

**TRANSLATING WOMANISM INTO
PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS**

by

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Introduction

Over the past two and a half decades, an alternative pedagogy has been evolving in this country. It can be found in all the disciplines of religious study where African American women, once locked out, have been able to enter. The notion of womanist pedagogy can probably be traced to those moments in Black women's seminary training when two or three of us gathered together to share our observations of classroom dynamics, to question the weighty authority of male canonized texts and interpretations, and to contemplate meaningful research projects of our own design. We dreamed of inscribing what Black women really think, see and do upon a small section of the large *tabula rasa* of genuine inclusivity in the academy of learned societies.¹

Twenty-five years ago when I began seminary there were fewer than 35 African American women enrolled in Master of Divinity programs and only one African American woman registered in a doctoral program in the 200 accredited seminaries in North America.² As Black women choosing to pursue advanced theological degrees in a predominantly male setting, alienation, isolation and marginalization became our daily fare. Even with the

requisite credentials for matriculation in hand, we were constantly barraged with arrogance and insults, suspicion and insensitivity, back-hand compliments and tongue-in-cheek naivete. The worlds of divinity school, denominational headquarters, regional judicatory offices and local parishes which we negotiated demanded different and often wrenching allegiances.³ But we continued to study, struggling for our rightful places in the church and in the academy.

From time to time the paths of African American women seminarians crossed and a sisterly solidarity started to form. We talked about how we walked into every situation knowing that we were "the sister outsider."⁴ We entered every class discussion with a developing awareness that the indisputable norms of established orthodox truth⁵ would not be the norms of our daily existence.⁶ We engaged with others across all kinds of barriers and most of those with whom we dialogued were not even aware such obstacles existed. In order to crack open the patriarchal traditions that underlie and generate oppressive Christian practices, particularly against women of color, we worked with our sleeves rolled up, busily sharpening our oyster knife.⁷

In 1978, Dr. Delores Williams, published an essay that I think identifies the foundational underpinning of womanist pedagogy. In it, she says:

If I were asked what we black women students need to make the Union experience meaningful, I would say we need what every other student needs. We need role models. We need competent scholars who are black women. We need black women to provide input into selection processes... We need to select our own voices to represent us in those

processes. We need mature black women scholars who are actively committed to the task of welding together the theological and the ethical, the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the theological enterprise. We need black women in the support and counselling areas... We need spiritual, community and financial support to structure whatever it takes to make our academic experience here compatible with our vocational objectives and with our personal needs as students. We need the facilities to enter into those self-definition processes which help us understand more fully our ministry to the world.⁸

What I want to suggest in these remarks is how womanist pedagogy emerged out of this lived context where Black women have been challenging conventional and outmoded dominant religious resources so as to deconstruct those ideologies which lead us into complicity with our own oppression. Seminary-trained African American women began inventing opposable-thumb processes by problematizing the "obvious" to create alternative ways of conceptualizing the "natural." In other words, African American women scholars create new modes of rigorous inquiry for dealing critically with the tradition, structure and praxis of our fields of study in order to invite women and men of contemporary faith communities to a more serious encounter with the contribution African American women have made and continue to make to the study of religion. The imperatives suggested by this pedagogy call for engaged scholarship organized around three major concepts: historical ethos, embodied pathos, and communal logos--these three concepts help us to live more faithfully the radicality of the

Gospel.⁹

Historical Ethos:

Historical Ethos is a liberating term applied to politically and socially aware members of the African American intelligentsia who embrace the spirit, standards and ideals that characterize our rich educational heritage. In other words, *historical ethos* is a conventional device used to critique the cultural context and the political climate that prevail in formally structured learning environments. The long and conflictive history of African Americans in the United States of America lies at the heart of my vigilant affirmation.¹⁰ I rally around this Black educational heritage, safeguarding its everyday wisdom and proclaiming its diversified depth as an invaluable asset to civilization.

Several African American writers have produced works that address historical memory as cultural resistance. Michelle Cliff and Toni Morrison are two of several women writers who have written narratives in which memory is central. In her latest novel, *Free Enterprise*, Michelle Cliff successfully argues that as women of African descent we carry within us complex fundamental values that underlie, permeate and actuate major African patterns and retentions. Cliff's narrative strategy is predicated on the notion that if our lips, our hips, our skin color and our bone structure, are passed on from our ancestors, then why, why not memory?¹¹ Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize author who has attained international fame, marks this distinct kind of conceptual memory as journeying to a site to see what remains have been left behind and reconstructing the world that these remains imply.¹²

The foregoing considerations lead us back to cultural memories functioning as *historical ethos*. Beginning in 1793, Black women, in relatively small, albeit significant numbers, toiled day and night constructing a legacy as educators. The dominant society makes little reference about the contributions of the "freed intelligentsia" among African Americans.¹³ Steadily increasing in numbers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Black women taught reading, writing and arithmetic in overcrowded one-teacher schools.¹⁴ Despite a paucity of funds, multiple obstacles, deplorable learning environments, even when the much-needed material resources were non-existent, teacher after teacher said to African American students in run-down, dilapidated Jim Crow buildings, "I will give you the best I got and I want you to be even better."

Now, it is surprising to teach students of affluence who question with suspicion my commitment to my African American pedagogical tradition--"to give each student the best that I got because I want them to be even better." I have had more discussions in my office with students worrying whether or not my constructive feedback in the margins of their papers is no more than wolf tickets, wooden nickels, academic pennies with holes in them.

The invisible imbalance of cognitive imperialism gets played out in the culture of education in very visible expectations. The ubiquitous assumption of many of our colleagues as well as students in the womanist classroom is that they are not learning, that they are not participating in the rigor of academic excellence, that they are not getting the biggest bang for their educational buck if they are not beaten up, if they are not being told repeatedly how they got it wrong, how they messed up, if their papers are not bleeding with red ink from nonstop nitpicking of minor

flaws.

The principal saving grace in this dynamic is that I cannot afford to use up creative life-energy worrying a great deal about these entrenched suspicions and lopsided characterizations. Each of us has paid and is paying a different historical price to be in this so-called "common" classroom. Such students need not fear, distrust nor rebel against my particular version of womanist pedagogy. Due to the collective power of educational convention, womanist pedagogy will neither jeopardize nor lower the "core" value of their academic currency. What joins most educational institutions whose claim-to-fame is training "the talented tenth" is that the deliberate policies and repeated practices of white and male hegemony will continue to enforce the norms of cognitive imperialism as legitimate.

In fact, what emerges from this example is that the traditional, normative classroom in dominant institutions of higher learning in this country is dictated by "knowledge capitalism." The market value of academic currency is determined by the ability to deconstruct, to tear a work apart, to rip an idea limb from limb, to chew up the data and spit it out as a negative raw product.¹⁵ My inheritance says otherwise.

My experience as a teacher is rooted in the specificity of my particular *historical ethos*. Therefore, I will not allow my classroom nor my professional personhood as a self-defined womanist scholar be made into anybody else's image. I refuse to participate in the imposing presence, the enshrined perpetuation and the sometimes subtle, subliminal legitimatization of androcentric patriarchy. To put it succinctly, the protective arena of *historical ethos* operative in the womanist classroom bears witness to the ancestral gifts from my foreparents. The particular educational tradition I inherited demands that the

influence of history cannot be ignored.¹⁶

Embodied Pathos

For the second concept, I claim the phrase *Embodied Pathos*. Linking "historical ethos" with "embodied pathos" centralizes personal experience in teaching for justice-making transformation. *Embodied pathos* means that requirements for the course are designed to facilitate students in teaching themselves what they need to know. In addition to past history, we must unmask the truth of our life circumstances as identifiable referents.

For instance, as a womanist ethicist I have created seven graduate courses in Christian social ethics and each course is a metalogue, three courses in one. Each course consists of three concentric circles of discourse. Hence, womanist liberation ethics is very much like what the prophet Ezekiel talked about--"wheels in the middle of wheels way up in the middle of the air." One wheel deals with the intellectual predisposition of traditional male thinkers, usually dead or of European ancestry whose very language of objective universality masks our existence, forces us to persist in the binary opposition of either-or, and looks askance at Black women as superfluous appendages, saddled with odd concerns about race, sex, and class oppression.¹⁷ The second wheel focuses on the specificity of African American Christian culture, systematic accounts of the history and achievements, perspectives and experiences of members of the Black Church community. The third wheel explores the experiential dimensions of women's texts and interpretations. This is the part of each course wherein we listen to women of the African Diaspora speaking our mother's tongue, as we refine and critique our own realities

across time and space through the written word.¹⁸

Now underlying my womanist pedagogy imaged as wheels in the middle of wheels is the comprehensive definition of liberation ethics that I created in 1981 when I was a tutor in Introduction to Christian Ethics with Dr. Beverly Harrison at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Asked by students what, then, is the special nature of "liberation ethics?" I wrote on the chalkboard:

Liberation ethics is debunking, unmasking and disentangling the ideologies, theologies and systems of value operative in a particular society.

"How" is it done? By analyzing the established power relationships that determine the cultural, political and economic presuppositions and by evaluating the legitimating myths which sanction the enforcement of such values.

"Why" is it worth doing? So that we may become responsible decision-makers who envision structural and systemic alternatives that embrace the well-being of us all.

Now, this metalogic understanding of liberation ethics has served as the guiding principle in defining my purpose for each course I teach. The "what" and thereby the "how" and the "why" give me perspectives for how best to design a syllabus, select required texts, compile bibliographies, prepare instructional strategies, choose reference materials, organize the sequence of assignments and create pre- and post-assessment questionnaires.

In light of such a creative agenda for embodied pathos, I begin each course by introducing the syllabus as the covenant-of-intention. The principle of personal accountability of intellectual inquiry is crucial. In order for participants to move in the same direction we must mutually own the course of study. Under this model, there

is always time during the first class session to walk through the requirements collaboratively, actually to do a facsimile of the assignment that is due the next class period.

Yet if this educational endeavor is not to miscarry, I must be clear in the introductory session to name straight up, front and center, the discombobulation that most students will experience. The majority of students that I teach enter a different world when they walk into my classroom. Their cultural reality of order is no longer the basic, core scholarship of study. Womanism is the backdrop for this new experience, the upside-downness of meaning.

Over the years embodied pathos has enabled me to become even more cognizant of what is required for students to move into another culture, another context, another country, one which is my home. Sometimes students have to read and re-read the required texts because the books on my reading lists transport them across unfamiliar space and time. The contextual nature of learning means that we must cross new boundaries with care. I work at staying sensitive to the slowness of the majority of students who feel alienated by the reality of poor, Black women as the point of departure. Even the most capable students in my courses lose a lot of time hunting, digging and rooting up some semblance of the familiar.

Far too many students in today's world enter the womanist classroom armed with ferocious mythologies derived from past experiences wherein African American women are stereotyped either as hostile villains or as subservient mammies. For students who are members of the dominant race, the African American woman intellectual in the role of authority is "the embodiment of inferiority whether we are inside or outside particular

institutions and regardless of how we perform."¹⁹ A large number of students are trapped, locked into previous interpretations of experiences drawn from the powerful, distorted, interplay of negative stereotypes of race, gender and class. These students test, re-test, and still test again the paradigm shifts occurring in the womanist classroom.

The interrelatedness of *historical ethos* and *embodied pathos* is exemplified in the comments of a graduate student early in my teaching career. This seminarian said, "I cannot take your class because I refuse to put myself in a position where you can evaluate me." This particular white woman worked as a supervising nurse in a downtown city hospital. As she sat in my office, completing the paper work to drop the course, this woman informed me of the number of black children who are incest survivors that she counsels every day. She cited the number of legal abortions for Black women she supervises every week. She even trotted out her one or two acts of civil disobedience in the 1960s but concluded that she would be damned before she would put herself in a position where I, the Black woman was the one in the role of authority; where I, the Black woman would be her evaluator; where I, the Black woman would ever be in a position to grade her work.

What then, can I or anyone say after such brutal, unrestrained disrespect? What are our options in dealing with this type of contempt? What structural recourse is in place for handling and dealing with these types of indignities? However, I must confess that there are still occasions, occasions too numerous to count, when I am rendered dumbfounded, completely stunned on a regular basis by the rude arrogance and low-down despicable audacity of a hand-full of students who believe that their white-skinness or their materially privileged backgrounds

or their male genitalia gives them licenses to make the most offensive, bludgeoning comments and to pose gross abominable questions in any course taught by women of color. The simple common courtesy granted to other professors is nowhere to be found.

As for me, I simply signed the drop form, packed my briefcase with lecture notes for the next class, walked down the hall and began again.

Communal Logos

The third and final concept of *Communal Logos* distinguishes the womanist classroom as a place where dialectic-dialogic conversations can happen. What is important to point out is that discussions are organized so that questions and answers are continually reformulated. A key feature in the womanist classroom is reciprocity, all parties must participate. In a learning environment of wide differences and sharp contrast, communal logic conveys the irreducible character of our common language, as well as the tension that besets our conflicting realities.

As a womanist ethicist in the field of Religious Studies I realized within my first semester of teaching there is a core of students who enroll in every course I teach. So as not to become redundant, nor run the risk of becoming a bore, I decided to create different procedures and working concepts for each of seven courses originating from each of seven wheel spokes radiating from the hub that Beverly Harrison calls the "dance of redemption." I created seven methods to get seminarians to teach themselves what they need to know about ethics. This points to the heuristic nature of womanist pedagogy and it means that in the courses I teach the students use cognitive,

self-educating exploratory processes to discern mechanisms of exploitation in order to identify what patterns must be altered in order for justice to occur.

The students generate the energy that translates pedagogy into praxis by actively seeking and naming the cognitive dissonance they experience in their belief systems, lifestyles and in their behavior. This type of educational process is designed to get students to become self-conscious and deliberate learners who continually confront the inherent contestability of life's contradictions. The emancipatory historiography requirements (wherein students question whose experience is validated, what groups are left out, what ideology accompanies the analysis, and what is the framework that provides meaning and holds conflicting elements together) sharpen their analytical skills as to how particular death-dealing situations came to be what they are and how they affect our lives and the life of our communities. By consistently applying an ever-developing liberationist rationale to classroom discussions, time is not wasted on rehashing what is already known. We begin with those concerns about God, the world and neighbor that are genuinely problematic and confusing. The refectory as well as the library is alive with the hum of "erons"²⁰ as students reflect on their work of demystifying the ever-present dominating and chauvinistic Christian heritage, in order to act more effectively as empowered doers of justice.

It is essential that class discussions be structured so that the dialectic of historical ethos, embodied pathos and communal logos can be apprehended. I use the data gathered in the assessment questionnaires and in the race, sex, class inventories to design my lectures and to facilitate class discussions. The knack is to encourage a certain movement toward conscientization without seeming to

squelch others. Like Ann Berthoff,²¹ a philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts, I too have learned to come to class, not thinking of a territory to be covered but with a compass so as to determine the metalogical direction among a community of critically conscious ethicists.

Womanist teaching is interactive. I read students' papers the way I read letters, to learn more, especially more about the person. I conduct a running dialogue in the margins of each paper, informing students of supplemental readings and challenging them to find their ethical voice so that they can develop a method of moral reasoning which will stand them in good stead in any situation. The chief pedagogical value of weekly community announcements, lecture-note handouts (which the students have coined as "opaque transparencies"), conscientization exercises, written course requirements and an end-of-each-course announcement/celebration ceremony is to encourage students to see how they can embrace what Professor Harrison calls a faith praxis that transforms life in the direction of non-alienating experience.²² The overall objective of this work implies moral notions about obligations, values and virtues characterized by benevolent cohumanity and sacred power.

In addition, I now require self-referential, social class inventories. Each student applies a fundamental inquiry of economic anatomy to her/his biotext. In order to assess the functioning dimensions of social class, students critique patterns of distribution in our capitalist, political economy and the different stratifications of political power which have been studied in the course. Besides the systemic analyses, students wrestle with authoritative, legitimate interpretations of subtle as well as highly theoretical concepts and consequences of social origins and

mobility within our collective consciousness. This perspective of individual subjectivity, oftentimes shaped by excruciatingly painful experiences that students coined as a *class attack*, takes into consideration categories of cultural dispositions of class.

It is not surprising, therefore, that these inventories of social genealogy emerge carrying deep implications, endowed with profound power-shift dynamics in the womanist classroom. Social class identification tends not to follow a straight line but rather the contours, detours and byroads within a minimum time period of three generations. Many students, in writing their socio-religious autobiographies, have found something within themselves that links their lives to others, according to the communal logic that shapes the human condition. So understood, class is a mandatory tool in justice-making transformation.

In using their own experiences as data, students in successive stages of development sharpen their skills in moral reasoning. Gradually, they grasp the fundamental objective which is that long-range, justice-making internal resolutions are more important than quick, end of the semester, grade point average external solutions. In short, the major merit of "communal logos" is that there is no value-free space, no color-blank space, no apolitical space, no mathematically regulated spatio-temporal dispassionate space of so-called neutral, detached objectivity.

Conclusion:

Regardless of the differences between *historical ethos*, *embodied pathos*, and *communal logos*, they retain a common characteristic within the womanist classroom, which is the interactive engagement of both professor and

students. A question implicit in translating womanism into pedagogical praxis and raised throughout this lecture that particularly sets up the "why crisis" is the question "So what?" In fact, some of us may argue that if the power dynamics in the classroom are so oppressive, why don't women of color leave, why don't we simply fold up our tents, shake the dust off our feet and go teach somewhere else? Others among us may wonder as to the overall significance of what African American women teach. A few of us may question as to whether or not all the time and effort we put into our teaching is worth it. One or two may ask, does any of this really matter?

Now, that we understand *historical ethos*, *embodied pathos*, and *communal logos* in the translation of womanism into pedagogical praxis, it is mandatory to answer the "So what?" question. One response as to why every institution of learning needs womanist classrooms is that these are the spaces/places where we critique our epistemological assumptions. What we know, how we know, and the way we go about knowing is reconstructed. A further answer to the question "So what?" is that as justice-making moral agents we have the responsibility to identify the so-called normative aspects of social, political, cultural and economic typologies which have minimized African American women's experiences or totally erased African American women's contributions as liabilities to civilization. And, a final answer to the question "So what?" argues that the omission of womanist traditions result in education that is unbalanced, knowledge that is incomplete, and a world view that is distorted.

In essence, I conclude that translating womanism into pedagogical praxis is something we *do*; epistemology is accepting the findings we come to *know*; womanist pedagogy is the process by which we bring this kind of

knowing about African American women into relation with a justice-praxis for members of our species and the wider environment in which we are situated, in order to resist conditions that thwart life, arriving at new understandings of our doing, knowing and being.

ENDNOTES

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20. "Erons" is a phrase coined by Wynn Legerton in May 1989 to describe the erotic particles emitted into the air whenever we are doing the work our souls must have. For a fuller discussion see the Work in Progress Paper, "Alienation and Anger: A Black and a White Woman's Struggle for Mutuality in an Unjust World," by Katie G. Cannon and Carter Heyward with a Response by Sung Min Kim. No. 54, The Stone Center, Wellesley College, 1992.

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THE LECTURER

Katie Geneva Cannon, the Religious Studies Department's 1997 Witherspoon Lecturer, is an Associate Professor of Religion at Temple University. A native of Kannapolis, North Carolina, she previously taught at the Episcopal Divinity School, a member school of the Boston Theological Institute. Dr. Cannon is the author of *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1995) and *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988). She is the first African American woman to earn the Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York (1983) and the first African American Woman to be ordained into the ministry of the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. (1974). A brief sketch of her life is featured in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's work, *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*.

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In 1984, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Professor Witherspoon's distinguished service to UNC Charlotte, the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies established the Loy H. Witherspoon Lectures in Religious Studies. Hundreds of his friends and colleagues contributed to the fund that made this the first named, endowed lecture at UNC Charlotte.

Loy H. Witherspoon, Professor of Philosophy and Religion, was the first chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, established at UNC Charlotte in 1964. When the original Department was divided, he also served as the first chairman of the Department of Religious Studies.

Dr. Witherspoon, an ordained United Methodist minister, was instrumental in establishing the United Religious Ministry at UNC Charlotte as an ecumenical approach to campus ministry. He has received many honors, including the NCNB Award for Teaching Excellence. He has served as president of the faculty and is the only faculty member to have been twice elected to that office. Currently, he is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Religious Studies.

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