

The title for my lecture this evening is

Keeping the Faith-Disturbing the Peace:
Implications of a Womanist Ethic for the 21st Century (repeat)

by

Katie G. Cannon, Ph.D.

I would like to share with you three stories this evening,
three stories that describe in graphic details what it means to
keep the faith, to disturb the peace,

three stories that ^{invite us} ~~exemplify~~ Black women's lives as sacred text,
so that we can begin to grapple with the implications of womanist
ethics for the 21st century

three stories that we can use to critique the authenticity of our ^{the womanist moral agency}
~~commitment to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God~~
~~own lives and ministries,~~ ^{Concerning} Invisible Dignity, Quiet Grace / and Unshouted Courage (next page)

three stories that capture the essence of what ^{African-American} Black women have
meant down through the ages, from generation to generation,
wherein faithful living requires that we debunk, unmask and
disentangle powers and principalities, authentic ^{liberation ethics} Christian living
requires that we debunk, unmask and disentangle spiritual
wickedness in high places morning by morning and day by day.

STORY NUMBER One. Now the setting for story number one is in the 18th century in ^{Boston, Mass.} ~~New England~~.

^{Boston} ~~The New England~~ area is a symbol of much that has gone into the development of the great American consciousness.

For some people, ^{Boston} ~~New England~~ is the cultural center of ~~Northeast~~ ^{New England}.

For others, ^{Boston} ~~New England~~ is the nation's closest link to its European heritage wherein the people of ~~Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut~~ represent the vanguard of the American Revolution.

For still others, ^{Boston's} ~~New England's~~ theological influences have pervaded the nation for the past three centuries.

For most people, ^{Boston} ~~New England~~ remains the focal point of what may be the most diversified and the most dynamic combination of educational, cultural, medical and scientific activities in the United States of America.

But as for me, a Black womanist Christian ethicist, ^{Boston} ~~New~~ ~~England~~ is important because ^{Boston} ~~this~~ is the place where it was first legally declared that ^{African-American} ~~Black~~ women are full fledged members of the human race.

In other words, ^{Boston} ~~New England~~ is the ^{location} ~~place~~ where the great chain of human beingness was broken in two. The ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from plants, insect and animals through various races, creeds and colors of humans to the angels and God was first called into

question in the city of Boston, ~~Massachusetts~~ ✓

And, an amplified version of the story goes like this:

On a bright morning in the spring of 1772 a young African woman by the name of Phillis Wheatley walked into the Boston courthouse to undergo an oral examination, surely one of the oddest oral exams on record. This test, this ordeal, this procedure was organized so as to assess whether or not it was natural for a Black woman to read and ^{to} write? Do ~~Black~~ ^{African-American} women and men have the capacity to reason? Can we publish scholarly literature? The bottom line, fundamental question was how could a Black woman who was limited to doing kitchen table ethics obtain an education commensurate to a classical education only available to young white men of Harvard.

The answers to these questions would determine the direction of the life and work of not only Phillis Wheatley but also serve as a common denominator of Black womankind.

Perhaps Phillis Wheatley was shocked upon entering the courtroom. For there gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens. Among them was the Rev. Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church, John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant, and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence.

At the center of the circle sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

Why had this dignified group of New Englanders been

assembled? Why had these men seen fit to summon this young Black woman scarcely 18 years old, before them? This group that later defined itself as "the most respectable characters of Boston" had assembled to question closely Phillis Wheatley's book, the first book written and published by a Black ^{Woman} ~~person~~ in America.

We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to the young writer.

Perhaps they asked Phillis Wheatley to identify and explain --for all to hear-- exactly who were the Greek gods and the Latin scholars that she alluded to so frequently in her writings. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in ~~the~~ Latin or ~~even~~ to translate randomly selected passages from the ~~Vulgate, the~~ Latin translation of the Bible.

Or perhaps, these gentlemen asked Wheatley to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope.

We do not know the details of the questions. We do know, however, that Phillis Wheatley's responses were more than sufficient to prompt this blue ribbon jury of Boston's finest to compose, to sign and to publish an open letter to the public declaring that based on the results of the oral examination of Phillis Wheatley that ^{African American} ~~Black~~ women can think, that ^{Black & African American} ~~Black~~ women do have the capacity to reason, that ^{African American} ~~Black~~ women can write and publish scholarly literature. Yes, it was in Boston in the spring of 1772 that Phillis Wheatley took a giant step in the evil game of MAY I.

So what is Phyllis Wheatley's contribution to our modern day understanding of keeping the faith- disturbing the peace? What are the implications of her moral agency for ^{a womanist ethic in} the 21st century?

Well, the first implication we need to remember is that our foremother, Phyllis Wheatley debunked, unmasked, and disentangled the ideological myth that charged that ^{African-American} Black people were not members of the human race. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, European patriarchs and their descendants wondered aloud whether or not Africans and people of African ancestry could ever create formal literature, whether African people could ever master the arts and sciences, whether we could be ^{an} ~~us~~ asset to civilization. And the theo-ethical argument ran like this-- if Africans and people of the African Diaspora could demonstrate the capacity to reason, if we possess the capacity to think, to cogitate, to speculate, to create and to envision, then maybe, just maybe, our humanity is fundamentally related to the humanity of all people. In turn, no person of African descent would be destined to be a slave, to be chattel property, to be classified as a non-person.

Thus, Writing, became the visible sign that the patriarchal powerbrokers used in determining whether or not a race of people had the capacity to reason. Black women and Black men were "human beings" if and only if we demonstrated the mastery of the arts and the sciences, Black women and Black men were human beings if and only if we created literature, Black women and Black men were human beings if and only if we wrote and published

scholarly books. And yet at the same time, at the very same time, ^{African American} Black people are the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden by law to learn to read and to write.

And still to this present moment ~~in time~~, ^{our} Black people's humanity is based on our ability to reason, and our ability to reason is determined where we study, with whom we worship, how we travel, where we sleep, what work we do, where we recreate and most important of all-- what we write.

^{And} Yet we live in a world wherein on this very day in ¹⁹⁹⁰ 1989, ^{African American} Black children lack a fair chance to live, to learn, to thrive in this great land of ours.

^{The state of} For instance, an ^{African American} Black baby born this ^{day} morning, ^{Oct. 4, 1990} April 20, 1989 ^{in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania} is three times as likely as a white baby to have a mother who dies in childbirth and is twice as likely to be born to a mother who has had no prenatal care at all.

In school, ^{African American} Black children are twice as likely as other children to be suspended, expelled or subjected to corporal punishment. ^{African American} An Black child is twice as likely to drop out of school, is twice as likely to be behind grade level, is three times as likely to be labelled mentally retarded but only half as likely to be labeled gifted. (go to next page)

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only 5 percent of college and university professors are African-Americans, including those faculty at historically Black colleges.

The resurgence of racism and numerous racial incidents on predominantly white college campuses across the nation has created a hostile climate for racial ethnic students.

Dearly Beloved, these are critical issues and should be of concern to all of us, especially those of us who work ^{a study} in higher education. As dire as the outlook may be, together we can make a difference when it comes to finding solutions to these most difficult and pressing problems. The challenge before us is to marshal our personal, professional and community resources and address these concerns.

And the implications of Phillis Wheatley's ^{moral agency} ~~ethics~~ ^{commitment} for the 21st century is that we must inform ourselves broadly about these issues, studying them thoughtfully through newspapers, professional journals, and public forums. Once knowledgeable about them, we must act, committing our time and resources to constructive programs and activities that promise solutions. ^{For to know is to be responsible}
~~Without the personal commitment of each one of us grappling with the problems that plague us, these problems will persist and even worsen.~~

In essence, the implications of a womanist ethic exemplified in the ^{invisible dignity of} ~~life and work of~~ our foremother, Phyllis Wheatley requires that each and everyone of us, if we take seriously our call to faithful living, then we must read and we must write, we must

read and we must write, even when the lights are out.

Keeping the faith- disturbing the peace, morning by morning,
day by day.

STORY NUMBER TWO. Now the setting for story number two is in the 19th century in the mid-west, in Akron, Ohio and the story goes like this.

After one of Sojourner Truth's anti-slavery tours in 1852, she decided to go to Akron, Ohio in order to attend a women's rights convention that was scheduled to take place. Sojourner Truth had not been invited to this women's right's convention, but this would neither be the first ^{time} nor the last ~~time~~ that Sojourner Truth would attend a meeting without an invitation.

When Sojourner Truth arrived in the meeting hall, many people recognized her. Several of the white feminists were openly hostile to Sojourner. One of the white women even warned that with the presence of Sojourner Truth, the issue of women's rights would become associated with Black people and ^{white} women's rights might even get connected to the abolition of slavery. It was at this point that several of the white women begged the chairperson, Frances Gage, begged her to not let Sojourner Truth speak, under no circumstance did these women want their rights contaminated by Black presence.

And for the first day of the women's rights convention, Sojourner Truth watched the proceedings from the sidelines. But early during the meeting on the second day Sojourner Truth stood

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quoted "We died
but you who live
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Sojourner Truth

9

up and spoke out.

What happened was this: The clergymen, the guild of male religious leaders, threatened to disrupt and dismantle the women's rights convention. One minister spoke up rather loudly from the floor, IF GOD MEANT FOR WOMEN TO BE EQUAL, GOD WOULD HAVE GIVEN SOME TOKEN OF THE DIVINE WILL THROUGH THE SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST.

Another minister shouted out, Yes that's right. He went on by arguing that women did not deserve the right to vote because women are weak and helpless. ^{Women are} Women have to be carried over ditches and lifted into carriages.

It was at this point that Sojourner Truth got up from her seat and spoke from the lectern and as many of you know, this is ^{when} ~~what~~ our foremother, Sojourner Truth ^{raised} ~~said~~: *The fundamental question that Ain't I a woman*

I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. Then Sojourner turned toward the minister who said that women had nothing to do with Christ and demanded an answer, she asked the minister WHERE DID YOUR CHRIST COME FROM? When she didn't get an answer, Sojourner repeated the question, even louder, WHERE DID YOUR CHRIST COME FROM? In the silence Sojourner gave her own response: YOUR CHRIST CAME FROM GOD AND A WOMAN, MAN HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT! To the ~~other~~ point about women being helpless and weak, about women needing to be carried over ditches and lifted into carriages, Sojourner dramatically raised her bare arms and with a booming voice demanded:

LOOK AT MY ARM! I HAVE PLOWED AND PLANTED AND GATHERED INTO BARNES AND NO MAN COULD HEAD ME AND AIN'T I A WOMAN? I could work as much and eat as much as any man- when I could get it- and bear the lash as well, and ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children and seem most of them sold into slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me, ain't I a woman?

So what is Sojourner Truth's contribution to our modern day understanding of keeping the faith-disturbing the peace? What are the implications of Sojourner Truth moral agency for ^{womanist ethic in} the 21st Century?

Well, the second lesson we need to remember is the radicality of Sojourner's famous Ain't I a Woman Speech. In this speech Sojourner Truth extended and pushed wide open the parameters of what constituted ^a womanhood.

What is important to grasp is that the inclusion of ^{African American} Black women within the traditional structures is a pioneering endeavor.

In scanning the canon of ^{scholarly} ethical studies one finds that the omission of Black women provides continuing ideological support for conditions and public policies oppressive to Black women. This type of academic invisibility reinforces racist/sexist stereotypes and justifies misapprehensions that lock ^{African-American} Black women into marginal status. In other words, the concepts used by the majority of ethicists to discuss moral agency implicitly devalue Black women's contributions. And as long as current research methods do not reflect or pay enough attention to the needs of

African-American women, the policies and programs that may result may benefit white women or ^{may benefit} Black men but not Black women.

When ethical discourse provides truncated and distorted pictures of Black women, the society at large uses these oppressive stereotypes to define what it is to be ^{African-American} Black and female. An even more basic manifestation of this trivialization of Black women has been the traditional practice of generalizing about Black women on the information gathered from white women or from Black men. The challenge from Sojourner Truth is that the emphasis has to be placed on information based on Black women talking about our own lives and our own religious experiences.

→ In essence, the implications of Sojourner Truth's ^{moral agency} womanist ethic for ^{a womanist ethic in} the 21st Century ^{womanist ethic} requires us to critique our epistemological assumptions. What we know, how we know, and the way we go about knowing must be reconstructed. As justice-making moral agents we have the responsibility of identifying the so-called "normative aspects of the social, political and economic typologies as well as the ethical points of view which have minimized or totally erased ^{African-American} Black women's contributions and experiences in crucial periods of ^{U. S.} American history. The omission of African-American traditions result in education that is ^{education that is} unbalanced, ^{education that is} incomplete and distorted.

We who are gathered here this evening, we must understand that the ^{quiet grace} wisdom of Sojourner Truth calls for us not only to examine our epistemology but also we must build coalitions. We must meet with varied and different constituencies. We must go to

conferences, conventions and gathered assemblies and stand up and speak out whether we are invited to do so or not.

Keeping the faith-disturbing the peace, morning by morning, day by day.

STORY NUMBER THREE

Now, the setting for the third and final story is in the twentieth century in the southern part of the United States. This last story takes place in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Story Number Three is about Fannie Lou Hamer, a God-fearing woman born in 1918, to sharecropping parents in Ruleville, Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer was the youngest of twenty children. Both as a child and as a young woman, Fannie Lou worked as a domestic and as a fieldhand, forms of ^{hard} ~~menial~~ labor that served as constant reminders of her exploitation.

So during the summer of 1962 Fannie Lou Hamer walked off the sharecropper's land. Fannie Lou went into town to the Sunflower County Courthouse making a vow to herself that she was not going to return home until she could register and vote as a citizen of these United States. Fannie Lou's desire to register and vote was an affront to the powerbrokers. So, Fannie Lou Hamer was repeatedly arrested and thrown into jail. And ^{during} one of the times when Fannie Lou was in jail, a white sheriff and a white deputy ordered two Black ^{make inmates} ~~men~~ at gunpoint to beat Fannie Lou Hamer.

The men ordered Fannie Lou to lay down on her stomach on a bunk bed. One man sat on her feet while the other inmate beat

her. The men beat Fannie Lou with a ^{leather} ~~big, thick leather~~ blackjack that was loaded with something heavy like a piece of lead or some rocks. At one point Fannie Lou's dress came up and when she tried to reach behind her to pull her dress down, ^{one of} the white man walked over and pulled her dress up as high as he could, pulling ^{her dress} ~~it~~ over her head. And after a while the pain from the beating became so excruciating that Fannie Lou began praying, she prayed that they would just go on and take her life. ^{she prayed that she would go on & die} The men beat Fannie Lou until she lost consciousness but Fannie Lou didn't die. And even though the beating left Fannie Lou permanently scarred, when Fannie Lou regained consciousness she kept saying, "They can't touch me now, they can't touch me now."

"Now, what Fannie Lou Hamer was saying when she said, "They can't touch me now," is that Fannie Lou Hamer had crossed over to the other side. Fannie Lou had gotten as close to death as one can come without dying and yet she was still alive. Fannie Lou knew that she had transcended the range, the scope, the circumscribed patriarchal boundaries of second class citizenship.

The fact that they had taken her dress and pulled it over her head helped Fannie Lou come to grips with the fact that there is no room for false modesty when one is struggling to live with integrity in a situation of oppression. Also what Fannie Lou was saying when she said "They can't touch me now" was that she was now going to follow the path of Black women's ancient moral wisdom so that she could keep on keeping on.

When Fannie Lou Hamer returned to the plantation where she

worked as a sharecropper, the ~~patriarchal~~^{of the land} owner told her either to withdraw her name from the registration rolls or find a new place to live. Fannie Lou wasted no time in leaving her home to stay with friends saying over and over again they can't touch me now.

Two weeks later 16 bullets were fired into the home of the friends where Fannie Lou was staying. This incident prompted Fannie Lou to ask, Is this America? Is this the land of the free and the home of the brave? Is this America, a nation that claims liberty and justice for all and yet ^{some} people are beaten, lynched and killed when they try to register and vote?

The patriarchal powers and principalities repossessed the car that Fannie Lou and her family had been paying on for three years. The patriarchal powers and principalities arrested Fannie Lou's husband because he refused to pay a water bill charging the family ^{use of} ~~of~~ using 9,000 gallons of water ⁱⁿ ~~for~~ one month. ^{Fannie Lou} ~~Hamer~~ understood that these terrorists acts and systemic harassments against her family, ^{against her} friends and ^{against her} love ones were a result of her commitment to break down the rigidly segregated social and political system. However, this did not stop Fannie Lou Hamer.

Fannie Lou warned other Black people "There is no need to run. There is no need to hide. There is no need to avoid getting tangled in this voting rights mess, because if you are born in America with a Black face you are born in this mess."

So In 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer was a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that demanded to be seated as her

state's representative at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. While Fannie Lou and the 67 other delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party were not given seats in 1964, this grassroots movement was the energy and impetus for political reforms that have taken place ^{all} across the nation. In that sense Fannie Lou Hamer knew that her labor was not in vain. She knew in her heart of hearts that they really couldn't touch her now.

So what is Fannie Lou Hamer's contribution to our modern day understanding of keeping the faith-disturbing the peace? What are the implications of Fannie Lou Hammer's moral agency for the 21st century? ^{a womanist ethic in}

Well, the third and final lesson we need to remember based on the ^{unshooked courage} ~~life and work~~ of our foremother, Fannie Lou Hamer, is that we have an obligation to engage ourselves in actively seeking justice and equality.

Fannie Lou Hamer worked against the social restrictions that limited her mobility and at the same time she demanded that the relationships between her own conditions and the conditions of those who have a wide range of freedom be equalized. ^{Fannie Lou} ~~Hamer~~ identified the massive dislocation and violence exacerbated against the Black community. She brought into clear focus the direct correlation of economic, political and racial alienation.

The implication of Hamer's ^{moral agency} ~~womanist ethic~~ for the 21st century calls for each one of us to be ~~an~~ activist and if we can't be a full time activist we can be a part-time activist, but

an activist just the same.

Audre Lorde summed up the mandate for activism in this way:

When times are hard, do something. If it works, do it some more. If it doesn't work, do something else. But keep doing.

Keeping the faith—disturbing the peace, morning by morning, day by day.

In conclusion, whether the discipline of ethics has almost completed neglected the stories of ^{African American} Black women as in white male ^{traditional} scholarship or treated Black women's stories as incidental to central issues as in ^{African American} Black male scholarship or considered gender as the only important factor for research as in ^{much of} white feminist scholarship, the cumulative effect of womanist ethics is that it requires us to tell the stories of how ^{African American} Black women keep the ~~faith~~ ~~and in turn these stories move us toward a fundamental reconceptualization of all ethics with the experience of Black women at center stage.~~

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For some people, New England is the cultural center of Northeast.

For others, New England is the nation's closest link to its European heritage wherein the people of Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut represent the vanguard of the American Revolution.

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In other words, New England is the place where the great chain of human beingness was broken in two. The ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from plants, insect and animals through various races, creeds and colors of humans to the angels and God was first called into

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The answers to these questions would determine the direction of the life and work of not only Phillis Wheatley but also serve as a common denominator of Black womankind.

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Well, the first implication we need to remember is that our foremother, Phyllis Wheatley debunked, unmasked, and disentangled the ideological myth that charged that Black people were not members of the human race. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, European patriarchs and their descendants wondered aloud whether or not Africans and people of African ancestry could ever create formal literature, whether African people could ever master the arts and sciences, whether we could be an asset to civilization. And the theo-ethical argument ran like this-- if Africans and people of the African Diaspora could demonstrate the capacity to reason, if we possess the capacity to think, to cogitate, to speculate, to create and to envision, then maybe, just maybe, our humanity is fundamentally related to the humanity of all people. In turn, no person of African descent would be destined to be a slave, to be chattel property, to be classified as a non-person.

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up and spoke out.

What happened was this: The clergymen, the guild of male religious leaders, threatened to disrupt and dismantle the women's rights convention. One minister spoke up rather loudly from the floor, IF GOD MEANT FOR WOMEN TO BE EQUAL, GOD WOULD HAVE GIVEN SOME TOKEN OF THE DIVINE WILL THROUGH THE SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST.

Another minister shouted out, Yes that's right. He went on by arguing that women did not deserve the right to vote because women are weak and helpless. Women have to be carried over ditches and lifted into carriages.

It was at this point that Sojourner Truth got up from her seat and spoke from the lectern and as many of you know, this is what our foremother, Sojourner Truth said:

I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. Then Sojourner turned toward the minister who said that women had nothing to do with Christ and demanded an answer, she asked the minister WHERE DID YOUR CHRIST COME FROM? When she didn't get an answer, Sojourner repeated the question, even louder, WHERE DID YOUR CHRIST COME FROM? In the silence Sojourner gave her own response: YOUR CHRIST CAME FROM GOD AND A WOMAN, MAN HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT! To the other point about women being helpless and weak, about women needing to be carried over ditches and lifted into carriages, Sojourner dramatically raised her bare arms and with a booming voice demanded:

LOOK AT MY ARM! I HAVE PLOWED AND PLANTED AND GATHERED INTO BARNES AND NO MAN COULD HEAD ME AND AIN'T I A WOMAN? I could work as much and eat as much as any man- when I could get it- and bear the lash as well, and ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children and seem most of them sold into slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me, ain't I a woman?

So what is Sojourner Truth's contribution to our modern day understanding of keeping the faith-disturbing the peace? What are the implications of Sojourner Truth moral agency for the 21st Century?

Well, the second lesson we need to remember is the radicality of Sojourner's famous Ain't I a Woman Speech. In this speech Sojourner Truth extended and pushed wide open the parameters of what constituted womanhood.

What is important to grasp is that the inclusion of Black women within the traditional structures is a pioneering endeavor.

In scanning the canon of ethical studies one finds that the omission of Black women provides continuing ideological support for conditions and public policies oppressive to Black women. This type of academic invisibility reinforces racist/sexist stereotypes and justifies misapprehensions that lock Black women into marginal status. In other words, the concepts used by the majority of ethicists to discuss moral agency implicitly devalue Black women's contributions. And as long as current research methods do not reflect or pay enough attention to the needs of

African-American women, the policies and programs that may result may benefit white women or Black men but not Black women.

When ethical discourse provides truncated and distorted pictures of Black women, the society at large uses these oppressive stereotypes to define what it is to be Black and female. An even more basic manifestation of this trivialization of Black women has been the traditional practice of generalizing about Black women on the information gathered from white women or from Black men. The challenge from Sojourner Truth is that the emphasis has to be placed on information based on Black women talking about our own lives and our own religious experiences.

In essence, the implications of Sojourner Truth's womanist ethic for the 21st Century requires us to critique our epistemological assumptions. What we know, how we know, and the way we go about knowing must be reconstructed. As justice-making moral agents we have the responsibility of identifying the so-called "normative aspects of the social, political and economic typologies as well as the ethical points of view which have minimized or totally erased Black women's contributions and experiences in crucial periods of American history. The omission of African-American traditions result in education that is unbalanced, incomplete and distorted.

We who are gathered here this evening, we must understand that the wisdom of Sojourner Truth calls for us not only to examine our epistemology but also we must build coalitions. We must meet with varied and different constituencies. We must go to

conferences, conventions and gathered assemblies and stand up and speak out whether we are invited to do so or not.

Keeping the faith-disturbing the peace, morning by morning, day by day.

STORY NUMBER THREE

Now, the setting for the third and final story is in the twentieth century in the southern part of the United States. This last story takes place in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Story Number Three is about Fannie Lou Hamer, a God-fearing woman born in 1918, to sharecropping parents in Ruleville, Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer was the youngest of twenty children. Both as a child and as a young woman, Fannie Lou worked as a domestic and as a fieldhand, forms of menial labor that served as constant reminders of her exploitation.

So during the summer of 1962 Fannie Lou Hamer walked off the sharecropper's land. Fannie Lou went into town to the Sunflower County Courthouse making a vow to herself that she was not going to return home until she could register and vote as a citizen of these United States. Fannie Lou's desire to register and vote was an affront to the powerbrokers. So, Fannie Lou Hamer was repeatedly arrested and thrown into jail. And one of the times when Fannie Lou was in jail, a white sheriff and a white deputy ordered two Black men at gunpoint to beat Fannie Lou Hamer.

The men ordered Fannie Lou to lay down on her stomach on a bunk bed. One man sat on her feet while the other inmate beat

her. The men beat Fannie Lou with a big, thick leather blackjack that was loaded with something heavy like a piece of lead or some rocks. At one point Fannie Lou's dress came up and when she tried to reach behind her to pull her dress down, the white man walked over and pulled her dress up as high as he could, pulling it over her head. And after a while the pain from the beating became so excruciating that Fannie Lou began praying, she prayed that they would just go on and take her life. The men beat Fannie Lou until she lost consciousness but Fannie Lou didn't die. And even though the beating left Fannie Lou permanently scarred, when Fannie Lou regained consciousness she kept saying, "They can't touch me now, they can't touch me now."

"Now, what Fannie Lou Hamer was saying when she said, "They can't touch me now," is that Fannie Lou Hamer had crossed over to the other side. Fannie Lou had gotten as close to death as one can come without dying and yet she was still alive. Fannie Lou knew that she had transcended the range, the scope, the circumscribed patriarchal boundaries of second class citizenship.

The fact that they had taken her dress and pulled it over her head helped Fannie Lou come to grips with the fact that there is no room for false modesty when one is struggling to live with integrity in a situation of oppression. Also what Fannie Lou was saying when she said "They can't touch me now" was that she was now going to follow the path of Black women's ancient moral wisdom so that she could keep on keeping on.

When Fannie Lou Hamer returned to the plantation where she

worked as a sharecropper, the patriarchal owner told her either to withdraw her name from the registration rolls or find a new place to live. Fannie Lou wasted no time in leaving her home to stay with friends saying over and over again they can't touch me now.

Two weeks later 16 bullets were fired into the home of the friends where Fannie Lou was staying. This incident prompted Fannie Lou to ask, Is this America? Is this the land of the free and the home of the brave? Is this America, a nation that claims liberty and justice for all and yet people are beaten, lynched and killed when they try to register and vote?

The patriarchal powers and principalities repossessed the car that Fannie Lou and her family had been paying on for three years. The patriarchal powers and principalities arrested Fannie Lou's husband because he refused to pay a water bill charging the family of using 9,000 gallons of water for one month. Hamer understood that these terrorists acts and systemic harassments against her family, friends and love ones were a result of her commitment to break down the rigidly segregated social and political system. However, this did not stop Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou warned other Black people "There is no need to run. There is no need to hide. There is no need to avoid getting tangled in this voting rights mess, because if you are born in America with a Black face you are born in this mess."

In 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer was a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that demanded to be seated as her

state's representative at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. While Fannie Lou and the 67 other delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party were not given seats in 1964, this grassroots movement was the energy and impetus for political reforms that have taken place across the nation. In that sense Fannie Lou Hamer knew that her labor was not in vain. ~~She knew in her heart of hearts that they really couldn't touch her now.~~

So what is Fannie Lou Hamer's contribution to our modern day understanding of keeping the faith-disturbing the peace? What are the implications of Fannie Lou Hammer's moral agency for the 21st century?

Well, the third and final lesson we need to remember based on the life and work of our foremother, Fannie Lou Hamer, is that we have an obligation to engage ourselves in actively seeking justice and equality.

Fannie Lou Hamer worked against the social restrictions that limited her mobility and at the same time she demanded that the relationships between her own conditions and the conditions of those who have a wide range of freedom be equalized. Hamer identified the massive dislocation and violence exacerbated against the Black community. She brought into clear focus the direct correlation of economic, political and racial alienation.

The implication of Hamer's womanist ethic for the 21st century calls for each one of us to be an activist and if we can't be a full time activist we can be a part-time activist, but

an activist just the same.

Audre Lorde summed up the mandate for activism in this way:

When times are hard, do something. If it works, do it some more. If it doesn't work, do something else. But keep doing.

Keeping the faith-disturbing the peace, morning by morning, day by day.

In conclusion, *I would like to say that* whether the discipline of ethics has almost completed neglected the stories of Black women as in white male scholarship//or treated Black women's stories as incidental to central issues as in Black male scholarship//or considered gender as the only important factor for research as in white feminist scholarship, the cumulative effect of womanist ethics is that it requires us to tell the stories of how Black women keep the faith and in turn these stories move us toward a fundamental reconceptualization of all ethics with the experience of Black women at center stage.

Perhaps they asked Phillis Wheatley to identify and explain --for all to hear-- exactly who were the Greek gods and the Latin scholars that she alluded to so frequently in her writings. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in the Latin or even to translate randomly selected passages from ~~the Vulgate~~, the Latin translation of the Bible.

Or perhaps, these gentlemen asked Wheatley to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope.

We do not know the details of the questions. We do know, however, that Phillis Wheatley's responses were more than sufficient to prompt this blue ribbon jury of Boston's finest to compose, to sign and to publish an open letter to the public declaring that based on the results of the oral examination of Phillis Wheatley that Black women can think, that Black women do have the capacity to reason, that Black women can write and publish scholarly literature. Yes, it was in Boston in the spring of 1772 that Phillis Wheatley took a giant step in the evil game of MAY I.

Now, the third and final vignette that I would like to share before I move into an ethical critique of the implications of womanist theology for our work is a paraphrased quotation from a novel written by L.C. Morse, entitled Sundial. This paraphrased statement sums up the essence of comments that Black women