

# Walking through the Valley

*Womanist Explorations  
in the Spirit of Katie Geneva Cannon*

Emilie M. Townes,  
Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas,  
Alison P. Gise Johnson,  
and Angela D. Sims,  
*Editors*

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**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

*For Katie Geneva Cannon,  
Wise Guide, Pedagogue Extraordinaire,  
Truth Teller, Friend, Woman of God*



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## *Foreword*

### Katie Cannon of Kannapolis

NIKKY FINNEY

Kannapolis, North Carolina, a deeply segregated mill town, will forever have the privilege of being where Katie Geneva Cannon, smart and plucky daughter of Esau and Corine Lytle Cannon, was born in 1950. Cannon's last name will also forever be imperfectly reflected in one of the most successful manufacturing histories of the twentieth century, Cannon Mills. Cannon is the surname of her people, those formerly enslaved at the Cannon Mills Plantation. Katie Cannon was the great-grandchild of those who had worked for several generations to build the business into a textile dynasty. The white Cannons and their perpetual wealth and upper-caste status never crossed over to Katie's side of the Kannapolis railroad tracks. As a great cracked mirror of human demarcation, it perhaps was Katie Cannon's first up-close blood portrait of the haves and the have-nots, a quizzical and intimate silhouette of American society. This early truth was Katie Cannon's permission, as a deeply reflective religious scholar, to ask and seek answers to monumental ethical questions for the next four decades.

Everything about Katie Cannon's youth revolved around the church. The Black Presbyterian Church where her blood elders were also the religious elders of the church. The Black church—where devout religious southern Black folk, only a stone's throw out of slavery, spent much of their time. There was nowhere else for a Black Christian family to matriculate. The Black church was the only world they owned. It was the only physical space where Black people held sway and say-so about who they were and who they dreamed to be. Katie Cannon of Kannapolis, daughter of a Black farmer and the first Black woman to ever run the machines at the Cannon Mills textile factory instead of cleaning the toilets, marched in perfect step with her family and tight-knit community: "We had to know the Bible as if it might not be there one day." She kept a deliberate and closed focus until other books and ideas made their way to her hungry mind and heart. Enter the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, Brown versus Board of Education, the assassination of Martin Luther King

Jr., Black-gloved fists rising into the Olympic air, and more. There was nowhere else to turn but to her true self for seeking the answers to the deeper questions that began to visit. With her Bible still close, she walked smack-dab into the great social and political crosswinds and conversations of her day.

After reading and devouring Lerone Bennet's history-altering *Before the Mayflower*, Katie Cannon found the walls of her old world too small. "How could we Black people have such a rich culture, come from such a rich civilized people on the continent of Africa, and be told all our lives that we are a liability to civilization?" Black religious study was about to be Cannonized. The young woman from Kannapolis, with all her questions in tow, made up her mind not to follow the well-heeled road of deliberate lies and instead return to an old, trusted, albeit dusty truth now with a twist: Black people are the children of God, and Black women are their moral compass. Her founding of Black Womanist Theology built a new mountain on the old landscape of Christian ethics.

In an oral interview with the Presbyterian Historical Society in 1987, Katie Cannon of Kannapolis walks us through her brilliant unpaved life. She is asked why she took such an unusual path as a religious scholar. Cannon laughs, describing the attempts of others to make her someone she was not. "I'm just Black. Even the Black bourgeois tried to get me to pass as though white. 'She's not going to do it. She just can't pass.'" Katie Cannon goes on to explain her situation as if she is listening to one of her elders tell the story of one of her ancestors who kept running away from the plantation, no matter the level of punishment: "It's like having a dead man's genes. I'm mechanically Black."

I met the wondrous and mechanically Black leader, Katie Cannon of Kannapolis, in 2005. I was building a life as a poet, and my books were just starting to generate verve and energy. I didn't know she knew my work and therefore was surprised to hear from her. As president of the Society for the Study of Black Religion, she invited me to speak to a small group of Black biblical scholars. I thought she had invited the wrong poet. She assured me that she had not. Before I arrived, I worried that my stories and poems might not be religious enough. I combed through my stanzas to double check, looking for more linear Jesus moments. I didn't know Katie Cannon's connection to Zora Neale Hurston then or to Black culture or to Blackness. We were only just beginning our journey. I was a Black woman searching for my own flight path into the American literary tradition and was not finding a

comfortable fit. Katie Cannon had found her own air current and was in full-throttle flight. That weekend I learned a precious thing. Katie Cannon never just invited anyone anywhere. When Katie Cannon called, you were being sent for, and a caravan of deep listeners, mighty thinkers, and joyful toe-tapping folks were always there, waiting.

There was nothing linear or one-dimensional about Katie Cannon. She was a human vessel of swirling circles and living color. She didn't entertain straight lines or absolutes, loved her African fabric, loved to laugh and tease. If she caught you off guard, she would hold her face in a serious gaze until she could no longer resist the laughter moving like a wave up from her belly and into her eyes. There are reliable ghosts from the Black Girl Etiquette class at Barber Scotia College in 1969 with stories of how Katie Cannon of Kannapolis sat with her arms folded in row 5. One day it finally hit her that etiquette was being taught to Black girls so that white people would not be afraid of the many colors and swirling circles that Black girls possessed, so that Black girls could move more easily into the white worlds that awaited them just beyond Scotia's door. Katie Cannon of Kannapolis was not having it.

All along the way of her life, there were those who saw Katie Geneva Cannon's job as a Christian social ethicist to simply be a believer like the rest of the church. They wanted her to just get on board and leave behind her edgy particulars, her Blackness, her woman-ness, her Southern-ness, all the natural and radical geographies of her life. They hoped she would learn to *transcend* her Black womanist leanings and tap down her chestnut skin to reach *higher ground*. But Katie Cannon of Kannapolis knew what the higher ground was, and she also knew why the Old Testament keepers wanted to avoid it at all costs. With this clear understanding of four hundred years of American culture and thousands of years of Christianity, she decided to spend the rest of her life teaching women and men to climb there with her, in order to tap *back* into themselves.

The last time I saw Katie Cannon of Kannapolis—the last time she sent for me—it was an invitation to attend the inaugural gathering of the Center for Womanist Leadership, in Richmond, Virginia, April 4–7, 2018. I arrived, and there she was, sitting at a circular table surrounded by her great and loving community—her church. “The poet is here,” she said; “to do what she do,” she added. She stood up and made a place for me because that's what Katie Cannon always did. Other womanist scholars and preaching women were already onstage and having church, one after the other testifying and blowing up the

mic with their words, truth, sermons, and stories. When it was my time to go up on stage, she reached for the mic and my hand and looked up at me, whispering, “I am going to introduce you from the floor. I am not going up there onstage with you.” I didn’t understand. I needed her to go up there with me. I was in her house. “I will not go up there,” she said. “When you stand up there and ‘do what you do,’ you make the whole room pregnant.” She started to giggle softly up under her breath at having used the word *pregnant* in such a literary context. She giggled hard as if her old professor in Etiquette class, back at Barber Scotia in 1969, might possibly appear out of the ether and critique her Katie Cannon description of what happened when my words traveled through the microphone and landed out in the wide sea of the room. But the word was perfect and had been perfectly placed. Katie Cannon of Kannapolis had once again demonstrated what can happen when a woman of deep faith and clear understanding, freed from the confines of “what’s proper,” looks another free woman of faith in the eye, in the presence of hundreds of other free women of faith, robed in African cloth and swinging earrings, and decides that sweet Black freedom talk, spoken one heart to the other, is the most faithful language of all.



# *Acknowledgments*

## FROM STACEY M. FLOYD-THOMAS

I would like to acknowledge the labor of love that has allowed this project to flourish. The Black church worship tradition of call and response is akin to the womanist practice of mutuality and reciprocity. The writing of this text has been womanist worship, lending our life and labor to “where all the yeses line up,” as Dr. Katie Cannon would often say. I thank Renita Weems and Melanie Jones for always saying “yes” to being the willing worker-warriors and wind beneath the wings of womanism, which is the soul that my work must have. I thank my kin, most especially Juan Floyd-Thomas (my soulmate), Lillian Floyd-Thomas (our star), and Janet Floyd (my sister beloved) as well as the legacy of love provided by the Floyd and Underwood family, both those living and those at rest, who have always been willing and able to provide the bandwidth and encouragement this work requires and to celebrate my every success. And to my village people who inhabit the fabulous spaces and give soul to the thriving of Black folk in a tradition that esteems the Cannon legacy and takes the forms of the Black Religious Scholars Group; Friendship West Baptist Church; Sabbath Sistahs Book Club of Nashville, Tennessee; The Womanist Salon Podcast Team; The Temple University cohort of Cannon mentees; Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society AAR Group; The Center for Womanist Leadership Design Team; The Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership Staff; and the coeditors and contributing authors in this volume.

## FROM ALISON P. GISE JOHNSON

I acknowledge my sister Debra Jennings, whose insights and critique as advocate, practitioner of social justice reform, and budding womanist scholar were invaluable. I also thank my daughter Anisa Johnson, who made herself available any time of day or night to listen to my work

and editorially support this endeavor. I thank my Claffin University Department of Humanities colleagues for making my transition to this new space life-giving. Your extravagant welcome and impromptu collegial exchange made it easy to prioritize my writing, for the first time in my academic life. To my cowriters, Vanessa and Faith, I am extremely grateful for how our work together continues excavation of the non-negotiable need for an applied womanism that destroys socially constructed differences between Black women; embodies collaboration as the image and likeness of God; and demands sacred strategic action to create holistically sustainable communities that honor Spirit, earth, and ancestors. And finally, to Dr. Emilie Townes, thank you for your unwavering commitment to seeing this work through. Thank you for your patience as I wrestled with the real soul work of writing; the painful limitations of writing with two fractured elbows; and the beautiful challenge, pressure, and hope of creating a usable resource that would make Dr. Katie G. proud.

#### FROM ANGELA D. SIMS

With appreciation for Black women who

- make a way out of no way,
- refuse to foreclose on their souls, and
- forge a path for others

#### FROM EMILIE M. TOWNES

To the generations of Black scholars who came before me and are following me—you are the reason I do what I do. To my spouse and rock, Laurel—you bring joy and serious talk all in one breath. To the faculty, staff, and students of Vanderbilt Divinity School—I cannot think of a better place to be to face the challenges of these days and celebrate the delights that are always peeking around the corner and keep us going and thriving.

## *Lesson Plan*

God is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
God makes me lie down in green pastures,  
and leads me beside still waters;  
God restores my soul.  
God leads me in paths of righteousness  
for God's name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of GOD forever.  
—*Psalm 23, Inclusive Language Lectionary, Year B*

*Walking through the Valley* echoes Psalm 23, which assures us that God will be with us through all things that we place in conversation with an extension of the work of the womanist Christian social ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon, who was the founding figure in exploring how the concept of womanism can be used in moral thought. Cannon argued that dominant (normative) ethics was designed, however unintentionally, to mark those of darker hues as morally deficient if not bankrupt because of the ethicists' understanding of what constitutes virtue, value, identity, and theological standpoint. Cannon's writings and lectures and classes ushered in other persistent voices that disputed this methodological and moral valley. This volume draws on the foundation that Cannon crafted for others to build from.

With some of the themes from Cannon's body of work as starting points, the coeditors of this text begin to explore the potential next steps for where her moral thought can lead contemporary womanist moral reflection and theological ethics broadly considered. The themes of justice, leadership, embodied ethics, and sacred texts come to the fore. In true participatory knowledge production, each editor has invited two womanist scholars to join them in a conversation about the theme in each part of the book. The writers prod and probe the possibilities and seek new moral insight as to how we might learn, yet again, that the world Cannon invited us to build, one of inclusivity and hope, is possible even in the dark valleys of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and systematic hatred. We invite our readers to join this conversation and engage the potentialities of taking on the task of this work.

### UNEARTHING THE SACRED FROM OUR OWN TEXTS

Since its initial emergence in the 1980s, womanist theological ethics has sought to dismantle theological and sociopolitical constructs that disavow that Black women's full humanity is made in the image of God and endowed with the potential to enliven freedom and rightly divine the word of truth. Katie Cannon's training in both biblical studies and ethics has played an essential role in what she deemed the *telos* (ultimate end)—the “debunking, unmasking, and disentangling” of womanist norms for emancipatory practice.

A large part of this work involves women challenging ideas about their status that are derived from so-called sacred texts. While notions of biblical authority and *sola scriptura* make it difficult to unmask the power dynamics embedded and invested in traditional biblical interpretations, several generations of Black women scholars in the field of religion have nevertheless produced works deconstructing texts and their interpretations that for centuries have denied agency, worth, and legacy to Black women.

Although much has been accomplished, there remains much more to be done in terms of debunking textual myths, unmasking the truly sacred, and disentangling Black women's marginalization.

The authors in this part of the manuscript employ Cannon's ethical mandate by challenging the presumably unassailable, centuries-old notion of biblical authority that has silenced, shunned, and stunted Black women: their effort is to help Black women and others see the

limitations and constraints that have been force-fed to society as the word and will of God. This intergenerational and interdisciplinary offering is designed to engage the enduring legacy of Katie Geneva Cannon for both the future of theological education and the edification of Black women who discern and drive the primary modes of inquiry that deal critically with tradition, structure, and praxis in all their fields of study.

## STRUCTURAL POVERTY AND BLACK COMMUNAL SOVEREIGNTY

At the core of Womanist analyses of structural poverty are four axioms: (1) Poverty is essential to capitalist modes of production. (2) Capitalism hinges on control of land, labor, and relationships. (3) In racialized economies, distorted imaging of Black women's ecological and economic realities serve as essential commodities to be bought, sold, and leveraged for greater power. Finally, (4) poverty is an affront to the God of provisions, necessarily requiring, therefore, a response from Black women.

Guided by Katie Cannon's ethical analyses at the intersection of sexism, racism, and economics, with sights on freedom, and privileging the voices of activist womanist practitioners, this chapter posits a constructive approach to ecologically responsible Black communal sovereignty in the face of structural poverty. Of particular interest is praxeologically addressing issues related to spiritual apartheid, climate change, and external imaging of Black female bodies as sociopolitical production—how addressing these issues impacts ecological viability in general and Black women's eco-economic health more specifically.

## WOMANIST WAYS OF LEADING

In this part, the authors employ an autobiographical/dialogical approach to illustrate expressions of womanist embodied leadership informed by commitments to and engagement in the academy and the Black church. With attention to ways in which Black women chart paths for themselves, nurture potential in others, and curate space for collaborative engagement, particular attention is given to identifying strategies advanced by women when “foreclosing on our souls” is not an option.

## EMBODIED ETHICS

Eschewing the mind/body/spirit fractures that haunt moral discourse, this final part of the manuscript explores what happens in deep methodological and ethical ways when we bring our whole selves into moral discourse. Rather than subscribe to either/or dualistic thinking, the authors explore how the theo-ethical praxis of Katie Geneva Cannon continues to prompt new avenues of epistemological candor, to develop a moral praxis that is meant to release circles of liberation, hope, and sustenance in the work for justice and a healing world.

PART ONE

*Unearthing the Sacred  
from Our Own Texts*

*The Biblical Field's Loss  
Was Womanist Ethics' Gain*

Katie Cannon and the Dilemma  
of the Womanist Intellectual

RENITA J. WEEMS

Some women deserve double honor. Katie Geneva Cannon (1950–2018) is one such woman. Katie Cannon occupies a unique place in the theological academy. She is the foremother of Christian womanist ethics, a once contested but now fixed part of the field of Christian ethics. She was a leading voice in the subjects of womanist ethics and theology and of women in religion and society. In her 1985 essay “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,”<sup>1</sup> Katie Cannon inspired a young generation of Black women scholars in theological studies—those like myself, a graduate student at the time—to use the word “womanist” as an alternative to “feminist” and thus to set our research on Black women’s theological realities apart.<sup>2</sup> Katie’s gifts as a womanist ethicist were shaped by humble beginnings in rural North Carolina. She arrived in her discipline by calling attention to its racist heteropatriarchal assumptions, which made it scoff at the notion that Black women possessed moral wisdom worthy of academic study. Katie, a Black girl from poor Southern working-class origins, would go on to pioneer a totally new field of inquiry in Christian ethics, known as womanist Christian ethics, centering Black women’s epistemologies for thinking and talking about God.

Katie was the first Black woman to graduate with a PhD from Union Seminary in New York and the first Black to graduate from that institution with a degree in ethics (1983). But what is not so well known is that when Katie Cannon arrived on the campus of Union Theological



Seminary in New York City in 1974, she did not intend to study ethics. Katie's dream was to become an Old Testament scholar. Having just completed her Master of Divinity degree that spring from a historically Black theological school, The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), Katie came to New York with an acceptance letter to Union's PhD program in Old Testament studies.<sup>3</sup> She imagined earning a PhD in Old Testament and returning to ITC, where she envisioned a career as a Bible professor, teaching Black clergy and religious leaders. I am credited with being the first Black woman to graduate with a PhD in Old Testament (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1989). But Katie Cannon serves as a reminder to all that being the first at finishing doesn't mean you're the first at starting, dreaming, or trying. For years a quote by Alice Walker hung over my desk in my graduate school dorm room, a quote written ten years prior to Walker coining the term *womanist*. In the introduction to her second book of poems, *Revolutionary Petunias*, Walker wrote: "To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrow, is always a measure of what has gone before."<sup>4</sup>

I was familiar with this quote before I met Katie Cannon face-to-face. I clung to this quote to remind myself of the cost others had paid to make it possible for this specific Southern Black girl to dream big in the 1980s about earning a doctorate in biblical studies. I carried this quote around with me long before I discovered that I was not the first Black woman to enroll in a PhD program in Old Testament studies, long before finding out that a decade earlier Katie Cannon had enrolled in a PhD program in Old Testament and was ejected from the program after two years of study. It would be many years before I learned about Katie's ordeal in the Bible department at Union Seminary.<sup>5</sup> By the time I came across her story, I had completed my degree, and Katie had rebounded and was well on her way to becoming a preeminent scholar in Christian ethics.

This essay in memory of Katie Cannon is not another lament on how hard it is being a Black woman in the academy. I am a Black female intellectual who has survived for forty years, working both inside and outside of the academy. Along with Katie, I and other womanist colleagues can testify that it is possible to survive, even thrive, within

and outside anti-Black, anti-woman, misogynoiristic spaces. How? By learning how to rise above injury to do the work that you love. Cracking open spaces and blazing trails in work previously designed for whites and for men is difficult work. There is a guaranteed trail of tears awaiting Black women who pursue the life of the mind, as it does nearly all people of color who enter curricular halls not made with them in mind. But what I discovered, as did Katie and others of us who are part of that first generation of Black female scholars of religion, is that eventually it comes to you that the world is larger than the racist and sexist institutions that begrudgingly grant us degrees, promotion, and recognition for our work, and larger than the Eurocentric intellectual world, which threatens to devour us and spit us out. What makes a black woman intellectual keep going? The prospect of giving up and giving in to the anti-Black woman stereotypes and assumptions about you is a worse prospect.

“So, what does it mean and what has it meant to be a black female intellectual?” asks Black feminist critic Brittney Cooper in her book *Beyond Responsibility: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, in which she charts the far-reaching intellectual achievements of African American women as public intellectuals and the evolution of their thought from the end of the 1800s through the Black Power era of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> To answer Cooper’s question, to be a Black female intellectual in this country means, for one thing, to think, write, and teach under a cloud of suspicion that says you’re not good enough, not serious enough, not smart enough. Forever the outsider, the interloper, the *other* in a world that centers whiteness and maleness as the abiding images of inquiry, Black women have rarely had the luxury to pursue a life of the mind; when they do, they are likely to wind up working in institutional spaces, where they are constantly put on to justify not just their production of knowledge, but also their very existence in the discipline. Katie Cannon’s journey to becoming a preeminent scholar in womanist Christian ethics is the story of what it means to be a Black woman intellectual. Daring to seek a doctorate in the 1970s and daring to center that research on Black women’s realities and moral voices, one had to be prepared to face obstacles. “Do the work your soul must have” was Katie’s famously popular response to complaints about roadblocks to one’s work. It sounds easier than it is. After all, patriarchy doesn’t bend easily, and when it does bend, it seems impervious to actually breaking and focuses its energy on breaking anyone and everyone who threatens it. Katie would learn this firsthand.

In the 1970s Union Theological Seminary seemed to be a logical place for a student of color interested in doing Christian scholarship to enroll. By the twentieth century, the school had distinguished itself for its deep commitment to the broad paradigm of liberation theologies. The oldest independent seminary in the United States, Union Seminary had long been known as a bastion of progressive Christian scholarship, with a number of prominent thinkers among its faculty and alumni.<sup>7</sup> Black faculty at ITC had urged Katie to go for her doctorate at Union because of Union's bold hire in 1970 of a firebrand young scholar, James Cone, who would go on to become the main architect of a brand of theology that grew out of the Black power movement. Even though behind the scenes Union Seminary was experiencing serious financial troubles by the 1960s, the seminary remained the place to study in the 1970s for those committed to progressive religious ideas and liberation in any shape or form. In the 1970s the school boasted one of the largest enrollments of Black students at a predominantly white theological school.

Later Katie admitted that she had no idea what it meant as a Black woman to step into a predominantly white, male, elite insular theological institution and seek a seat at the table where its most prized discipline, Old Testament, was debated and decided. As the first Black to be admitted to Union's Bible department, Katie Cannon didn't know what she didn't know. In Katie's words, "I was the first black woman to try and get a PhD in the Old Testament, . . . and I did not know that brain power alone would not produce a PhD. . . . I did not know that it was 75 percent political—[that] someone had to take you on as [your] mentor."<sup>8</sup> Union Seminary was a vastly different intellectual environment from ITC, where Katie had been admittedly accepted as one of the boys. Like many students of color from working-class backgrounds who aspire to become professors but lack the vocational counseling to know what lay ahead, she found that graduate school can be tough, regardless of the discipline or the school one attends. Katie was clueless about the hierarchy in the guild of theological studies. She knew little to nothing about the hierarchy among the disciplines, with Old Testament studies having the reputation of being the most rigorous of the disciplines due to its language requirements. But Katie could do the work. Yet the confluence of sexism, racism, and classism that she experienced in the department would almost do her in. The arid, dispassionate debates, snubs from her classmates, the use of jargon, the foregrounding of the European canon, the centering of male subjectivity, the erasure of other

voices—it was a world vastly different from the loud, heated, passionate, good-humored debates about God, African peoples, human suffering, divine judgment, rights, slavery and the Bible, and Black prayers she had known at ITC.

Katie admitted decades later of nearly cracking from the pressure of “the white trauma of Union” that she experienced as the only Black woman in the biblical studies department.<sup>9</sup> Ostracized, lonely, and frustrated, she nevertheless pushed forward, applied herself, and jumped all the hurdles necessary, she thought, to prove to her peers, her professors, and herself that she deserved to be in the program and could finish.<sup>10</sup> But two years into the program, after successfully completing her course work and preparing for her qualifying exams, Katie learned one of the harshest lessons for Black women aspiring to a life of the mind: despite what you think, intellect is not enough in the world of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Just as she began looking forward to drafting her dissertation proposal and digging into her research, her department adviser called her into his office with news that devastated her. He was not signing the application renewal form for her Ford Foundation Fellowship. What was the reason given for refusing to sign the fellowship renewal form? The department believed that Katie Cannon wasn’t a serious enough student. “Based on what?” one asks. They had discovered that Katie was working as a supply pastor while a student in the doctoral program.<sup>11</sup> Holding down a job while a student in their program was allegedly proof to the department that Katie Cannon wasn’t giving her studies her all. The precarity of Katie’s financial situation as a Black female, first-generation student was well known in the department. But that didn’t matter. Without funding, she couldn’t afford to continue her studies. Refusing to sign off on her third-year Fellowship funding was a death knell to Katie’s completing her doctorate in Old Testament, and her adviser knew it.<sup>12</sup> The department had found the excuse it needed to force the lone Black female student out of the program. That excuse was declared: Katie Cannon wasn’t a serious-enough student. Translated: the nerve of this Black woman to think she can study for a Union Seminary PhD and have another life alongside. Never mind that Katie had completed her coursework. That wasn’t the point. It was her temerity. A Black woman thinking she was equal enough to white men in intellect to study Hebrew Bible was already unthinkable, but assuming she could study and simultaneously hold down a job was a challenge to the Old Testament section’s reputation as a first-class, rigorous program at Union Seminary.

Katie was crushed and humiliated. Word spread quickly throughout the small, tight-knit Union campus: Katie Cannon had been booted out of the PhD program. She learned a second important lesson from her days in Union's biblical studies department, one that she took with her the next forty years whenever she moved from one teaching post to the next: when and where a Black woman enters the halls of the white Eurocentric, cisgender, patriarchal academy, you can be assured there will always be those who will remind her: "*You don't belong.*"<sup>13</sup>

By the time I met Katie Cannon sometime around 1986, I was a graduate student at Princeton Seminary, questioning my vocational choice, wondering what convinced me to think that enrolling in a PhD program was something I wanted to do, that specializing in Old Testament studies was the way to go, that becoming a professor was possible, that being intellectual was something a Black woman should aspire to. We were both products of our generation of smart Black girls from the South who came of age in the middle of what one might think of as the bridge years of boomer unrest, just as the Civil Rights Movement was losing momentum and the women's rights movement was gaining momentum, in 1968–74. Katie was a few years older than myself, but we shared several things in common. We were smart, sassy, strong-willed young women desperate to escape the restrictions of our working-class Protestant homes, young Black girls who loved to read and learn and then at different times found our way to Northern elite institutions as radical Black nationalism and radical feminist consciousness were clashing and making headlines. Both movements, radical Black nationalism and radical feminism, proved crucial to us in helping to frame and explain the reactions and resistance we met as we sought a footing in our programs and in our journey into the academy.

In all the years that I knew Katie Cannon, she never told me about her dream of earning a doctorate in biblical studies nor did she admit that she had once enrolled in a doctoral biblical studies department. It was years before Katie talked openly about what she later described as "the white trauma of Union," which left her feeling awkward, clumsy, lonely, isolated, inferior, shabby, and unfit for a career in the biblical field. Even after I learned of her experience, I never queried her about it. I understood Katie's silence and empathized with the wound associated with the memory. Only now, thirty-five years after graduate school, have I begun to peel the layers back and take a look at my own memories of surviving a graduate program in biblical studies in the 1980s. Only in the last few years have I ventured to talk in public

about what it was like to be the first and the only Black woman in the all-white biblical studies department of Princeton Seminary. I still wince when I hear myself introduced as the first Black woman to earn a PhD in Old Testament studies. I don't presume to understand all that Katie experienced at Union in the Bible department in the 1970s. Indeed, all graduate-school stories are unhappy. Each graduate student is unhappy in her own way. But I know from my own experiences of being Black and female in a predominantly white graduate department how it feels to be treated like an interloper. Let's face it. The world of academic biblical studies had a race and gender problem in the 1970s when Katie Cannon enrolled in the Bible department at Union Seminary, and it continued to have that same problem a decade later in the 1980s, when I was a doctoral student in the Bible department at PTS. The discipline has made significant improvements in the decades since then, with the influx of more scholars of color to the field, but the field still wrestles with its whiteness. The problem is not about this or that bigoted school, nor is it about this or that racist or sexist faculty member. The problem is intrinsic to the discipline itself. To be a Black woman scholar in the biblical field, one must first be willing to submit and receive training to be concerned with the questions of a white male biblical scholar.<sup>14</sup> After you finish the program, it's up to you to commence shedding the hegemonic baggage you have acquired from your field and teach yourself to think about your discipline and your role in it better than you have been trained.<sup>15</sup>

How Katie survived academic humiliation in one department and how she made her way into another department at Union Seminary is a longer story than can be told here. But one can be sure it's a tale of perseverance, grace, synchronicity, faith, prayer, and intervention (both divine and human). Kudos to Beverly Harrison, a white feminist faculty member in ethics who summoned Katie into her office after Harrison heard that her white male colleagues had booted Katie from her Old Testament program. She urged Katie to switch to the field of ethics, promising to help Katie achieve her dream of earning a PhD. It was risky. Harrison wasn't yet a tenured member of the faculty, but what she lacked in clout, Beverly Harrison had more than enough in grit and a determination to breaking with the "malestream ethicists" of the day by ushering more women's voices into the field.<sup>16</sup> Katie found a home in the ethics department at Union. Harrison's mentorship proved hugely important to Katie's successfully graduating in 1983 as both the first Black woman to earn a PhD in social ethics and the first

Black woman to graduate with a PhD from Union Seminary.<sup>17</sup> At the core of this story about Katie's experience in Union Seminary's Bible department, however, is not what happened to Katie Cannon. It is about who Katie Cannon was at heart, which allowed her to get up after a severe blow by the academy, brush herself off, and pivot. At heart, Katie was an intellectual, a Black female intellectual, to be more precise. Katie arrived at Union Seminary in 1974 *because* she was an intellectual, a thinker, a budding scholar, a woman bursting with questions, ideas, hunches, and suspicions that needed to be tested. What she sought was a home where her intellectual restlessness could be nurtured, directed, and sharpened. The racism, sexism, and classism she experienced in Union's Bible department couldn't quench Katie Cannon's appetite for thinking and learning. She just needed an intellectual home, a room of her own, in which to roll up her sleeves and proceed with proving that Black women's moral discourse was deserving of a place in the academy.

Finally, the story of Katie Cannon's journey to become a Black female intellectual is not just about the importance of finding the right disciplinary home, the right mentor, nor the right questions to send you off on a lifetime career project. Those things are important. But what is more truly critical to being able to do the work you must do is to be able to rise above the opinions of others and the obstacles they put in your way, to frame an identity for yourself and situate that identity within something larger than yourself. Katie's love for the Bible dated back to the time when she was a girl, sitting at her grandmother's knee and listening to homespun Bible stories. Katie loved studying the Bible, but the field of biblical studies did not love Katie back. Yet she did not give up her dream. She drew a lot on the Bible as a resource for ethical reflections and moral discernment. Her treatment of texts in her publications was always done with the highest level of skill and sensitivity, like someone with training in biblical criticism.<sup>18</sup> "It gave me another competence" is how Katie would come to rationalize her two traumatic years as a doctoral student in Bible: "Most people studying the Bible know very little about ethics, and most people doing ethics know very little about the Bible."

Katie Geneva Cannon triumphed in the end. She went on to become a pioneering figure in the field of social ethics. She has produced groundbreaking texts showing how the interlocking systems of oppressions faced by Black women have lots to do with shaping the moral and liberationist ethics Black women live by and showing that

Black women's moral discourse deserves a place in the Western moral canon. One of her legacies as a social ethicist is that she worked to bring the moral voices of the marginalized, especially Black women educated and uneducated, into the academy with the recognition that they deserve recognition as thinkers, themselves producers of knowledge and shapers of moral wisdom. Further, Katie became an exceptional teacher with students vying for the opportunity, even at her death, to pen testimonials to their prof's impact in the classroom, describing her classrooms as being like living laboratories, where she inspired and challenged students to think thoughts that debunked, unmasked, and disentangled the mythic lies telling the marginalized and those rendered invisible that they are not good enough, smart enough, qualified enough for this or that work. Katie Cannon proved that Black women are thinkers, intellectuals, field-defining producers of knowledge. The field of biblical studies that she sought to pursue at Union was not the field where she eventually landed. As Stacey Floyd Thomas, Katie Cannon's first doctoral student, observed, the gain for Christian ethics was the biblical field's loss.<sup>19</sup> Katie's eyes never lost focus of her subject matter: Black genius, Black women's moral wisdom, God's preferential option for the oppressed. Because she possessed an innate light that could not be extinguished by others, Katie managed to do for the theological academy, for the discipline of Christian social ethics, and for the field of womanist religious scholarship what her literary muse Zora Neale Hurston imagined for Nanny Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high."<sup>20</sup> We no longer are privileged to have Katie Geneva Cannon's luminous presence and her bold laughter, but we will always hear her from her perch on high. Katie left her work for us to continue.<sup>21</sup>

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