—a reference to Zora Neale Hurston's observation that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world.” Statistical analysis reveals that while Black women vote at higher rates than any other demographic group, they receive disproportionately little political power or protection in return. In the 2020 presidential election, 90% of Black women voters supported Democratic candidates, yet their policy priorities—including maternal health equity, economic justice, and voting rights protection—remain perpetually deferred in favor of ostensibly broader coalitional concerns.

This pattern reflects what hooks identifies as the problematic nature of “centering” that becomes another form of marginalization. Black women find themselves simultaneously centered as democracy's saviors—credited with electoral victories, praised for their

turnout and organizing—yet marginalized when it comes to actual policy influence and political power. The centering functions as performative recognition that does not translate into substantive transformation. Black women are asked to save democracy repeatedly while democracy fails to protect Black women’s lives, bodies, and communities.

The expectation that Black women will continuously save democracy while democracy fails to protect Black women creates what Townes would recognize as a “site of cultural production of evil”—a system that exploits the very commitment it claims to honor (Townes 2006, pp. 23–45). This exploitation operates through multiple mechanisms: Black women’s political labor is extracted without commensurate compensation or recognition; their policy priorities are deferred indefinitely while their votes are counted on unconditionally; their emotional and intellectual labor in political organizing is consumed without reciprocal care or protection.

The material consequences of this exploitation manifest in stark health disparities, economic inequality, and physical vulnerability. Black women face maternal mortality rates three to four times higher than white women, poverty rates double those of white women, and disproportionate exposure to intimate partner violence and police violence.⁵ Yet political systems continue to demand their advocacy, organizing, and votes while providing minimal protection or policy response to these crises. The kenotic love that Black women demonstrate through their political engagement—the emptying of themselves in service to democratic ideals—requires reciprocal recognition and protection that democratic systems consistently fail to provide.

This contemporary manifestation of exploitation reveals the ongoing relevance of the five components of womanist advocacy. Black women’s grounding in communal survival continues to motivate their political engagement—understanding that their individual well-being connects inextricably to collective flourishing, that democracy’s failures threaten entire communities, and that political withdrawal might harm those most vulnerable. Yet this very grounding becomes the mechanism of exploitation when political systems leverage Black women’s commitment to community against their own needs for rest, reciprocity, and restoration.

5.2. Womanist Permission for Strategic Disengagement

The womanist ethic of advocacy offers theological grounding for strategic disengagement from exploitative systems—not as abandonment of commitment to justice but as a necessary practice of self-preservation that enables sustainable resistance. This permission emerges from multiple theological and ethical frameworks that authorize rest, withdrawal, and strategic retreat as faithful responses to systems that would consume those who resist them.

Sabbath theology provides one framework for understanding rest as resistance to systems that would consume human energy without regard for human dignity. The biblical mandate for Sabbath rest emerges not merely as individual piety but as theological resistance to systems of endless productivity and exploitation. In the context of chattel slavery, Sabbath observance became a radical assertion of humanity against systems that treated enslaved people as mere instruments of production. Contemporary Black women’s strategic disengagement from political systems that exploit their labor operates similarly—asserting their full humanity against systems that would reduce them to instruments of democratic legitimacy without reciprocal care or protection.

The kenotic love that chooses strategic withdrawal recognizes that self-preservation serves communal interests rather than contradicting them. Black women cannot sustain effective advocacy if they themselves become casualties of the systems they resist. Strategic disengagement becomes not abandonment but wisdom, not defeat but sustainable resis-

tance, not betrayal but revolutionary self-love that recognizes caring for self as a prerequisite for continued advocacy.

Spillers' concept of "self-recovery" includes reclaiming the agency to withdraw from situations that demand sacrifice without reciprocity. For enslaved women who had their very flesh marked as property, self-recovery required claiming ownership of their own bodies, their own labor, their own capacity to say no to systems that presumed unlimited access to their productivity. Contemporary Black women's strategic disengagement from political systems that presume unlimited access to their advocacy operates within this same tradition of self-recovery—reclaiming agency over their own energy, their own commitment, and their own capacity to choose when and how to engage.

Morrison's "source of self-regard" recognizes that dignity sometimes requires saying no to demands that would diminish one's humanity (Morrison 2019b). Morrison writes of the necessity of having "a little creek" that flows within, providing sustenance independent of external validation or approval. Strategic withdrawal becomes the practice of protecting this internal source, recognizing when political engagement threatens to poison the very wellspring of one's capacity for continued resistance. The womanist ethic insists that Black women's "little creek" deserves protection, that their source of self-regard cannot be contingent upon political systems' recognition, that their dignity requires boundaries against systems that would consume them.

Kenotic love operates through the wisdom to discern when departure becomes the most loving response—loving toward oneself, toward one's community, toward the long-term sustainability of justice work. The examples of Polet's seven-year sojourn in Philistine territory and Wells' strategic exile from Memphis provide biblical and historical precedent for this wisdom. Both women recognized that staying in contexts that threatened their survival would serve neither their own interests nor the interests of those who depended on their continued advocacy. Their departures enabled restoration, expanded perspective, and renewed capacity for effective resistance.

5.3. Practical Applications for Contemporary Readers

The womanist ethic of advocacy offers practical wisdom for contemporary Black women facing similar dilemmas of exhaustion, exploitation, and the need for strategic disengagement. These applications translate abstract principles into concrete practices that honor both individual dignity and collective liberation.

The decision to leave toxic religious communities honors the sacred nature of environments that nurture rather than diminish spiritual growth. Too many Black women remain in religious communities that exploit their labor, dismiss their concerns, perpetuate patriarchal oppression, or fail to address the particular spiritual needs of Black women. The womanist ethic provides theological permission to leave—recognizing that faithfulness to God does not require loyalty to institutions that dishonor one's humanity. Practically, this means recognizing when a church, mosque, temple, or other religious community demands service without reciprocal care as exploitation rather than discipleship, understanding that critiquing one's religious community or choosing to leave it does not constitute abandoning faith but honoring one's own spiritual well-being, seeking religious communities that explicitly value Black women's leadership and address their particular theological concerns, or developing spiritual practices outside institutional religion when no available community adequately nurtures one's faith. Polet's relationship with Elisha provides precedent here—she leveraged a prophetic relationship for her own advocacy while maintaining agency to make demands and set boundaries.

Professional transitions as forms of self-advocacy recognize that career changes can constitute spiritual practice rather than personal failure. Black women who leave careers

in social justice, education, healthcare, or other helping professions due to burnout or exploitation are not abandoning their calling but honoring their own sustainability. Wells' evolution from frontline journalism to institutional organizing demonstrates how strategic professional transitions can preserve capacity for continued advocacy while protecting against burnout. Practically, this means recognizing when a job, career, or profession demands unsustainable sacrifice as signal to transition rather than evidence of personal inadequacy, understanding that leaving social justice work for more personally sustainable employment does not constitute abandoning commitment to justice, pursuing careers that provide better compensation or work–life balance as honoring one's own worth rather than selling out, or transitioning from direct service to policy, research, or other forms of advocacy that provide more sustainable engagement with justice work.

The ethics of “rest as resistance” embrace rest as a refusal to be consumed by systems that would exploit commitment to justice. This component synthesizes the others—recognizing that rest enables communal survival by preventing burnout, that rested advocates build better alliances, that rest provides space for processing trauma rather than accumulating it, that choosing rest constitutes speaking truth to power by refusing exploitation, and that rest itself embodies sacred self-preservation. Tricia Hersey's Nap Ministry has articulated this womanist wisdom powerfully: “Rest is resistance. Sleep is a social justice issue.” (Hersey 2022, pp. 15–28). Practically, this means treating rest as a non-negotiable spiritual practice rather than a luxury to be earned, scheduling rest proactively rather than waiting for collapse to force it, resisting productivity culture that measures worth by output, creating rest practices that restore rather than just distract, and building communities that honor rest rather than shaming those who take it. The womanist ethic insists that Black women's rest matters not just for their individual well-being but for the sustainability of justice movements that depend on their continued participation.

These practical applications translate the five components of womanist advocacy from historical examples and theoretical frameworks into lived practices that honor both individual dignity and collective liberation. They recognize that Black women cannot sustain effective advocacy if they themselves become casualties of the systems they resist, that strategic withdrawal and rest enable rather than undermine long-term justice work, and that self-preservation serves not only individual interests but communal well-being.

The contemporary applications of womanist advocacy ethics demonstrate that the patterns identified in Polet's and Wells' narratives continue to illuminate paths forward for Black women navigating current systems of exploitation. The five components—communal grounding, strategic alliance, trauma awareness, truth-telling, and sacred self-preservation—operate not as abstract principles but as practical wisdom for sustainable resistance. They honor both the fierce commitment to justice that characterizes Black women's historical advocacy and the urgent need for self-preservation that enables that advocacy to continue across generations.

6. Conclusions: The Kenotic Courage to Choose Life

There is a time for staying and a time for going, a time for speaking and a time for strategic silence. Both Polet and Wells understood that advocacy without self-preservation becomes martyrdom, and martyrdom without choice becomes sacrifice on the altar of others' expectations. The womanist ethic demands that we love ourselves enough to live, that our kenotic love extend to ourselves as well as others.

The narratives of the Shunammite woman and Ida B. Wells illuminate what Townes identifies as the urgent need to excavate and celebrate the “cultural production” of Black women's resistance. These stories serve as profound testimonies to a womanist ethic of advocacy that refuses the erasure hooks describes when she writes about moving “from

margin to center.” (Hooks 2000b). Their kenotic love operates through the paradox of self-emptying as self-assertion, self-sacrifice as self-recovery.

Yet their stories also reveal the limitations that make the fifth component—sacred self-preservation—so crucial. Polet’s fierce advocacy for her son succeeded; the child was restored, yet the narrative subsequently reveals her seven-year exile during famine. Wells’ anti-lynching crusade generated international attention and founded institutions for ongoing resistance, yet lynching continued for decades and Wells herself eventually had to balance frontline activism with sustainable engagement and family life. Their victories were real but incomplete, their advocacy powerful but unable to single-handedly transform the systems that necessitated such fierce resistance.

This incompleteness does not diminish their achievements but underscores the need for the womanist ethic’s integration of all five components. Communal grounding prevents the isolation that makes sustainable resistance impossible. Strategic alliances expand capacity beyond individual limitations. Trauma awareness transforms suffering into wisdom without romanticizing pain. Speaking truth to power challenges systems while recognizing the costs of confrontation. Sacred self-preservation enables advocates to continue the work across time rather than burning out in single heroic stands.

This womanist ethic of advocacy emerges from what might be recognized as a counter-discourse that “must be defended”—not merely the society that marginalizes Black women, but the alternative social formations they create through their advocacy. The five components constitute the radical potential of women of color to “bridge” seemingly impossible divides through their embodied knowledge of multiple oppressions, their kenotic love that transforms suffering into wisdom.

The legacy of Polet and Wells becomes not merely historical precedent but living tradition—a resource for contemporary Black women and their allies as they continue the work of transformation. Their stories insist that this work is not optional but essential, not individual but communal, not safe but sacred. Their kenotic love provides the theological foundation for advocacy that honors both individual dignity and collective liberation.

In embracing this womanist ethic of advocacy, we honor not only their contributions but the ongoing struggle for justice that their lives both exemplified and advanced. We learn that advocacy is ultimately about love—kenotic love fierce enough to confront evil, strategic enough to build alliances, enduring enough to sustain communities across generations, and wise enough to know when choosing life requires choosing to leave.

Through their example, we discover that the most radical act is sometimes the refusal to participate in systems that would consume us. In this refusal, we find not abandonment but the courage to create new possibilities, not defeat but the wisdom to preserve ourselves for the long work of liberation that still lies ahead. Our kenotic love extends to ourselves, recognizing that self-preservation serves not only our own interests but the interests of justice itself.

The five components of womanist advocacy—grounded in communal survival, building strategic alliances, transforming trauma awareness, speaking truth to power, and practicing sacred self-preservation—emerge from Black women’s centuries of resistance to systems designed for their exploitation and erasure. These components function not as a prescriptive formula but as a descriptive framework for understanding the sophisticated praxis Black women have always enacted, providing conceptual tools for ongoing struggles while honoring the wisdom encoded in their resistance.

For contemporary Black women facing exhaustion from endless demands for advocacy, the stories of Polet and Wells offer both challenge and comfort. The challenge: to continue the work of resistance with fierce love and strategic wisdom. The comfort: permission to rest, to withdraw strategically, to choose life even when systems demand sac-

rifice. The integration: recognition that rest enables resistance, that strategic withdrawal preserves capacity for continued advocacy, that self-preservation serves justice by sustaining advocates across time.

Your rest is not abandonment. Your strategic retreat enables sustained resistance. Even Jesus withdrew to pray. You are not required to save everyone—but you are called to save yourself so that the work of justice may continue through you. Your kenotic love must include yourself.

This final exhortation captures the heart of the womanist ethic of advocacy—the recognition that loving justice requires loving those who do justice, that sustainable resistance requires sustainable advocates, that the work of liberation demands those who labor for liberation live to continue the work. In honoring this truth, we participate in the legacy of Polet and Wells while creating new possibilities for those who will continue the struggle after us.

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Notes

- ¹ All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted, see (Coogan et al. 2018).
- ² “Womanist sass” denotes the particular idiom of protective, knowing resistance embedded in Black women’s vernacular speech—a mode of expression that combines humor, defiance, and self-protective wisdom. The term draws on the broader womanist tradition’s affirmation of Black women’s everyday epistemologies as sites of moral and theological knowledge. See (Cannon 1988, pp. 75–91; Collins 2000, pp. 99–116).
- ³ Elisha’s established role as a miracle worker provides important context for Polet’s strategy. The preceding narrative (2 Kgs 4:1–7) records Elisha multiplying a widow’s oil to spare her sons from debt slavery, demonstrating his capacity for life-restoring intervention. Polet’s decision not to inform her husband before seeking Elisha reflects, in part, the urgency imposed by Jewish burial law, which required interment before sundown on the day of death (cf. Deuteronomy 21:23). Delaying to explain and negotiate with her husband risked losing the narrow window for prophetic intervention. The parallel with Eli’s death upon hearing catastrophic news (1 Sam 4:18)—where sudden shock kills the elderly priest—further illuminates Polet’s wisdom in withholding the news of her son’s death from her aging husband until a solution could be sought.
- ⁴ For comprehensive biographies of Ida B. Wells, see (Giddings 2008; Bay 2009).
- ⁵ On Black women’s maternal mortality rates, see (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019, pp. 762–65); for poverty statistics, see (Bialik 2018); for political participation and policy returns, see (Solomon et al. 2019).

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