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Work in Progress

Alienation and Anger: A Black and a White Woman's Struggle for Mutuality in an Unjust World

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Work in Progress

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Alienation and Anger: A Black and a White Woman's Struggle for Mutuality in an Unjust World

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Response by Sung Min Kim, D.Min.

About the Authors

Katie G. Cannon is Associate Professor of Ethics, and Carter Heyward is Professor of Theology, at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA. Sung Min Kim received her doctorate from the Episcopal Divinity School in 1991 and will be working in solidarity with Korean-American women, probably in the Boston area. This presentation was given on March 6, 1991 as part of the Stone Center Colloquium Series.

Abstract

In this paper, professional colleagues Katie G. Cannon, an African-American womanist ethicist, and Carter Heyward, a white lesbian feminist theologian, examine their ongoing effort to build a friendship. The presentation takes the form of letters, spanning nine years, which reflect Heyward and Cannon's struggle against the devastating effects of racism and other structures of oppression on their effort to create and sustain a mutually empowering relationship. Their experience suggests that a commitment to mutuality can help transform the very structures that impede it and, as such, may be "the hope of the world." Responding to Cannon and Heyward, Sung Min Kim, a Korean-American feminist theologian, agrees that mutual relation holds the key to all authentic

empowerment and justice. She urges Heyward, Cannon, and others to work with an informed commitment to global realities, complexities, and consciousness.

The first exchange of letters in this presentation are slightly adapted excerpts from the Mudflower Collective's *God's Fierce Whimsy* published by Pilgrim Press, 1985. Reprinted with the permission of Pilgrim Press.

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Katie: We were born in North Carolina five years and twenty miles apart; one of us the daughter of Esau and Corrine, a millworker and a domestic and Avon lady; the other, the daughter of Bob and Mary Ann, an Exxon salesman and a homemaker. We attended different, segregated, schools and colleges, and different, segregated, churches. Carter's father died in 1984. Mine is still alive and lives in North Carolina with my mother. Carter's mother also lives in North Carolina. Our mothers have never met. We have never introduced them. Carter has never visited in my home in the South. I have been to hers only once and not without some fear of what might happen. Both of our mothers participated in Harvey Gantt's unsuccessful campaign to defeat Jesse Helms, and both did what they could to protest and stop the war in the Persian Gulf.

Carter: As far as I know, I had no family members in the Gulf. Katie had nineteen cousins and one brother who were there. The war, we agree, has set our presentation in bold relief. It was many things, this war. It was a racist and classist war. Young, poor, and working class people from the United States, 30% of them black, brown, and dark, fighting other young people of color to protect the interests of the working class, and doing so at the expense of what little was available to be shared among poor white, black, brown, Asian, and Latino people here at home.

While the war offended my basic sense of what is moral and what we should tolerate, it touched Katie's basic question of whether survival is possible for her and her people. And I am learning, slowly, surely, that the racism that infuses our lives, as in this war, offends my sense of what is moral precisely because it has raised the question of survival for Katie, for people of color, for Arabs and for Jews, for the poor, for the earth and, insofar as our lives are connected at the root, as Katie and I believe, it has raised the question of whether survival is possible for any of us.

To be honest, this war made me quite grumpy. It felt intolerable, and it was intolerable because Katie is my friend, intolerable because the blood spilt on Iraqi ground, on Israeli, Kuwaiti, and Palestinian ground, is the blood that runs through Katie's veins, and it is the blood that runs through mine.

I am learning, day by day, that this connectedness - this social, economic, psychological, and spiritual link - is profoundly important. I am learning that it is the basis of our morality and that to actively take on this connection necessarily bursts boundaries between us. I am learning that I live in Katie and that she lives in me in healthy, creative ways insofar as we are struggling toward a right, mutually empowering relation not only for ourselves but with, and for, our people and the earth, in the smaller and larger places of our lives.

And so we come here together in this struggle.

Katie: The readings we will be sharing tonight span nine years in the growth of a collegial relationship and friendship that is still strained, and often distanced, by realities like the war which threaten to extinguish the small flames we light whenever we struggle together for justice, peace, and survival. We offer these readings as a sign that the power in mutuality - that which we experience as sacred and irreplaceable - wherever we may find it, is the hope of the world.

Carter and I did not meet until the late 1970s, when she was finishing, and I was beginning, doctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York. After she moved to Cambridge to teach at the Episcopal Divinity School, we stayed in touch through our professional, intellectual, and political commitments. We also had friends who helped us hold our young, tentative, relationship together.

Carter: In 1982, I received a grant to do a research project on "feminism and theological education." I asked a small group of women of different colors to collaborate in this work and help focus it on our *differences* as feminist theological educators.

The group became the Mudflower Collective and our project, which we wrote in 1982-84, was published in 1985 as *God's Fierce Whimsy*. The first exchange of letters from which we will read tonight is from *God's Fierce Whimsy*, an exchange of letters which Katie initiated with me in 1982 following a discussion in the collective of Alice Walker's recently-published *The Color Purple* (1982).

Sharing our letters is the best way we've found, to this point, of experiencing in common some of the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and political material from our lives that moves us more fully into our power in mutual relation.

October 31, 1982

Dear Carter,

My mama always says that black people must remember that all white people have white mamas. She makes several points with this proverb.

First, the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world. We may question the validity and truth of such assumptions, but we cannot deny the impact that racist child-rearing practices have had on sustaining and perpetuating white supremacy.

Second, the volatile relationship between the majority of white women and the majority of women of color has to do with the pedestaled position that white women allow themselves to be placed upon, always at the expense of other women. When white women buy into the privileges of white supremacy and the illusive protectiveness of their superiority, women of color are forced to pick up their slack.

Third, white women are the only ones to guarantee the purity of the white race. They are the

white man's most important treasure. The bottomline motivation for the oppression of people of color is white men protecting the virtue and virginity of white women, resulting in the objectification of white women and all others.

Fourth, white women in particular are always seeking blessings of assurance from women of color. By this I mean that, even as a teenager when I worked as a domestic, I was asked by the white kids that I tended to, who were sometimes my age and sometimes older, for advice. (My confusion was always about the injustice of why, if we were the same age, I was their caretaker.) They would sometimes ask me what I thought about washing their hair with beer and other white folk phenomena. Learning, knowing, and remembering my place was critical to my job security. If I responded "What in the hell do I care?" or any milder version of that feeling, I would have been written off as uppity and therefore disrespectful, and fired. If I dumbed up and numbed out, ignoring them completely, just continuing my menial, low-paying work, such silence would have been read either the same way or as reinforcing my so-called inferiority and ignorance. It really was that precarious situation my mama describes: when you have your head in the lion's mouth, you have to treat the lion very gently.

Economic/work relationships cannot be minimized in discussing and understanding the relationship between white women and women of color. Also this same blessing of assurance has been manifested in my experience with white women when they don't want to participate in an equal, reciprocal process of give and take.

I remember once at a party lots of folks relaxing and having a good time. Black and white together. My conversation with a white woman appeared to be fairly open and honest. She said that she had always been taught that black people had a foul odor and asked for permission to smell me. (I didn't even flinch. I just registered the request in my category of weird-things-white-people-do.) After she sniffed and smelled and got her nose full of me, she concluded that all of the time she had been living with a racist myth, which, as far as she could tell from her experiment with me, was not true.

I then reciprocated the experiment by saying that I, too, had heard some smell-myths about white people. I had been taught that when white people wash their hair or get wet, they smell like dogs. I then proceeded to smell her. She jumped back, appalled, infuriated. How dare I have the audacity to smell her. This is when I was shocked. It was good enough for

me to be the object of her examination, but it was not ok when the tables were turned.

And that white woman, huffing and puffing, got up and stormed out of the party. This is often what white women do when they're not in front of the line, calling the shots, or in charge of the dynamics between themselves and women of color. They take their toys, their funds, their programs, their printing press, and go home, where they can perch on a ledge and not have their boat rocked. This in itself is privilege.

Kate

November 2

Dear Carter,

I haven't heard from you, so I will continue this dialogue in my head, assuming you have asked me to elaborate a little more about my mother's statement that all white people have white mamas. Whether this is your question or not, I think it is where a little more clarification is needed. My line of reasoning is not to establish white women or women of color either as the evil ones or as only the victims of patriarchal oppression and exploitation but to expose the rape of the psyche that causes all of us to internalize our own destruction so that "if there is not a backdoor, our very nature will demand one."

Rosa D. Bowser, an outstanding black woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, coined the words my mother used to accept her accountability: "Men are what the women make them." If I were to choose to bring forth a child from my womb or raise a child as an adoptive parent, I would have the responsibility to teach that child the rudiments of surviving a racist world. The only way that can be done is to set up a schizoid, push-pull, give-take child-rearing pattern, wherein I rape the psyche of my own offspring or immerse the child in the bleaching-vat process myself. Parenting is difficult in a racist patriarchal capitalist society.

Maybe I am totally off target in holding white women accountable for their role in white families in the same way; if so, I think there needs to be some honest communication with me and other women of color about the paralyzing nature of oppression of white females. I do know that black women have a sayso in child-rearing and the goings-on in the black family, and I believe white women have some sayso too, for perpetuating white privilege. Black women are not solely responsible for pathology in the black community. Poverty, drug abuse, low educational

achievement, prostitution, and unemployment are real. But we are, as Bernice Johnson Reagon¹ said, holding up the wall of society so that it doesn't crush the next generation, and simultaneously taking from that wall the essentials of survival. Black women, therefore, have neither the privilege nor the leisure to analyze the changing reality and the changing needs of the very people they claim that they are accountable to. If I don't accept some of the responsibility for the perpetuation of my own oppression, I can never be free. Whether I use the analogy of holding up the wall with my back, or the rape of my psyche, once the violence has happened, and even when it becomes routinized in well-documented, insidious institutional systems, the people in my community and I have a responsibility to the God who has created us in God's image to face and explore the terror, so as to mobilize the radicality of our own rebirth.

Kate

November 18

Dear Kate,

I'm excited to be writing this because I like you and I know you like me, which makes it a little easier to speak my mind. But I would be lying if I said that I'm comfortable discussing race, even with you, maybe especially with you.

Surely I've told you about Bessie. Bessie was our maid. I was about four years old, living with Mamma and Daddy, at the time still the only child. Bessie came every several days, maybe once a week, to clean the house and cook fried chicken, my favorite food, and look after me. And I adored her. Sometimes she'd take me to the movie theater in Hendersonville, North Carolina where "colored" people had to sit in the balcony and white people downstairs. I can remember begging her to let me go with her to the balcony! And I remember asking Mamma and Daddy why we never went to Bessie's house, except to drop her off at the end of the driveway, and why Bessie's house looked so poor, like a shack, and ours didn't. My memory is fuzzy, but I think I recall both my parents' very pained and strained expressions as they tried to explain racism to a four-year-old white child. I will go to my grave grateful that they told me racism was wrong and that it was not God's will and that we, all of us, were living in a sinful society. My parents, even then, were considered by most folks who knew them to be moderate to liberal white Southerners, and these were the lessons they tried to teach me.

But they didn't try to teach me, explicitly, that we should do something about ending racism. I suppose, like most, they didn't know what to do. They felt powerless.

Let me share a story with you: One day my friend Elliott (a white girl) and I were playing jump rope in the front yard and Bessie was watching over us. And I began that infamous little jingle: "Eenie meenie, miny mo, catch a nigger by its toe." I still to this day have no sense of whether I knew what I was saying, whether I was making the connection between "nigger" and "colored person" or between "nigger" and Bessie; but Bessie walked into the house, got her coat and walked out again, slowly down the driveway. I never saw her again.

That was 1950. Mamma and Daddy explained to me that I had hurt Bessie's feelings and that it was wrong for me to have done it, but that Bessie shouldn't have taken offense at a four-year-old girl. Recollecting this story is still painful for me.

As I've gotten older, the story has begun to make me angry, to put me in touch with feelings of having been betrayed - by the dominant, racist culture of course, but also by Bessie. My fantasy now is not to watch silently as she walks down the driveway, but to run after her and ask her to stop, turn around, come back. My fantasy is to demand that she tell me why she's going and what she feels like and, even at age four, to tell her that if I could do something about it, I would. I also would want her to know that I'm sorry, that I am ashamed, and that I didn't know what I was doing - at least not consciously or willfully.

It is almost more than I can bear to imagine that Bessie didn't give a damn about me, yet now, over thirty years later, I can say, for certain, that if I were a black woman, I would be burning with an unquenchable fire of rage against white people - including the four-year-old girls and boys I had been expected to nurture at the expense of my own.

Can we be different but not alienated? I agree totally, Kate, that the answer lies in the quality of our relation and whether real dialogue, the "miracle of dialogue" as you say, is possible and desired between us and around us, among our sisters, black and white. The problem with white liberalism is that liberal white men and women do not advocate real relation, not mutual relation, but rather a patronizing relation. White liberals "love" black people; white liberal men "love" all women (white women and women of color) as long as we're not threatening to change the name of the power game.

In my opinion, we white people have few models of mutual relation. Few people helping show the way. Even our primary, most intimate relationships and friendships have been characterized more by the attitude of “let me give you what I believe is good for you” than by the more mutual “let’s try to see what’s good for us and work together for what we see.” The former is destructive of human well-being, whether among friends and lovers or races of people. The latter may be redemptive. And it seems to me that that’s exactly what we need to be about, we white women and women of color.

Yes, indeed, every white person has a white mama, and a white papa too. And while I hear the particular poignancy and responsibility in the black mama-child relation you articulate, Kate, it’s the white daddy/papa/father image, symbol, and reality that cuts to the core of what I see the problem to be in the white world I know.

You see, for me, in my white culture it’s the father who’s been responsible for a kind of headship of family, a position which the mother enables. She is to nurture, coddle, and pass on the father’s values, including racism. This may sound simplistic, because individual white mothers are often as assertive and strong as white fathers. But in the dominant culture, the prevailing *public* expectation is that father does indeed know best. Even in families where there is no father at home, or in which the mother rules the roost, the societal image looms large of “the man”/“the father”/“God” in whose service one’s life is being lived. This makes for a complex, often dishonest, relation between the white mother and the white child.

Often accepting this hierarchy means the white mama must be manipulative, indirect, and circuitous in asking for what she needs, because wives and mothers do not live for themselves. It means that the mama must not let the daddy think that the children love her more, even if they do. Because, in fact, she is an emotional channel through which the children’s feelings get passed to daddy. Which means, again, that the mother must be coy, mysterious, enigmatic when it comes to appropriating the child’s feelings for her. It also means that she seldom will really feel loved by the children, even though they may adore her. It means that many white mamas live frantic emotional lives in relation to their children, trying not to love them too much, but at the same time desperate to feel loved by them.

And while black mamas have to teach their kids how to survive in a racist world, white mamas, if they

are justice-seeking women, have to teach their kids how to reject the patriarchal values of racism, sexism, and economic greed, and yet how to be well enough “adjusted” to this social order that they will not be destroyed.

I’ll probably write to you more later. Right now I’m spent. Your words bear witness to some deep and abiding truths - and I don’t often speak of “eternals.” Thank you for the gift of you.

Carter

November 20

Dear Carter,

I feel so grateful for the honesty of sharing that is occurring in these letters. It reminds me of my childhood, when I habitually watched Red Buttons on TV. I gathered a host of imaginary friends around me for comfort, all named HiHi, HoHo, HeHe, based on the characters I remembered that Red Buttons talked about a great deal. My sister, Sara, who is twenty-three months older than I, refused to play with me, because I insisted that my imaginary friends be allowed to play too. At that point she announced to the world (which consisted of my younger sister, Doris, and the neighborhood children, all blood relatives) that I was crazy. But I didn’t really care, because my imaginary friends were with me through thick and thin, they never left, and when I raised questions about the fundamental order of life, especially as to what the curse of blackness was all about, they (the imaginary friends) raised the same question. I knew in my heart of hearts that they knew I wasn’t crazy, just extremely delicate and sensitive.

I feel that you are one of those imaginary friends who is now present in the flesh. We were bonded before we were born. I just remembered I wrote a poem about such a bond on the day that the Feminist Theological Institute came into existence - November 22, 1980.

Strolling down the sidewalk
a woman-pair
Holding quadraphonic conversations
in our heads
Sure of words
not sure of the genus of our souls
Agonizing the same truths
Embedded in the common womb

of wrestling supplications
Posing difficult questions
with piercing x-ray vision
inherent in the friendship

before the beginning

The poem goes on, but the point I am making is that the covenant of relating is mutual. I know that if I tried to lift or erase the fear you have about your racism hanging out that I would be trespassing on God's territory. However, I do believe that only in experiencing the new heaven and the new earth do we develop convictions about what is really possible as well as renewed commitment to keep the covenant alive and ever expanding.

Before closing, I affirm that I enter this covenant of friendship with you because I am thoroughly convinced that I cannot be all that I can be as a black woman if I dismiss you from the community of humanity just because you are a white woman. I cannot be in an I-it relationship with anyone and call myself Christian. And the more I-Thous in my life, the more I feel, experience, and know the Eternal Thou who lives and breathes in each one of us in beautiful and unique ways. (I never thought I would reach the day when I'd say that I need white people in my life just as I need black people and the other people in the world because we are all part of the whole!)

Kate

Katie: The second set of letters from which we will read tonight evolved from the aftereffects of completing the manuscript for *God's Fierce Whimsy*. As we wrote in the closing pages of the book:

Like the Beatles, the longer we worked together, the better we became: the stronger our perceptions, the clearer our voices, the more interesting our contributions, the sharper our insights and the more complicated our lives in and outside of MudFlower. The "mature" Beatles, by the time they produced their last album, could not work together in the same studio. They sang and played separately and let the engineer mix their parts for commercial purposes...[The MudFlower Collective] had to decide either to work with one another toward resolving relational/vocational problems, or to finish [the] book. We confess we chose to finish the book. (Mudflower Collective, 1985, p.202)

Each of us in her own way experienced the accuracy of our "MudFlower" name because each of us had to live the reality of the heartache and pain of trying to grow flowers in mud.

I myself experienced three major shifts once we finished the book. The first shift actually began while we were still working together on it. I was challenged by another African-American sister as to whether or not I was a mammy for staying in the collective with a Hispanic woman and four white women. In other words, wasn't I, Katie Cannon, simply being used by the Anglo women to champion their cause, for their benefit and gain? Was I not aware that what was revolutionary for white women was professional suicide for me and other black women? So by default, was I playing the role of a mammy if I allowed my name to be printed among their names on the cover of the book? My heart ached when I heard these words over the telephone. And I distinctly remember hanging up the phone, turning to the Hispanic and white women in the room, sharing with them the indictment of my being a mammy if I continued to trust their acts of good-faith, hearing them offer words of comfort, and my saying, no, that in times like these I needed to be alone. I left the Riverside Drive apartment where we were meeting, caught the crosstown bus, and walked for hours in the drizzling rain on the East Side of New York. When I returned to the apartment, I was clear in my heart of hearts that I wasn't a mammy and that even if no one else understood the what, the how, and the why of my participation, I was willing to remain a member of the MudFlower Collective.

What makes this dilemma so lonely and so painfully difficult for me and other black women is that, when racism does show up in this kind of crossing-the-color-line coalition work, black women offer little or no comfort to those of us who have taken the risk, because each of us is supposed to know better than to trust white people in the first place. So as I walked the streets that dreary night I had to call on the ancestors. I had to find resources deep, deep down inside myself, and it was then that I heard my grandmother's saying over and over again, "You've got to be in the ring. You've got to be in the ring, even if you don't mean a thing, just be there! You've got to be in the ring, even if you don't mean a thing, just be there!"

The second shift for me was in 1987, when Carter and I agreed to jointly lead a conference in our home state of North Carolina to be held in May 1989. This conference, entitled "Can We Be Different But

Not Alienated?"²would be the first public appearance that Carter and I had made together since the publication of *God's Fierce Whimsy* in 1985. We offered to do the conference on the second Sunday in May, which is Mother's Day weekend. Even as we proposed these dates to the conference facilitator, I was knocking on wood with my fingers crossed, hoping that no one would want to come and talk about eradicating racism and homophobia on such a high and holy weekend in the Tarheel State of North Carolina. No such luck. More than one hundred women registered for the conference. So Carter and I started meeting and reconnecting in preparation for the North Carolina conference.

One of the surprising things about the feedback that Carter had received concerning our letters in *God's Fierce Whimsy* is that people asked her from time to time if the letters in the book were love letters. I was shocked, totally surprised by that question, because that possibility had never crossed my mind. I knew we were both pouring out our souls, trying to be as honest as we could be, trying to live into an unknown possibility of a black and white woman as mutual friends in right relation, but including love letters in a book about theological education was totally beyond my comprehension!

With the sensitivity of the priest-forever, Carter saw me hyperventilating from across the table. Yes, my heart was palpitating from fear that maybe I had put in print for the public to read something that I didn't know myself. Carter the Priest assured me that whenever intense, soul-to-soul, work takes place, like what we were doing in the exchange of letters, genuine intimacy does occur. Later, during the conference we talked about this type of intimacy as passionate, erotic work, and we concluded that whenever erotic work is being done, erotic particles are being emitted into the air. In May 1989, our sister, Wynn Legerton, coined the phrase "erons" for the erotic particles emitted into the air whenever we are doing the work that our souls must have. And far too many women respond just as I did. We are so afraid of the erons that we prohibit the possibility of mutuality.

The third and final shift occurred when Joan Martin and Letty Russell invited Carter and me to deliver the keynote address for a conference, "Troubling the Waters: Risking the Contradictions of Race, Sex, and Class," sponsored by the Women's Theological Center in Boston in April 1990. It was in preparation for this keynote address that we wrote the letters from which we will now read:

April 10, 1990

Dear Carter,

The first wellspring to tap in reflecting on what we were doing eight years ago in *God's Fierce Whimsy* is this: We need to recognize that the kind of sisterhood we were trying to mirror in our friendship is up against all kinds of powers and principalities, up against all kinds of spiritual wickedness in high places. As much as women of all colors might like to be in solidarity with each other, there are systems, structures, and institutions full of men and women who spend every waking hour of every day making sure that we don't trouble the waters, that you stay perched on top of the pedestal and that I stay crouched in a "jungle posture," "combat stance," down below.

The second wellspring to tap deals with anger. Carol Gilligan³ tells wonderful, energizing stories of how pre-adolescent girls name, claim, and flow with the push-pull power of rage and anger. Often, eight-year-old girls face life, front and center. And, from the pit of their guts they roar, I AM A-N-G-R-Y!

During this past decade, I have gotten in touch with my anger. As an African-American woman, I am angry! I am angry about how the vast majority of black women are violently forced into the crouched "jungle posture," "combat stance" beneath the pedestals of white supremacy, the pedestals of androcentric, heteropatriarch, the pedestal of postindustrial capitalism that rush African-American women to premature graves.

So where do I go with my anger? What do I do with it? As Bev Harrison (1985) says so clearly,

Anger is a feeling signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring. To put it another way: anger is, and always is, a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed. Extreme and intense anger signals a deep reaction to the action upon us or toward others to whom we are related. (p.14)

And yet, over and over again I hear white women talking about their fear of black women's anger, and I have watched white women go to any

length to repress, suppress, depress, oppress all acknowledgment of black women's anger. As a matter of fact, I have had to remove Nikki Giovanni's autobiography, *Gemini*, from the reading list in my course because when the majority of the white women in the class read it, they get so indignant that the pedagogy of the course can't go on. Over and over again, they demand, "How dare black women be angry!" And when they read that black women are full of rage, they ask "Why?" And then they turn and, tantrum-like, scream out their innocence of white privilege and class elitism.

Yes, there are a lot of sisters who are full of anger and full of rage, anger that causes the blood pressure to rise and rage that causes our noses to bleed. Sisters whose pressures are rising because we need to walk the floor, we need to pace back and forth, screaming out the unspoken rage and the leftover pain inflicted during the strange career of "jim crow." Sisters whose pressures are rising and whose noses are bleeding because we need to scream out the rage and the leftover pain - of the upstairs in movies, the back doors in cafes, outdated textbooks, discarded musical instruments, "colored" water fountains, backs of buses, "only on Tuesday" amusement parks, no admittance to public libraries, rewarded for dumbing up, punished for talking back, peeping through iron gates at Williamsburg during class trips, all the time hoping that what we were experiencing was not all there was.

And it is not just the bottled-up anger and rage of yesterday, but the mounting anger and rage of today. So let us not forget our younger sisters in prep schools and in public schools who experience this pressure, younger sisters in the inner city housing projects and the outer-limit suburbs, sisters who grew up believing that we had, for all intents and purposes, overcome. Sisters who were the first generation to reap the benefits of the Civil Rights movement - and the first to lose them, they too feel their blood boiling and their pressure rising. Some of these younger sisters have tried to use their Ivy League degrees, credit cards, and new-found Buppiedom as badges of emotional armor against the pain and drain of racism, but none of it works. These sisters feel their pressure rising because they have never lived the constant barrage of arrogance and insult, the constant barrage of suspicion and insensitivity, the constant barrage of backhand compliments and tongue-in-cheek naivete that is now their daily fare. And so they are being consumed - their confidence undermined, their innards slowly eaten away, as if by worms.

The intense anger I am talking about is writ large in the black women's literary tradition, and the truth therein stingeth like a serpent's tooth. What I am saying is that African-American women novelists push their anger through the tube of each consonant and the hole of each vowel. Their style is so clean, so dab, so swift. Jamaica Kincaid (1988) writes about black women's rage succinctly,

Nothing can erase my rage - not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal—for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened? (p. 32)

Black women writers have a never-ending commitment to present the anger and rage of the sisters of Yam - to make whole the brokenness, to heal the bent-overness, so that we can stand tall, claiming the heritage "from which we sprang when the birds of Eden sang."

So if white sisters and others who cast their lot with us cannot or will not deal with black women's anger on the printed pages, how can you/they live in solidarity with our anger off the page, in real life?

My anger and my sisters' anger, this collective intense anger, is troubling the waters, and the question I pose with "piercing X-ray vision inherent in the relationship from the beginning" - Can you hold the anger? Do you know how? Will you ask why? If we understand the power of anger in the work of love, where is the power? Where is the love?

Katie

April 14

Dear Carter,

Even though you are still on the other side of the Atlantic, I am anxious to get a letter from you. Since I have to wait until you return, I will take the liberty of unpacking the leftover thoughts lingering in my mind.

The point I was making in the previous letter is that if women are serious about risking the contradictions of love and anger in order to live in solidarity, then the pedestals of privilege inside the androcentric heteropatriarchal pyramid have to be dismantled. The ideologies, theologies and systems of value that hold racism, sexism, and classism in place have to be taken apart - stalk by stalk, plank by plank,

brick by brick. Each of us needs to do some rigorous soul searching in order to wrestle with the personal and political implications of the following statistic. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, What does it mean for my life that in 1991 black women, who represent just over 12.5 percent of the U.S. female population, currently account for more than fifty percent of all U.S. women with AIDS?

Carter, I suppose the final thing that I will say relates to what happened this spring at the beginning of my course on the "Genealogy of Race, Sex, Class Oppression." At the beginning of the course I talked about some of the dilemmas of the black woman scholar. Some of the students are still rocking and reeling from the impact of that lecture, twelve weeks after the fact. I had no idea that talking about how the majority of African-American women are forced into the script as either mummies or villains could be unsettling for so many white women. I made it quite clear on the first day of class that if I have only these two choices, to be either a mammy or a villain, then I consciously choose to be a villain.

I bring this issue up here because it is directly related to troubling the waters. Whenever black women move into positions as tenured academicians, corporate managers, human service activists, or creative entrepreneurs, and we refuse to straitjacket ourselves into the role of mammy, a large number of white people experience all kinds of cognitive dissonance - black women rock the boat, we trouble the water.

For example, I have been teaching graduate courses to a predominantly white student body since 1977, and I have experienced students getting downright indignant with me when they realize that I am a black woman in a role of authority. A few students have tried to stage coups. Others have wasted valuable classroom time arguing with me for hours on end, that I don't know what I know. One or two white women have dropped my courses after the first week of class, making it quite explicit that they would be damned before they would put themselves in a situation where a black woman has the power to critique, grade, and evaluate them.

Following the last coup in 1982, I hammered out the following words in order to keep my pressure from rising and my nose from bleeding:

I may be your "mammy"
but not your "mentor"
There seems to be no end
to the exploitation of my

nurturing capacities
and the forced relinquishment
of my humanity

I may be your "mammy"
but not your "mentor"
your flood of tears
shed at the finale
of my low-stature-menial-work
is indicative of your denial
of my desire to create
to analyze
and to strategize

My refusal to be your "mammy"
negates all possibilities
to be your "mentor"
only
now
a "mule of militancy"

If we are serious about troubling the waters and risking the contradictions, then we must create possibilities where none existed before so that African-American women and all who cast their lot with us can have options, many more options than Mammy or Mule.

Katie

April 16

Dear Katie,

In *God's Fierce Whimsy*, we knew that we don't have the privilege of not being alienated. Racism is a structure of alienation. So is advanced patriarchal capitalism, heterosexism, and all the vicious evil structures that, as you say so often, "hold the power in place." So we can't crawl out of these realities. In fact you and many other women of different colors have helped me learn that the first step in struggling against oppression of any sort is to realize how deeply immersed we are in it.

Sometimes I feel as if we're drowning in alienation - even you and I, Katie. I know that this is contrary to what either of us wants. I know also that both of us do our best to teach, preach, and contend

against alienation in our work. But the toll these wretched structures - the principalities and powers - take on us, and in our case, on our relationships across race and class lines is real and often dreadfully high. The system of oppression within which we rise each day is bigger and stronger than any one, two, twenty, or three hundred of us. Despite our good intentions and well-seasoned commitments, we can't always be there for each other in ways that we can trust. It's not that I distrust you, Katie G. Cannon, personally, or myself. It's that I distrust the messages communicated through the amplifiers of race, class, sexual, and gender oppression and the images these messages convey. Messages of you, of me, of us, of what is possible and of what is not.

Which brings me to your anger - the anger not only of Katie Cannon, but of countless numbers and generations of African-American women "violently forced into the crouched 'jungle posture.'" You asked me where you go with it? What you do with it? Whether I can hold it? Whether I know how? Katie, I can try to hold your anger if, in giving it to me, you can try to hold my honest response - be it remorse, confusion, or anger. To hold anger with you is, I believe, a way of our sharing anger at the violence being done to so many of us, and especially to poor women and women of color.

We should be angry about racism, and at racist people, even when, as in my case very often, the racist person is myself. But I hear you challenging me to go further with you in your anger; with you in your anger at me; with you in your rage at what white women like me embody, carry, and represent in relation to racist oppression. It seems to me that for you to want me to hold your anger signifies your vulnerability and mine. I will try to hold your anger, Katie.

We have moved a long way and over some rough terrain since *God's Fierce Whimsy!* I view our movement through the lens of our learning how to honor the authority of our own voices in a context that makes this learning critical, challenging, and creative. Here we are: you are one of so few African-American women scholars in theological education with tenure, and I'm an "out" lesbian Christian theologian. Along with a number of our women colleagues, both of us often embody a disquieting mixture of creative authority among our primary constituencies, but some crazy-making projections, constructed out of the confusion, fear, woundedness and anger of our sisters can exacerbate our own fears and discouragement.

I am sure your presence in the classroom,

academy, church, and seminary evokes the damndest dimensions of racism from among us; your faculty colleagues and your students. For white students to refuse to be graded by a black woman is another instance of race, class, and gender oppression! But who can be terribly surprised by this, unless they harbor an illusion that racism, classism, and sexism are behind us now?

To whom can you take this pain, Katie? Can you and I, black and white, share this level of political, cross-cultural, intimacy and vulnerability? I have a strong hunch that our capacity to stand together, through thick and thin, in this goddamned racist, heterosexist, class elitist, and increasingly violent, social situation has a lot to do with our being able to sit together in confusion and weariness and pain.

As a white woman, part of my difficulty in being able to hold your pain has to do with my whiteness imaging for me, as well as you, the root of so much of your pain. I believe, Katie, that a way through the pain, and the fear, is to name it and invite each other to come - me with you, you with me, our sisters with us - in our commitments, our work, our writing, and our learning to embody the critical mixture of vulnerability and courage required for any sort of radical change ever to happen. This is my only way through white guilt, by which I mean the sense in which my white privilege keeps me stuck, immobile, in feelings of powerlessness and fear (fear, for example, of saying something racist). The only way I can hear and hold what you write about yourself and your sisters' "rising blood pressure and bleeding noses" is to try not to run away, Katie; not to distance myself nor to identify, but simply to hear and see as best I can my involvement in the perpetuation of conditions that destroy you; and, of course, to renew my commitment to participate in undoing these conditions, this racism, step by step, step by step, even in the smallest ways.

Katie, I am learning that I can do only what I can do with the help of friends and companions in the struggle. I believe this is all any of us can do, whenever possible, one day at a time, and that it is, for me, today, enough. I've begun to sleep more easily since *God's Fierce Whimsy* and since I quit drinking, not because the dangers are smaller or fewer, because they're not. To the contrary, I believe Reagan-Bush is a disaster - dangerous and demeaning to people of color, poor people, women of all colors and classes, poor women of color especially, lesbians and gay men, elderly folks, kids, sick folks, to the earth and sky and water, and to many, many living creatures. It's really

not safe to sleep or wake these days, but I sleep better knowing that I'm in good company and accept that we can only do what we can do.

At what (I hope!) is about the midpoint of my life, I'm experiencing a good bit of serenity in the struggle for justice. Not always, of course, and never perfectly, but in good, comforting measure. And this gives me great hope.

Clearly, your presence in such a school even as our fine justice-seeking seminary is bound to be shaking the foundations not only of the school, but yours as well. I want to do everything in my power, professionally and personally, to help you live in this shock without harm, because you are a sacred, spirited gift, a source of grace and truth and compassion and courage at the Episcopal Divinity School. And I am a white Anglican priest. But, more importantly, Katie, to me, and, I believe, also to the school, to the church, the world, and certainly to God, I am your sister.

And, Katie, I need you to hold with me the tension and pain of my being myself at EDS. I, too, am something of an anomaly in our professional context. In choosing to come out as a lesbian, to insist upon the Christian character of my work, and to do feminist liberation theological work is to make myself a lightning rod at the school and beyond. I have chosen this way consciously on the basis of (more or less!) intelligent vocational criteria. But I continue to discover how much energy it takes to keep the faith and how much I need the solidarity of my sisters with whom I try to stand.

I do not always know when I may be asking too much of others, including those closest to me. And I am able to be told, and usually to hear, that I am. But it is important for me to say to you, my African-American womanist friend and colleague, that I need you just as you need me in our work together.

Things aren't going to get easier for us, at the seminary or elsewhere. Reagan-Bush is not an abstraction! We didn't dream it up in some nightmare, nor can we make it disappear soon by teaching and preaching womanist/feminist principles. In the short run, our teaching is likely to strengthen the christofacism of Reagan-Bush. So, we're either in for the long haul, involved in processes of slow, radical, mutual, and compassionate transformation in the small as well as larger places of our lives, or we're in serious trouble.

Carter

Carter: In the spring and summer of 1990, Katie and I wrote a couple of other letters reviewing the "Troubling the Waters" conference. Since the fall of 1990, we've been meeting biweekly, in preparation for this Stone Center presentation, to explore our relationship; to explore our alienation and anger, our passion and "erons," our caring and commitments, our struggles, differences, and efforts to move *in*, and *toward*, a more fully mutual relation.

The last reading is from the letters we wrote last summer.

May 25, 1990

Dear Carter,

A number of the African-American sisters approached me after our keynote dialogue wanting to know what causes you and other white women to be confused when racist incidents happen. What is the source of the quandary? In essence, does the pain of black women prevent clarity? Does our presence inhibit truth?

But to those of us who hold the ancient memories of African-Americans in the U.S. context, the claims of confusion seem outrageous. African-American women, especially from the working-poor strata, have had to cultivate a "serene clarity" in spite of tortuous living conditions. Our survivalist intention allows us to do no less. So, what do we need to say, what scars do we need to show that will provide clarity to that which creates alienation and confusion?

I suppose the final thing that I need to address is my appreciation to you, Carter, for hearing the vulnerability of my anger. I don't quite know what to do with your quick turn around. It felt too fast-your asking me to hold your anger at the same time that I am asking whether or not you are able to hold mine. One of us has to hold while the other rests or else it seems we will cancel each other out.

Katie

June 8

Dear Katie,

In this society so decimated by racism that

everything we feel and think and do and dream happens within a racist context, I frankly do not know how it is possible for any of us, white or black not to be confused by the profoundly mixed messages we give and receive in relation to one another as we attempt to live and work in honest ways together as colleagues and friends.

I'm trying to get at whether mutuality is possible between us, Katie. I know that we cannot and will not ever be completely "equal" in a racist society. Our racial inequality has been structured into our common life. In this racist society there will always be a power-disparity built in our relationship as black and white women.

Mutuality, if it is possible, is a relational movement that can't be grounded in the denial of oppression or injustice but rather must seek to transform it. This transformation needs to take place in our personal and professional relationships as well as elsewhere in the world. I believe it has been happening between us, Katie, in our commitment toward creating the realm of whatever is most sacred by struggling together toward its realization.

It's true, I think, that other white women and I sometimes say we're "confused" in relation to women of color when actually we just plain disagree with you. I know I do this in various situations. I'm trying to do it less, to be more honest and risk conflict rather than merely plead "confusion."

My question to you is how much room for such disagreement do you see in relation to white women, in relation to me in particular? The struggle for mutuality requires space for conflict, but how do we actually live it? Can I say to you that I think you're wrong sometimes, even in your assessment of racism? I may be wrong. But can I risk making this mistake?

I hear you asking me if I can hold your anger without seeking something in return. I hear you asking me not to do such a "quick turn around," not to ask you to hold anything for me while I hold your anger. I hear you asking me to hold your explosion and your vulnerability, your rage and your pain.

Katie, I want to hold your anger with profound respect. But I know that I do, and will, hold it also in pain, and in anger, not often at you, but at racism and sometimes at myself for ways in which I collude with those who hold racist power in place. And I will sometimes feel confused. In this context, "confusion," I trust, may be simply a word for being human. Yes, Katie, I can at times hold your anger without asking anything of you, and there are times when I must ask you to hold my pain, my anger, or my grief.

I want to say clearly to you that your pain and anger do not prevent my clarity about racism and that you don't have to "show any scars" to provide clarity to me or other white women who are open to seeing what is happening. The "scars" are quite evident, pervasive, and omnipresent in racist society: We see them in the media, the economic structures, and the ways our institutions are organized. We see these scars in our political systems, our psychic constitutions, our theologies and our ethics. We see them in the white churches, white therapy system, white medical establishment, white Congress, White House, white everything holding capitalist heteropatriarchy in place.

We are a scarred people, and I know that you, an African-American woman, bear the special effects of the vicious scarring process that has tried to eliminate you altogether, obliterate your name, obfuscate your being, and devastate even your capacity to dream dreams. I know that this racist process has broken and scarred our whole body in its efforts to destroy you and other African-Americans. I believe that you do not have to show anything to those of us who are ready to see. Everything we need to see is right before us. Much of it is within us. The poison of racist ideology infuses white folks' bodyselves long before we know what's happening.

I am grateful, Katie, to be living in a period in which women like us, two "tarheelers," black and white, born into an alienated world that taught us the sheer impossibility of such dialogues as ours, are actually breaking through together into a realm of new possibility! Something amazing is happening. We are leading one another through some scary terrain.

The wilderness can be a place of transformation in which, as a white and black woman, we learn to build mutual relation. But how? How do we god? How do we learn with one another what it means to "make justice roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream?" We do it, I believe, the way we're doing it. We're in the midst of the very process we're trying to describe. We are breaking boundaries, envisioning a new heaven and a new earth, drinking from wellsprings of hope, compassion, and anger, calling one another forth, more and more fully into the Katie Geneva Cannon and the Isabel Carter Heyward we are meant to be. One of our colleagues calls me a "Platonist," a classical idealist, but this is not who I am and not what we are doing. We are not struggling toward a world of forms that awaits us out there or up there somewhere. We are

contributing to the creation of a more just and compassionate world. In small measure, we are embodying this world and signifying it as real and possible when we share the truths of our lives. We are like drops of water falling on a stone in our struggle to strengthen the conditions for mutually empowering relation in an unjust world.

May we keep our courage

Carter

Katie: May we keep our courage.

Response to Katie Cannon and Carter Heyward by Sung Min Kim

Tonight I have been asked to respond to the experiences of racism - anger and alienation in black and white relations - as an Asian-American woman. I always feel ambivalent about being placed in this position. I don't wish to take the focus away from my black sisters and brothers in regards to white racism. At the same time I hope that my own experiences of racism will add richer understanding to help all of us fight the injustice of such an evil system in our world.

As a woman who immigrated to this country twelve years ago from Korea, I certainly had a very different experience growing up than did Katie and Carter and I still live a very different reality from Katie and Carter though we live in the same society, including our little society at the Episcopal Divinity School. As for most Asian Americans, the way I experience racism is the pain and anger of invisibility. Whites, do not consider us to be whites, but we are also not considered to be persons of color either by whites or blacks because we are not blacks. We are not of the majority culture, and yet we are also not recognized as people of minority status. The historical reality of racism for Asian-Americans in this country is for the most part unknown and misunderstood by the general public, including Asian-Americans. Because of that invisibility and ignorance, as well as indifference, we always "fall between the cracks" as if we are nonbeings whenever issues of racism are discussed. As one who has to cross the boundaries of language and culture even to be included in the dialogue about racism, the feelings of alienation and anger overwhelm me, and that is a fact of my daily life.

So what is my place in the movement toward authentic community that Katie and Carter are

working on? What brings us together, and what is it that sustains us in our connections beyond the fact that we have met as teachers and students at a seminary? Or is there anything?

Listening to Katie and Carter talk about their experiences as black and white women in this racist society, I cannot relate my upbringing to the life experiences of either woman, for I was brought up in another society, but, I have lived and am living a historical reality that is not at all unrelated to the realities that Katie and Carter experienced.

Though I was not in the United States in the sixties, I am here now as a direct result of what happened in the sixties, when at the height of the Civil Rights movement, the immigration law changed, lifting the restrictive quotas placed upon Asians and opening the doors wide for Asians to add a different color to the heavily black cities of the United States. The racial bigotry and violence that we witness daily in all of the major metropolitan areas around the country between blacks and Asian immigrants is not unrelated to the racism we are talking about tonight.

If I can name a common experience I share with both Katie and Carter, it is the men we have experienced, especially the black and white men of the United States. American GIs have now been in Korea for forty-six years. They fought the Russians on our soil, and thousands of people, mostly Korean, have been killed. The war divided the land and the people and many of our families remain divided. Koreans have prayed for the uniting of our divided families for the last forty years. But the system that loves war still stands strong on both sides of the Pacific. Tens of thousands of our women have served black and white American men with their bare bodies and are still serving them faithfully - it is a case of economic survival for many of the poor.

I also share the common experience of the power of capitalism through multinational corporations. If you wonder where all the factories that have closed down in this country have gone, and why your families, especially the poor ones, have lost jobs and are laid off, I will show you these factories in my home town, Seoul. The bodies and souls of millions of my sisters and brothers in Korea are given over to the most inhumane laboring conditions because our government guarantees businesses no taxes and no unions.

Though I did not share the growing-up years with Katie and Carter in this society, I certainly share the domination and oppression of a racist world as it works out its evil through sexism, capitalism,

militarism, cultural imperialism and all the other destructive “isms” around the globe. This domination and oppression has forced on us the kind of realities that we lived, Katie’s and Carter’s here, and mine on the other side of the world. We may not have known our connections then, but we recognize them now, for we are living them together, today. I just hope we can extend our vision to see clearly what is happening to our sisters and brothers across the Pacific ocean.

Experiencing the realities of the global context of oppression is where I see the hope of mutuality not only among Carter and Katie and me but among all women. My sisters in Asia and my Asian sisters in America have been longing for the kind of commitment Katie and Carter have when they commit themselves to relating to each other, honestly, in genuine fear, anger, and love, not willing to give up in spite of all the forces that try to separate them.

I enter into their dialogue as a woman caring for the well-being of other women as well as other living beings. Identifying with the pain and anger existing in this alienated world also challenges me in my own commitment to the survival, empowerment, and liberation of all oppressed peoples of the world. I am in mutuality with them in our passion for justice. In the midst of such an alienated world, I am grateful for the common language many Christians use, yet I acknowledge fully that it is also a language that hurts many people, especially women. I appreciate the ways we continue to struggle with what faith and spirituality mean to each of us as we relate to the faith/ethnic communities we have come from and are part of today.

I hope that you can hear my voice and see me clearly as a whole person, in my Asian-Korean-Americanness. Invisibility is painful. It is my hope that our joint pain and anger will help us overcome the alienating forces that divide us, and move us closer to each other, in true mutual relation.

I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to a white and a black woman’s struggle for mutual relation, but I also hope that, someday in the near future, Asian-American women will become full participants in truly mutual dialogue with other “American” women.

Discussion Summary

A discussion is held after each colloquium presentation. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here.

Comment: I’m a Korean person who grew up in the United States; so as I listen to Carter and Katie talk

about white and black experience, I think a lot about the history of Asian people in this country. As Katie spoke about “colored” fountains and sitting at the back of buses, I’m reminded of all the Asian people who, like black people, were treated as sub-humans. I thank Katie for sharing all that because I feel that she’s talking about all people of color in this country. All people of color in the United States have had a history of being dehumanized and silenced. I also thank Sung Min for talking about invisibility, because that is the plight of Asians in this country. We are invisible, and we’re more than Asian; we’re Korean, Japanese, Filipino... We’re a vast part of this globe. We have particularities and specifics, different cultures and different languages. I do not feel invisible in this group tonight because Sung Min talks about my story and about other Koreans and other Asians. Thank you.

Comment: I also would like to thank the Asian sister very much. I’m a Latino woman. The black and white issue does away with everybody’s identity, including white women who are not from this country. I don’t want to be critical because I really appreciate this colloquium. At the same time, I have discovered that Americans are very parochial. For example, you U.S. women don’t have to speak other languages as the rest of us do. So the one criticism that I have when I go to these kinds of forums is that it’s so parochial. What I would like to see more is an acknowledgement of women’s experiences on an international level.

Comment: I’m a black woman from South Africa. I want to ask where the journey to mutuality starts. I was touched by Carter’s “eenie, meenie, minie, moe” story, and I wondered whether her parents actually did make an attempt to follow up when Bessie left. It would have been so important. Nevertheless, I also would like to pose this question to Katie: Has she ever, or have her parents, invited Carter’s family to share with them or to be with them in their home? With all the “isms” in the air we breathe in South Africa, it is important.

Cannon: No, my parents haven’t. Carter’s invited me again to Christmas parties, but I never went back because the Klan is very active in North Carolina. Those of you who know about the Piedmont Peace Project know the anti-Klan work they’re trying to do. One of the things I’ve had to learn living in Boston for eight years now, is that I can’t take my comfort here for granted. I can’t do stupid stuff like

cross lines in North Carolina that would jeopardize the well being of my relatives and other black folks once I get back to Boston. I have to be sensitive to that. One time I went home and I forgot, and since that time I haven't forgotten. My mother and I were driving, and I said, "Ma, we need to stop and get some gas," and she said, "Kate, keep driving." I said, "but Mom, we need gas," and she said, "just keep driving." That's when I realized that the gas station was owned by a Klansman. I can't afford to forget that. I can't afford to forget that we live in a state of siege, a state of emergency. And it's that kind of stupidity and forgetfulness that would cause someone else, randomly, to be hurt. So, no, our families haven't met.

Comment: I'd just like to say that I feel really fortunate to be here. The level of respect in this room and the willingness to hear are very, very powerful. There are a lot of men who are looking for alternatives and the work you're doing is a real beacon of light and I'm very grateful for it. The relational ethics and the struggle for mutuality is a lot of what helps me to break through and peel off the scabs that you were talking about and I thank you.

Miller: I know that I speak for everybody here in our thanks to Katie and Carter and Sung Min. Carter keeps saying to me, "I want you to relate this to clinical issues," but I don't think we have to worry about that. We're talking about the salvation and growth of all of us. We are so grateful to you for leading the way. Thank you.

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Footnotes

¹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, an African-American artist, musician, and cultural historian is a founding member of Sweet Honey in the Rock. She is on the staff of the Smithsonian Institution and is a friend with whom Katie Cannon works from time to time.

² The conference in North Carolina is an annual event sponsored by Women in Ministry in the South, a feminist educational program coordinated by the Reverend Jeanette Stokes.

³ Katie Cannon is working with psychologist Carol Gilligan, of the Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in her current research on the development of adolescent girls.