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Deep Breaths and High Impact Aerobics: Reflecting on Teaching Writing in the Key of Katie Geneva Cannon

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ABSTRACT

This tribute by a former doctoral student of Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon reflects on her mentor's pedagogical strategies and techniques and how they have impacted her own teaching, as well as her approach to research and writing. The short essay describes several of Dr. Cannon's assignments, including the Personal Ethical Inventory and the Socio-Religious Autobiography, and expresses her gratitude and indebtedness in prioritizing experiences and contributions of Blacks as an essential aspect of graduate theological education.

KEYWORDS

cultivation of intellect, womanist ethics, teaching strategies, oral histories, integration of research and teaching

On a warm late summer September day in 2002, I gathered around a table with two Black women, an Asian woman, an Asian male, a White woman, and two White males to begin a journey of ethical theological reflection with Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon. On this day, which marked the one-year anniversary after buildings imploded and exploded, after planes crashed, after countless lives were forever changed on September 11th, 2001, Katie Cannon posed a question (which I no longer recall) about this fateful event that required each student to delve into our own interiority and respond from a place of interconnected interwoven realities.

Cannon, known for her ability to allow silence to function as a catalyst by which students engage in genuine introspection, sat with us in the silence. In a nondescript classroom on the grounds of Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary) whose library archives house documents that justified support of chattel slavery in the United States, Cannon's proficiency in Socratic methodology was evident. Equally evident was her dexterity in reading embodied transcripts as she employed a process that did not assign normative value to broad non-contextual generalizations. She neither ignored nor sought to diffuse apparent discomfort.

Instead, she encouraged us to take some deep breaths as a preparatory measure for high impact intellectual aerobics. I continue to benefit from the student-centered mutual-learning approach that characterizes Dr. Cannon's teaching. Each syllabus, each assignment, furthered our appreciative understanding of womanist religious thought. These assignments included many creative exercises, including a Personal Ethical Inventory, a Socio-Religious Autobiography, and a Womanist Rhetorical Methodology for Projects of Possibility.

In her Summer 2006 “DMin Seminar II: Church and Culture” syllabus, Cannon’s guidelines for the Personal Ethical Inventory required students to address ten areas of ethical behavior as one way, as stated in the course description, to “critique intellectual bridges between the church and cultural patterns of moral agency,” in order to “become conversant with elements of responsible decision-making.” For many students, non reliance on assigned readings for direction in crafting a response resulted in questions about sources of moral discernment which had not been considered previously. While similar to the Personal Ethical Inventory, Cannon’s guidelines for a Socio-Religious Autobiography required students in her January 2004 “Ethical Matters of Life and Death” seminar to “look at patterns of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in [their] family and among [their] circle of friends.” For Cannon, and as iterated on the syllabus’s course objectives, it was important for students to “demonstrate facility in using inductively embodied reason and deductively applied norms so as to become conversant with elements of responsible decision-making.” As a final example of her pedagogical creativity, Cannon, in her May 2003 “Codes of Ethics in Freedom Narratives” seminar, provided guidelines for a ten-step multifaceted assignment with the initial step functioning as invitation to students to “write in free-style [their] ‘felt sense’ of the values, ideas and/or experiences [they] brought to the reading of slave narrative, religious text, and the slave novel.” Drawing on Beverly Wildung Harrison’s *Dance of Redemption*, Cannon’s Womanist Rhetorical Methodology for Projects of Possibility asked students not only to identify a specific “audience of accountability” but to be conscious of their own personal responsibility and commitment that might translate into others accepting an invitation “to engage in justice-making ministry.” Aware that several students may not be familiar with the seminar’s required readings, Cannon designed this Projects of Possibility assignment “to enable students” to accomplish four specific objectives:

- a. Examine theoethical issues in the freedom narratives of enslaved African Americans
- b. Reflect upon required readings and gain facility in assessing scholarly literature
- c. Discern and articulate ways in which the course materials can serve as a resource for Projects of Possibility in the practice of ministry
- d. Demonstrate a coherent grasp of the womanist rhetorical methodology

As with all of Cannon’s approaches to teaching and learning, students were encouraged to embrace the cultivation of the intellect as a process that necessitates an appreciation for what is required to love the Lord with one’s whole self.

In a compilation of pioneering essays published as *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Cannon writes:

As a womanist theological ethicist my research continues to look directly at ancestral cultural material as well as relatively fixed literary forms. Womanist ethics examines the expressive products of oral culture that deal with our perennial quest for liberation, as well as written literature that invites African Americans to recognize “the distinction between nature in its inevitability and culture in its changeability.” When understood in its essentials, my work as a womanist ethicist focuses on the four following areas: (a) the creation of womanist pedagogical styles; (b) the emergence of distinctive investigative methodologies; (c) reconsideration of the established theories, doctrines, and debates of Eurocentric, male-normative ethics; and (d) the adjudicative function of womanist scholars. (2002, 69-70)

When I developed the protocol for my oral history research, “Remembering Lynching: Strategies of Resistance and Visions of Justice,” published as *Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror* (Sims 2016), I did not consider initially how my research would inform my teaching nor how my teaching would be shaped subsequently by a methodology whose results might offer significant insight into counter responses that enabled individuals to exercise agency in what is perhaps best described as a culture of domestic terror. By the time I began to design a Spring 2010 “Black Church in the United States” survey course, with more than forty oral histories recorded, the question was not if, but how, to incorporate an aspect of my research into the class. Designed to provide a general overview of religious expressions among Blacks in the United States, two-thirds of the students were Black, two were white, and two were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. What continues to stand out for me in this initial seminar offering was the white male student from East Texas who thought it appropriate to offer me a lynching artifact preserved by his family. I used this teaching moment to encourage the student, who subsequently dropped the course, to use this artifact to initiate conversations on race, violence, and memory with his relatives.

To address ways in which students might initiate difficult but necessary conversations about specific moral issues, I adopted a historical approach informed by an ethical dilemma as a way to (1) invite students to broaden their view of life in the United States and (2) frame an examination of the Black Church's response to lynching. This required each student to facilitate and record an oral history interview, not to exceed ninety minutes, about this particular national dilemma. In addition to a review of the approved research plan adapted for the course, an introduction to oral history methodology, as well as a review and discussion of at least one oral history interview from my project, I needed to adapt a pedagogical approach to guide students' engagement with an ethical issue with which they might have limited knowledge. In particular, I needed a teaching strategy that (a) emphasized an awareness of the critical role of language in shaping religious identity, (b) addressed multiple intersectionalities across a spectrum of social constructions, and (c) provided a framework to foster informed religious-social-historical analysis. I elected to modify a pedagogical approach, "Report of a Critical Conversation" (see Appendix) which Cannon introduced to me in a Fall 2003 seminar, "Social Ethics and Contemporary Thought."

Cannon defines the "Report of a Critical Conversation" as an account of a life-experience, which as nearly as possible recounts the exact words and happenings. It is the raw data of a discussion, meeting, or informal discourse. As such, the interviewer attempts to recall as nearly as possible exactly what was said and done in a given situation, initially imposing the least possible degree of interpretation of the facts. A verbatim similar to that used in other disciplines, the conversation, reconstructed as soon as possible after it occurs from notes or an electronic record, serves as a primary resource from which to write a three-part report. As a teaching and learning tool, Cannon's Report of a Critical Conversation includes a list of guiding questions that inform how to situate a conversation within a particular context. This background information, essential to an analysis of the conversation, contains indicators about themes that scaffold the conversation which warrant further investigation. In addition, Cannon insists that the investigator must also engage in a process of self-evaluation. In my own research, I situate Black elders' lynching narratives in Cannon's Report of a Critical Conversation as a pedagogical research approach to assess the relationship between oral history and ethical-theological ethnography.

Each interviewee had a story to tell about life in the United States of America during a period characterized by "mob rule" not confined to southern states. As I listened to each account, and read the associated transcript, I did so mindful that each lynching narrative is a primary text. In this regard, Cannon's pedagogical approach reminds me that priority must be given to both the interviewee's contextual location(s) and the socio-cultural factors that might influence how a story is transmitted and the level of detail offered.

Participants' narratives illustrate how oral histories, as primary texts, invite and maybe even demand that non oral historian researchers examine and assign value to these non-scribal sources as repositories from which to reframe theological questions that force us to examine key issues and ethical problems that may not be addressed from multiple perspectives in our accepted canonical sources. In other words, to employ Katie Geneva Cannon's pedagogical approach as a research tool is to engage in a thick description of the resultant ethical-theological-ethnographic analysis.

As a methodology, oral history, as more than data collection, can facilitate our ability to excavate sources and/or resources that add texture to difficult but necessary dialogues. In addition to providing students with written guidelines, class time was designated to prepare students to conduct an interview with an emphasis on active listening. While it has been eight years since I taught this course, I recall students making connections between memory and published representations of history as well as thinking more deeply about the function of narrative theology in their own ministry setting. As a teacher, this experience reemphasized the importance of prioritizing experiences and contributions of Blacks as an essential aspect of graduate theological education. Given a legacy of oral tradition as a primary mode of transmission among Blacks, to integrate oral history as a research methodology with Cannon's interdisciplinary approach is to engage in an intellectual endeavor whereby we celebrate embodied creativity that values Black peoples' lived experiences. Blacks who remember lynching remind us that, at its best, history is always an incomplete record. Thus, I do the work to which I am called, as I breathe deeply and engage in high impact aerobics guided by Cannon's yet to be developed fully womanist virtue ethics characterized by "invisible dignity, quiet grace, and unshouted courage" (1988, 159). Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, thank you for your gift to society, to the academy, to the church.

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ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS FORUM HONORING DR. KATIE GENEVA CANNON

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APPENDIX: Report of a Critical Conversation by Katie G. Cannon

Definition:

The Report of a Critical Conversation is an account of a life-experience, which as nearly as possible recounts the exact words, and happenings. It is the raw data of a discussion, meeting, or argument. The presenter attempts to recall as nearly as possible exactly what was said and done in a given situation, imposing initially the least possible degree of interpretation of the facts. The conversation may be reconstructed from notes or recorded electronically. The best time to commit a conversation to paper is soon after it happens.

Structure of Presentation:

1. Background

Share enough information to set the conversation in context. Who are the speakers? What did you have in mind when you decided to initiate this dialogue? What were your hopes and fears? When and how did you become involved with your conversational partner(s)? Describe the physical space and surrounding of the critical conversation.

2. Account of Conversation

Report exact words as often as possible. When paraphrasing, avoid interpretive remarks. That comes later. A form often used is that of dramatic writing.

Sara: How long have you been in ministry?

Ben: Are you referring to this time or the time before?

Ngozi: I was under the impression that this was your first ordination.

Ben: No, I've been ...

3. Analysis

Read the transcribed conversation at least twice, silently and aloud. Hear the voices and begin to form an interpretation. Identify key issues, ethical problems, and theological questions by uncovering the sequencing and layering of emergent themes that scaffold the conversation.

- mark words and phrases that you remember and the ethical issues inspired by the dialogue
- examine the transcript for hidden assumptions and premises that are not stated because they are assumed – logically, contextually, and/or culturally
 - note moments of silence, places of evasiveness and/or laughter
 - write about a significant difference between you and your conversation partner(s)
 - summarize the primary insights you learned

4. Evaluation

Estimate your effectiveness in this conversation. From looking at the data, what observations can you make about your own skills as a listener? Did you do what you set out to do? If so, how? What factors or dynamics emerged which you did not anticipate? During the conversation, what points do you wish you had made but you did not? What would you do differently if you could have another conversation on this topic? Will you dialogue with this person again, why or why not?

Katie G. Cannon (2002)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela D. Sims is President of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. She is the author of *Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror* (2016).

