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Christina Landman Theologizing with Herstories : The Theology of a Founding Matriarch of “TheCircle”

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## 6 | Christina Landman Theologizing with Herstories – The Theology of a Founding Matriarch of “The Circle”

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### Abstract

This chapter sets to unfold the contribution of Christina Landman as a Matriarch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, affectionately known as “The Circle”. The chapter will analyse her theological works and perspectives, as well as her ecclesiastical participation, in the way it impacted on South African faith communities and academic spaces. As a scholar, a church historian, also a systematic theologian, and an ordained minister, Christina Landman has achieved a milestone that has shaped the way scholars are theologizing and how churches do ministry. As the first South African woman to become a professor in theology, she has trodden on the road less travelled and against all odds imprinted a mark in the South African soul and even beyond. This chapter employs the insights of oral history where the focus is not on the interviewer, but rather on the interviewee who does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to guide the directions as thought to be most productive. It also makes use of literature review to capture the richness and ethos of a legend’s sacrificial life which is well lived.

**Keywords:** Christina Landman, Theology, Women, South African, Sankofa, Matriarch

### Introduction

*To the matriarch, the co-founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, a scholar of note, a pastor, and an activist, we salute and say long live the legend!*

This chapter is written against the background of the call for papers under the theme: “Nehanda: women’s Theologies of Liberation in Southern

Africa”, where the intention is to produce a book in which the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians’ theological works and perspectives of the founding matriarchs are analysed. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the life of Christina Landman in three dimensions: firstly, as an academic and theologian; secondly as an ordained minister who in the context of her theology, impacted on the church and communities; and thirdly as a founding matriarch of the Circle.

The chapter has employed qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research methodology process involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell 2009:22). The study also utilized the insights of oral history where the focus is not on the interviewer, but rather on the interviewee who does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to guide the directions as thought to be most focused on the study objectives<sup>1</sup>. Consent was solicited from the participant through completing a copy of the consent form which was approved by the University of Venda. The study was guided by the following research objectives, namely:

1. To give an overview of Landman’s history and contribution to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
2. To identify the theological sources used by Landman and describe the purpose of Landman’s theology.
3. To evaluate Landman’s theology in relation to patriarchy, colonialism, sexual discrimination, and African male theologians.
4. To profile Landman’s contribution to the world of knowledge and assess her theology in relation to the future.

The chapter unfolds by highlighting the data collection methods and a brief biography of Landman before exploring her theological contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR\\_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf](https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf)

## Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and literature review. A semi-structured interview has been used because of its flexibility in affording the research participant the opportunity to elaborate and develop her responses, and to enable the researcher and the participant to interact in real life situation (Creswell, 2009). A semi-structured interview was conducted with the interviewee Christina Landman through Microsoft Teams where they were recorded and transcribed. The reason for this was that the interview was conducted during the time of COVID-19 when there were restrictions and lockdowns. The focus of the interview was on her life experience, gathering her reflections on her academic and ministerial journey and more focused on the objectives of the research. The interview was conducted on 03 March 2022. Follow-ups on questions were consequently utilized to capture the full richness of the participant's reflections. Data was also collected using literature review where information related to the aim of the research was identified and discussed to serve as significant data for this research. The publications that are included in this study were selected as deemed to be more aligned to the objectives of the study, and those that were not selected were not well focused on this study.

Data were analysed through narrative inquiry. The rationale behind narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk 2007). The duo (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk 2007) describe the pros of narrative inquiry which include the fact that it is relatively easy to get people to tell stories, since most people are pleased to share a story about themselves. Besides gaining in-depth data (thick description) being possible because this often occurs with ease in narrated events, it is also possible to gain in-depth meaning and reflection because participants are content to reveal themselves in stories and to reflect on their accounts at a later date as well. Narrative inquiry further assists the author in identifying the various kinds of narratives as captured from the perspective of the participant. In this regard, the willingness of the participant to share her narratives, assisted in the analysis. The in-depth reflection of the participants' narratives also formed the main argument of this study and assisted in determining the meaning as related to the main objectives of the study. The next section highlights a brief biography of Christina Landman.

## A Brief Overview of Christina Landman

As the first South African-born woman who became a professor of theology at a South African university, it suffices to provide a brief introduction to who Christina Landman is. The biography of Landman is narrated in relation to her educational background, ministry formation and her life's challenging moments.

### *Educational Background*

Christina Landman was born on February 8, 1956, in Pretoria. She obtained five distinctions in her final year at the Lyttelton High School in 1973. She subsequently obtained seven degrees (cum laude) at the University of Pretoria and South Africa. In 1976, she obtained her BA degree, which was the beginning of a great journey into theology. The coming year in 1977, she obtained her BA (Hons) with a specialization in Greek. Christina Landman continued with her studies, and in 1980 she obtained the BD (Script: "Aspects of the exegetical method of Augustine"). She then furthered her studies whereby in 1981 she graduated with her MA (Greek): "The use of non-Christian literary sources in the Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea".

In 1987, six years later from her latest qualification, she obtained her DTH (Church History): The use of Scripture in the *Tractatus de regia potestate et sacerdotal dignitate of Hugo Floriacensis.* With her love of knowledge in the original languages of the Bible, in 1988 she obtained a BA Honours degree again but this time it was in Latin. She proceeded and studied Postgraduate Diploma in Translation in 1990. In 2007, she obtained her second DTH in Pastoral Therapy. In all these achievements, Landman demonstrated a commitment to studying theology from the onset, and this has contributed to the milestones which she achieved in the academia and in ministry. Landman's well-rounded training in theology contributed to making her a scholar of note and the powerful woman she is.

### *Her Ministry Formation*

Landman's calling to church ministry came while she was a teenager. Her calling was not an easy one as the circumstances surrounding a woman's call were not welcomed by society. The (Afrikaans) Reformed churches in South Africa did not allow women to be ordained before the late 1990s. Landman finished her theological studies at the University of

South Africa, which in the 1970s and 1980s was the only university where women could study theology. Landman finished a six-year theological training without the possibility of being ordained as a minister.

About her early calling, she recalled that at that time it meant a calling to become nothing. And, again strangely, it was possible for her to study theology precisely for the fact that girls anyway were not supposed to become something. Her father was a professor at the University of Pretoria, and she studied for free. So, she was free to follow her calling, to become nothing (Landman 2019).

From the beginning of her career, she knew what she was getting herself into and she never looked back. The self-determination she demonstrated, was beyond imagination. It was later in 2006 when the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa licensed her as a minister of the Word. She was ordained in URCSA Dullstroom in Mpumalanga in 2008 in the “township” of Sakhelwe with Zulu and Ndebele-speaking congregants. They were people whose land had been stolen from them by whites in a previous century, leaving them poor, unemployed, alienated from their cultures, prone to HIV infection, and some even half-literate. Here, Landman built a church and established a creche. In 2018, she received and accepted a call to URCSA Karlienpark in Rustenburg in the North-west Province. The congregation consisted of “Brown” people who are Afrikaans and English speaking.

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa played a vital role in what Landman has become in terms of ministry. The development and appreciation she has for the church is summarised in an article she wrote describing her journey with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (Landman 2019:13):

URCSA has empowered Christina Landman to develop from the restricting “Volkmoeder” ideal of a single nation to positions in ministering and leadership where she could move beyond gender. However, although gender for her became an irrelevant category for self-identification, it may not as yet be the case in the church itself, in spite of its ethos of equality between genders. URCSA has enabled her to move from the racial identification of whiteness to racial inclusiveness, while the church at the same time upheld a variety of ethnic expressions in church life and practice. Her journey with URCSA has sensitised her to move from a position of “a woman’s soul is too pure for politics” to become part of the prophetic voice of the church in its relationship with the state.

Landman decided to move away from the academic culture of historical criticism to become part of theologies that were based on grassroots expressions of faith. In URCSA she now leads liturgies in a variety of cultures, wearing a church uniform as identification with congregants. From being a young woman who was not allowed to own property, she persisted until she became a minister who built a church with the men and women of a URCSA congregation. Though for many years she was excluded by the Church Order and Stipulations from becoming a minister of the Word, eventually the Church Order and Stipulations were placed in her hands as Actuarii of the Northern Synod and later the General Synod as its custodian. Landman decided to become a practitioner of the theories she was teaching in class, by that she embodies and defines herself as a theologian who is both contextual and relevant.

### *Life Changing Moments*

In 1991 Landman met with Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Geneva, Switzerland and this changed Landman's life completely. It was from that meeting that she started to be invited to the meetings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. From then on, Landman attended all the Pan African Conferences of the Circle and gave a paper at each meeting, becoming a "founding matriarch" of the Circle, who focused on academic publications in the field of African Women's Theologies (Landman 2019:6). Confirming herself as a matriarch of the Circle, she stated the following: (her own words):

In 1991 I was on a study trip to the Netherlands where the "mission" documents of South Africa are being held. The trip was financed by the University of South Africa I was studying the transfer of Christianity from white missionary women to local black women in South Africa from the 17th to 19th centuries. At that time Mercy Amba Oduyoye was more or less the only black woman theologian whose work was familiar to me. I took the liberty of contacting her at the World Council of Churches where she was the Deputy General Secretary. The only time she could see me was on a specific day during lunch time. I travelled 6 hours one way to see her. This changed my life. She started inviting me to meetings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which was launched in 1989. From then on, I attended all the Pan-African Conferences and gave a paper at each (Interview 2022).

Landman has in her possession all the copies of the Circle publications that were sold during the meetings. She bought copies for the library of the University of South Africa where she was teaching too. Today she is one of the few people with full publications of the Circle. The selflessness and the sacrifices she made of introducing the circle in all her engagements, her knowledge, theology, and contributions to the circle, put her above her peers to the rightful position of being a Matriarch of the Circle.

### *Struggles*

In her theological studies, before 1991, Landman was only exposed to male theology, male black theology and American and European feminist theology. When she became part of the Circle, she never looked back again. She found in the Circle what she calls the cream of African women theologians and their work. In every meeting of the Circle, she will ensure that she buys all the books and even distributes them to the libraries. The Circle contributed much to her that changed her theological trajectory, in her own words, she explained:

For me, the Circle was an eye-opener and a life-changer. In 1990 I became the first woman Professor in Theology at a South African university. In 1991 I met Mercy Amba Oduyoye and joined the Circle. I was then 35 years old – and up till that date I have only been exposed to male theology, fortunately male black theology, as well as American and European feminist theology. At the Circle I met with the cream of African women theologians and their work. Today I am one of the few people with a full set of the publications of the Circle (Interview 2022).

### **Theological Contribution of Christina Landman**

During the second Pan-African conference in 1992, Landman was invited to be one of the participants. Among the eight women who were there, she became one of those who read a paper and contributed to “Groaning in Faith” (Landman 2022). The paper she read was “A land flowing with milk and honey: Reading the Bible with women who are breastfeeding” (Landman 1996:99-111). The paper was based on lectures she gave to women at a theological school in Zambia, where she addressed women who were not allowed to study for the ministry and were kept in a special lecture room to be domesticated into the role of the wife of the minister (Landman 2022). Landman has since from the onset challenged the stereotypes of what was accepted as a norm of being a woman. She taught

theology to women, and she knew they would understand as she has proved it herself that women can be taught theology to understand and not make them rely on asking their husbands at home if they do not understand.

The next meeting of the Circle that Landman participated in was again held in Nairobi, Kenya from 25 to 30 August 1996 titled “Women in the Household of God”. Landman delivered a paper entitled, “The Implementation of Biblical Hermeneutics” (See Landman 1997:83-94). The third Pan-African Conference of the Circle, which is the first of the 21st century was held in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia from 04 to 09 August 2002 and addressed practical theological, HIV and AIDS pandemic and its influence on African women. The theme of the conference was “Sex: Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices”. It was held from 4 to 9 August 2002 in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and it was attended by 140 women from 25 countries, on invitation only. Papers delivered at this conference were published in 2003 under the title “African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities” (eds Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya). Landman’s contribution deals with “Spiritual Care-giving to Women Affected by HIV/AIDS” (Landman 2003:189-208). The article tells the stories of 20 South African women of whom eleven were Black, six were White, two Brown, and one Indian. Of them, 14 were ‘ongoingly underprivileged’ and six upper-class. What they had in common was, firstly, their HIV status which was bestowed on them mainly through rape and unfaithful husbands, and secondly their need for spiritual care-giving. The article described the road of counselling travelled with these women of faith.

The fourth Pan-African Conference of the Circle took place from 6 to 10 September 2007 at the Yaoundé Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. The theme was “The Girl Child, Women, Religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa”. Landman gave a paper at this conference entitled “A theology for the older, female HIV-infected body.” The paper consisted of the stories of women over the age of 50 who became infected with HIV for a variety of reasons, such as unfaithful husbands, or treating their HIV positive children without protection. From these stories, a theology was deduced to empower women specifically from this age group to understand and overcome what was happening to them (Landman 2008:52-67).

The fifth Pan-African Conference was held in Kempton Park, South Africa from 25 to 28 September 2011 under the theme, “God-talk/Biblical Hermeneutics Amidst Pronounced Patriarchies and Violence Against Women and Children in Southern Africa.” Landman gave a paper at this 2011 conference on, “Negotiating Masculinities in a congregation living with HIV and AIDS”, taking as the research population people living in Sakhelwe in Dullstroom (in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa). This “township” is poverty-stricken with 89% unemployment. Although it is mainly women who are employed – albeit in lowly paid jobs such as domestic workers and waiters – a strong patriarchal culture prevails leaving women vulnerable to HIV infection and domestic violence. Landman’s contribution to social justice and uplifting people’s lives has contributed to the better treatment of women today in South Africa.

Although Landman was an activist against apartheid in South Africa, the rest of Africa became accessible to her as she would often be invited to academic women’s groups in a variety of African countries like Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Ghana and many more. According to Landman, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has indeed done the impossible, the unimaginable as she has brought the women theologians of Africa together. There is this night that she cannot forget, and these are her words:

I remember one night, at the closing of a conference in Ghana, we were all sitting in a circle, and we were asked to sing a song from our country. When it was my turn, I found myself singing a song from the time when I was a young girl – and suddenly all the women of Africa started singing with me, each in her own language. This is an experience I shall never forget (Interview 2022).

Landman through the Circle met with a totally new theology and with a totally new vocabulary for expressing women’s experiences and theorising about their issues. She started reading the Bible with empowered eyes. Theologically her world changed, her eyes, her ears saw and listened differently, and her heart and mind took her on another road. Comparing what the Circle contributed to her theological path with her contribution, her contribution is minimal. Pointing to what she thinks contributed to the Circle, she said, “I can point humbly to two possible things I think made a contribution to the Circle”, in her own words:

Firstly, I gave a paper at every Pan-African Conference, each of which was very contextual and told the stories of women in South Africa. I had access to the stories of South African women as a therapist at a state

hospital and as a pastor in a variety of black and brown congregations. Through ethical clearance these stories were changed so as not to expose the women but nevertheless to tell the stories of their plight. Secondly, I introduced the Circle to all the ecclesiastical and academic bodies of which I was a member in Southern Africa (Interview 2022).

Landman's publications are based on oral history research. Her theological sources include the spiritual experiences of abused women in Thohoyandou in the north of South Africa with Dr LM Mudimeli (see Landman & Mudimeli 2022) or the concepts of God held by men in Zonderwater Correctional Facility just outside Pretoria who are serving life sentences. However, now and then, Landman publishes something on Church Polity. As such she also publishes on women pastors' legal struggle in the church towards equality and acceptance in congregations and positions of leadership.

Furthermore, the theological context of Landman is grounded in her training as a historian of the Early and Medieval Church. It is in this specialization where she obtained an Honours degree in Latin and a master's degree in Greek. Her first doctorate was on the Middle Ages, and especially Church Polity. Her real calling though not regretting her training, as one of South Africa's first woman theologians started when she got a transfer to the Institute for Theological Research at UNISA (University of South Africa) where she was running projects in Oral History research. This enabled her to conduct huge projects on retrieving the silent voices of poor, HIV affected and domestically abused people in all the corners of South Africa as well as in other African countries such as Malawi. She became an Editor-in-Chief of the journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa (*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*), as well as the Editor of the Oral History of South Africa. It was in this context that she was able to publish the research of other historians on the neglected voices of the voiceless. Landman has made her mark and still is, she has distinguished her work as a gender activist and a non-conformist who stood her ground being the first South African woman to become a professor in theology, she has trodden on the road less travelled and against all odds imprinted a mark in the South African soul and even beyond. Her contributions through articles and books are read not only in South Africa, but across the globe.

Much of Landman's work at the moment uses the methodologies of (1) narrative inquiry that is based on the subjective relation of equity between

researcher and interviewee(s), and (2) ethno-autobiography in which the story of the researcher focuses on co-journeying with the interviewee(s) (Laubscher Interview 2019). Bentley and Molobi (2019) rightly note that:

Christina Landman's career boasts what most academics can only dream of. Her work includes over 65 academic articles published in accredited peer-reviewed journals, numerous academic and popular monographs, chapters in books and articles in popular publications. She holds a C2 rating with the National Research Foundation, acknowledging that her work is recognised both locally and internationally. Her name is synonymous with theological work done among those who find themselves on the margins of society, providing a voice for those who are either ignored, shunned, or rendered voiceless.

Landman has contributed a wealth of knowledge to both church and academia. The work of this serious, disciplined scholar, dedicated teacher and compassionate minister of the Word provides theologians and pastors to come with a wealth of material for reflection (Van Huffel 2014).

## Themes Identified in Landman's Theology

Landman's theology as captured through narrative analysis which permits the author to collect the participant's stories as lived experiences and tell them through research has revealed the following themes in this study:

1. The main purpose of her theology is to heal people from their pain.
2. The name of her theology is a Theology of Narrative Compassion or a Theology of the Shared Story. Whatever way, it is a Theology that is derived from people's stories and experiences, and not a Theology that prescribes to people what their lives should be like.
3. Her theology confronts patriarchy, colonialism, and sexual discrimination as structural sins, she does that through using experiences/stories of people who suffer from these types of discrimination.
4. Her theology does not have a gender. It invites dialogue between the binaries of male/female, Western/African, etc. It invites everyone to share their pain with their oppressor and to enter dialogue with one another.
5. Her theology's contribution to the world of knowledge and the future is to give people (and to theology as an academic discipline)

words to express their experiences and resistance against destructive systems, and to deconstruct the damaging discourses that negatively affect their lives towards healthy discourses.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, Christina Landman's theological works and her perspectives on the way they impacted South African faith communities and academic spaces have been discussed. The chapter has shown that as a scholar, a church historian, also a systematic theologian, and an ordained minister, Christina Landman has achieved a milestone that has shaped the way scholars are theologizing and how churches do ministry. Her calling as a church minister, her involvement and commitment to social justice, gender, healing, and spiritualities continues to imprint a mark not only on the South African soul, but also around the globe. Her theology and experience place her in the position of being the Matriarch of the Circle.

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