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FORUM

Personalizing Katie's Canon

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Katie Canon not only touched the lives of her students with what she taught in the classroom, but by how she lived her life. She modeled the type of scholar students of color should strive to become. See companion contributions to this Forum written by Edwin David Aponte, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Karen K. Seat, and Angela D. Sims.

KEYWORDS

narrative ethics, Storytelling, Raising consciousness, Ancestors, Mulatto, Socratic questioning

On a balmy fall Philadelphia morning I entered the Anderson Building at the campus of Temple University to start my first day of classes as a doctoral student. I rode the rickety elevator to the sixth floor to begin a new chapter in my life. I was running late so I entered a classroom already filled with fellow students. I noticed one remaining seat next to a particular African American which I quickly occupied. Besides being my first day of doctoral studies, it was the day I made a friend at Temple: the student sitting next to me was Stacey Floyd-Thomas. This was a day of firsts, for it was also the first time I sat in a classroom taught by a person of color. Throughout high school, an undergraduate degree, a master's in administration, and a master of divinity – decades of formal education – this was the first time I ever sat at the feet of a scholar of color.

Dr. Cannon soon became more than simply a brilliant ethics professor upon whose shoulders my own work has stood; she became a mentor who patiently taught me through her actions, more than her words, the responsibility I held for occupying a marginalized Latino body within the academy. I was willing to learn from her because she took the time to get to know me and my story. Over many meetings discussing the institutionalized ethnic discrimination I faced, she earned the right to teach and challenge me. She was instrumental in raising my consciousness of how, in spite of the biases I faced, there existed those who resided on my own margins – specifically women of color. She taught me by challenging me, holding me accountable, questioning my own complicity with racism and sexism. What I learned from Dr. Cannon can be summed up in the three vignettes which follow. I recount these stories in honor of her pedagogy of storytelling which raises the voices of those usually unheard.

Dr. Cannon taught me to boldly proclaim truth by her example. While at Temple I took a class in the department of Latin American Studies. The professor, a white man from Britain, explained how those countries colonized by the English, like India, developed healthy democracies while those settled by the Spaniards leaned more toward authoritarian forms of government. Needless to say, as the only person with Latinx origins, I challenged his assertions. One day after class he pulled me aside and requested that I speak less during his lectures because I was disrupting the class. Dejected, I sat down with Dr. Cannon to seek her council. Dr. Cannon's pedagogy incorporated accountability to one's community to propel the timid toward praxis. If I remain silent when I'm able to speak, she told me, all my ancestors will rise up and accuse me of cowardliness. Talk about linking the past with the present to create a new future. Through her own stories of her ancestors, Dr. Cannon taught me that

I had a responsibility to stand and speak on the side of justice, regardless of the cost. Too many before me sacrificed greatly so I could pursue a doctoral degree; I had a responsibility to those who came before me. I confidently returned to the class and continued to agitate and disrupt attempts to normalize and legitimize structures responsible for so much of the world's oppression. I received the lowest grade of my graduate studies for that class, but who cares? for I found my voice through Dr. Cannon's example.

Dr. Cannon taught me of my own complicity with racism and sexism by becoming vulnerable and holding me to task. Decades occupying a Latino body has made me familiar with oppression. On both my body and psyche I carry the scars of not belonging, the stigmata of falling short of the white ideal. Surely being among the oppressed meant I could not be among the privileged – or so I thought, in clearly dichotomous terms. Early in my academic development I came to Dr. Cannon sharing my commitment to Mulato Christianity, a popular way of thinking among Latinx religious scholars during the 1990s, especially those – like myself – who hailed from the Caribbean. At the time, the term “mulato,” which connoted the African and Spaniard racial composition common throughout the islands, was intended to be a counterpart to Mestizo Christianity which focused on an Indigenous and Spaniard hybridity. Dr. Cannon insisted that I explain to her how a term like “mulatto,” used negatively in her culture, could be celebrated by light-skinned scholars from my culture. The more I tried to explain how it was not racist, the more I was convinced it was. Through Socratic questioning which forced me to defend undefendable propositions, I discovered I need to be more critical of what I embrace. More than teaching me womanist thought, Dr. Cannon, with great intellectual dexterity, made me aware of how both my gender and light pigmentation make me complicit with racism and sexism because I appear to be closer to the white male ideal than others.

Dr. Cannon taught me that not all Latinx are my allies. After having my consciousness raised concerning my embracing of a mulatez theology, I began to seriously research the etymology of the word. I incorporated the rejection of Mulato Christianity as part of my dissertation. I argued that the only ones using Mulato Christianity as a way of self-identifying were light-skinned religious scholars who were mainly Cuban. No one on the streets of Miami would ever self-identify as mulato, insisting there was nothing “black” in their genealogy. Unfortunately, when I sought a scholarship from the very first Hispanic granting committee in religious studies, the majority of my fellow white Cubans deciding who obtained graduate financial support were scandalized by my proposal. One particular Latina scholar insisted I was simply wrong and that the term was not racist. I was denied funding.

Rejected by my own community, I contemplated dropping out of the PhD program. Once again, Dr. Cannon used personal stories of her own negative experiences within her own community to provide comfort and support, teaching me the responsibility that scholars of color have to their students of color. She shared how when she began developing the concept of womanist ethics, she too stood before a committee of fellow Black religion scholars who were scandalized she had the audacity to supposedly speak for all Black women. Regardless of her insistence that she was speaking for herself, suspecting other black women might resonate with her thoughts, the committee still rejected her. With a chuckle she confided that some of her strongest detractors then were now vocal in their admiration of her work. With a wink she prophesied the same would one day be true for me. And it came to pass, as those who once dismissed me have written chapters for books I have edited.

Dr. Cannon was first and foremost an intellectual mentor. Sharing her academic rigor in the classroom was pedagogically sufficient. Any perusal of my writing clearly reveals her womanist fingerprints (and those of her students) on my works. But she did not stop there. I am the scholar I am today in part because of how she taught outside the classroom. Listening to my story, becoming vulnerable, holding me accountable, challenging my privilege, and sharing personal stories were pedagogical tools she used which I now attempt to imitate.

Over twenty years have passed since I had the honor and privilege to sit in her classes. Today, I stand before the next generation of students interested in ethical studies. Her impact on my formation as a scholar is manifested in my current pedagogy. Like her, I realize I cannot with integrity raise the consciousness of my students if I don't take the time to hear their stories. For this reason, I constantly strive to hear the stories of my doctoral students, committing to stand in solidarity with them both within and beyond the academy. When I teach, I become totally vulnerable, sharing the failures and successes of the personal, quick to articulate where I have fallen short of my own rhetoric and remained complicit with oppressive structures I rile against. By example, this vulnerability creates a safe space where students are given permission to also be vulnerable. Hence our class conversation moves from the positioning of oneself in the academic discourse to intimately wrestling with uncomfortable topics. And finally, I have adopted her Socratic methodology of questioning those who hold undefendable positions (as I did with Mulato Christianity). Many of my students, through the implementation of this methodology, have experienced major paradigm shifts.

Dr. Cannon's passing is a tremendous loss to me personally, and more generally, to the struggle for justice. As I sat during the Denver AAR session, listening to others honor her life, I was moved by how packed the room was, filled with those whose lives were impacted for the better by her presence and/or by her written words. I consider myself blessed to have experienced both. Although her death was untimely, too soon with much left to be accomplished, nevertheless, she died a death most academics can only dream of – influencing not only the lives of many, but the lives of generations yet to come. Doña Katie, always *¡presente!*

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS FORUM HONORING DR. KATIE GENEVA CANNON

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