

A Thinking Margin
*The Womanist Movement as
Critical Cognitive Praxis*

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The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same, but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don't even have to think about.¹

My folk . . . have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, beautiful and communicative.²

As a group, African American women remain underappreciated as critical thinkers, that is, as intellectuals who can assess astutely, reliably, and comprehensively the breakdowns and collapses in religion and society as well as generate creative and plausible alternatives. More than a decade ago, Michele Wallace bemoaned the condition of black women thinkers, concurring with French feminist critics that “we are all functioning symbolically as phallogocentric, ethnocentric, and logocentric subjects, in other words as ‘white men [with] black women . . . the least convincing in this role, the least trustworthy.’”³ Thus, a certain poignancy characterizes black women’s intellectual positioning: Even those scholars with whom we share the periphery, other outsiders committed to human flourishing, suspect our intellectual ability. Put differently, **womanists—theologians, ethicists, scholars, and cultural critics—fight a never-ending battle against the hegemony of the pseudo-universality of a deracinated male posited as the Western standard of normativity.**

Since the black woman’s involuntary arrival in the West, her body and

mind have been relegated to the margin, pressed to and beyond the limit. Down-pressed, she became a marginated being—living, breathing, bleeding, thinking, struggling, moving, and loving on the margin. She was reduced to an “exotic” outer edge against which men, white and black, tested physical and sexual power. Her body’s heartbreaking fertility was manipulated to adjust the planter’s margin of profit; her soul’s longing for expression was thwarted against desperate and mimetic preference for the black male. Pressed to the margin, embodying outsider status in society and religion, black women became liminal. Standing outside conventional points of social, cultural, and religious reference, black women have learned to think on the margins, to think clearly and quickly before the blunt force of *ersatz*-reality. Black women intellectuals have taken up Zora Neale Hurston’s keen razor-sharp oyster knife to cut through thick stuff, to apprehend and appropriate their own subjectivity in search of truth.

Alice Walker’s definition of womanist captures the intensity, responsibility, and accountability of the vocation of black women situated on the margins with the denotation “serious.”⁴ The notion *serious* connotes a perspective or stance that is *resolute* or “strong-minded, unflinching, tenacious, persevering”; *critical* or “essential, pivotal, radical”; *responsible* or “far-sighted, reasonable, trustworthy.”⁵

To be a serious thinking margin means to take up a *critical cognitive praxis*. The phrase *cognitive praxis* denotes the dynamic activity of knowing: questioning patterns and the sometimes jagged-edge of experience (including biological, psychological, social, religious, cultural, aesthetic); testing and probing possible answers; marshaling evidence and weighing it against cultural codes and signs, against imperious and subjugated truths; risking judgment; taking up the struggle. Such knowledge roots its accountability, its authoritative control of meaning and value in the cognitive, moral, and religious authenticity of the identity of poor, excluded, and despised black women.⁶ Womanist critical cognitive praxis yields not only concrete embodied relatedness to truth, but a metaphysical one as well. For the human mind wants to know and wants to know that what it knows is *real*. But what is real is not necessarily what is “out-there,” for the kind of “measure and standard of objectivity” that “out-there,” empirical and observable represents is but a form of naïve realism.⁷ Insofar as womanists enact a critical cognitive praxis in which the “fulfilling conditions are data of sense or data of consciousness,” then what womanists know is real, is being.⁸

The term *critical* in womanist cognitive praxis refers to its intention to carry out a radical critique of what is. This critique encompasses both intellectual and practical aims, disrupts all habitual affirmation of the status quo, distinguishes appearance from reality, and exposes the roots of what is. To borrow Katie Cannon's definition of liberationist ethics, womanist radical critique engages in

debunking, unmasking, disentangling the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society . . . 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.⁹

To be serious, then, calls for the conscious and intentional appropriation of one's knowing and the orientation of that knowledge toward the achievement of authentic and moral human living. To be serious means to acknowledge and accede to an *ethics of thinking*, that is, a surrender and commitment to the *eros* or integrity of the exigencies of the mind. An ethics of thinking has everything to do with what Audre Lorde named "an internal requirement toward excellence" that results in "an internal sense of satisfaction," which stems from "demand[ing] the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work"; from holding onto our "honor and self-respect."¹⁰

As an expression of subjugated knowledge,¹¹ womanist analysis is *responsible* to the historical conditions of black folk—children, women, and men. Patricia Hill Collins offers a truism, although one that is neither trite nor meaningless, when she remarks: "On some level, people who are oppressed usually know it."¹² Subjugated knowledge emerges from ordinary people's reflection on their experiences of gender, race, and class oppression. Cannon describes the relation of womanist work to subjugated knowledge as "draw[ing] on the rugged endurance of black folks in America who outwit, outmaneuver, and outscheme social systems and structures that maim and stifle mental, emotional, and spiritual growth."¹³

Theologians and philosophers frequently equate the term *foundations* with the reduction of the act of knowing (or knowledge) to pure sense impressions or with the attachment of knowing to a priori first principles or with the search for absolute validity and total certainty so typical of Cartesian method in science and philosophy or Kant's categorical impera-

tive in morals. The position I advocate locates womanist foundations not in propositions but in persons, in critically inquiring, thinking, probing, reflecting, judging, deciding, acting black women.

Womanists are their own foundations. When black women critically inquire, probe, reflect, judge, decide, challenge, and act in service of truth, they constitute themselves as critical knowers (and doers). Womanist critical cognitive praxis, as a mode of critical consciousness oriented toward emancipatory struggle (personal, communal, and social transformation), can trace its genesis to the earliest actuated meanings of resistance by captured and enslaved African women.

As a mode of critical self-consciousness, black women's cognitive praxis emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on experience of that oppression, and action to resist and eliminate it. Thus, as an authentic intellectual movement, womanist analysis originates in asking and answering serious questions; in grappling with human existence confronted by the mix of greed, cruelty, and desire in struggle for life and love. Hence, black women know the meaning of human existence as capital, labor, collateral, medium of exchange, object of property. But black women also know themselves as subjects, as thinkers, as knowers, as actors. The matrix of domination responds to human agency: the struggle of black women suggests that there is choice and power to think, to theorize, to act—mindfully, seriously.

Womanists are their own foundations. This position welcomes Toni Morrison's insistence that the Ancestors are foundations.¹⁴ We should recall that Alice Walker puts forward the definition of womanist in the context of remembering and honoring the Foremothers. Indeed, her search for a ground on which to stand and from within which to grow leads to and through our mothers' gardens. Here, audacious women tend and prune the trees of the knowledge of good and evil, of truth and life; plant and nurture magnificent flowers. The wisdom they possess grows from experience and struggle. Walker describes these mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers in lyrical, yet poignant language as

exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century that did not acknowledge them except as "the mule of the world." They dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand. . . . They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those

frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned.¹⁵

Yet the Foremothers persisted in their dreams and “waited to pass on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see.”¹⁶ They handed on to their daughters “a legacy of respect for all that illuminates and cherishes life, respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them . . . respect for strength [and] love of beauty.”¹⁷

The release of subjugated knowledge constitutes a serious, even dangerous, activity. To question ideas and circumstances, to probe and understand and evaluate and judge those ideas and circumstances, begins a first and crucial moral step toward authentic liberation. Yet liberation springs not only from what human persons know, but also from their actions or showing what they truly are—human beings. Womanist critical cognitive praxis slices open the brutal oppressions of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism in order to advance being human and human flourishing.

Womanist analysis is not idealist, believing that to know the good is to choose it; rather, womanist critical cognitive praxis concludes in decision that leads to action, to transformation in religion and society. Audre Lorde warned us that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They will allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about *genuine change*.”¹⁸ Tools for genuine change or transformation include nurture and interdependency; the acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of difference; and friendship.

Womanists share among themselves as well as with other subaltern scholars a fluid constellation of cognitive and religious commitments, methodological and theoretical practices. Over the past two decades, womanists have developed a wide-ranging and rich conceptual vocabulary that mediates meaning, even as those meanings may be contested and require negotiation and refinement. In considering the meanings of these nine notions—body, canon, death, know, mind, race, sass, survival, transgress—my hope is to suggest something of their protean meanings, repetitive and multilayered resonances; to suggest the curve and flow of the grammar of the womanist movement.

By sorting, labeling, and disciplining different types of human *bodies*, the notion of *race* simultaneously constructs, signifies, and symbolizes social conflicts and interests.¹⁹ To understand race as a social construct is

serious *knowledge*. For to consider race as ideology is to refuse to address the longevity, resilience, geographic irreverence, and egregious effects produced by biased race-thinking and race-acting. To dismiss race as illusion detaches it from human experience, that is, from human bodies and their situated-ness in particular social and historical circumstances.

In order to defuse these inaccurate conceptions of race, womanist analysis subverts the aesthetic taxonomy of the West, in which blackness is constructed as a deficient and negative signifier. Black bodies are stigmatized and marked as dangerous, diseased, pathological, sexually deviant, and coerced to assume an inferior ontological position. One way to re-order this aesthetic is to contest the *canon* and its attendant moral and religious connotations.

Canon [from the Greek, connotes standard or measure]: In academic contexts, canon refers to that set of texts that determine the standard by which epistemic, aesthetic, moral, and cultural decisions, as well as human acts, are adjudicated. Canonical texts constitute a course of study and, often, may yield a tradition of thinking. Too often canonical texts valorize or are distorted to valorize *one* culture and *one* experience to the detriment, even degradation, of differing cultural perspectives, insights, and values. To demonstrate the force of the implications of *the* canon in Western education, we need only mention the famous Britannica collection, "The Great Books of the Western World."

A canon coaches, sometimes seduces, but always intentionally forms a *mind*. It leads and trains a mind in an appropriation of a tradition of epistemic, aesthetic, moral, and cultural decisions, priorities, and desires. But, sometimes when coaching and seduction fail, in order to prime the mind and the soul, a *cannon* is turned on human bodies. Cheikh Hamidou Kane in his novel *Ambiguous Adventure* describes the impact of the cannon and the canon in a small African village. He writes:

real power resided not at all in the cannons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore behind the cannons was the new school. The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fighting weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and the school [the canon] fascinates the soul.²⁰

As a serious thinking margin, womanists critique the canons of their various disciplines, not merely because they disapprove of the distinction

between opinion and knowledge, nor because they reject the possibility of an objective transculturally valid rational standard.²¹ On the contrary, black women *know* (in mind and body) just what it means to be the object of relativized opinion or stereotype, what it means to be excluded from or be regarded as the conspicuous exception within the community of rational discourse. Rejecting knowledge grounded in empiricism and idealism, womanists advance a critical realist way of knowing, in which human experience can be interrogated and differentiated seriously; in which differing and analogous experiences, questions, and judgments are engaged and weighed in the service of understanding reality and truth; and in which knowledge exists for the creation and development of the common human good as well as individual human liberation.²²

As a serious thinking margin, womanists have adopted an archaeological approach to canon formation. Digging back and deep into black history, literature, and other expressive forms of culture, womanist scholars have unearthed the bodies of unknown or forgotten black women and bodies of unknown or forgotten texts. Katie Cannon brings the writing of black women's texts and the reading of black women's bodies together when she cites African American literary critic Mae Henderson, who identifies "black women's bodies as texts."²³ Thus, the crucial contribution that womanist analysis makes to canon (re)formation is the heretofore neglected subject of the experience of black women.

This does not mean that womanist theologians, for example, overlook Friedrich Schleiermacher or Karl Barth or Bernard Lonergan or Aristotle or Plato just because they may be dead white men. Rather, **womanists take the survival and flourishing of oppressed, excluded, and despised humanity (children, women, and men of all races and classes) as criteria for evaluation in reading texts.** As Katie Cannon explains, "Canon formation is a way of establishing new and larger contexts of experience within which African American women can attend to the disparity between sources of oppression and sources of liberation."²⁴ Insights that potentially enrich or correct our understanding of what is good and true can never be ignored. Reading in this way, womanists disentangle valuable and effective insights from thorny and ineffectual ones. Moreover, through this critical reading, womanists not only critique and (re)shape the canons of their disciplines but also rethink, revise, and transform whole areas in the common fund of human knowledge.

Another and crucial way in which womanists subvert the canon is through teaching. Education, bell hooks insists, must be the practice of

freedom, to teach in this way is to teach to transgress. Transgression entails “movement against and beyond boundaries.”²⁵ Transgressive teaching leads students to grapple with boundaries that constrict cognitive and moral growth; encourages them to explore new intellectual terrain; and models for them compassionate solidarity with the poor in the advance of justice.²⁶ Transgressive teaching grasps and communicates the difference between life and death.

Another form of transgression is *sass*. Sass is the use of mother wit and verbal dexterity to resist insult or assault. It denotes impudent, uppity speech; sharp, cutting back talk—sharp, cutting talk thrown at the back. Sass is a gift from the Ancestors. Enslaved black women took up verbal warfare in order to regain and secure self-esteem, to gain psychological distance, to tell the truth, and, sometimes, to protect against sexual assault.²⁷ The word “sass” derives from the bark of the poisonous West African sassy tree. Deconcocted and mixed with certain other barks, sass was used in ritual ordeals to test, punish, or absolve those accused of witchcraft. For our enslaved Foremothers, sass was a ready defense that allowed them to “return a portion of the poison the master . . . offered.”²⁸ The sass is strong and threatening in the lines of a song women cutters sang in the Louisiana cane fields: “Rains come wet me/Sun come dry me/Stay back, boss man/Don’t come nigh me.”²⁹

These nine terms—body, canon, death, know, mind, race, sass, survival, transgress—form part of a large and complex conceptual vocabulary that overlaps discussion in other fields, including anthropology, epistemology, literary criticism, philosophy, sociology, Africana and post-colonial studies. This chapter has attempted to interpret and engage some of the notions and terms pertinent to womanist cognitive praxis, and what has been accomplished is by no means definitive or exhaustive. My basic concern here was to turn a light on womanist cognitive praxis and to demonstrate its necessity in the realization of our dreams.

NOTES

1. John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 33.
2. Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 336.
3. Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990), 7.

4. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

5. Robert A. Dutch, ed., *The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, rev. ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), 350, 376.

6. Bernard Lonergan, "Cognitive Structure," in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967), 221–239; idem, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (1957; University of Toronto Press, 1992). My account of womanist cognitive praxis relies on the work of Bernard Lonergan, who offers the best trans-cultural account of the human mind that I have come across in more than twenty-five years of study. Its significance for the cognitive praxis of all persons forced to the margins of society is found in its ability to pose an ethics of thinking and to expose the emergence of bias when that ethics is violated. To illustrate: Racism, sexism, heterosexism are structural forms of bias that result from *scotoma* or blindness that results from the more or less conscious refusal to admit new insights, questions, discoveries, and to repress the insights or questions that continue to disturb. Thomas Jefferson's ambivalence toward slavery provides a good concrete example.

7. Lonergan, "Theories of Inquiry: Responses to a Symposium," in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 39. The "out-there" or "the already-out-there-now-real," Lonergan explains in "An Interview with Fr. Bernard Lonergan," in *A Second Collection*, is "'already'—prior to any questions; 'out'—extroverted consciousness; 'there'—spatial sense organs have spatial objects; 'now'—the time of the observer is the time of the observed" (219).

8. Lonergan, "Insight Revisited," in *A Second Collection*, 274; see also idem, "Metaphysics as Horizon," in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan*, 202–220; and John Phillips, *Contested Knowledge: A Guide to Critical Theory* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

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

10. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.

11. My use of the term "subjugated knowledge," coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), follows Patricia Hill Collins's reformulation of the term to more adequately represent black feminist thought. Foucault defines subjugated knowledge as "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it" (82).

With Patricia Hill Collins, I suggest that womanist knowledge is neither “naïve,” nor incapable of “unanimity,” in her *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 291n. 2.

12. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 8.
13. Cannon, “Appropriation and Reciprocity in the Doing of Womanist Ethics,” in *Katie’s Canon*, 135.
14. Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in *Black Women Writers, 1950–1980*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 344–345.
15. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 232.
16. *Ibid.*, 232, 240.
17. *Ibid.*, 241–242, 243.
18. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*, 112 (author’s italics).
19. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.
20. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962; New York: Collier Books, 1969), cited in Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986; London: James Curry/Heinemann, 1989), 9n. 10, 32.
21. Joseph Wagner, “The Trouble with Multiculturalism,” *Soundings* 77, 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1994): 410.
22. Joy James, “Teaching Theory, Talking Community,” 118–135, esp. 133, in *Spirit, Space, and Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe*, ed. Joy James and Ruth Farmer (New York: Routledge, 1993).
23. Cannon, “Womanist Perspectival Discourse and Canon Formation,” in *Katie’s Canon*, 74.
24. *Ibid.*, 76.
25. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.
26. *Ibid.*, 13–22.
27. See Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).
28. *Ibid.*, 30, 31.
29. Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 25, 26.