Research as Play:
Womanist Theology and the Liberation of Library Research
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ABSTRACT: This essay explores how a womanist theology of play can reimagine librarianship as a sacred, generative, and embodied practice. Drawing from personal experiences in librarianship and divinity school, it challenges dominant epistemologies that frame research as rigid and exclusionary, inviting instead curiosity, joy, and expanded ideas of meaning-making. Womanist thought, rooted in the lived experiences of Black women, reveals how systems of knowledge often privilege objectivity over imagination and marginalize relational, intuitive, and spiritual ways of knowing. The author engages scholars like Lakisha R. Lockhart-Rusch to argue for research as play—defined by attraction, improvisation, and freedom—as a liberative act. By embracing playful, interdisciplinary methods, libraries can become spaces of moral formation and intellectual vitality that invite exploration, risk, and wholeness. This vision affirms the power of play to challenge the limits of academic structure and create conditions for wonder and renewal.

Like many who are drawn to librarianship, my professional journey was sparked by my love of reading and words. My mother often tells me about the relief she felt when I learned how to read, as it gave her a break from reading stacks of books to me nightly. I have early and fond memories of my late father taking me on outings to the public "li-berry" to select books for the week. My preteen idea of fun was using my allowance to fund biweekly trips to Waldenbooks to purchase the latest *Baby-Sitters Club* series release. By high school, I spent my summers volunteering at the public library, began my deep dive into poetry, and credited Nikki Giovanni's words as a significant marker of my coming-of-age formation.

Being accepted to library school after undergrad was a natural evolution of my passions and personality. I was excited to be moving forward with a career. I was eager to learn about various research methods and the intricacies of library management. However, I faced my first library-related obstacle in the form of a cataloging class. While I knew how to shelve books, this was my first encounter with the science and particulars behind categorizing and cataloging. I found that the rigidity of this process stood in stark contrast to the wonder and creativity that had caused me to fall in love with books in the first place. I struggled to master the concept in a formal classroom setting.

After surviving this library school requirement, I avoided my cataloging insecurities by leaning fully into reference and event programming. I loved the challenge of helping customers sort out problems and finding needles in haystacks; I thrived when it came to introducing people to all that the library had to offer and the various resources that could support their research. I learned that when I met people at their point of need and understanding, they were more likely to appreciate the library as an accessible resource rather than a place solely for readers or scholars.

Unexpectedly, years later, my pivot to divinity school led me to view my previous educational experiences with fresh eyes. I arrived with a toolbox filled with practical library experience and a strong sense of purpose, but the classroom conversations and theological texts invited me to explore previously ignored areas of my life. I began to question the scholarly frameworks I had taken for

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granted—how knowledge is named, who gets to claim authority, and what we lose when we prioritize structure over imagination. Learning more about meaning-making caused me to reflect more deeply on my fraught relationship with cataloging. I realized that my insecurity had led me to avoid the work rather than fully understand it. I began to see that library science was itself a form of meaning-making—but who was allowed to make meaning? Melvil Dewey? The Library of Congress? How many meaning-makers and system developers who looked like me originated in these spaces? For me, these questions began to find their answers in the space of womanist theology. I became particularly engrossed with womanism and the ways its theology developed from the lived experiences of Black women. In womanist thought, I found a language for the tension I had experienced and witnessed between institutional systems and lived experience. Suddenly, the disconnect I felt around cataloging was not solely about technical prowess—it was about a larger struggle to make space for wonder, for play, and for forms of knowing that do not always fit neatly into numerical categories.

Librarians understand how to navigate the inner workings of a library. Many of us genuinely enjoy the process of following a trail of questions, tracking down sources, and uncovering the unexpected. We learn, not just how to find information, but how to sit with what is missing and how to return to a question again and again without rushing to an answer. However, outside of the profession (and even within it), people often hold narrow or outdated ideas about our work. Libraries are viewed as quiet, rigid places, and research work as dry or overwhelming. That disconnect matters. It means that tools, stories, and discoveries sit untouched—not because they are not useful, but because the way we present them may feel out of reach. In many cultures (often othered by descriptions of ethnicity or outdated customs) knowledge is exchanged in lively, boisterous, or communal ways. These forms of communication clash with the modern library's reputation for silence and solemnity. Like many academic spaces shaped by Western ideals, librarianship is heavily influenced by rules governing how to catalog, organize, and define what matters. We are trained to follow structure and to treat selective standards as sacred. However, those same standards can unintentionally exclude people and ways of being. What if we made room for something else? Yes, librarianship and research are framed as serious, structured, and rigid endeavors. However, a womanist lens invites us to reimagine research as acts of curiosity, seeking, and meaning-making. By embracing research as play, theological librarianship can foster spaces that honor creative, intellectual, and spiritual agency while challenging dominant epistemologies that restrict theological exploration. This essay argues that womanist theology, specifically a womanist pedagogy of play, offers a fresh pathway to approach professional librarianship and think differently about what it means to learn, to seek, and to find.

"Womanist" is a term coined by famed author Alice Walker in the opening of her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. After coming to terms with the limiting space for Black women within feminism, Walker expanded the concept by defining the identity of a womanist. Her four-part definition is rich, flowing, and rooted in the lived experiences of Black women. Alice Walker's words found fertile ground in the soil of Black women scholars, who watered its seed and grew it into a flowering lilac garden of womanism. First-generation womanists, such as Katie Geneva Cannon, a formidable liberation theologian and Christian ethicist widely regarded as a founder of the womanist movement, , and Delores S. Williams, who articulated a womanist liberation theology in her classic work *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, laid the foundation for the field. These trailblazers passed the baton to womanist ethicists, such as Emilie Townes, who examined the cultural stereotypes distorting Black women's lived experiences in her groundbreaking book Womanist Ethics and the *Cultural Production of Evil*, and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, who outlined the four tenets of womanism in *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*—principles that continue to shape the theology of emerging scholars and thinkers. More than four decades of womanist thought, academic study, and dialogue have given rise to a fourth wave of Millennial and Gen

Z womanist scholars. Supported by the analysis of those who came before them, these contemporary thinkers do not shy away from delving into the ways womanist theology offers practical tools of liberation and pathways to thriving amid the present circumstances of Black women and allies who have ears to hear.

Earlier this year, Lakisha R. Lockhart-Rusch released a womanist theology-centered book entitled *Doing Theological Double Dutch: A Womanist Pedagogy of Play*. Her detailed and thoughtful writing asserts that the need for play in theological education is great—it can aid in teaching and learning by inviting people to critically remember and reflect, deliberately question, creatively and collaboratively imagine in academic spaces. She makes her case by highlighting how "womanism seeks to disrupt systems that silence and oppress not only the voices and experiences of Black women but also all oppressed voices and experiences" (Lockhart-Rusch 2025, 12). Like many who participate in the academy, I had to learn the ways academic and research culture prioritize white, cisgender, heteronormative information and knowledge systems in both form and function. Lockhart-Rusch offered me the language to articulate something I knew intrinsically about play, fun, and joy—that they are necessary if we are to thrive.

The act of play enables learners to embody experiences of understanding and answer-seeking. Society readily embraces this concept in the arena of early childcare. Experts teach that play "allows children to use their senses and promotes exploration and curiosity...they learn to think creatively...develop critical thinking skills through problem-solving, learn about cause and effect, and build memory skills" (Office of Child Care 2025). My experiences working in the youth services department of the library solidified this concept for me. Teaching parents that singing, dancing, clapping, and games are foundational skills needed to create strong readers aligns with the notion that learning and understanding are embodied experiences. Similarly, creative spaces and programs are considered standard for youth-centered areas of libraries. Makerspaces, 3D Printer access, and builder programs (such as LEGO and K'Nex) are hallmark attractions geared towards teens and tweens. These spaces are curated to facilitate creative thinking and solution development for young people. Because we recognize that interactive, embodied experiences are essential to learning in our formative years, we should interrogate the ease with which we separate play from intellectual and professional development.

This concept took even greater shape for me during a conversation in divinity school. Divinity Librarian Kashif Graham was guiding students through using the various resources available to support our theological research. When someone asked about the best way to incorporate different resources into a project, he responded, "Try different resources to figure out what works for you—research is play." That comment, however small, answered a question I didn't know I had been asking. I realized that play is a stimulating aspect of librarianship for me, and now, my theological formation in divinity school is guided by that idea of play. Unfortunately, as we "grow up," play is relegated to youthful spaces or particular times and places, as in "work hard, play hard" culture.

However, play is not trivial. The concept of "seriousness" in academia and librarianship often mirrors white, patriarchal structures that attempt to distance scholarship from embodied knowledge, emotion, intuition, and creativity, i.e., ways of knowing frequently associated with marginalized communities, particularly Black women. These norms uphold objectivity and detachment as the gold standard while casting relational, spiritual, and imaginative practices as less valid. In doing so, they limit the fullness of what research can be and whom it can serve. Womanism allows us to open the door for playful, embodied engagement with information gathering and discovery. It functions as a sacred act of survival, resistance, and meaning-making for Black women and for those who seek to expand the idea of what it means to learn. "Play instructs our social skills, deepens our emotions,

enhances our cognitive functioning, holds space for joy and lament, encourages moral formation, and engenders balance by providing a space that aids in integrating body, mind, and spirit in a way that invites exploration and risk" (Lockhart-Rusch 2025, 115). Womanism enabled me to deconstruct the origins of my academic insecurities and recognize my strengths as valuable for advancing the field of scholarship.

So what, then, does this mean for librarianship as a whole? Traditional research can feel linear and exclusive to particular academic spaces. There is a separation between the perception and reality of the profession that is particularly pertinent to the time in which we live. I cannot keep track of the number of times that I have been told I "do not look like a librarian" or have been compelled to combat the myth that I spend my workday reading novels. It is no secret that libraries are on a constant campaign to stay relevant and prove their worth in a Google- and smartphone-centric and now AI-focused universe. More importantly, we exist in a time when news literacy, information accessibility, and cultural competency are often viewed as controversial, politically charged buzzwords rather than guiding tenets of responsible library use and research. How can we break through the perceptions and biased structures to offer academics and lay users comfort and freedom in the stacks and databases?

One way libraries and research can be more accessible to all learners is by embracing the ways in which research and play are aligned. Lockhart-Rusch marks her definition of play by "apparent purposelessness, volunteering, attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation of desire while also maintaining a sense of unity, boundaries, and fairness" (Lockhart-Rusch 2025, 114-115). Play is something that we want to do; we find the act of play fun and rewarding, even when there is no discernible outcome for the activity. While joy can be found in the act itself, there happen to be many benefits to our minds and bodies along the way. Like play, research allows for surprise, curiosity, and deeper engagement with oneself and, therefore, with one's course of study. From this perspective, research becomes not merely a means to an end, but a generative practice that nurtures intellectual vitality and sustained personal engagement.

Womanism draws its strength from its intersectionality. It is not a theology that finds its liberation in claiming a single identity. Its origins honor the layered realities of life, affirming that race, gender, class, and spirituality are not separate concerns, but deeply intertwined dimensions of lived experience. That kind of nuance is something we need to lean into more fully in our research spaces. We already recognize the interdisciplinary nature of our work—libraries are places where knowledge across a variety of fields intersects. But do we extend that intersectionality to methods of research that are playful, sensory, or embodied? We understand the importance of citation and recognition but often overlook how these systems of reference can exclude traditions like storytelling or oral history. Our dominant models of information sharing leave little room for what can be understood through movement, sound, or through shared laughter. This becomes especially clear in theological education, where the task is not only to study religious histories and concepts but to deepen one's own spiritual formation. In these spaces, we're often expected to express what is sacred in a language shaped by academic structures, even when the knowledge we're engaging in is intuitive, emotional, or beyond words.

We must be willing to create space for nontraditional, system-free approaches to information discovery—ways that honor how meaning is made through curiosity, intuition, and experience. What role might we play in cultivating environments where research invites wonder and play? Although such freedom is often reserved for public library settings, academic spaces can also benefit from embracing this nuance and boldness. We see this concept beginning to breakthrough in some college campuses. In 2015, a mobile LEGO maker space "toured 7 states and facilitated 20 workshops

to learn more about the possibilities and benefits of low-cost, hands-on makerspaces in academic libraries, as well as introducing how creative problem-solving skills can be used by academic library faculty and staff in a collaborative environment" (Lotts 2016, 500). Author and researcher, Megan Lotts, who immersed herself in the mobile makerspace investigation, concluded that "participants were surprised to find that even though they may not see or work with their colleagues regularly, they all share the same challenges and are on the same page. Also, individuals want to have more fun at work and be encouraged to think creatively and try out new ideas" (Lotts 2016, 523).

This demonstration is but one example that although such freedom is often reserved for public library settings, academic spaces benefit from embracing such nuance and boldness. Similarly, Lockhart-Rusch illustrates a classroom scene where she opened a class with "The Cupid Shuffle." Initially, students were uncertain and hesitant about dancing during class—with their professor no less—but the moment of play opened up the room for a deeper discussion about "cultural appreciation, cultural understanding, and cultural appropriation/exploitation" (Lockhart-Rusch 2025, 84). Lockhart-Rusch goes on to state that "through the womanish mode of play of line dancing we were able to engage the complexity of culture and community through conscious questioning and God-given creative and collaborative imagining. And it was glorious!"(2025, 84).

What if libraries could function in the same way—with play serving as a vehicle of "renewal and rejuvenation, a space for the enacting of agency and moral and ethical formation" (Lockhart-Rusch 2025, 94)? This could take shape through gamified research methods, creative exploration tools, or simply reimagining libraries as places of theological inquiry rather than merely as repositories of information. When researchers feel blocked or overwhelmed, they may choose to walk away from their workspace to return with fresh insight. What might it mean to intentionally build those moments into the space itself? Meditation rooms, reflective corners, or access to green spaces could invite opportunities for pause and renewal. Some libraries may even have the flexibility to push further against traditional boundaries and offer spaces that embrace sound, invite movement, and honor the body as a site of knowledge processing. In this framing, librarianship becomes less about managing content and more about curating conditions for discovery, where research becomes a sacred and playful encounter.

In exploring ways to bridge womanist play with traditional research, I am reminded of an excerpt from Alice Walker's definition of womanism: "...Responsible. In charge. Serious... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker 1983, 290). These words affirm the truth that play is a serious and responsible quality in its contribution to the survival and wholeness of entire people. It is this vision of wholeness that motivates my desire to expand our thinking about research tools and possibilities. While not everyone is called to librarianship, there are those who could bring fresh, imaginative approaches to the field. Unfortunately, the traditional rigidity of library research culture can discourage potential innovators from offering their contributions. When we accept that responsibility and seriousness do not always follow rigid forms, we make room for joy, curiosity, and creative risk-taking. In doing so, we extend the survival of the library—not only as a repository of knowledge, but as a playground of ideas and librarians as facilitators of such. This is how we build spaces of exploration that honor lived experience, spiritual agency, and the liberating power of play.

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