

Taking womanist theology to the beauty shop

“My mama was womanist. My grandma is womanist. Just because they don’t have the language or the identifier doesn’t make them less womanist.”

[Annelisa Burns](#) interviews Candice Benbow in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue



Candice Benbow (Photo by Cuemadi White)

Candice Benbow is a theologian, writer, and educator whose work focuses on Black women’s shared faith experiences. She created the #LemonadeSyllabus social media campaign and established the LouiseMarie Foundation, which supports community mental health projects and nursing students at historically Black colleges and universities. Her debut book, Red Lip Theology, is a collection of essays that defines the parameters of her progressive theology, which grows out of and expands on womanist theology as well as her own lived experiences within the church, the academy, and the community of Black women who raised her.

The phrase “red lip theology” came to you after a White male classmate asked you if you were a theologian or a Black theologian. You define it as “the space in which young, Black churchwomen can sit with the parts of ourselves and be honest about all of them.” You are clear that this is a book for Black women. Why was it important to identify your audience?

I’m writing to other Black women about our faith experience because too often we don’t get that luxury. Black women are the most religious demographic in America, but we don’t get the same opportunities to have theological discussions that center us. We often read texts that don’t speak to our lived experiences and have to make them sit for us in ways that non-Black women of faith don’t have to do. I really wanted to use this opportunity to center Black women’s faith experiences and say that these can be just as pivotal, educational, and transformative as everyone else’s.

You write about needing progressive theologies that see God as a woman in the beginning of your journey, before arriving at seeing God as not constrained by gender. Can you speak about that?

Part of it was that I needed to understand God in the ways of people who have been the kindest to me—and that was my mom. My mom gave me life and reared me with care and correction. I think if we all had to describe God in ways that would best reflect the people who have been the most kind, compassionate, and caring to us, we would all have different reflections of God. And I think that that’s the point—God is supposed to be that personal to us.

“What does it mean to do the work so we don’t have to doubt that who we are matters?”

Beyond that, I wanted to refer to God in ways that I talk only about God. I felt like using the pronouns that I used for other people made my conversation about God too common. I wanted to restore a certain level of glory, majesty, and beauty to my dialogue about the Divine. That also gave me the freedom to say that God is not bound by these things that I want to bind God with and to, that God is not gendered, that all of who we can be exists within God and yet God is not bound by any of that.

So many of us struggle with wanting to leave the church at different moments of our lives. You write that stepping away from church temporarily was actually the best thing for you after your mom died. How did you know that this was the right choice?

I felt peace. There was also a certain level of clarity in my conversation with God and in my prayer life that allowed me to hear God and hear myself much more clearly, without the distractions of other people's voices. It was important to me to honor the reality that God speaks to me and that I have a relationship with God grounded in love and truth, one where we can talk to and with each other. I had to get there apart from church for a minute.

What I hope that people get with is not that everybody has to leave the church, but rather to ask what it means to do the work to be able to trust our own selves and not have to doubt that who we are matters, what we have to say is important, and what we need is powerful.

You also describe a painful split with academia. You saw lots of red flags in your academic institution. How important is it for young academics to identify and heed those warning signs?

What's scary is that if you are a woman, or if you are a member of any marginalized community, you see those red flags all the time, but you have to ignore them if you want to stay, take opportunities, and achieve your goals. That's not fair. Too often, men don't have to deal with that. We, as women, as African Americans, as people of color, have to negotiate what we will and will not accept.

As a Black woman, I live in a world with perpetual red flags. If I didn't take opportunities because a red flag was raised, I wouldn't have opportunities. That is my reality as a Black woman.

I think the bigger question is how do those in power create a world that does not leave women and people of color in a situation where they are forced to ignore red flags. That's the question, and that's not our work to do as women and people of color. The question then becomes, What kind of world do we live in where those in power don't check themselves and say, *Hey guys, maybe we should be less sexist?*

You write about God's voice sounding a lot like the voice of opinionated Christians. Is it still hard to distinguish between those voices?

Absolutely. We can hear these less-than-positive attributions or themes that don't honor us in any way, and we have to work to quiet those voices. I have to get really still and ask myself if what I'm hearing reflects the truth that I know about God. Sometimes the answer is no, and then I have to tell myself that it's okay to move

into a space that reflects the truth that I know about God.

“We want so desperately for the communities we were reared in to be proud of us.”

That’s not easy work for anybody, especially anybody who was raised in a church context or comes from a Christian family. The communities that we were reared in become the loudest voices in our head, and we want so desperately for them to be proud of us that sometimes we give them more leeway than we ought. It takes a moment for us to think through whether what we’re hearing reflects God’s heart. If the answer is no, then we need to ask what we need to do in order to move into a space where God’s heart is reflected. I hope *Red Lip Theology* tells women that it’s okay to ask.

Tell us about your “spiritual care squad,” a way of “decentralizing power” in your spiritual health. How does one go about establishing such a squad?

You have to recognize who are the people in your life that you look to for spiritual guidance and authority. They’re the people who you’ve given permission to speak into your life in that way. Not everyone has permission to speak into your life. Just because you may love me, just because I may deeply respect you, it does not mean that you have the right to give me spiritual guidance.

As you’re thinking through who could be a part of your spiritual care squad, you’re thinking about people who are deeply thoughtful. You’re thinking about people who believe in where you can go and what you can do.

They are people who can seek God, divine counsel, and ancestors on your behalf. In my context, often people call me and say, “God told me to tell you,” or, “God came to me and has orders for you.” And there’s some people where I’m like, “Now I know God ain’t told you *nothing* concerning me.” But in my spiritual care squad are people whom I know see God, and if they were given a word or instruction from God on my behalf, I could trust it. They are people who, when they say they’re praying for me, they mean it.

Too often, we don’t think about our spiritual care in that way. We think about going to church and having a pastor and that’s enough. But, when it comes to spiritual care and development, there is a requirement for us to take seriously how much our theology and spirituality inform every aspect of our life. It also matters that we move into a space where those who love and care for us can guide us in that journey.

You write that womanist theology gave you “the language to best articulate Black women’s relationship with God” but did not give you your “ethics or sense of purpose,” which came from your mom, grandma, aunties, and other Black women in your life. Do both of these groups contribute to your red lip theology?

Womanist theology came into my life as an academic. Identified womanist theologians are academics. I found myself in a context that celebrated them in a way that didn’t make room for how they could also reflect or impose their own wounds and traumas onto the next generation. So while I stand very squarely on the shoulders of their contributions, and while *Red Lip Theology* is a womanist project, it is important for me to also be clear—and that clarity was more for myself than anyone else—that just because I got introduced to it in this academic context doesn’t mean that’s the only way I learned womanism.

My mama was womanist. My grandma is womanist. Just because they don’t have the language or the identifier doesn’t make them less womanist. It was important for me to honor the idea that womanism is a lived experience outside of the academy. As much as *Red Lip Theology* is part of an academic tradition, it is also a part of a Black, female, communal experience—and that’s not in the academy. That’s just Black women who go to church. That’s Black women who do hair and go to get their hair done. That’s Black women who are doing all they can to raise their kids, to maintain healthy homes, to maintain their own health and sanity.

This book is very honest. Was it difficult to be vulnerable on the page?

There were things I took out. My grandmother is still alive, and I didn’t want to write something that, even as she’s proud of me, would have grieved her heart. I think that even as we have the right to tell our stories, when we live in community with people, it also matters how and when we tell those stories, especially for those who have not harmed us but live with those stories in a very different way.

I continually ask myself: What does it mean to be somebody that’s public-facing and to name that there are some parts of you that not everybody gets to have? What does it mean to care for my story, to guard my story, to care for the people I’m in community with, in a very different way than I would have prior to having a book in the world?

Social media plays a big role in your life and your theology. How do you make sure that you're using it in a healthy and constructive way?

Some folks will be like “Oh, it’s just Twitter or Facebook,” but it’s also people’s lives. When people share parts of their life with you, when people want to follow you and care what you have to say, there’s a certain level of care and honor that you should take with that. That also means stepping away when social media feels too heavy and destructive.

Prior to the pandemic, marginalized people connected through social media because they were looking for a community that certain spaces and institutions didn’t provide. I think that, generationally, some people didn’t understand that relationships formed in digital and social media spaces could be just as fulfilling to people as relationships formed otherwise.

Now, though, the pandemic has required some reflection about social media that is a bit more gracious. Because now we’ve all needed it in order to stay connected in ways that some of its earlier adopters already knew.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Beauty-shop womanism.”