

CATCHING OUR MORAL BREATH:
Womanist/Methodology/as a Mode/of Transformative/Action

by

Katie Geneva Cannon

Black women/ trained/ in the field/ of religion/ who embrace/ Alice Walker's/ four-part/ definition/ of womanist/ always find ourselves/ in the most precarious/ predicament. On the one hand, my task/ as **social ethicists**/ is to transcend/ my blackness/ and/ my femaleness,/ and draft/ a blueprint/ of normative ethics/ that somehow/ speaks to,/ or responds to,/ the universality/ of the human condition. On the other hand,/ my assignment/ as womanist/ liberation ethicists/ is to debunk,/ unmask,/ and disentangle/ the historically/ conditioned/ value judgments/ and power relations/ that undergird/ the particularities/ of race,/ sex,/ and class/ oppression.

These/ two tasks/ stand/ in opposition/ to each other. In essence,/ women in religion/ are "part/ of the canonical boys" and "the non-canonical - other"/ at one/ and the same time. Zora/ Neale Hurston/ described/ such a dilemma/ as hitting/ a straight lick/ with a crooked stick.

Now,/ the first concept/ that we need/ to embrace/ related to Catching/ Our Moral Breath: Womanist/ Methodology/ as a Mode/ of Transformative Action/ concerns/ the Black Woman scholar/ as One/ of the Canonical Boys.

Even though/ there is/ no/ clearly/ written/ statement/ among social ethicists/ regarding/ the nature/ of scholarship,/ enough areas/ of agreement/ do exist/ within/ the guild/ to make/ reasonable

generalizations/regarding/ the Black woman/as scholar./ Most of these areas/of academic currency/ have nothing/ to do/ with the realities/of African American women./

For instance,/ membership/ in this highly/ complex/ fraternity/ equates/ intellectual superiority/ with investigating/ abstract./ philosophical thought/ of the established canon/ of academic inquiry/ with supposedly/ calm/ and detached/ objectivity./

To prove/ that we are/ sufficiently/ intelligent,/ Black women in colleges,/ universities/ and throughout/ graduate ^{study programs/} school must discount/ the particularities/ of our/ real-lived/ experiences/ and instead/ focus/ on the validity/ of generalizable/ external/ analytical/ data./ The dilemma/ we face/ in joining/ the canonical boys/ is that/ of succumbing/ to the temptation/ of only mastering/ the historically/ specified/ perspective/ of the Euro-American/ masculine/ preserve./

In order/ to be respected/ as capable/ ⁿ and responsible/ thinkers/ in our disciplines/ of study,/ Black women/ are placed/ under/ a double/ injunction./ We/ have to face/ a critical jury/ primarily/ White/ and male,/ that makes claims/ for sex neutrality and value-free inquiry/ as a model/ for knowledge./ Black females/ in institutions/ of higher learning/ will have/ little opportunity/ to expand/ our creative energy/ in the direction/ of womanist discourse/ if we concentrate/ on searching/ for universal truths/ unhampered/ by so-called/ incidental matters/ such as race,/ sex,/ and class differences./

In other words,/ there is an unspoken/ informal code/ within

the ^{academy} ~~guild~~ that African American women must engage in this type of abstract moral discourse or else we run the risk of being misunderstood, the risk of being misinterpreted, and the risk of being frequently devalued as second-class scholars specializing in Jim Crow subject matter.

To exemplify what I am saying about **Catching Our Moral Breath**, let us now turn to the life and work of a frontrunner, an African American woman who was a **precursor** of the modern day Black woman scholar. Let us draw near and listen closely to a story about what happened to a particular Black woman who was an early contributor to a liberationist mode of transformative action.

Now the setting for our story is in the 18th century in Boston, Mass.

Boston, the capital of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is a symbol of much that has gone into the development of the great American consciousness.

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

For others, Boston is the nation's closest link to its European heritage wherein the people of Boston represent the vanguard of the American Revolution.

For still others, Boston's theological influences have pervaded the nation for the past three centuries.

For most people, Boston 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 Christian womanist social liberation ethicist, Boston is important because this is the place where it was first legally declared that African American women are full fledged members of the human race.

In other words, Boston 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, insects 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.

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 African-American women and African American men have the capacity to reason? Can we publish scholarly literature? The bottom line, fundamental question was how could an enslaved African 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 Bostonians 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 in America by a person of African descent.

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 Latin or to translate randomly selected passages from 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 women / can think, / that Black women / do have the capacity to reason, / that African American women / can write and publish / scholarly literature. / That African American people / are more / than animals / with a mere / signature of humanity / on our face. / Yes, / it was in Boston / in the spring / of 1772 / that a writer / named Phillis Wheatley / took a giant step / in the evil game / of MAY I.

So what / is Phyllis Wheatley's / contribution / to our contemporary / understanding / of ^{*Womanist Methodology as a Mode of Trans-*} ~~privileging womanist ways of~~ ^{*formative Action*} knowing? / What ideologies, / theologies, / and systems of value / did Phyllis Wheatley / debunk, / unmask / and disentangle?

Well, the ^{*major*} first lesson we need to remember ^{*in Catching Moral Breath*} is that our foremother, / Phyllis Wheatley / debunked, / unmasked, / and disentangled / the ideological myth / that charged / that African American people / were not / members / of the human race. / Long before / the 18th 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 ^{Eurocentric} patriarchal 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 people are the only people in the United States of America ever explicitly forbidden by law to learn to read and to write.

Now, the second concept we need to embrace related to **Catching Our Moral Breath: Womanist Methodology as a Mode of Transformative Action** concerns ~~the~~ Black women scholars as the Non-canonical Other.

The dilemma of Black women in the academy as the non-

canonical other is defined as working in opposition to the established tradition, yet building upon it. The womanist scholar works both within and outside the guild. What this means is that ^{all of us, especially in this celebration of 25 years of Women's Studies at the} ~~Black women~~ must stay mindful of what happened to our ^{Univ. of} foremother, Phyllis Wheatley. ^{N. C. - Greensboro}

We are aware that even with Phyllis Wheatley working within the established tradition as one of the canonical boys which in some way facilitated her eventual freedom from slavery, in the end, Wheatley's canonical status could not, did not, protect her from the ravages of racial bigotry. ^{Wheatley's} Her work, like our work is still subjected to interpretations engendered by white supremacy expectations and androcentric patriarchal assumptions. ^{we}

The tension in being the non-canonical other is found in the balancing act of raising the questions that the discipline of study dictates, and understanding that it takes more than words ^{endorsed by the Canonical boys} to change powers and principalities, to dismantle spiritual wickedness in high places. ^{tradition}

The ^{fundamental} ~~major~~ merit in the ethical work of Catching Our Moral Breath ^{is embodied learning} ~~is that~~ it enables us to embrace our never-ending responsibility of the what/ the how/ and the why/ concerning the fact that when each of us woke up this morning, there were 100,000 children in the United States who woke up homeless.

Every 32 seconds, a baby in the United States is born in poverty.

Every 14 minutes, approximately the time it took some of us to shower and brush our teeth, a baby died in America.

Every 64 seconds, a baby is born to a teenage mother.

And every 13 hours, before we go back to our homes this very night, a child who is a pre-schooler is murdered in this great country of ours.

When we engage in womanist methodology as a mode of transformative action, we wrestle with what is the proper emphasis to place on the various determinants influencing our existential situations.

Womanist methodology
 We challenge and ~~we~~ reshape the traditional inquiry by raising candid questions between the two locales of whiteness and maleness. *so that we let go of the myth that all the women are white and all the blacks are men,* We insist that new questions guide the research so that Black women's moral wisdom can provide the answers.

In essence, the intersection of race, sex, and class gives African American women a different ethical orientations with a different ideological perspectives. The experience of being both the participant from within and the interpreter from without results in an inescapable duality to the character of womanist scholarship.

When those of us in Women's Studies
 After Black women scholars receive the preestablished disciplinary structures of intellectual inquiry in our fields of study, our mandate is to balance the double, conflicting impetus between the paradigms of *these* intellectual traditions with a new set of questions arising from the context of *our lives* Black life.

As we celebrate 25 years of Women's Studies here at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and prepare ourselves to usher in the new millennium, we need to ask ourselves: ~~What~~

real-lived contexts

What

are the implications/in our various ~~disciplines~~ of study, wherein a woman/in the United States/~~of America~~ is beaten/ in her home/ every 15 seconds/which results/in almost 4 million women, of all races,/creeds/and colors/, beaten/ by their partners/ very year./

3 million children/witness/acts of violence/daily/and in turn,/children of abused mothers/are six times/ more likely/to attempt suicide/and 50% more likely/ to abuse drugs/and alcohol./

The American Association/ of University Women/ reports/ that 66% of high school boys/ admit/ to ~~be~~ sexual/ ~~harassers~~ ^{ing} of teenage girls/, while only 7.8% of women/ in this country/ claim/ that they have not been assaulted/ or harassed/ during their lifetime./

If/ all the women/ who will be victimized/ by domestic violence/ in 1997/ would join hands/, the line/ would stretch/ from New York City/ to Los Angeles/ and beyond.

And yet, ^{these} ~~this~~ desperate/ contestable/ issue^s/ seems not/ to even/ cause/ a flinch/ nor a pinch/ in the conscience/ of so many/ of our Sisters/ and Brothers/ in the academy./

^{How do we catch our moral breath}
What are the ~~ethical~~ implications/ concerning/ the fact that far too many/ of us experience/ no cognizant dissonance/ as we face a Supreme Court/ whose hit list/ include eliminating affirmative action, /eliminating busing/, and eliminating/ civil right laws/ which will chart/ our human rights movement/ from segregation, to desegregation to resegregation.

When we Catch/ Our Moral Breath/, we must ask ourselves/ in this place/ and at this time/ in our lives/, what are we learning/ that will enable us/ to deal effectively/ with the polarization/

What are
we teaching

that is increasing between the number of billionaires and the escalating number of families sinking lower ^{and lower} into recession.

Hundreds of thousands of our kinfolks and our skinfolks are forced into the permanent underclass, forced to join the 36 million Americans who are trying to make ends meet far below the poverty level.

With all the downsizing going on, the deficits are piling up at record breaking speed in both the public and private arenas of our lives.

What value does Women's Studies place on the fact that the debt-ridden federal government is wielding its budget cutting knife deeper and deeper by closing public hospitals and community clinics, by phasing out daycare centers and job training programs, by reducing services on public transportation and in public parks and by doing as little as possible to address the prognosis that by the year 2000 there will be 100 million people infected with the HIV AIDS Virus.

Therefore, in light of these realities, Womanist Methodology as a Mode of Transformative Action maintains that there is no value-free space,
 There is no-color blank space,
 There is no apolitical space,
 There is no mathematically regulated spatio-temporal dispassionate space of so-called neutral objectivity.

Womanism is the backdrop for this discourse, the upside-downness of meaning.

in order for each of us to catch our moral breath, then we must realize that

Now, the third and final element that we must embrace related to Catching Our Moral Breath: Womanist Methodology ^{1st} as a Mode of Transformative Action concerns our capacity to wrestle with the delicate balancing act of being one of the canonical boys and the non-canonical other ^{within} in the power dynamics in the university ^{courses of study} at one and the same time.

For example, womanist scholars endure with a certain grace the social restrictions that limit our own mobility, and ^{simultaneously} at the same time we demand that the relationships between our own ^{circumstances} conditions and the conditions of those who have a wide range of freedom and choices be recognized.

We bring into clear focus the direct correlation of economic, political, and racial alienation in the politics of campus life. *We insist that if we are going to talk the talk then we must also walk the walk.*

As participant-interpretors, we are conscious of the various value systems ^{within university life} which are antithetical to Black survival.

For instance, as I travel around the country, lecturing at various institutions of higher learning, over and over again African American students describe to me the dilemma of catching their moral breath in ^{the following} this way and ^{this is what they say} I quote:

"The anxieties of being Black in predominantly white institutions have little or nothing to do with prior academic preparation--- because it is not the schooling but the living that is most difficult.

None of us have ever lived the constant barrage of arrogance and insult.

None of us have ever lived the constant barrage of suspicion and insensitivity.

None of us have ever lived the constant barrage of back-hand compliments and tongue-in-cheek naivete that is now our daily fare.

The place for us is a living hell, and we have yet to tell anyone else, believing no one can possibly understand. And so the school, the workplace, the society at large begins to consume us, undermining our confidence, slowly eating way at our innards like worms.

also I have discovered as I travel this country of ours
And at the same time, far too many students in today's world enter the Black woman's classroom armed with ferocious mythologies wherein African American women are stereotyped either as subservient mammies or hostile villains.

For a vast number of 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."¹

The dynamics of what I am talking about are exemplified in the comments of a graduate student early in my teaching career. This student said, *Katie Cannon* "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

¹ Patricia A. Williams, The Rooster's Egg: On the Persistence of Prejudice. Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 105.

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 days. 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 rather/ spend eternity in hell/ than 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 ^{as the Reverend Doctor} 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 no where/ to be found./

Recently, a scholar/ in The Journal of Blacks/ in Higher

Education summed up the^{re} dynamics this way:

And I quote It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in some influential quarters, when the object of discussion is the African American community, basic principles of decency, and of scholarly and journalistic integrity, no longer apply. Blacks seem to be held in such contempt that we can be slandered, defamed, and insulted without remorse, or consequence. p. 72 (repeat last line) End of quote

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.

Especially, for those of us who teach, work and have our being in ^{the interdisciplinary study of women} ~~Women's Studies~~ if we want to continue to catch our moral breath in the 21st century, attention must be paid to creating an educational climate that includes ~~all~~ the experiences of all women. The omission of any group of women in the ^{women's studies} ~~study of~~ ^{of the modern-day Phyllis Wheatley's} ~~women~~ means that our education is unbalanced, that our knowledge is incomplete and that our worldview is distorted.

In conclusion, ^{the overall point is} ~~what I am saying here is~~ that womanist methodology as a mode of transformative action means that we must ^{to evaluate critically the inherited} first learn ~~the various~~ traditions that have been handed-down in all of our ~~various~~ courses of study. The second ^{concept} ~~thing~~ in womanist methodology as a mode of transformative action is that we must stand ^{ing} over against ^{all} ^{so-called normative} ~~inherited~~ traditions that prove to be death-dealing and rename ourselves as ^{life-affirming} doers of justice. And finally, in womanist methodology as a mode of transformative action ^{catch our moral breath by reading and} is that we must read and we must ~~study~~ ^{we writing} ~~we must~~ ^{write} ~~read and we must study~~ even when the lights are out.

Thank you!

practicing what we teach and preach in all that we say and do, morning by morning and day by day. Thank you

Our lecture this ^{morning} evening is entitled
PRIVILEGING WOMANIST WAYS OF KNOWING (repeat)

by

Katie Geneva Cannon

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Most of these areas of academic currency have nothing to do with the realities of African American women.

For instance, membership in this highly complex fraternity equates intellectual superiority with investigating abstract, philosophical thought of the established canon of ^{theological} ethical inquiry with supposedly calm and detached objectivity.

To prove that we are sufficiently intelligent, Black women ^{as advocates} ~~scholars~~ ^{we are told that we} must discount the particularities of our real-lived experiences and instead focus on the validity of generalizable external analytical data. The dilemma we face in joining the canonical boys is that of succumbing to the temptation of only mastering the historically specified perspective of the Euro-American masculine preserve.

In order to be respected ^{as capable and responsible advocates} ~~scholars~~ in our disciplines of study, Black women are placed under a double injunction. We have to face a critical jury, primarily White and male, that makes claims for sex neutrality and value-free inquiry as a model for knowledge. ^{Women advocacy workers} Black female ~~scholars~~ will have little opportunity to expand our creative energy in the direction of ^{justice making ministries} ~~womanist ethics~~ if we concentrate on searching for universal truths unhampered by so-called incidental matters such as race, sex, and class differences.

^{mainline denominations} In other words, there is an unspoken informal code within the ^{docs of justice} ~~guild~~ that African American academicians must engage in this type of abstract moral discourse or else we run the risk of being misunderstood, the risk of being misinterpreted, and the risk of

being/frequently/devalued/as second-class, scholars/specializing/^{superfluous, throw away appendages with a working budget shrinking into non-existence} in Jim Crow subject matter.

To exemplify/what I am saying,/let us now turn/to the life/and work/of a frontrunner,/an African American woman/who was a precursor/of the modern day/^{advocate for women} Black woman scholar. Let us draw near/and listen closely/to a story/about what happened/to a particular/~~Black woman~~ who was/an early contributor/to the canonical/tradition.

Now the setting/for our story/is in the 18th century/in Boston, Mass.

Boston, the capital/of the Commonwealth/of Massachusetts/is a symbol/of much/that has gone/into the development/of the great/American consciousness.

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For others, Boston/is the nation's/closest link/to its European/heritage/wherein/ the people of Boston/represent/ the vanguard/ of the American Revolution.

For still others, Boston's/theological influences/have pervaded/the nation/for the past/three centuries.

For most people, Boston/remains/the focal point/of what may be/the most diversified/and the most dynamic/comboination/of educational/cultural/medical/and scientific activities/in the United States of America.

But as for me, a Christian/womanist/social/liberation/ethicist,/Boston/is important/because this is the place/where it