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## FORUM

### Teaching the Canon and Cannon Formation as Incarnation and Conjure: Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon as Womanist Mentor and Muse

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#### ABSTRACT

Written by her first doctoral student, this essay is a tribute to the legacy and lessons of Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon (1950-2018), the progenitor of womanist ethics. The author embraces Cannon's signature womanist embodied pedagogy, which takes embodiment as a Black woman seriously and serves as a paradigm for those who purposefully and poignantly live intersecting roles of race, gender, and class. Through both a personal account of the grief experienced by the passing of her mentor and a critical reflection on lessons learned by Cannon's legacy, the author exposes the daunting challenges faced by womanist scholars as they navigate the front line of the classroom and the frequently death-dealing and dismissive terrain of higher education. See companion contributions to this Forum written by Edwin David Aponte, Miguel A. De La Torre, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Karen K. Seat, and Angela D. Sims.

#### KEYWORDS

embodied pedagogy, womanism, intersectionality, critical pedagogy, teaching race and gender

I am proud to say that I knew Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon for well over twenty-five years. As the first doctoral student enrolled to study with her at Temple University's graduate department of religion, I was determined and thrilled to have the opportunity and good fortune to work with Dr. Cannon, whose work and research as a Christian Social Womanist ethicist had provided me a sense of refuge, rigor, and reassurance that one could do ethics – “by hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick” (Cannon 1987), to invoke her womanist definition of thinking while Black and female – without inhabiting the body of one of the “canonical boys.” I was legitimately awed by her presence as a Black woman who took seriously and unapologetically both her confession as a Christian and profession as an ethicist. Moreover, I knew without a second thought that I had to study under her tutelage and guidance as a doctoral student. But when I experienced her for the first time in the classroom, her words became flesh and I was blown away.

The first and foremost lesson that Dr. Cannon taught me was, in her words, “to teach, read, and write, even when the lights are out.” For her, there could be no losing sight of my life's goal by compromising my integrity in any fashion. As a graduate student who aspired one day to be a professor, my goal was to achieve academic excellence, and she set an incredibly high standard. Whenever I felt overwhelmed and drained by what she demanded of me as her student, she would look at me with compassion and authority simultaneously and then say to me “Stacey, you have to remember who you are and what you're here for. You have to continue to read and write, even when the lights are out.” Early in my career, I understood Dr. Cannon's

indoctrination regarding academic excellence in a more limited way simply to mean putting studies before socializing. But, as the Pauline injunction warns us, “we gaze through a glass darkly.” Having lived a little bit longer and having seen a lot more in academia, what I now think she was trying to impart to me was that this calling to the “life of the mind” was supposed to be my paramount concern, over and against any external force. It was by excellence, she stated, that I ultimately would be regarded, judged, and evaluated, rather than by any grace or mercy extended by kinfolk or “skin-folk” by virtue of my color, gender, or pedigree.

What many people who have only known her as scholar and colleague might be surprised to know is that it was clear that her first priority was the classroom. Dr. Cannon was rigorous and tough when dealing with students, holding them accountable and responsible in their own intellectual growth and development. Furthermore, her love of the interdisciplinary field of African American thought and womanism, alongside her brilliance as a Christian social ethicist, was so compelling and contagious that her students were left wanting more and more of her instruction and scholarly guidance, which blended meticulous attention to detail with patient mentoring in ways that brought out the best in her students.

Furthermore, Dr. Cannon’s teaching was also marked by a continuous quest for more effective methods of instruction and more compelling modes of presenting information. Drawing from family lessons, women’s literary narratives, social history, and critical theory in a manner that was equally innovative and inspiring, Dr. Cannon’s pedagogy emphasized a deep concern with seeing every moment of interaction as potentially transformative. It was through her sensitivity to both the formal and informal moments of learning that she was able to develop a rich synergy between academic rigor, cultural sensitivity, and character building in ways that clearly benefited her students while also encouraging her colleagues to want to be better teachers.

During my time at Temple, I worked on research projects with her guidance, enrolled in every course she taught at the graduate level, served as her teaching assistant, and discussed pedagogy with her on numerous occasions. In light of this, I can say with full confidence that Dr. Cannon truly exemplified excellence in teaching. On both a philosophical as well as a practical level, her teaching represented a delicate balance between conscientization (as she said, “unmasking, debunking, and disentangling the myths that create death-dealing realities for the least of these”) and patient guidance (helping her students realize that “doing the work their soul must have” is a labor to which we must attend “morning by morning and day by day”). Ever mindful of this, Dr. Cannon masterfully utilized literature, case studies, historiographies, and self-inventories of her students in order to address various ways of learning and to provide students with rich resources. Dr. Cannon’s work entails an impressive blend of traditional and classic concerns in ethics as well as more contemporary developments in womanist thought. In addition to sophisticated methodological and theoretical considerations, careful planning and meticulous preparation formed the core of Dr. Cannon’s teaching, a fact that was quite evident even from a mere glance at her syllabi.

Her commitment to pedagogical concerns – in the form of what she called “high-impact moral ethics” taught using a “pedagogy of possibility” – was further expressed not only by the numerous courses she developed over more than two decades but also by the institutions across the nation that clamored to have her as a visiting professor, guest lecturer, and scholar-in-residence. For most scholars, the teaching moment ends as soon as class is over. However, Dr. Cannon continued the teaching/learning process long after class time had ended, and, indeed in many cases, after the degree had been received. To this point, most of her graduate students were well-equipped and motivated, inspired and prepared for creative approaches to career and ethical living through the fostering of productive relationships in more general terms. In short, Dr. Cannon had a unique ability to urge “embodied greatness” in her students and push them to maximize their potential. Her students gladly accepted this nurturing motivation.

Discovering the power and necessity of embodied pedagogy is the outcome of a teaching career in which I have continued to be challenged by ideas and practices that transform the teaching-learning process. Writings such as Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018), bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress* (2017), Carter G. Woodson’s *Mis-Education of the Negro* (2008), Katie Cannon’s *Teaching Preaching* (2007), Charles Foster’s *Educating Clergy* (2006), and the anthologies *Being Black*, *Teaching Black* (Westfield 2008) and Gutiérrez y Muhs et al.’s *Presumed Incompetent* (2012), have become scriptural for my sacred practice of teaching. In fact, their research and testimony have caused me to publish and share my own insights about teaching that transforms society at large.

In my own quest for knowledge and classroom competency, I have also learned that, as a Black woman, I must negotiate the contested space of the classroom, because my very presence causes dissonance in what is largely considered an elitist, Eurocentric, and middle-aged space. My ability to overcome the teaching challenges encountered in such a context has been

aided by those who have designed, implemented, and experienced the power of transformative pedagogy in their own ways and experiences.

I'll share here the perennial challenge and continuous confrontation that Dr. Cannon faced and most Black women academics still weather in the classroom and academy writ large; namely, "What shall I call you?" Without question, this is the most asked query to a Black female professor by her predominately white students, whether they are enrolled in undergraduate, seminary, or graduate courses. Dr. Cannon would always respond, "call me by the same title you call any white man to whom you confer scholarly/religious authority: "Dr.," "Professor," why you can even call me "Bishop!" Invariably, they would sheepishly laugh as if to wonder "Why does she have a chip on her shoulder?" But always, without fail, they would let "Katie" roll off their tongue and slip out of their mouths.

They missed the lesson of respectability politics in post-Jim and Jane Crow America, wherein all people should be afforded the same respect in naming and reference as white people, despite the deferential ways in which "Mister" was treated as "Master." The hierarchy of race, then and often now, regarded Blacks only as valuable in as much as they could be seen as property on the one hand, or human in as much as they could be deemed in an obligatory or infantilized way, on the other. Therefore, Black women were familiarly treasured as "Mammie" or "Auntie" by those whites for or to whom they nursed, coddled, cooked, served, and provided greater care to than their own family. Or they were called out as "girl" or "gal," undeserving of anything else because they had no name or significance by which to be considered more than a minor entity. Under no circumstances would a Black woman signify a title reflecting her authority and autonomy. To call a Black woman respectfully by her station in life, "Miss," "Mrs.," "Ma'am," "Ms." was unheard of, but to call her by a title denoting authority and autonomy like, "Dr.," "Professor," or "Reverend," well that was completely unfathomable. Such was and still is the implicit bias and implausible reality of most of my colleagues. This practice of addressing Black women by disrespectful or inferior nomenclature reduces the Black people to non-persons. Black women are continuously traumatized and violated by the microaggressions of *misogynoir* by being called out of their named authority much like their grandmothers and mothers who were always insulted by those infants and infidels who sought to "put them in their place" of service and submission to them. Just as I often answer my office door to a newly admitted and naïve student requesting to see "Dr. Floyd-Thomas" and observe their shock when I respond, "Yes, how may I help you," their shock may ignite a sharper sting to so many of my Black female colleagues.

Caught within what Dr. Cannon called a "superwoman-villain dichotomy," Black female professors are forced into ill-fitted and ill-named boxes that serve as either a means to professional suicide or real-life coffins. When a Black female professor refuses to assume stereotypical social roles and insists on being taken seriously as doctor, professor, scholar, author, and colleague, by focusing explicitly on the formal tasks of her job and remaining rigid in her avoidance of personal involvement by isolating herself and making herself unavailable for informal contacts, she's deemed and labeled a "villain," carrying the image of a cold, inflexible authority and "Bad Earth Mother." Her lot is to deal repeatedly with student covert and overt fear and rage, as she becomes deluged with petty, unceasing requests for clarification by students who find the simplest tasks on her syllabi too difficult to understand and her teaching style far too cold. When she's not besieged with hostile challenges in and out of the classroom from the students, she is spending the remainder of her time defending her authority, autonomy, and academic freedom in the dean's or president's office.

Or, as Dr. Cannon tells us, we can go the other route and become superwomen – veritable carbon copies of the maids depicted in the film *The Help* (2011), subjected to numerous entitled students turning our classes into virtual talk shows wherein they are captivated on their virtual couches in our classrooms claimed as their livings and they believe that regaling us as their most regaled postmodern nanny/mammie in Oprah Winfrey instead of their professor. And in so doing, they lay claim to our Black bodies instead of embodied pedagogy to be the surrogate for their every need, to comfort the weary and oppressed, to intercede on behalf of those who feel abused, to champion the cause for every student at our own expense, to compensate for the deficits of the inability or unwillingness of other colleagues to teach, to speak up for those who are unwilling or unable to speak for themselves, and to make demands on their behalf, to do more than our share of work to make up for students and colleagues who refuse to complete their assigned task or teach any lesson. In effect, we are expected to become Mother Confessors to all and to counsel and advise students on matters unrelated to the tasks at hand, always willing to use our bodies and lives to protect the seemingly innocent and dampen the aggression of others.

Dr. Cannon resorted to including a statement in her syllabi on the first day of class – objectively stated, subjectively solicited, and with a touch of internalized indignation – proclaiming that, "We will address our colleagues in our classroom by name in recognition of their humanity and individuality. We will refer to our professor by her appropriate title in recognition of her

training and position.” I, too, now include this in my “Terms of Engagement” in my syllabus, but somehow it still eludes the desperate need of many students to make us other than what we are in our *real* and *right* relationship to them.

Dr. Cannon made her final transition a few days before my fall semester classes started. Stunned, shaken, and still in shock, I can remember every second that passed on the first day of my “Liberation Ethics” class when a student, like clockwork, asked me, “What would you like me to call you?” Hearing this refrain anew while in the midst of my grief, I heard Dr. Cannon clearly remind me as she did in every class, “The time we have now we shall soon have no more... [so] *carpe diem!*” Hearing her voice, mourning the loss of her life but also being emboldened by her plight to be her embodied *theos* in the classroom, I channeled her lessons infused with the gall of my grief and said:

I am an African American Christian woman. As such, I believe I have received a double portion of sacrality in my religious formation. That is to say, African Traditional Religion and Black Baptist sensibilities are inculcated in my very being. Thus, I take conjure, *nommo*, and naming seriously. The word indeed becomes flesh. So, call me by the name of the persona you would like to invoke and engage you. “Dr. Floyd-Thomas” teaches, advises, tutors, writes letters of recommendation, advocates on your behalf to the various constituencies from whom you seek graduation, ordination, adjudication, promotion, and certification. “Stacey” is the indulged youngest sibling of four, pampered wife, and celebrated friend. “Ma’am” is the person who is being helped, catered to, and assisted by a minor. And as for any other stereotypical expletive with which Blacks and women have often been referred, well, only your worst nightmare can articulate what she might do to you. So, in that I believe in the power of conjure and incarnation, I am confident that what you call me will summon the very embodiment which you call out of me.

Since outlining this taxonomy, I have *never* encountered such a slip of tongue from my students again. In fact, “Dr. Floyd-Thomas” often peppered the sentences that came from their mouths, as a way to insure that only the professor was present, and no other iteration that I previously introduced to them.

Channeling the grief of my loss of Dr. Cannon was the ethical context that provided me the agency to do what she always did well: challenging and integrating pedagogical approaches that take my embodiment as a Black woman seriously despite the fact that it creates both cognitive dissonance and even cultural shock for most of my students. Instead of shying away from this reality, I use this conflict and dissonance in my teaching by chipping away at the external façade of many of my students’ identities and their expectations of the teaching-learning process. I have found the pedagogical creation of uneasiness and tension with the status quo to be a vital component for the resolution of ethical conflict, and ultimately the realization of social justice. That is, to create conflict is to invite and bring about change, and it is only through change that unjust conditions can be transformed to positive life options.

Dr. Cannon was an outstanding scholar and a prime exemplar of excellence in teaching. To be her student was to have before you the most superlative caliber of teaching that at once engaged the *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, and *theos* of meeting people where they are in order to take them to the best versions of their possibilities. Quite frankly, the more I engaged my womanist muse through her writing, the more I felt my dream of becoming a womanist ethicist was more attainable, partly because Dr. Katie Cannon wrote a new definition for my reality. Even now, while I am still in utter despair and disbelief of her death, she became larger than life and met me in the teaching-learning moment to redeem time, space, and subjectivity for her, for me, and for the others who are yet to come.

It never crossed my mind or my mouth to refer to her as anything other than “Dr.” and “Professor” because that was her role and authority in my life. And, after I received my doctorate, she referred to me unceasingly as “Dr. Stacey.” What an honor and a womanist act of redemption and reciprocity. Indeed, her great light still shines and the lessons that I learned from her have committed me to daily practices of reading, writing, and teaching in a womanist fashion. What I have been able to accomplish has been done in memory and honor of this wondrous woman and powerful pedagogue whose very surname represents the canon she brought to life for me and the Cannon formation that blew my mind all those years ago and which I carry as my academic arsenal in the front lines of teaching while being an embodied and visionary womanist social ethicist, morning by morning, day by day, and even when the lights are out.

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