

Appropriation and Reciprocity in the Doing of Feminist and Womanist Ethics

Author(s): Emilie M. Townes, Katie Geneva Cannon and Kristine A. Culp

Source: *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 13 (1993), pp. 187-203

Published by: Society of Christian Ethics

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23559561>

Accessed: 28-03-2019 02:36 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Society of Christian Ethics* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*

# **Appropriation and Reciprocity in the Doing of Feminist and Womanist Ethics**

## **Introduction**

**Emilie M. Townes**

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff  
not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street  
but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff  
like a kleptomaniac workin hard & forgettin while  
stealin  
this is mine/ this ain't yr stuff/  
now why dont you put me back and let me hang out in my  
own self  
somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff

ntozake shange, *For Colored Girls  
Who Have Considered Suicide  
When the Rainbow is Enuf*

This quotation from the work of ntozake shange is from a conversation about Black women who are moving into their own tomorrows. Although it is about a man's almost betrayal of a woman, it also speaks to the following essays on appropriation and reciprocity in the doing of feminist and womanist ethics. The danger is that we have been trying to walk off with each other's stuff. The aim of these papers is to consider this possibility and to provide a forum for those who see womanist-feminist dialogue as a viable source for interpreting their own work in progress. These essays intend conversation that respects the boundaries of race, ethnicity, sexuality, as well as cultural and religious traditions in our approaches to the doing of liberation ethics.

The essence of this conversation is a measured look at women's experience as a source and resource for feminist and womanist religious scholars. The key concern is to learn from the dangers of relativizing the particularities into a mundane and unnuanced analysis. This has the

makings of poor scholarship and belies a certain hegemonic control over the lives and the work of women seeking to learn and to do analysis and reflection from the grist of their lives and the corporate experiences of their communities.

In short, being women all the time is not enough. Womanist wisdom cautions that because many of us *are* women all the time, feminist and womanist scholars cannot too easily or quickly assume that because the issues sound the same, the analytical tools are strikingly similar, and the passion for justice is like an echo in our souls, that we can equate the struggle of other women with our own in an unreflective manner.

An internal rigorous hermeneutic of suspicion must be at work as feminists and womanists do the work of ethics. All of us are subject to the ravages of structural racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and so forth. However, we cannot collapse this into a grand narrative that subsumes the distinctive features and histories women of color and white women. Feminist and womanist work, at its most piercing, examines the very structure of domination and subordination and how all of us move in and out of roles of victim and oppressor.

The essays raise the caution flag that reciprocity is as hard a task as appropriation. The particularity of women's lives is the essence of who they are and the substance of their communities. This is "their stuff" and women approaching their material as if it can be taken *carte blanche* and interpreted through other lenses of experience with no question or attempt to understand the culture it comes from and the lives it represents, does violence not only to that culture, but wreaks havoc on measured attempts at scholarship that seek to be truly liberatory ethics.

The goal is shared work that will increase our perceptual constructs, expand our intellectual horizons, and work toward justice. This is, finally, not just a dialogue that is important for feminists and womanists. The concerns and issues raised in the essays by Katie Geneva Cannon and Kristine A. Culp are academic questions for *all* scholars. The task for ethicists is to refrain from rushing into the now-filled-silences of the voices that were long unheard (but not unspoken) and explain what we hear and what we have learned. As ethicists dedicated to pithy analysis, our work may well mean that we listen longer and harder before we speak so that appropriation is joined in genuine reciprocity in the doing of our discipline.

## Appropriation and Reciprocity in the Doing of Womanist Ethics

Katie Geneva Cannon

I will be forever grateful to Cheryl J. Sanders for her willingness in allowing her essay, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," to serve as the lead article in the "Womanist Roundtable Discussion" that was published in *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, in 1989.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Sanders's "Final Rejoinder" became the catalyst for my interest in the recent controversy concerning appropriation and reciprocity. Sanders's closing remarks and assessment of the roundtable discussion articulated a contestable issue similar to the ethical crisis that Cecil W. Cone advanced in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

Cone charged that Black Theology failed to recognize the irreconcilability of Black Power and established Eurocentric academic theology. He argued that the failure of major Black liberation theologians was the inability to create Black Theology from the essential core and essence of Black religious sources. In fact, Cone objected to the way African American theologians succumbed to the conservative theoretical concerns of the received European traditional standards in order to achieve academic respectability within the structure of predominantly white seminaries.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>"Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," A Response to Cheryl Sanders in *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 5, no. 2 (1989): 83-112.

<sup>2</sup>Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, Henry Belin, Publisher, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>Cone also argued that the Black Power slogans and the motif of Black radicals are inappropriate for doing Black Theology, for expounding upon the orderly description of the faith of the Black church.

The problem with theological standards can be stated generally as an undue sensitivity on the part of black theologians to the opinions and working conventions of white theologians. Because theology, like other fields of western intellectual activity, was developed by white people, it ignored black religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large part of its methods and results are inappropriate for black theologians. When black theologians write about black religion, they will inevitably depart in large measure from matters that have concerned the white majority and have therefore been labeled "good" theology. This will, of course, create a question of "acceptability" for the black scholars. Although the black writers have often shown considerable courage in resisting the pained outcries of white colleagues, the former have sometimes compromised in the interest of "dialogue" or "reconciliation." While this may sometimes be appropriate in informal encounters, it confuses and retards Black Theology when carried into formal writing.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Cone reasons that as long as African American scholars allow Euro-American analytical concepts to serve as the point of departure in Black Religious Studies, there will be a distortion in the essence of what is intended to be analyzed. He concludes that contemporary writers of Black Theology cannot probe the depths and scope of Black Religion if they use the academic tools of white theologians.

Cheryl Sanders expressed in relation to womanist scholarship Cone's identical concern in the following way:

The fact that almost all of their footnotes are derived from the writings of black women sends the important signal that we are appreciating, analyzing and appropriating our own sources, and also those of black men, without appealing for the most part, to white sources for sanction and approval of what we ourselves have said. This observation is especially significant in view of the fact that in a racist society, self-hatred manifests itself as unmistakably in the academy as in the ghetto when we are pressured to employ our oppressors' criteria to evaluate our own work and worth. To see black women embracing and engaging our material is a celebration in itself.<sup>5</sup>

After reading and analyzing the above statement by Sanders, I realized that of the four other respondents in the roundtable discussion (Drs. Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, bell hooks, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes) I made more references to and cited more sources by white women scholars than any of the other womanist respondents.

Yes, this was my irrefutable ethical crisis—am I, Katie G. Cannon, who boldly stated my anger with Sanders's treatment of womanist as a

---

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>5</sup>Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion," 111.

secular terminological issue and who proudly proclaimed myself “a self-avowed, practicing, Black-Womanist-Liberationist-Christian Ethicist,” guilty of misappropriation? By using the scholarship of white feminist liberationists to frame and substantiate the theoretical requisites for rejecting patriarchal intrusions in the predicament of African American women, am I running the risk of lobotomizing womanist ethics and diminishing both Black women agents and agency? Within the terms of the controversy, we need to ask: is it appropriate for Black women to use analytical modes of exposing and criticizing domination and exploitation created by women with different social identities? In other words, what are the pros and cons of modeling our right to meaningful and constructive self-determination on paradigms created by non-Black women?

Thus, the implied accusation in Sanders’s rejoinder was a shocking and terrifying disorientation for me. I knew that I had fashioned an original, concise, and powerful critique of Sanders’s essay, and yet her closing statement suggests that my response was somehow bogus relative to her criterion of womanist accountability. Using quotations from the writings of Beverly W. Harrison and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza to shape and substantiate my theoretical argument was not a manifestation of self-hatred, nor did it make me a fraud.

It was at this moment that I felt I had no choice but to do everything I could to confront this challenge. Every reflective and well-intentioned African American scholar who is consciously concerned with “the liberation of a whole people” must work to eradicate the criterion of legitimacy that implicitly presumes an absolute incompatibility between womanist critical scholarship and white feminist liberationist sources. As one of the senior womanist ethicists, I am issuing advance warning to new womanist scholars, both actual and potential, that Sanders’s devaluation of credibility consequent on such a conservative framework of black-sources-only encourages guesswork, blank spots, and time-consuming busy work, the re-invention of the proverbial wheel over and over again. Having struggled so long and hard at the intersection of race, sex, and class, African American women scholars cannot allow the suspicion of fraudulence to spread and contaminate the creative horizons in womanist research and writing. Staying open-minded as heterogeneous theoreticians may prove to be the most difficult ethical challenge in securing and extending the legacy of our intellectual life.

In my experience as a Black woman in a racist and misogynistic society, tremendous pressure is continuously exerted on me to choose between my racial identity and my womanhood. Black women are repeatedly asked to cast our lot of identifying loyalties in one or the other competing camp. Either we are Blacks or we are women. Despite womanist scholars’ best efforts in arguing that this is a conceptual

impossibility because we embody both realities as Black women, the full force of the punitive and damaging effects of binary categories remain intact. When African American women defy the traditionally accepted race and gender niches of where others think we and our work belong, our essential worth and competence come into question.

In light of these concerns, let us consider a working definition for appropriation in the doing of womanist ethics. Generally speaking, one would have to say that the concept of appropriation has to do with the act of preempting, usurping, confiscating—possessing the power to seize and control a people's resources without authority or with questionable authority. Within the terms of this critique, the social process of appropriation means the taking over of someone else's culture, and I would add, someone's educational capital or discourse, more or less with a desire beforehand to convert the thing taken over to one's own use.

One may question how operative is this working definition of appropriation when I, an African American woman, study in an in-depth way the body of feminist liberationist literature created by Beverly W. Harrison, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Letty M. Russell in order to lay bare the underlying realities of Black women's lives? Is it merely self-evident that a person or a group is guilty of appropriation only when they have power to co-opt, seize and control? Is it reasonable to assume that any process of appropriation is also a process of confiscation?

Yes, this is the ethical dilemma—what is the appropriate relationship between women of color who only in the past decade have been able to enter the learned societies of the theological guild and senior women scholars of European and Euro-American ancestry who have exercised their legitimate right to shape the essential nature and foundations of feminist liberationist discourse? Or, is authentic womanist discourse an unprecedented phenomenon, representing not just progress in our collective struggle to transform invasion and conquest to revelation and choice, but total innovation in cultural ideological and ethical preferences? Is womanist ethics *sui generis*? As African American womanist ethicists, how do we evaluate the content of white feminist ethics and its relevance to the lives of the majority of Black women who live under radically different circumstances? In essence, can there be appropriation without intellectual domination?

Next, let us consider the concept of reciprocity. The assumption has been that in a reciprocal process one recognizes the validity of sources and origins in the development of one's own discourse. For me it means giving back in kind and quality, mutually exchanging and being changed by each other's data and resources, and paying back what I have received from working with some of the keenest, formative feminist intellectuals of our time. There is indeed a collaborative moving to and fro between

my work and the work of white feminist liberationists as we each return something given, done, or said from a place of mutual dependence, action and influence.

Even more obvious and troubling is the question that emerges at this point in the debate. Is the politics of citation solely determined by who befriends whom? The vast majority of African American women have not trusted white, women mentor-friends who consistently show commitment and belief in our capabilities and motivate us to work to our full potential. Only a few of us have received genuine invitations into the exclusive inner circle of European and Euro-American feminism. Can there be reciprocity among womanist and feminist scholars without the a prior acceptance of unguarded comradeship and close friendships? The intellectual and political currents within the feminist movements determine whether or not African American women will respond ye or nay to these strategic overtures of friendship. The invitations by white women are not unintentional, nor are the responses by Black women insignificant.

In order to address some of these emerging questions concerning heterogeneous perspectives and critical modes of assessment that ignite, inform, and help establish the parameters of appropriation and reciprocity in womanist discourse, I sent out fifty questionnaires focusing on "Epistemological Sources for Critical Womanist Scholarship."<sup>6</sup> The number of questionnaires answered indicates what is at stake for "the essential core and essence of womanist religious sources."<sup>7</sup>

Over and over again, African American women responded that the starting point for womanist epistemology is the oral culture bequeathed to us by our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters. Examples from the womanist questionnaire illustrate this:

I attribute the origins of my womanist voice to my grandmother, a strong, articulate woman who was deliberate in nurturing my sense of who I am and what I could attain in life.

The origins of my womanist voice are from my great-grandmother, grandmothers, mother and aunts and the kitchen-table conversations I heard and

---

<sup>6</sup>A three-item, open-end questionnaire (a. What are the origins of your womanist voice? b. What forces-experiences shape the voice you have? and c. Whose interests does your voice serve?) was sent out in the Spring of 1992 to fifty African American women who are theologically trained. The sample was interdenominational and included self-identified womanist clergy, faculty, doctoral candidates and seminarians across the United States. There was a 85 percent response rate to the survey.

<sup>7</sup>This quotation, taken from the operating framework for drafting the questionnaire, was inspired by Cone's *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*.



participated in from the time I was four or five years old. That is as far back as I can remember really *understanding* the stories and values they passed on to me. I inherited my voice from them and the richness of their conversations.

My womanist voice comes from deep within myself. It rests in my innate God consciousness present in the breath of my ancestors from the Motherland. Scripture inspires it to speak. My womanist voice is strong because of my mother's strength and resilience, attributes which I choose to embrace. My Womanist voice is the legacy of Wisdom passed over to me through the lives of African American women, living and dead; kin women, women of the church, women activists and friends near and far. . . . My Womanist voice is deep speaking into Deep!

My voice originates in the personal voices of my mother and grandmother and sister whose voices sound like my own when it comes to personal survival and the survival of family members, as well as the community.

The origins of my womanist voice are from my reflections on my life as a black woman, a daughter, a sister and a spiritual sojourner. The origins seem to arise from the flowing waters of the "life river" within me. When I retreat with myself I find myself sitting at the banks of my life river, listening to the constant, continuous, flow of river water, calling me to flow with it, to stir it up, or simply lie in it. The voices of women, black women, that I have known and have read about, call to me from the river.

Through inventive expressions, womanists are finding opportunities to model in our writing the traditional intimacies of our historical-social context. Our goal is to acquaint others with the distinctive dynamics of the orally constituted thought forms of African Americans so that the stream of Black women's proverbial sayings and wisdom stories flows naturally into our academic life. By linking the ironies, frustrations, and ambiguities of the spoken wisdom from mouth to ear to the visible but silent thoughts written on the page, we import the codification of our ancestors' lore.

It is a fact, to be sure, that as we engage in the scholarship of interpreting, particularizing, and reproducing the life, power, and meaning of the spoken wisdom, the appropriation question changes. The new question is: how do we remain both beholden to our inherited religious culture materials as well as responsible in favoring the extension of oral texts for posterity? In other words, what are the tradeoffs in our movement from orality to textuality?

Another distinctive feature of epistemological sources for critical womanist scholarship is the intersection of medium and message. As African American scholars, our effort is to transpose the essential

experiential elements of racism, heterosexism, and class elitism into a written medium, as a way of affirming Black people's ethical equilibrium against the odds.

Responses from the questionnaire bear this out. Womanist respondents note:

My upbringing in the Black Church and the racist, sexist, homophobic culture of life in the USA are the experiences that shape the womanist voice I have.

The two important experiences that shape my voice consist of being one of the first Black children to attend an all white school (my siblings and I might have integrated it) and coming out as a lesbian at age 19. As the daughter of a middle class Black woman and a poor Black man from the south, who struggled his way into the middle class, my commitments to race, gender, sexual orientation and gender justice come from my experiences in this context.

My voice is shaped by the personal experience of racism and other forms of oppression, particularly the elitism of class oppression in the African American community (sometimes manifested as regionalism, North/South). My voice is also shaped by experiences of sexism and, finally, by seeing others oppressed and exploited.

Living, being exposed to white culture at an early age—the demystification of it, Black culture, and seeing and feeling first hand the destructive power of alcoholism are the experiences that inform my womanism.

The womanist writing consciousness does not obscure or deny the existence of tridimensional oppression, but rather through full, sharp awareness of race, sex, and class oppression we present the liberating possibilities that also exist. Our womanist work is to draw on the rugged endurance of Black folks in America who outwit, out-manuever and out-scheme social systems and structures that maim and stifle mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. Repeatedly, in light of the stated task, womanist thinkers raise the question of reciprocity in this way: how do we bring to the forefront the unity of knower and known?

Hence, we have come full circle. The origin of the idea dictates the claims of accountability. Whether we begin with paradigms created by mentors of European and Euro-American ancestry or with theoretical constructs emerging from the oral traditions in the African Diaspora or with a dialectical, syncretistic interplay between the two, we must answer the inescapable questions of appropriation and reciprocity. To decline the ethical labor of wrestling with the questions I have raised throughout this essay is to cede our future scholarship to conventional, either-or, dichoto-

mies. It is to play the game of androcentric, heteropatriarchal academese without understanding it.

## Appropriation, Reciprocity, and the "Use" Fiction

Kristine A. Culp

A productive site for thinking about and working out patterns of reciprocity and appropriation in womanist and feminist ethics is the use of literature in ethical and theological reflection.<sup>8</sup> Citations and discussions of novels, short stories, and poetry by Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Marge Piercy, and others proliferate in books, articles, syllabi, and program announcements for scholarly meetings. And for good reason: through Toni Morrison's novels, the texture of African-American experience in small town southern Ohio can be felt; read Marge Piercy and enter into, to some extent, a world of Jewish, Detroit working-class "making do"; with Margaret Atwood cross the border north to Toronto and become immersed in the ethos of a white professional woman. Through reading and engaging these fictions, we may be enabled to consider the world from perspectives other than our own and to connect the lived struggles of others that are portrayed in them with our own daily contentions.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>I would like to acknowledge this paper's indebtedness to another site of working out womanist and feminist reciprocity: that place of conversation created among colleagues. To a significant extent, the original paper grew out of an ongoing dialogue with Dr. Emilie Townes; the current version has benefitted greatly from other panel presentations and comments by Dr. Katie G. Cannon and Dr. Beverly W. Harrison and from the comments of an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>9</sup>As Katie Cannon argues in *Black Womanist Ethics*, "there is no better source for comprehending the 'real-lived' texture of Black experience and the meaning of the moral life than the Black women's literary tradition." (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 90. See also bell hooks' comments on the importance of fiction to resistance struggles in her essay, "Narratives of Struggle": "Critical fictions work to connect art with lived practices of struggle. Constituting a genealogy of subjugated knowledges, they provide a cultural location for the construction of alternative readings of history told from the standpoint of the oppressed, the disinherited, or those who are open to seeing the world from this perspective. Concurrently

Moreover, this space among others and self is precisely the space of ethical action and reflection. Thus it is not only that we may be able in some measure to enter into cultural spaces and experiences other than our own through fiction, but also, to the extent that many of these spaces are more readily available to us in literature than in any other mode, that we must “use” fiction in ethical construction and reflection.

The topic of the “use” of fiction—especially the use of African-American women’s literature by white feminist scholars—opens both the problems and the possibilities of appropriation and reciprocity in womanist and feminist ethics. “Use” is an appropriately ambiguous word, on the one hand, suggesting that we rarely get anywhere, least of all to wisdom and humanity, without help, and, on the other hand, whispering “abuse.” We *do* learn by “appropriating” the work of others. What, then, constitutes the difference between being mentored by a text—that is, learning from it by thinking along with it—and, to use Adrienne Rich’s image, “vampirizing” a text? To what extent is the difference between being mentored and “vampirizing” constituted more by *who* is “using” the text than *how* it is being “used”? What follows are some observations, thoughts, and questions that emerge from my own practices of “using” or, to choose a less laden term, engaging African-American women’s novels in teaching and scholarly reflection and construction.

What I think I first sought in reading African-American women’s literature, besides the pleasure that comes from reading, was knowledge about cultural contexts and persons very different from the place of my childhood and adolescence: a predominantly white, predominantly middle class community in the middle of the United States. In fact, white feminist scholars often have turned to African-American women’s literature in order to expand their experience and understanding of women’s lives and strivings, and thereby to ground their reflections in a more diverse range of experience. By contrast, womanist scholars often have turned to African-American women’s literature in order to articulate moral wisdom that resides in their own communities and to retrieve African-American women’s strategies for dwelling as selves-in-community. See, for example, Katie Cannon’s use of Zora Neale Hurston’s life and writings in *Black Womanist Ethics*.

---

they enable the articulation of cultural practices that are part of the reality of marginalized groups, not forged in the context of struggle. The assertion of a decolonized subjectivity allows us to emphasize resistance, as well as other aspects of our experience.” In Philomena Mariani, ed., *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*, Dia Center for the Arts, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, Number 7 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 59.

In contrast to womanist uses of African-American women's literature, I seemed to be attempting to accumulate experiences to place alongside my own (good capitalist behavior!). Other white women's approaches to African-American women's literature may be recognizable as continuations of behavior well ingrained from girlhood: seeking from it approval (i.e., legitimation) from others for our selves and our own projects.<sup>10</sup> Tellingly, neither accumulation nor legitimation were what I yearned for when I first read Marge Piercy or Marilyn French or Willa Cather or Jane Austen or the Brontës. I sought from these other writers lessons about myself that could be learned through identifying with the characters and situations portrayed in their books. Later, with my attention more trained to discerning cultural distinctiveness—trained largely, I must add, from reading and rereading Audre Lorde's theorizing about difference and a wealth of theory and literature by women of color—later, I came to learn lessons about difference in Piercy and Cather as well. Conversely, the more I began to understand the particularity of my own cultural location(s), the more I could articulate points of similarity across difference. As I have continued to read and to reflect on and to teach fiction by African-American and other women, I find that literature can provide much more than lessons about different contexts and peoples or lessons about how persons with analogous life choices have understood and oriented their daily lives. Literature can also teach something of what is required for human persons and communities to survive, to resist evil, to stand before God, and sometimes even to thrive in these times.

Part of the power of novels by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Gloria Naylor, among other African-American women writers, is that they are often able to be media through which we become connected with particular human lives, experiences, and struggles. However, if the demands required by authentic connections with the lives and struggles of others are not heard clearly, the use of novels by African-American women can become a form of armchair tourism. The armchair tourist crosses over this bridge called my book—to coin a phrase—in order to gain access to new persons, experiences, and places. This tourist is more likely to be searching for novelty than for strategies for survival and is also liable to presume familiarity inappropriately. Profound connections with the struggles of others and ethical reflection

---

<sup>10</sup>It may also be that those who have been used to considering themselves as dwelling in middle spaces—in the midst of relationships, in the middle-class, and sometimes geographically, in the middle of the United States—are unsettled by the possibility that difference is to be prized, understood, respected, rather than to be mediated (i.e., synthesized, harmonized).

in those struggles require much more than acquiring a feeling of immediacy.

In addition to (ab)using African-American women's literature by expecting it to serve primarily as a means of transportation to a new venue, another misuse is that of seeking from it support and legitimation for already defined projects. It is never adequate or acceptable to "graze" a text looking for a pithy quote that can be used to add "flavor" to one's writing. This is one of the many lessons that Audre Lorde taught about appropriation and reciprocity. Through her letter to Mary Daly, Lorde continues to ask other white feminist scholars: "Have you ever read my words or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? . . . Have you ever read my work, and the work of other Black women for what it could give you?"<sup>11</sup> In addition, it is seldom adequate to employ African-American women's literature as a source of illustrations only. When white feminist scholars' engagement with the work of women of color is limited to the use of a supporting illustration from *The Color Purple* or to pithy quotes from bell hooks or Audre Lorde, the use is usually token use, serving to bolster an already predetermined agenda. Both forms of limited engagement tend to leave the original argument or scholarly proposal unchanged by genuine engagement with the lives, thoughts, and struggles of African-American women. Careful engagement with African-American women's literature changes much more than the epigraphs at the beginning of essays and the sources listed in bibliographies and cited in footnotes; it usually results in a changed theoretical stance or articulation.<sup>12</sup>

Many white feminist scholars, having been made painfully aware of our own acts of exclusion and presumption, have tried to contextualize our efforts more precisely. However, problematic tendencies continue to visit these efforts: difference is romanticized without dealing with white privilege; diversity among women is collapsed into black-white, rich-poor, gay-straight divides; women of color are described always and only as victims but never as actors; alternately, whatever has been said or written by a woman of color is valorized uncritically; confessions of guilt

---

<sup>11</sup>Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 68-69.

<sup>12</sup>This is so for a number of reasons besides the cultural locations of African-American women in the U.S. I think especially of the ways in which much African-American women's literature is written for communal purposes and as communal expressions. Also, the extent to which and the ways in which the relations among self(ves) and community(ies) are addressed and construed differ from much Anglo-American literature.

now uttered as confessions of privileged race and class location substitute for constructive proposals for thought and action. Moreover, exacting contextualization in and of itself will not insure reciprocity. Alongside efforts for meticulous contextualization can remain the temptation of thinking that by analyzing more precisely and by reading more, perfect comprehension can be attained.<sup>13</sup> However, the quest for perfect comprehension—the quest to “master the text”—reveals itself as a thinly veiled strategy for remaining in control, as an attempt to master those who are defined as different. Until scholars rethink the desirability of (absolute) mastery as a goal and become willing to take responsibility for the limits of their understanding, the need for those who are defined as different or other to “explain themselves” will never be satiated.

I would like to suggest that reciprocity requires shifting our metaphor from mastery of texts to careful listening and conversation with texts; and from gaining control of the subject matter to being accountable for my interpretation. I find that I have to do a lot of listening before I first teach or write about any text and especially about African-American women’s literature. Listening carefully means reading a novel forward and backward. Listening carefully also entails reading widely: the author’s other works, literary traditions in which it stands, literary criticism about it. Before teaching or writing about a novel, I have to read and listen to a point where I become responsible for my own interpretation of the novel. “Taking responsibility” means that an interpretation requires a kind of solidity and conviction—it isn’t built solely on what someone else may have determined a correct interpretation to be. I come to be accountable for my interpretation by forming and reforming my thoughts and questions and observations in relation to the interpretations of relevant others and through ongoing engagement with the text and the context of the text. “Being accountable” does *not* necessarily mean that I have completely comprehended the text and have become, for example, an expert on the work of Toni Morrison. It does mean that I can articulate the limits of my comprehension and the nature of those limits. For example, do I not understand because the character or the situation is enigmatic? Do I not understand because I know enough about the author’s work—or the context portrayed—to know that there is something more going on that I cannot yet articulate? Do I not

---

<sup>13</sup>See Kit Yuen Quan’s observations to this effect about white feminist scholars in “The Girl Who Wouldn’t Sing,” in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1990), 215.



understand existentially? Do I not understand because I have come face to face with the limits of my own constructs of thinking and acting?

Do these demands for genuine conversation with a text differ from those required for solid relationships among persons? Do these demands differ from what scholarly standards demand of our approach to any text? Perhaps the demands for careful listening are not all that dissimilar for engaging African-American women's literature than they are for engaging texts by Schleiermacher or Barth or Tillich or for my engagement with other persons. Indeed, perhaps reflection on the rigors of respect and reciprocal "use" in doing womanist and feminist ethics will cause us to rethink our use of other texts. For example, I do not think that the way Mary Daly subsumes the experiences and work of African and African-American women into her own project is unrelated to the "springboard principle" she applies in her use of texts by male authors.

When I approach African-American women's literature in my teaching and writing, I try to begin with the recognition of its integrity and to remain attentive to the boundaries between self and others. I try to be vigilant about what I bring to the process of interpreting and to be wary of subsuming other texts—and through them, others' work and cultural heritage—under my own agenda. And yet, to listen well means that those boundaries are risked, that I entrust my self to be challenged, mentored, met by other texts and persons and possibilities. Moreover, to engage reciprocally means that I risk a constructive response: that is, it means that literature may become the basis for theoretical articulation and critical evaluation and not only a source of illustration.<sup>14</sup>

Fictions that are sufficiently powerful to help us survive and even thrive, that are sufficiently powerful to extend our imaginations and affections and commitments to spaces beyond our own lives often also achieve, by virtue of these powers, a status beyond that of other novels and poems and stories. They may, as in the case of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* or her short story, "The Welcome Table," Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula* or

---

<sup>14</sup>An engagement that avoids accumulation, "transportation," legitimation, or mere illustration requires risking a thick interpretation that may include theoretical articulation and critical evaluation of what is portrayed in a specific literary work. Key to theoretical articulation and critical evaluation should be conversation with womanist theorists. Resulting theoretical constructs may be able, in turn, to interpret, organize, and inform white feminist ethical work at a number of levels. At that point, however, a new host of issues about appropriation emerge. For example, can these "more universal" constructs stay rooted in particularity or will they subsume particularity under a dominant group's claims about "common" experience, struggles, and/or humanity? To what extent will such efforts result in nothing more than a more nuanced use of African-American women's literature to legitimate white feminists' work?

*Beloved*, to name a few, achieve a sub-canonical status—not just in the sense of becoming recognized as an important part of a literary tradition or canon but in the sense of a canon of scripture. In the literary works that I have just named, writers have so powerfully interpreted and explored African-American women’s experiences—including religious dimensions of experiences—that their writings have become decisive prototypes for further interpretation and exploration. The power of these texts, namely, that they connect us in an immediate way with the lived experiences and struggles of others and so expand the space of our living and enable us to survive and to resist, may also make us tend to presume familiarity. However, these fictions must be approached with the same reverence and care—which include the full engagement of one’s critical questions—as other texts that have made their way into canons of religious classics.

I would like to think that when we have continued to engage texts not only for what they can teach us about particular lives and locations but also have attended to theoretical constructs implied within—that is, when we have ventured to respect particular stories, lives, and locations and also universals that begin to emerge in the midst of these particularities—that then pithy quotes and illustrations will shape the work of white feminist scholars differently. Then an image like that of Toni Morrison’s narration of Sula and Nel’s determination to “create something else to be” will become at once deeply relevant for an articulation of being human and deeply resonant of a small African-American southern Ohio town where Sula and Nel “were girls together.”