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

Katie G. Cannon, Ph.D.
Carter Heyward, Ph.D.

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 an 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 irrepressible - 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.

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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