

## ***OUTCASTS IN THE DESERTS OF HOPELESSNESS***

Emilie M. Townes\*

### **ABSTRACT**

*It was not until Delores Williams' Sisters in the Wilderness that Black women's experiences and modes of survival were given theological voice as a companion and/or corrective to the dominant mode of liberation found in Black Theology. This womanist response helped provide a thicker description of Black religious thought and modes of being—female and male. I explore what this expanded discourse has been used in womanist social ethics and ongoing battle that Black folk wage for our humanity.*

### **“WHY SIT WE HERE? WHY SIT WE HERE UNTIL WE DIE?”**

It was the fall of 1984 and I was excited that I would finally get to hear and see the already famous Katie Cannon. I began hearing about her as I was finishing my DMin in 1982 and she was someone who I could look to as a Black woman who was breaking through barriers and providing a role model—even for those of us out in the hinterlands of the Midwest. So, when the National Council of Churches Committee on Women in Ministry decided to sponsor a racial ethnic women in ministry consultation, I lobbied to have Katie Cannon be the keynote speaker. It wasn't a hard lobby as she was already making her mark in the Presbyterian Church and was nearing the end of her doctoral program at Union Theological Seminary.

Many of you have heard me recount how Katie called me out at that meeting and told me that I needed to get on with my pursuit of a PhD in order to teach, so I won't recount that story now. Instead, I begin with the scripture redaction that Katie used in her first sermon to that gathering of women from 2 Kings 7:3 (KJV):

“Why sit we here? Why sit we here until we die?”

It was a powerful sermon. And what struck me and has stayed me over the years was the question Katie used to ask us about what we were doing, or not, in our ministries. To have this question as my earliest memory of the power and incisiveness of Katie's witness through her teaching and her scholarship had a profound impact on my own ministry and scholarship, and I suspect to many of us gathered here this afternoon.

As a friend, a sojourner, a trailblazer Katie believed in taking a whole bunch of people with her as she made her way through the church and the academy.

The trailblazer announced her arrival in *Black Womanist Ethics* when she called out theological ethics and the dominant ethical systems that

implied that the doing of Christian ethics in the Black community was either immoral or amoral. The cherished ethical ideas predicated upon the existence of freedom and a wide range of choices proved null and void in situations of oppression. The real-lived texture of Black life requires moral agency that may run contrary to the ethical boundaries of mainline Protestantism. Blacks may use action guides which have never been considered within the scope of traditional codes of faithful living. Racism, gender discrimination and economic exploitation, as inherited, age-long complexes, require the Black community to create and cultivate values and virtues in their own terms so that they can prevail against the odds with moral integrity.<sup>1</sup>

Dominant ethical theorists and apologists went into absolute apoplexy. How could this Black woman so clearly not center whiteness on her eyeball—and tell them that was what she was doing and did not ask permission to do so. After all, whiteness represented objective, universal ideals that help the mind do mental gymnastics such that it can ignore the Middle Passage, Jim Crow, lynching trees, forced sterilizations, Tuskegee and syphilis, and just all ‘round White supremacy. These things are only aberrations or exceptions at best—if recognized—and certainly not what the white elite—male identified, and female identified thought or did.

What Katie made clear is that these were neither aberrations or exceptions but systemic, persistent, sinful, hegemonic—and entrenched in the many myths folk used to rock themselves to sleep after dining on a meal of disaster and violence that consisted of the bones of black and brown folk. And over the years, she included queer folk, trans folk, disabled folk, and so many more. She knew then and until the day I last spent time with her in late July just before she died, that like the poet Lucille Clifton often said, whiteness is not reliable, and it sometimes does not tell the truth.

She was clear in her essay, “Teaching the Womanist Idea” in *Katie’s Cannon* that the point of all that she did was shake the foundations of the many “ists” in our world:

When asked by students to define the special nature of “liberation ethics,” [She] wrote the following on the chalkboard:

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

How is it done?

*By analyzing the established power relationships that determine cultural, political, and economic presuppositions and by evaluating the legitimating myths that sanction the enforcement of such values.*

Why is it worth doing?

*In order that we may become responsible decision-makers who envision structural and systemic alternatives that embrace the well-being of all.<sup>ii</sup>*

I have said elsewhere, and I’ll say it again, “Katie Geneva Cannon is one of the most incisive, creative, and rigorous minds we have in contemporary Christian ethics. Her ability to create living laboratories of learning in her classes both challenge and inspire students to think through who they are in relation to the world around them and the ways in which they must continue to grow into the mysteries of God’s ongoing revelation in the world. She is also one of the best pedagogical minds we have in theological education. Her ability to think through the ways in which students learn and what they must be exposed to in order to learn with depth, and compassion is simply amazing—and produces classroom designs that are transformatory.”

As a sojourner, she is an exemplar of Toni Morrison’s dancing mind. Her mind was open to listening and dialoguing with others in a way that kept the conversation going—even through the rough and tough waters of moral reflection and analysis. As one of the founders of womanist theology and ethics while still a doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, she was like the icebreaker ship designed to move and navigate through the ice-covered water of ethical orthodoxies that have left the lived worlds of far too many people—female and male—absent from moral discourses and pastoral concerns. It was her work, bringing the moral voices of Black women into the academy as full and robust participants that is her legacy, a legacy for which we are all the better for as we go about the work our souls must have.

When she joined the ancestors, a large hole opened in many of our hearts and in our lives. So many of us have living memories of Katie, but we each know, in some way, that they cannot take the place of bodies breaking bread together over the mundane as well as the breath-taking.

But more than anything, my dear friend has died, and I miss her every day. For Katie,

friendship meant something—it was more than being polite, it was light years beyond platitudes, it was more than niceness or womanifesting with Abiola Abrams because loving and believing in someone did not require of them brilliance, stellar deportment or perfection—even though she did prescribe to the Presbyterian decently and in order. How many of us gathered here did Katie get laughing and kept laughing as she told stories or made wry observations about something she saw or heard? She broke down conventions and invited you to join in the fun and she stood by you and told you the truth you didn't want to hear and the truth you needed to hear. This was the incomparable gift of friendship Katie offered—the truth.

Yes, one of our founding mothers has died and we must now take up the work with renewed vigor as we mourn her passing and honor her memory by doing the work our souls must have.

---

\* Emilie M. Townes is the Dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University and Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society.

© 2018 Author and Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

---

i Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, AAR Academy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 2-3.

ii Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 138.