

## **Introduction to the Special Issue Beyond Resistance: Building, Making, and Creating Sanctuary**

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*Co-editors Preeta Banerjee, Sheron Fraser-Burgess, and Anya Phillips Thomas draw upon their combined expertise to contextualize this thematic journal issue on “sanctuary” and to introduce its components.*

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The democratization of suffering opens new vistas for shared sacredness as an ontological category of our humanity and foregrounds the ancient wisdoms of ancient cultures that have navigated these paths before of pain, personhood, and perseverance to endure and thrive. Such a project dismantles patriarchy, sexism and other forms of oppression in religion that constrict the soul’s journey towards spiritual wholeness. In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), a foundational womanist and Black Feminist, wrote:

All prejudices, whether of race, sect or sex, class pride and caste distinctions are the belittling inheritance and badge of snobs and prigs. The philosophic mind sees that its own ‘rights’ are the rights of humanity. That in the universe of God nothing trivial is or mean (sic); and the recognition it seeks is not through the robber and wild beast adjustment of the survival of the bullies but through the universal application ultimately of the Golden Rule.<sup>1</sup>

The sacred can be a basis for an interreligious, universal, and common space of sanctuary.

That which is sacred can be one ground of sanctuary in its plural sources of inspiration across diverse religious traditions. For the sacred not only gestures to that which is moral or good, but is also a space of refuge away from the outward facing combativeness of contemporary politics and the racialized, nationalized, and normative internalized pressures it elicits within the self. Katie Cannon, an esteemed Black womanist theologian, underscored the cultural and experiential prism through which the sacred is lived and becomes a sanctuary for one’s cultural legitimacy in the human pantheon. Cannon held that the folklore of the Black community was its “corporate story”—in that it enshrines the “interlocking complexities of the beliefs, etiology and practices of the community, and also constitutes the community’s understanding of, and response to, its own humanity.”<sup>2</sup> This cultural soul orientation leads into acknowledgement of the facets of the phenomenological and ontological connection of the sacred and sanctuary.

In addition to providing a haven for social, cultural and interpersonal connection, the experience of sanctuary equips the subject as a political being for discursive deliberation. For it provides a proper determination of the embodiment-to-spirituality connection. The ethics of that

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, “A Voice from the South,” in *The Portable Anna Julia Cooper*, edited by Shirley Moody-Turner (New York: Penguin, 2022), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

which power in various forms visits upon bodies can be evaluated in light of the inherent spirituality that resides in each person. Layli Maparyan asserts that *luxocracy* (rule by light)—in the spiritual sense of the consciousness being illuminated by divine insight—is essential to our political discourse. “If politics is not undergirded by a sense of the spiritual, the sacred, it is a dead end.”<sup>3</sup>

The notion of sanctuary acknowledges that we are entitled as such spiritual beings to a (physical or nonphysical) place of safety to which to return from the public square.<sup>4</sup> We must tend to the skills necessary for the finding, building, and maintenance of sanctuary. In the words of famous Afrofuturist Octavia Butler: “Intelligence does enable you to deny facts you dislike. But your denial doesn’t matter. A cancer growing in someone’s body will go on growing in spite of denial. And a complex combination of genes that work together to make you intelligent as well as hierarchical will still handicap you whether you acknowledge it or not.”<sup>5</sup> So we welcome you, our reader, to this special issue.

### **Origin and Process**

In Fall 2021, we three editors found a need for interreligious exploration regarding the creation of brave and safe spaces as we reclaimed our own humanity—a need, that is, to reclaim, rename, and revisit sanctuary. Therefore, we called for essays on the building, making, and creating of sanctuary—which, we suggested, might consider such topics and themes as time, space, cosmologies, earth, sustainability, Womanism, Shaktism, cosmic forces, celestials, decolonization, or different ways of knowing. In this special issue, we present the response to our call.

In formulating our call for papers on themes associated with sanctuary and spiritual caregiving, we were influenced most deeply by the ideas of Bayo Akomolafe.<sup>6</sup> His words provide tenets for unlearning that which allows us to become fugitives from the colonized definition of being human. We can make sanctuary in ourselves by slowing down when things seem most urgent. This special edition asks scholars and practitioners from traditions as diverse as African cosmologies and Dharmic traditions to share from age-old traditions and wisdoms to help us make refuge within ourselves for others and for ourselves as we reclaim our humanity. The five pieces we have contributed to this special issue highlight this imperative.

### **Content in Context**

Because he was our initial inspiration, an essay by Bayo Akomolafe opens this issue. His “Embarkation: A Meditation on Making Sanctuary at the End of the World” engages the Yoruba trickster-god Èsù as a lens through which to read Fernand Deligny’s post war works on asylum. Èsù demands that loss be reckoned with and Deligny politics are a playground for considering the death of a worldview and the meaning and location of sanctuary. Akomolafe helps the reader consider the complexity of moving into a world where mortal bodies and minds function differently. Wishing to unravel modern western thinking, he calls for transformative

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<sup>3</sup> Maparyan, Layli. (2012). *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, “Plato on Reason,” in *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins*, ed. S. Floyd-Thomas, S. and Miguel De La Torre (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 3–13.

<sup>5</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd, 1987), 40.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/>.

change “beyond justice” and commends becoming undone and un-worded in order to become re-earthed as a new creation.

In our second essay—“Who Are My People? Do I Have Belonging in Sanctuary?”—Simona L. Brickers and Tsukina Blessing consider how to situate sanctuary in the bosom of social interdependence. They explore how inequality expressed legally and politically at the crossing of ethnicity, religion, identity, and memory may create or eliminate safety and belonging. Having chosen to explore from a space of seen/unseen racial difference, Brickers and Blessing note nuances around “of its kind” via culture (intra-spiritual), faith traditions (veiling), and interactions with the earth help define belonging and sanctuary. They keep their focus on the human need to organize into social groups, while also discussing the burgeoning diversity and pluralism after nearly two centuries of assimilation for all. Brickers and Blessing help us look at how the need to connect with “others of its kind” reveals locations of disconnection and (ultimately) trauma. Sanctuary, in its recent incarnation as a public entity, must arch to include intimate mental spaces and enlarge to include public policy.

In “Call and Response in Interreligious Chaplaincy: On Creating and Supporting Sanctuary-building through Ritual Practice,” co-authors Azmera Hammouri-Davis and Preeta Banerjee focus on the employment of Africana and Hindu traditions in spiritual care in higher education chaplaincy—particularly, the incorporation of “wildling fugitive practices” into the bosom of western ontological and spiritual spaces. That is, they explain how they draw upon a wide spectrum Africana and Hindu practices to provide care and sanctuary to students seeking chaplaincy support. They embrace the necessity of working outside of the traditionally understood care models, while firmly seeking to carve out space within the heart of academic chaplaincy. Drawing insights from their own purposeful “unlearning,” they describe how personal divinity or unification with the divine can offer balm to Africana- and Hindu-identifying students. In this refusal to equate fear with the unknown, they see potential for enlarging the interreligious conversation.

Our fourth article is “Onto-fugitivity: Grounding Sanctuary in the Cracks” by Fabrice Olivier Dubosc. In this piece, Dubosc works through themes of sanctuary, not only in western mental, spiritual, and physical ideals, but through a global lens. His process examines not only the trauma of the exiled and displaced, but also schisms between humans and the natural world. He suggests that sanctuary possibilities be considered through the lens of data-futurism—the notion of a world where peace and longevity are packaged data. By exploring “a posthuman and post-humanist, liberation theology,” Dubosc argues for the necessity of slow multi-lensed study of life streams including feelings, time, and connection.

In our fifth article, “Conversing from Below: An Ethic of Liberation and Freethought,” Anthony Cruz Pantojas releases the hold of humanism, ethics, and aesthetics from the white imagination. His piece paves paths of liberation of peripheralized perspectives. Drawing on the thought of Miguel De la Torre, Cornel West, and Anthony Pinn, he examines syncretic traditions in their relationship to indigenous colonization and western capitalism, considers the lessons they have for humanism, and explores how employment of co-created histories might speak to a modern audience.

## **Encountering, Engaging, and Integrating**

We three guest-editors are grateful to the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* staff for the opportunity to present scholarship on the theme of sanctuary. Our hope is that our readers may feel safe to encounter, engage and integrate what is being shared on all the dimensions of being. The three of us supported a process whereby these pieces of insight were requested; created by practitioners, scholars and scholar-practitioners; and cared for by editors and cultivators so that it may come to be in your presence. And in being, may this special issue grow our individual and collective capabilities to create sanctuary near and far.

We acknowledge that even our best efforts did not yield a larger roster of minoritized scholars. Especially in times like these, they need to be found and integrated into a publication such as this. Yet we are confident that what this special issue provides is a burst of the energy that is essential for transformation, change, disturbance, and countering. We are working to balance the relentless movement towards dehumanization with the timelessness of humanity. We all have spirituality that we embody that testifies against the forces that work to separate us from this reality. We have taken seriously the words of Octavia Butler: “There’s no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.”<sup>7</sup> Here is evidence of our choice.



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*Sheron Fraser-Burgess, Ph.D. is Professor of Social Foundations/Multicultural Education at Ball State University. An ethics and education generalist, she focuses, broadly, on the political implications of social identity and social positionality for education in a democratic society. Her scholarship clusters around moral, political, and epistemological questions as they pertain to Black consciousness across the African Diaspora. The turn towards Womanism attends to the educational significance of the historically embodied subjectivity of Black women and the underlying metaphysics of spirituality. Most recently, Fraser-Burgess has co-edited (with Jessica Heybach) *Making Sense of Race in Education: Practices for Change in Difficult Times* (Myers Press, 2019); and has co-authored (with Audrey Thompson) “Blackness (Un)defined by Whiteness: Possibilities for Education, Interiority, and Democracy” in *Educational Theory* 71, No. 2 (August 2021).*

*Rev. Anya Phillips Thomas, executive director of Ancore Foundation, is a minister and coach for people and organizations seeking to work through spiritual trauma, loneliness, and loss. Her core belief is that the right*

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<sup>7</sup> Octavia E. Butler, “A Few Rules for Predicting the Future,” in *Essence* (May 2000): 165–66, 264 at 165.

*environment can help individuals live more fulfilling lives and help organizations achieve their purpose. Thomas has a Master of Divinity degree and a Certificate in Nonprofit Management from Boston University.*

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