

CHAPTER 1

Notes on Appropriation and Reciprocity

— Prompts from Bonhoeffer and
King’s Communitarian Ethic —
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Great men often beget excessive sycophancy. When coupled with issues of appropriation and reciprocity, a rather large moral conundrum sets in. Dealing with such towering figures as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. is akin to being a prized turkey caught on a barbed-wire fence on the first day of hunting season¹—entrapped by someone else’s ideal of security and exposed to all manner of predators and sympathetic passersby. My concern in this situation is that neither Bonhoeffer nor King is seen in the full expanse of his respective thought. Rather, the general tendency is to appropriate excerpted thought from both men in order to underscore a contemporary argument. What remains wanting are explorations into the deeper ways in which the contradictions and challenges in their respective thought do not easily fit into postmodern moral discourses and the ways in which they differ from each other theologically.² This becomes even more so when contemplating Bonhoeffer and King in conversation or in tandem.

The essays in this volume attempt, in large measure, to heed the cautions and challenges in dealing with figures we often see as moral giants and martyred activists. However, there remains for me a more general concern about the ways in which contemporary Christian social ethics deals with the overarching issues of appropriation of the culture and insights of culturally marginalized groups in contemporary U.S. life and the global implications

and manifestations of this and the particular contribution black women in the United States can make in troubling these waters so that there emerges a thick description of our moral lives and living. With Bonhoeffer and King as stout moral sentinels, this essay explores some of the key features I believe are important to be mindful of regarding our attempts at thoughtful appropriation and respectful reciprocity as we search for ethical pillars to rest our contemporary analysis on in facing the incredible challenges of early twenty-first-century global realities.

I

For decades, there was silence about or, more appropriately, few listened to structurally marginalized voices. Whole worlds were left outside of dominant discourse and analysis, except as the occasional other who served the needs of oppression and dehumanization. It has only been since the late 1960s with the beginning of black studies programs in secondary and higher education that black realities were studied by black folks in large numbers. Before, the bulk of studies that focused on black Americans were done by white researchers who had varying degrees of awareness of the biases they brought to their studies.³ Cultural and social differences were funneled into deadly dualisms that carried with them difference, objectification, and, ultimately, domination. W. E. B. Du Bois and others named the experience often felt by the Other as double consciousness—seeing one's self through the eyes of the other rather than through the framework of one's experience and knowledge.⁴

As clarity emerged about the nature of the blight—which entailed processes of objectification and subordination used to define whole peoples, categorized patterns of thought and behavior, and (re)presented chimera as concrete history while counterfeit history became reality—African American women found that the words they had shouted to the winds, the lives they had lived *regardless*, found a place, albeit a small place, in normative discourse and inquiry. Early works by Delores S. Williams, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Jacquelyn Grant from the 1980s has now been joined by the more recent work of Melanie Harris, Eboni Marshall, and Dianne Stewart.⁵

Although several years old at this point, the modernism-postmodernism debate continues. Within this debate, various groups that have been traditionally marginalized, such as darker-skinned women, the poor, and sexual minorities, are insisting on being heard as their lives and cultures are usually the grist for hegemonic moves of appropriation that do not recognize or value the need for reciprocity. However, we stand within a context that is volcanic as

modernity radically alters the nature of everyday social lives. Within the modernist frame, there is a high value placed on universal rationality, attempts to establish objective, value-free established knowledge and ontologies. Modernity focuses on the individual who then creates communities rather than being birthed/formed by community. It seeks to institutionalize radical doubt, and it insists that all knowledge is really hypothesis.

On the other hand, postmodernism focuses on a radical historicity in which plurality, particularity, locality, context, the social location of thought, and a serious questioning of universal knowledge are key features. It is this molten-hot sand that provides the backdrop for considering the ways we use and misuse the lives and works of Bonhoeffer and King by often bypassing rigorous considerations about the nature of the other and how each of us shifts in and out of this posture: for at times, we are the subjects who objectify.

The promise of postmodern ethics is that it provides a way for many of us to think our way into concrete knowledge of and contact with African American realities as well as the realities of other structurally marginalized groups; for example, those formed by other racial, ethnic, sexuality, class, or age groups. When postmodern discourse only represents abstract thinking, however, it can commit the same vexing errors found in the modernist assumptions of universal rationality, objectivity, value-free established knowledge, individuals who create communities rather than being birthed/formed by community, institutionalized radical doubt, and knowledge as hypothesis. The challenge for postmodern ethics is to push for theoretical reformulations that embrace the great diversity found within humanity and creation *and* practice a concrete concern for the lives of people and implications of the theologies we espouse.

II

Considering the ways in which Bonhoeffer and King disrupted the status quo of their time in their reliance on a strong communitarian ethic that continues to prod us today, there are two key lessons that can inform postmodern moral discourses so that we do not fall victim to relativizing our actions and theories. This ethic, which insists that we belong to the same moral universe and must be treated with dignity and respect as children of God, reminds us that we must acknowledge that the notion that we are aware of another person's feelings and experiences only on the basis of empathic inferences from our own veers into solipsism. Self-consciousness and awareness of others are not natural or inevitable dance partners. Understanding the other is not predicated on how the individual (or the group) makes the shift from the certainty of her, his, or

its inner experiences to the unknowable person. When we make this kind of tenuous shift the outcome generally falls into two categories: *romanticization* (because we are all women, we understand poor women) or *trivialization* (why can't we all get along?). What we must be about as we approach one another's work and lives is care-filled listening, observation, and engagement. This takes time, energy, resources, fortitude, and a stout will to comprehend others. We are not to be theoethical tourists in the lives of others, but are to attempt the hard work of being pilgrims on the journey with others.

Second, it is important to remember that this is not a disembodied voice we seek to hear and understand, but one in which rich traditions and histories have shaped it as it continues to be renewed and transformed. It is a voice from a particular culture whose integrity and worth must be respected. If we rush in too quickly with our tools of correct analysis and solidarity, the voice we will hear is our own echo—a distortion of the original but Dolby in sound. Inept appropriations of cultures that are not our own not only signal a lack of reciprocity in which we share some of who we are as well, it is also stealing. That which is taken becomes a shadow of that culture rather than a rich appreciation of the history, tradition, and current manifestations of it. For example, the mass cultural appropriation of hip-hop has dulled the initial clipped, piercing social criticism that was the heart of the early work of groups from the 1960s like the Last Poets, individual artists such as Gil Scott-Heron, or, arguably, the later work of Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and Arrested Development.⁶ Today's mass cultural hip-hop does not chronicle social inequities such as poor housing and education; it is a mass of "booty shots" and misogyny wrapped in a glorification of violence as manly and necessary.⁷ How far this has come from the West African *griots* who are the wandering poets and praise singers that are the forerunners of U.S.-based hip-hop. They are the repositories of the oral tradition of their societies—they must tell the truth rather than be driven by marketing and stereotypes that reify a fantastic hegemonic imagination that calls us out of our name and warps all of us into gross stereotypes of who we actually are.⁸

III

Naming is a powerful theoethical act. For example, black women and black folk in general in the United States are making a political choice when deciding between "womanist" and "feminist," "colored" and "black," "black" and "African American." There is a history and culture of struggle, dialogue, arguments, and peeling away imposed language to ponder and then utilize an articulate,

indigenous witness to the absolute necessity that no one can speak for us but ourselves. This remains true regardless of who is the current resident in the White House and of the policies he or she espouses.

There is power in the ability to take away a name—being called girl or boy when you are in your sixties, seventies, and eighties by hegemonic culture; women being asked to speak, but not preach in black churches. There is deadly power in taking away the ability to name as well. In the important dynamic of appropriation and reciprocity, it is important to recognize that there must be spaces for the structurally marginalized to name their reality, which they may still be in the process of discovering. The point is not perfection, but the important *search* for precision in naming the joys and pain, re-memorizing the body of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, and more in a dominating culture. It is vital to recognize that in many instances, it remains sadly true that some marginalized groups are only just beginning to name the issues and points of tension that they must deal with internally when considering their work from a position outside of our society or on its fringes. This may mean that these groups will speak in cultural codes and shorthand and that they may be coming from cultures that value oral tradition or visual representation. This may mean that those of us who are not well versed in learning and understanding aurally (words and sound) or with images and pictures or who are not part of these groups must respect that not everything gets put into print in these cultures so we must learn new skills of listening, learning, and understanding.

The structurally marginalized want to tell their stories and be heard. Within a communitarian ethical framework, can we take this in and consider how we have or have not been a part of these stories? If we take up this challenge, it will be important to keep in mind that rather than assume that our attempts at respectful appropriation will mean assimilation into a larger culture which is inequitable at its very foundation for those who have been structurally marginalized, we must recognize that listening to others and hearing what they have to say and understanding the implications of their lives in relation to ours must be in *contrast* to our own traditions and cultures so that we begin to understand and consider how our lives and history are a part of the fabric of creation *with* the structurally marginalized. This means guarding against setting the realities of the lives of the structurally marginalized in our script, having them illuminate points we must or should make on our own (e.g., what it feels like to live in a homophobic and heterosexist society) through the integrity of our witness, analysis, and ability to critique and analyze from the perspectives of our lives as well as from the structures we both create and challenge that support inequitable relationships.

Hence, each of us must begin with our own cognitive dissonance. We cannot appropriate each other's dissonance and have a truly articulate and pithy analysis. We have much to learn from one another as we appropriate and reciprocate but we must not use each other up or down in doing so. Situations in which we are aware that we are experiencing cognitive dissonance and from which we are willing to learn are signs that we may be in unfamiliar terrain where we will learn more about the societies we inhabit; or more importantly, become aware that what we are most familiar with is not all that is occurring in the world. This encourages us to move beyond the notion that a solitary, autonomous individual who is only responsible for her or his own actions is a healthy model for humanity or a faithful moral agent. We are individuals who are socially constructed, and genuine reciprocation means that as we learn and grow from others, we share that knowledge and also share who we are and our perspectives and insights about how to shape a more just and equitable society.

IV

Considering the ways in which the communitarian ethic of Bonhoeffer and King can inform Christian social thought in postmodern worlds means that we are responding to the themes of difference, disruption, marginality, otherness, and transgression as we weigh each other's analysis and work. Whatever we think about postmodernism itself, it can teach us an important lesson. Until recently, and still not to the degree that it should not be, postmodernism has been largely (and narrowly) focused on the West. This is ironic given that it arises from the end of the Age of Europe, the emergence of the United States as a world power, the decolonization of so-called Third World countries, and the rise of China as a major cultural and economic force on the global stage. There continues to be scant mention of the black experience or particularly the writings of black women in postmodernist theory broadly drawn or postmodern ethics.⁹ Yet the categories of otherness and difference stand central to its task of critical reflection. For all its promise of providing a different and more useful way forward, postmodern ethics is caught in a paradox that must be acknowledged and challenged as we seek to appropriate with care and reciprocate with respect.

The key lesson to be learned from postmodern conversations is that we must avoid collapsing "otherness" into a universal category much like we have done (and learned not to do) with "women" and "minorities" or some of us will end up writing the second edition of "all the women were white, all the blacks

are men, but some of us are brave.”¹⁰ The rhetoric and conceptualization of otherness mean that we must engage those peoples and cultures who have a long history without our societies but have not been considered part of the “mainstream” or are often treated as supplementary on course reading lists. To truly engage otherness is to take seriously that there remains much for each of us to know about the rich diversity in our midst and then see this as opportunity rather than threat. It also means that we see this as a means to deepen our scholarship and analysis methodologically. It helps us be more expansive religious communities as we take seriously the ways in which God’s revelation is ongoing and may not be bound by our provincial notions of chosenness or faithfulness.

The experience and critical analysis done by structurally marginalized groups have much to offer social moral thought. This is enhanced when the challenges of the communitarian ethic of Bonhoeffer and King, with its emphasis on our being part of the same moral and social universe, are included. We all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect as children of God. The voices of feminists, womanists, mujeristas, liberation theology, Minjung theologies, Asian liberation theologies, queer theologies, and more have much to offer all of us as we stand in the clearing of our respective societies as early twenty-first-century peoples and try to decide where we must go. But I am also aware that other voices have not yet joined the conversation and there are those who are just pulling up to our kitchen table of public moral discourse. The power to name and speak of Native American and indigenous peoples has yet to gain full voice, though it is growing, and there are others. . . .

Our challenge is that as more folk join what has largely (and ill-fittingly) been a black-white dialogue, we accept the invitation, which comes from genuine appropriation and respectful reciprocity, to grow our worldviews and sensitivities to heart with communitarian zeal. In doing so, we must not interrupt these new old voices as they speak. We listen from a profound place and deepen our scholarship, our emotions, our histories when we respond to them with our voices and not an imitation of theirs or a megaphone of our own.