ENGAGING DIFFERENCE:

REPLACING THE SEARCH FOR ESSENTIALS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL ETHICS WITH A CONVERSATION ON DIFFERENCE.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1980, Eleanor Hume Haney asked, "What is Feminist Ethics?"[1] Since that time feminists have been shaping and reshaping definitions and formulations of feminist ethics. At its core, feminist ethics rises out of and rests on women's experiences of oppression and liberation, pain and joy. Women's experiences are used to identify the problems and issues to be addressed and the injustices to be corrected as well as being used to identify the goals and visions for women's liberation and justice. However, as Euro-American feminists moved from their initial focus on critiques of dominant, traditional, patriarchal systems and toward constructing a uniquely feminist ethical framework these same Euro-American feminists have come under increased scrutiny for broad and over-reaching generalizations and assumptions. Euro-American feminists have been accused of giving their own definition of women's experience universal value; in other words, creating an essentialist and normative definition of women's experience. Some women argue that in the last two decades of the development of feminist ethics, Euro-American feminists have reflected only on their own particular experience and from that foundation have built an ethical framework they would utilize to approach any and all ethical issues. The actual result of the particularized foundation of Euro-American feminists' definition of women's experience is that feminist ethics has tended to illuminate only the source of white, middle-class women's oppression and have provided visions of liberation that only meet the needs of women like those from which the

[1] Eleanor Hume Haney, "What is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (Spring 1980): 115-24.

experiences are drawn. In fact, rather than generating methods and frameworks leading to liberation for all women, Euro-American feminists have often perpetuated the oppression of women different from themselves through this use of an essentialist, normative definition of women's experience.

Women of color have raised their voices to identify the essentialism, racism/ethnic prejudice, classism and imperialism of Euro-American feminists' perspective and ethical frameworks. Additionally, women of color have asserted that the actions and work of Euro-American feminists inhibit the participation of Euro-American feminists in collective dialogue and work towards women's liberation in which different communities of women are currently engaged. The impetus for this critique has not been to discredit the theories of Euro-American feminists, but rather to expose the ways in which these women have repeated old oppressive and domineering habits and continued to erase the existence of women and women's experiences that differ from their own. In particular, Euro-American feminists have, in many cases, made the assumption that there is some core experience of oppression that all women, regardless of any differences in race, economic status, or life situation, hold in common. They further assume that this common experience is not only what bonds women together as a social group, but that this common experience can illuminate the singular source of women's oppression and provide visions for and avenues toward liberation for all women.

In asserting that Euro-American feminists have created an essentialist definition of women's experience women of color have not argued that there has been a calculated effort or a pre-meditated plot on the part of Euro-American feminists to subvert and silence other women's voices. Cries from women of color of being left out, ignored, or

whitewashed are not intended to cause feminists to retreat from discussions with other groups of women addressing women's liberation. Rather they argue that because Euro-American feminists have either ignored, avoided or been blind to the significance of the differences in and between women something must change in order for the conversations and developments toward liberation for all women to proceed.

Practically speaking, many Euro-American feminists have reacted to these critiques as if it had been their sole responsibility and duty to resolve women's oppression and envision liberation. Comments and feedback from women of color have been perceived as signs of failure rather than as part of an on-going creative and collaborative process. This perceived sense of responsibility and failure has disabled some Euro-American feminists from hearing the real intentions behind the critiques of women of color. Over and again, women of color have asserted that their intention has not been to discredit the internal theoretical validity of feminist ethics, but rather to articulate the actual effect that Euro-American feminist ethics has had on the lives and work of women of color and the ongoing work toward liberation and justice for all women.

Discussions and debates within feminism surrounding the difficulties and problems with identifying and defining women's experience began as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s, when feminist theory and ethics were just emerging. During this same time, numerous articles were written engaging issues of difference and essentialism such as an article in 1979 aptly titled "what chou mean 'we' white girl?" written by Lorraine Bethel[2]. Other timely examples include, Carol Christ's article, "Spiritual Quest

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[2] Lorraine Bethel, "what chou mean 'we' white girl?" *Conditions: Five: The Black Women's Issue.* 11, No. 2 (Autumn 1979): 86-92.

and Women's Experience,"[3] and bell hooks' book , *From Margin to Center* both published in 1984[4]. These issues have continued to be on the front burner of discussions among and between women, as Maria Lugones writes in an article in 1991 entitled "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism."[5] By 1994, Lois Daly compiled an anthology entitled *Feminist Theological Ethics* in which she gathered several pivotal articles shaping the birth of feminist theological ethics by authors from various perspectives which critically address issues of essentialism and difference.[6] Also in 1994, Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed edited *The Essential Difference*, which presented a philosophical analysis of the issues of essentialism and difference in feminist theory. Schor comments: "Many moments in intellectual and political history can be defined by impassioned debates: the essentialism / anti-essentialism debates define '80s feminism and, in a broader framework, the politics of identity in which feminism participates."[7]

Struggling with essentialism and the ensuing strain within and between communities of women dedicated to ending oppression, however, was not resolved in the 80s. Diana Fuss comments: "It is my conviction that the deadlock created by the long-standing controversy over the issues of human essences (essential feminity, essential blackness, essential gayness ...) has, on the one hand, encouraged more careful attention to cultural and historical specificities where perhaps we have hitherto been too quick to

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[3] Carol Christ, "Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience," in *Womanspirit Rising: Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 228.

[4] bell hooks, *From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

[5] Maria Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card.

[6] Lois Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

[7] Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds. *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), vii.

universalize but, on the other hand, foreclosed more ambitious investigations of specificity and difference by fostering a certain paranoia around the perceived threat of essentialism."[8] Both reactions, more careful attention and paranoia, have been expressed within feminist theory. Euro-American feminists have continued to evaluate and develop approaches to the issues of essentialism and difference since the initial efforts of the early 1980s. Contemporary work in this area within feminist ethics which focuses on friendship, love and mutuality resonate in a significant way with earlier efforts out of which they have emerged. bell hooks, Maria Lugones, Elizabeth Spellman and Sharon Welch among others continue to play, work, and dialogue with these issues. Julien Murphy comments, "Feminist ethical theory has taken at least five directions recently, which I identify as follows: (1) Ethics of Care, (2) Ethics of Freedom, (3) Communicative Ethics, (4) Virtue Ethics, and (5) Anti-Ethics."[9] The discussion here reflects early developments within the third direction, Communicative Ethics, as identified by Murphy.

Reflecting a predominately liberal perspective this dissertation focuses on the specific intersection of two Euro-American women with an important observation from Maria Lugones. This particular historical context shaped initial discussions on essentialism and difference. Getting at the roots of this discussion will help to expand our understanding of current discussions as they continue to struggle with essentialism and difference. As Sharon Welch addressed the issues of essentialism and difference in 1993 in her article "Sporting Power"[10] she engages Sheila Davaney's 1987 article, "The

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[8] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

[9] Julien Murphy, *The Constructed Body: AIDS, Reproductive Technology and Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 137.

[10] Sharon Welch, "Sporting Power" *Transfigurations*, eds. C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St.Ville, Susan M. Simonatis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Limits to the Appeal of Women's Experience."[11] It is 1991 when Maria Lugones, in "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism,"[12] suggested that Euro-American feminists have missed the call to dialogue from women of color. This dissertation explores the intersections of these ideas of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The exploration is significant not only because Welch, Davaney and Lugones continue to shape feminist ethics, but also because navigating difference is still an issue central to the discussions of contemporary feminist ethicists.

Comparing and contrasting the views of Sharon Welch and Sheila Davaney provide a case study as a foundation for the work of this dissertation. Four specific areas of their work will be explored: their interpretations of Euro-American feminists' use of women's experience; the role of theology in their interpretations; the contextual nature of knowledge; and their proposals for adjudicating amongst different visions of liberation. This approach reflects an effort to explore issues of difference and essentialism not in the abstract, but in the actual writing of two Euro-American feminists engaged in dialogue as they attempt to engage and respond to the voices of women of color. While the intersection of the work of Davaney and Welch is not a recent phenomenon, the issues they address and struggle with remain significant issues within feminist theological ethics. In revisiting the work of these two Euro-American feminists, reflecting on their engagement of the work of women of color within a particular context and critically analyzing their insights and contributions to the ongoing conversation, this dissertation

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[11] Sheila Davaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience" *Shaping New Vision: Gender & Values in American Culture*, eds. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

[12] Maria Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism" *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Kansas: University of Kanasa Press, 1991).

brings their insights to bear on the contemporary discussion regarding creatively engaging the differences among women, their varying experiences and the meaning of liberation and full humanity for women. Such collaborative and ongoing discussions are not linear projects, but rather tend to spiral toward some future resolution. As an issue is revisited over and over, never in quite the same way, various voices in the dialogue shift and change as do contexts, experiences and interactions with others in the conversation. Letty Russell refers to this process as "table talk" and comments: "Each time, we look at our experience and context in solidarity with those on the margin; do critical analysis of the social, political, economic, historical, and ecclesial reality; raise questions for interpretation of scripture and tradition; and search for clues to action and continuing reflection." The issues of essentialism and difference are ones that feminist theological ethicists must address as they do ethics. But as Russell suggests, the voices of women of color who have identified the pain and injustice suffered as a result of the assumptions regarding essentialism and difference within feminist theological ethics define the specifics of this moral and ethical issue for Euro-American feminists to address.

The issues of essentialism and difference still remain topics of debate and discussion today. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz has remarked: "Difference plays a significant role in all that we are and all that we do. Without any doubt whatsoever this is the key issue we will have to deal with in the twenty-first century, for it affects all."[13]

Formulating methods and perspectives to approach the significant differences among and between women in a constructive manner still seems to be elusive to some

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[13] Ada Marian Isasi Diaz, "A New Mestizaje/Mulatez: Reconceptualizing Difference" A Dream Unfinished, eds Fernandez, Eleazar S. and Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 203.

Euro-American feminists and frustrating to others. The voices of women of color continue to explain the impact this issue has had and continues to have on them is far more substantial than illusion or frustration - to them, essentialism is oppressive and denies the full humanity of many women. However, the problem of feminist essentialism goes beyond the differences between Euro-American and African-American women. It includes Hispanic women, Asian women and Jewish women. One can then ask, "Where does it stop?" Are the only significant differences racial/ethnic? What about poor women, women with children, women without children, lesbians, Muslim women, other non-Christian women, and women in wheelchairs? How can Feminist Ethics begin to enumerate and take into consideration all the significant differences? What happens when Euro-American feminists discover they have overlooked yet another difference? As many other women would agree, Euro-American feminists will not adequately address differences among women by simply "adding and stirring" each new perspective into one melting pot of experience. In fact, it has been this attempt at incorporating varying experiences and perspectives into a single, normative and essentialist definition of women's experience that has proven to inhibit the ongoing work toward liberation.

Setting the stage for this public discussion of the issues of essentialism and difference in Feminist Ethics are other impassioned debates that shaped the attitudes of Euro-American feminists, namely the civil rights movement and the efforts of many women to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. In the context of these struggles, feminism emerged as an approach to understanding and addressing gender oppression and inequity in relation to the culturally dominant group – Euro-American males. The particularities of this struggle significantly shaped the work of Euro-American feminists. As a result of

their experiences in these struggles, Euro-American feminists internalized two key assumptions which form the primary focus of this dissertation. First, Euro-American feminists developed a normative definition of the oppression that women experience which was based on gender, and which identifies the locus of this oppression within relationships with men of the same race/ethnicity and class. Once this definition of oppression was defined as normative, oppression based on gender came to be viewed as the most basic or fundamental form of oppression. Secondly, as they struggled for gender equality with men, Euro-American women learned that in the dominant world view, those who were considered different were not considered equal. In order to achieve equality, they sought to erase differences between the genders rather than challenge this assumption. As a result, Euro-American feminists developed an aversion to recognizing differences among women for fear that those same differences would make solidarity and equality between women of differing racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups impossible. As issues of essentialism and difference were addressed by women of color, Euro-American feminists often glossed over these differences due to fears that any acknowledgement of differences would automatically lead to a hierarchical ranking of these differences. This attitude toward differences among and between women has become ingrained in Euro-American feminists' development of feminist theological ethics. Adrienne Rich calls this attitude, or world-view, "white solipsism."[14] White solipsism is the belief that everyone experiences the world in the same way, that is, as white. In their attempt to erase differences and avoid the devaluation of some differences, Euro-American feminists have assumed everyone else is just like them. In

[14] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1976-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 299.

effect, they have put on blinders so that they can't even see that there is something they can't see.

Historical analysis may highlight the roots of the essentialist assumptions within feminist ethics, however, women of color point to several particular elements and attitudes in feminist theorizing that are key to the erasure of their experience and the oppression inflicted on them. Specifically, women of color draw attention to language, the definition of oppression, a boomerang mentality and an inability to creatively formulate and consider the intersection of multiple oppressions. Taking into consideration the historical context as noted above, these critiques illuminate two interlocking but distinct issues for Euro-American feminists to address on which this dissertation focuses. First is the problem of the essentialist definition of women's experience in feminist theological ethics, particularly due to the central function of women's experience in both defining and addressing oppression. Second is the injustice and oppression perpetuated by Euro-American feminists through their white solipsistic world-view and erasure of difference. These two issues have combined to restrict and disable the involvement of Euro-American feminists in any ongoing collaborative discussions and developments between different groups of women working towards liberation and an end to oppression.

Two Euro-American feminists who have addressed and articulated approaches to the issues of essentialism and difference are Sharon Welch and Sheila Greeve Davaney. Their voices intersect as Welch engages Davaney's critique of Euro-American feminists' use of women's experience. In a 1996 article, "Sporting Power," Sharon Welch questions Davaney's assertion that feminists' use of women's experience has been

oppressive to women.[15] Welch claims that Euro-American feminists have been very clear about voicing and using their own experiences as the basis for feminist theology; the result has been that women have, in fact, heard each other into speech. In support of her own interpretation of events, Welch sites the writings of women of color who claim that feminist definitions of women's experience which do not reflect their own experience has served as an impetus to tell their own stories. Welch concludes that rather than perpetuate racism and oppression, Euro-American feminists' actions and work inspired other women whose experiences were both alike and dissimilar to their own. Welch has written extensively in the area of feminist ethics and has attempted to engage the perspective of women different from herself. This reflects Welch's personal and professional value of considering and working with differences. In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*,[16] Welch identifies values and virtues found within the fiction of African American women whose characters exemplify survival and ongoing struggle in the face of daunting and life threatening situations. She then weaves these values into her own work as she develops a feminist ethic of risk.

In a 1993 article, "Sporting Power,"[17] Welch more explicitly writes of the use of women's experience as a hermeneutical tool rather than a reflection of metaphysical reality. In this way she attempts to avoid claims of racism/ ethnic prejudice and essentialism in her development of feminist ethics. In a presentation at the 1996

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[15] Sharon Welch, "Sporting Power," *Transfigurations*, ed. C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, Susan M. Simonatis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 171.

[16] Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

[17] Welch, "Sporting Power," 171-198.

AAR/SBL Annual Meeting,[18] Welch admitted that feminist ethics may have relied only on white, middle-class women's experience to define itself. However, she claims that the effect of this heuristic use of women's experience has been to spur other women with different experiences to speak for themselves and give expression to their experiences. As a result more women's voices are being heard, not fewer.

Sheila Greeve Davaney's assessment of the issues of essentialism and difference, which prompt Welch's objections, are found in Davaney's 1987 article, "The Limits to the Appeal to Women's Experience."[19] Davaney asserts that women's experience has been essentialized (specifically referring to the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Mary Daly) and further argues that Euro-American feminists have been complicit in the continued silencing of voices that reflect experiences that differ from the dominant white, middle-class feminist experience. While also responding to the voices of women of color, Davaney begins her analysis of essentialism with a more self-critical analysis of the theorizing work of Euro-American feminists before proposing what she terms historical pragmatism. In her work, Davaney stresses the need to historically contextualize experience, including women's experiences, rather than privileging a certain group's perspective because of their social location. She suggests that no perspective or viewpoint has any more value than any other; all experience is considered equally valuable for ethical reflection. The value of any ethical

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[18] Sharon Welch, "Virtuosity in the Face of Limits. Women's Identities and Subjectivities: A Conversation Among Liberationist and Postmoderist Approaches," American Academy of Religion, November 25, 1996.

[19] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "The Limits to the Appeal to Women's Experience" *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Value in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 79.

proposal or project can only be determined by an evaluation of the end result or consequences of that project. Davaney disagrees with feminist claims that women's experiences are somehow privileged because they have been oppressed. Davaney asserts that claiming any perspective has superiority to another perspective and thus some insight into divine reality creates an oppressive environment for anyone who disagrees with that picture of reality, for patriarchal males as well as differing groups of women. Thus, it is critical for Davaney to reflect on the oppressive effect that Euro-American feminists' theorizing has had on other women. She concludes that Euro-American feminist theorizing has had a negative effect on both the theorizing of women of color and the relationship between Euro-American women and women of color. In response to her evaluation of the situation, Davaney works to develop a method for adjudicating among differing perspectives and proposals by determining what consequences or environments are to be valued above others.

Davaney and Welch would hardly disagree that something needs to change in the present practice of feminist ethics, but their evaluations and approaches to the situation are different enough that they may in fact compliment each other if taken together. At the very least, their evaluations of the current situation and visions of change offer fertile grounds for exploring this issue. While they disagree regarding the critiques of essentialism, both Welch and Davaney advocate adjudicating differing proposals of liberation based on the actual environment that these projects facilitate or create. Davaney looks to an evaluation of history to provide a guiding principle or vision to define keys for liberation and adjudicate differing visions. Welch, on the other hand suggests looking to women's experience to provide a vision of liberation as well as

asserting that "women's experience is both the source for theological reflection and the norm for evaluating the adequacy of any theological framework."[20]

However, both women exhort their readers to hold to theories very lightly; theories are ever changing given that they are radically historical and contextual. Ethical dilemmas are not resolved, they assert, but rather approached repeatedly from different socio-historical locations developing resolutions that are equally socio-historically located. Neither Welch nor Davaney suggest a particular solution, but rather they hint at the processes necessary for work toward liberation.

Unlike traditional ethics, feminist ethics begins with the real life ethical dilemmas that women articulate. Thus, following feminist method, the beginning point in this dissertation is not the application of a value or principle, it is not an idealized view of community or dialogue, but it is the actual problem or experience of oppression that women are articulating. The moral dilemma this dissertation addresses, is most clearly articulated by Maria Lugones when she asserts that Euro-American feminists have missed the interactive question suggested in the critique of women of color. Not only do women of color critique the oppressive and racist nature of Euro-American feminist theorizing, but as well, the inability of Euro-American feminists to collaboratively engage in dialogue on these issues to develop effective and meaningful resolutions.

The first chapter of this dissertation explores the historical context surrounding the definition of women's experience within the discipline of feminist theological ethics. Included in this chapter is an analysis of the discussion regarding essentialism within Euro-American feminist circles. This analysis is then brought into conversation with the

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[20] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 32.

analysis of women of color regarding the issues of essentialism and difference. This method reflects the assumption that engaging the perspective of women that are different from and stand outside of the Euro-American feminist perspective will enable Euro-American feminists to be aware of and engage reflections of their own work that are pivotal to embracing and entering into dialogue with other women working toward liberation and justice. Without an awareness of a perspective outside their own world-view and engaging in dialogue with those that inhabit that differing world-view, Euro-American feminists cannot participate in the struggle for liberation and justice.

The second chapter focuses on the work of Sharon Welch and Sheila Greeve Davaney; specifically their analysis of essentialism in feminist ethics and their proposals for addressing difference. Their differing perspectives will be compared and contrasted in order to identify critical pieces of an approach to doing ethics that values and affirms differences among and between women in an effort to end oppression. As stated above, the different insights in the work of each woman serve to compliment and provide a certain check and balance for the ongoing discussion.

Davaney leads Euro-American feminists into self-critical analysis. This analysis is necessary for Euro-American feminist to acknowledge to themselves and show women of color their intentions to seriously address the issues of essentialism and difference. Welch encourages developing the ability to play with ideas and visions, to accept conflict and to continue to engage in the struggle for an end of oppression. Both women conclude that only by evaluating the results of any particular vision or liberative action can that vision or action be deemed to take us in the right direction.

In the final chapter, I will argue that women's experience must be reflected on not only insofar as women experience oppression, but within a matrix of factors that impact their experience and make a difference among women. I do not argue that women's experience is an improper foundation for building the values and criteria of feminist ethics. The goal of this dissertation is to understand the causes and effects of essentialism and then shape a new way of approaching women's experience and difference to enable Euro-American feminists to engage in the struggle towards women's liberation. This analysis will be accomplished by uncovering and exploring the essentialist assumptions and aversion to difference within feminist ethics. Reflecting on this work will reveal needed changes and shifts to a Euro-American feminist paradigm. These shifts will impact the constructions of women's experience in order to develop a cognitive awareness of Euro-American women's experience within its socio-economic, racial/ethnic and historical context. This first shift will then be intertwined with a second, a creative engagement of the difference that difference makes among women.

In order to facilitate this paradigm shift, I will propose a matrix of relationality. This matrix of relationality will provide Euro-American feminists with the tools to identify not only their own oppression, but also the ways in which their experiences of privileges and benefits of certain racial/ethnic and socio-historical factors impact their experience. In this way Euro-American feminists can recognize the ways in which they have contributed to the silencing and erasure of the voices of women of color. In order to move forward into the future and establish a collaborative and trusting environment, Euro-American feminists must demonstrate their ability to take responsibility for the impact their difference has on their theorizing and on their relationships with others. This

matrix of relationality will enable feminists to acknowledge and begin to move beyond essentialist definitions of women's experience. There is no collaborative future for women, if Euro-American feminists do not seriously account for the effects of their past actions.

Utilizing this matrix of relationality will initiate a second shift with Euro-American feminists' paradigm. The second shift is from a disdain of difference to a valuation of difference and an awareness of the difference that varying social locations have in relation to each other. This shifted paradigm reflects a collaborative approach to justice envisioned as right relations. This dissertation will suggest that building upon a matrix of relationality which acknowledges Euro-American privileged, real solidarity and collaboration among women can be achieved. In this way, justice is found. This notion of solidarity rests on particular assumptions about diversity and collaboration. The interconnections between women become the focus of collaboration and solidarity rather than similar experiences of oppression. Building on the changed assumptions and cognitive awareness that these two shifts represent, Euro-American feminists will be empowered to enter into solidarity with other women working for liberation and justice.

There are differences among women working toward liberation. These difference, however, need not be limiting, but rather can facilitate the opening of new horizons and insights. Recognizing the Euro-American feminist tendency towards essentialism and developing the tools for a paradigm shift is a moral imperative. Euro-American feminists, as both oppressed and oppressors, must create "theoretical possibilities that ... enable white feminists themselves to structure a consciousness of

racism/ethnic prejudice [and imperialism] into their theories."[21] Feminists must be aware of the oppressive assumptions within their working paradigm so that they can enter into the dialogue and struggle for liberation and justice with other women. The journey toward liberation and justice is collaborative and requires that we learn to walk together in justice. This dissertation hopes to promote and further this journey. It is important to see the proposals in this dissertation as another step in the conversation. This is a response to the interactive question that Maria Lugones so wonderfully pointed out. It's value will be determined not on the basis of internal theoretical integrity – though this is important in the process – nor on the value of its authors or originators. Its value will be determined by the new opportunities it facilitates and elicits and by the environment and relationships it enables.

[21] Susan Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 22.

Chapter 1

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AND ESSENTIALISM

Feminism begins with women's experience. Women begin to reflect on their experiences and come to the realization that "something is wrong." These experiences of something gone wrong may be personal but almost always involve various common societal arenas, such as work, school, family, and government. Definitions of oppression and identification of injustice and inequity in social structures are formulated by reflecting on these experiences. Feminist ethics begins with these definitions of oppression and injustice as experienced by women, in the very concrete actual experiences of women, rather than an idealized notion of the ideal family structure, or the virtuous person, or the real nature or essence of woman. An ethical framework for feminist ethics then continues to reference women's experience, as well, for a definition of liberation and a vision of real justice. As one would expect, definitions and analysis of women's oppression come from many different perspectives: radical, reformist, white, black, Hispanic, middle-class, lower-class, urban, etc. As a result, directions for liberation and visions of justice vary greatly and are shaped in many different ways. Euro-American feminists have often interpreted the breadth of perspectives as a problem, specifically the problem of difference. It is within this plurality of perspectives that Euro-American feminists have been brought to task for their inability to recognize and engage this variety of perspectives.

Women of color echo that something is wrong. They argue that feminist ethics has not contributed to their liberation, but rather furthered oppression. Maria Lugones articulated and directly addressed what Euro-American feminists called "the problem of difference."[1] Lugones asserted that women of color were not maliciously attacking Euro-American feminists, but simply trying to join in a conversation they perceived was already in progress. Women of color fully expected a response and ongoing dialogue with Euro-American feminists surrounding these issues rather than a defensive retreat. Reflecting on the Euro-American feminist reactions, Lugones comments,

> Now white women recognize the problem of difference. Whether they recognize difference is another matter. As white women are beginning to acknowledge the problem in their theorizing, it is interesting to see that the acknowledgment is a noninteractive one, or at least there is no clear emphasis on interactive acknowledgment.[2]

Lugones argued that rather than continue in dialogue with women of color, Euro-American feminists have taken largely to an internal examination of the content of their own theory and theorizing. In doing so, difference was recognized as a theoretical problem. As a result, Euro-American feminists attempted to broaden their own perspectives to recognize that there are differences among women. However, Lugones further argues that they simultaneously backed away from the larger ramifications of recognizing difference through the disclaimer. The disclaimer is used in an attempt to reconcile the writer's particular perspective or experience with the problem of difference. In this way, the writer defines her context or situates herself within a particular socio-

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[1] Maria Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism" *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 38.

[2] Ibid.

historical location. Lugones asserts, however, that once Euro-American feminists added an initial statement that their perspective is socially constructed and not shared by all women, they would continue to theorize and write as if nothing was ever said, making broad generalizations and once again universalizing their particular social context, applying it to all women. Euro-American feminists seemed to interpret that the problem was simply that they needed to identify their particular social location; as if once acknowledged the writer could forget and ignore any responsibility for the effect her generalizations had on her relationships with and to other women. For example, the writer may admit that she is white, but then continue to write and theorize in such a way that implies everyone is white and experiences the world in the same way – as if being white does not shape the ethical perspectives that follow. "The logic of the discourse emphasizes ignoring difference and acknowledging a singularity of practice, discipline, or construction,"[3] Lugones writes. What Euro-American feminists term "the problem of difference," women of color have identified as essentialism and racial/ethnic prejudice.

This difference of opinion represents more than just an inconvenient theoretical snag. Julien Murphy comments, "Feminist ethics, then, must be radically self critical in order to guard against the replication of currently oppressive ethical systems, it also must be part of an emancipatory project to combat a range of oppressive activities."[4] Women of color have expressed that Euro-American feminist ethics has furthered their oppression. This dissertation will critically reflect on feminist ethics in an effort to

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Julien Murphy, *The Constructed Body: AIDS, Reproductive Technology and Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 139.

identify oppressive and prejudicial assumptions at work within feminist ethics. Such critical reflection begins first with an analysis of the origins and nature of feminist ethics, second with the role of women's experience within feminist ethics and third an examination of essentialism and the assumptions which contribute to this problem in feminist theorizing. Finally, this chapter will appraise the comments offered by women of color regarding the issues of essentialism and difference. As women continue to work for liberation, women of color have articulated that something is wrong and offer critically needed insight into these issues. In order to foster ongoing work toward justice, Euro-American feminists must attend to this issue.

The origins of feminist ethics

Euro-American feminists radically asserted that women's failure to measure up to traditional models of moral behavior was not due to their immorality, but due to the patriarchal bias of the ethical models. Rather than continuing to endure these masculine models, feminists began to develop their own system of values and their own ways of making ethical decisions and analyses. In 1985, Barbara Hilkert Anderson, Christine Gudorf and Mary D. Pellauer commented, " feminist ethicists are just beginning the task of describing those actions and habits of life (virtues) which are consistent with our new versions of the Ultimate." [5]

Claudia Card credits Carol Gilligan for gaining some popular acceptance for feminist ethics in the early 1980s with her work in the area of justice and care. Card

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[5] Barbara Hilkert Anderson, Christine Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer, eds., *Women's Consciousness / Women's Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), xxiii.

comments: " Since 1982, the idea of feminist ethics has received a certain popular acceptance as a result of the research of developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan. Without drawing upon feminist ideas, she described several themes distinguishing the ethical thinking of many women from that of most men in her experience of many years' listening to mostly, white, middle-class speakers reflect upon themselves and upon certain moral problems."[6] Gilligan suggested that women's ways of thinking of justice weren't necessarily wrong because they were different from men's ways of thinking of justice. Instead Gilligan suggested that women's particular experiences led them to develop different, but valid ideas about morality. Card suggests that as women began to reject traditional ethical systems, they began to develop their own definitions of morality based on their own life experiences. Card writes,

> Feminist ethics is born in women's refusals to endure with grace the arrogance, indifference, hostility, and damage of oppressively sexist environments. It is fueled by bonds among women, forged in experiments to create better environments to overcome damage already done. Ethics benefits from reflection on our own experience, upon choices we have actually faced. Scarcely uniform, still women's opinions defined by legacies of sexual politics differ enough from men's to warrant different underlying labels for our reflections and commitments in this area.[7]

As feminist ethics has developed in the last two decades, it has taken a number of divergent directions. One such direction is the development of an ethic of care, based in large part on the work of Carol Gilligan's evaluation of women's distinct understanding of morality. Some feminist ethicists have developed their formulations based on a more theological perspective - rather than psychological or philosophical - building on the

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[6] Claudia Card, *Feminist Ethics* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 17.

[7] Ibid., 4-5.

work of feminist theologians. From Gilligan's seemingly simple rereading of women's and girl's morality a new and distinctively feminist ethical perspective has been developed within a number of disciplines. Julien S. Murphy outlines five divergent forms of feminist ethics in her attempt to organize and understand the development of this new discipline. "Feminist ethical theory has taken at least five directions recently, which I identify as follows: (1) Ethics of Care, (2) Ethics of Freedom, (3) Communicative Ethics, (4) Virtue Ethics, and (5) Anti-Ethics."[8] Murphy recognizes the limitations of her categories and offers them solely as a way of organizing her approach to health care ethics. However, her descriptions help to illustrate the variations among feminist ethicists and the importance of identifying the ethical framework out of which one works. For example, the term feminist theological ethics denotes a certain set of assumptions, values, and methods: assumptions about the reality of patriarchy and oppression of women, values that reflect the experiences of women, and methods derived from feminist theory and theology. Although feminist theological ethics is only part of the broader landscape of feminist ethics it will serve as the focus for this dissertation..

Within the framework of feminist theological ethics, it is important to recognize that women have experienced Christianity as both an oppressive and liberative force. The gender specific roles women have traditionally been assigned in the church and misogynistic interpretations of the Bible have been oppressive. But most feminist theologians and ethicsts do not completely reject the Christian tradition. Drawing on the insights of feminist hermeneutics and liberation theology, many women have found

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[8] Murthy, *The Constructed Body*, 137.

within Christianity a message of liberation for all who are oppressed. Centering on the hope and vision of liberation, feminist theology has been shaped with women's liberation as its focus. It is this theological message of liberation from oppression and conceptions of justice as right relation that fuels feminist theological ethics. As Beverly Harrison remarks: "The insight emergent from liberation theology- that our ability to grasp the broader, multifaceted, global reality of oppression hinges on our pursuing an interested engagement in the struggle for our own dignity and well-being – correlates with a basic feminist insight, one that traditional Christians resist."[9] Feminist and other liberation theologians have gleaned what is useful from Christianity instead of rejecting the tradition out of hand.

The presupposition that feminist ethics deals with a particular set of topics more closely identified with issues of interest particularly to women may have been true at one time. In the introduction to *Daring to Be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics*, Bar-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson write, "At the beginning of the second wave of the European and American women's movements there was a sense that feminist issues were easy to identify: they were those that all women had in common, e.g. reproductive rights or violence against women."[10] But feminist theological ethics has proved itself to be not unique due to the topics it addresses, but rather that is takes as its source and norm women's experiences of the world, i.e. what is oppressive and what is liberative. Eleanor Humes Haney articulates feminist ethics this way: "Feminist Ethics is not only a matter

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[9] Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 240.

[10] Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson, ed., *Daring to be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), ix

of supporting economic justice by and for women ... [but] that of fidelity to a vision emerging and developing in our lives. Feminist vision ... is a values - a moral - revolution. A feminist ethic seeks to articulate and make real that vision."[11] The vision that feminist ethics attempts to make real is the end of oppression for women. At the heart of feminist ethics is the use of women's experience to inform the direction for that vision as well as to shape that vision.

Not only do feminist ethicists address the gamut of topics traditionally thought of as appropriate for ethical reflection, feminists also bring new topics into the ethical arena. The new topics and new methods illustrate a significant feminist claim: because women do not function as traditional ethics defines the moral agent, it is not women, but traditional ethics that is insufficient to address issues that impact women's lives. In fact, feminist ethicists assert that traditional ethical methods by themselves are insufficient to fully address any issue. Perhaps, in turn, this is why most scholars in the field of ethics have not welcomed a feminist ethical perspective with open arms. Elizabeth Frazier comments:

> The attitude of university philosophy departments until recently - and this is now beginning to change - was that ethical and political theory were already conceptually competent to deal with all the interesting questions about virtue, rights, justice, equality and freedom; or at any rate that if feminists had difficulty in articulating their distinctive concerns in the dominant theoretical language, this must be due either to women's legendary incapacity for abstraction, or to the inherent triviality of the questions they were raising (as though, say, the marriage relationship fell below some implicit threshold of scholarly discussability).[12]

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[11] Eleanor Humes Haney, "What is Feminist Ethics?" 115-24.

[12] Elizabeth Frazier, Jennifer Hornsby, and Sabine Lovibond, eds. *Ethics: A Feminist Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 4.

In spite of this attitude, feminist ethics has flourished. In fact, this attitude is one of the reasons feminist theological ethics has been developed. Often, traditional ethics did not speak to the ethical dilemma's women faced, did not take women into consideration, or the evaluations traditional ethics offered were unsatisfying. Feminist ethics has its roots in women's critique of traditional, white-male ethics. Feminists claimed that while traditional ethicists purported to be objective and unbiased, there actually was no place to stand outside of socially constructed reality to be such an objective unbiased observer. "What have been called the objective sources of theology [or ethics]; Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience."[13] Traditional ethics are viewed by feminists as ethics grounded in dominant white, male experiences of the world. Feminists assert that reality is socially conditioned and cannot be known apart from women's socially shaped and historically located experiences.

Feminist ethics has developed with the goal of ending women's oppression, defined as sexism. As a result of that goal, feminist ethics developed mostly as a way to address women's lack of power in various situations. Finding themselves in situations where they lack power, women have developed different understandings of the moral agent, justice, and integrity. For example, in traditional, Euro-American male ethics, the moral agent is assumed to be independent and self-reliant which reflect characteristics and values of the dominant, Euro-American male world, not some higher plane of reality. Margaret Walker asserts:

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[13] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 13.

> What feminists show is not that moral philosophy is simply mistaken in its claims to represent the moral life. Rather, feminist critiques show how moral philosophers have in fact represented, in abstract and idealized theoretical forms, aspects of the *actual* positions and relations of *some* people in a certain kind of social order. The social order is the kind where the availability of these positions depends on gender, age, economic status, race, and other factors that distribute powers and forms of recognition differently and hierarchically.[14]

However, feminist ethicists have gone beyond critique of traditional ethics. Feminists are working to develop their own ethical perspective that reflects the actual positions and relations of women in a patriarchal society. As women work to end women's oppression, there is a need to define in positive ways the types of relationships, actions, and moral agency which will lead to liberation from oppression. Marilyn Frye speaks of this as a hunger for ethics:

> Why the hunger and whose hunger is it? I was speaking of something I recognized in myself and in many of the women in my lesbian community. The first thing that comes to mind to explain why such women are hungry for ethics is that both as feminists and as lesbians, we have in significant ways and degrees rejected and abandoned the values we grew up with, many of the values that are central to the cultures in which, willy-nilly, we live and work. Thus we are trying now to make decisions, choices, and judgments pretty much without the guidance of a system of values we can accept and endorse. We fall back, of course, as Sarah Hoagland points out, into habits of action and interaction that express the values of patriarchy, but we are very displeased when we realized that we have done that. We want a new and different ethics to fill the void so we will have a positive alternative and can know what to do and have some confidence when we do act that we have done rightly.[15]

The goal of feminist ethics is not meant to create a rigid definition or listing of specific actions or characteristics that constitute women's morality. Rather, it is meant to acknowledge and creatively address the gap between where women are and where they

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[14] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings A Feminist Study in Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.

[15] Marilyn Frye, "A Response to Lesbian Ethics: Why Ethics?" *Feminist Ethics*, 52.

want to be, between oppression and liberation. The need to reflect ethically on experiences or situations not taken into consideration up to now within traditional ethics requires the development of some new tools. In fact, both Sarah Hoagland and Marilyn Fry remark that women fall back too easily into patterns and habits that promote and perpetuate the very systems they wish to dismantle. This is especially true for women who benefit from the current *status quo*. Within the *status quo* and our culture of racism, sexism, imperialism, ethnic prejudice and other kinds of oppression are subtlety reinforced and perpetuated. A feminist ethic may serve to encourage reflection and critical judgment, providing the tools for the development of a more self-critical and insightful moral agent. "Positively, feminism aims ultimately at equality of respect and the concrete well-being of persons regardless of gender."[16] Feminist ethicists covers a broad range of topics to explore and spark imagination and action, to create dialogue and to envision a world in which there is no oppression.

Feminist ethics is not unique, however, in its understanding of the social construction of reality or in its assertion that actual lived experience is the source and vision for ethics. Many liberation theologies and ethics share these same assumptions. What does make feminist ethics unique is whose experience is being used as source and vision - women's experience. Historically, women's experience has been devalued or shut out altogether. Much of the work of contemporary women's studies is the recovery of women's history, writings, and experiences. The goal of feminist theology and ethics

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[16] Margaret A Farley, "Introduction," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 5.

is nothing less than an end to the oppression of women, which is achieved through the assertion that women are fully human persons. "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women."[17] Women's experience, oppression and liberation come in many forms. This multiplicity has proven to be a particularly difficult challenge for feminist theological ethics.

Ethical systems are often expected to provide no less than a source of ready-made decisions and directions. And yet the goal of feminist ethics, is to encourage reflection and thought, to encourage self-critical review so that one can be aware of the ways in which one participates in the perpetuation of systems of oppression or in the creation of systems of liberation. Rather than a system of ready-made decisions, feminist theological ethics, attempts to provide a model that encourages ongoing ethical reflection and action within the context of the Judeo-Christian context. Letty Russell elaborates this by commenting, "Feminist ecclesiology is also about relationships. It continually asks questions about how things are connected to one another, to their context, and to justice for the oppressed. It asks critical questions about the relationship of the experience of those struggling for the full humanity of all women together with men, to the experience of those struggling for liberation and new life in biblical and church tradition."[18]

Women's Experience

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[17] Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk,* 18.

[18] Letty Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1993), 18.

In Euro-American feminist ethics, women's experience serves three general purposes: 1) to identify oppression, 2) to identify positive values and visions for women's liberation, and 3) to evaluate the usefulness of the values and visions offered for women's liberation. These functions of women's experience are not being challenged, instead the critique and challenge addresses what has been normatively defined as "women's experience," namely white, heterosexual, middle-class women's experience. The definition of oppression, the values and visions, and the evaluation that arises from reflection on "women's experience" as it has been normatively defined, does not reflect the experience of all women. Because this definition of women's experience has gained normative status while only reflecting some women's lives, it has, in fact, perpetuated the oppression of some women rather than their liberation. Women whose experiences do not reflect the norm are erased, thus both their experiences of oppression as well as their visions and values are erased.

Feminist ethics is set apart from other ethical perspectives not by its methods, but rather by its forthright basis in women's experience. Feminist theology and ethics have plumbed many different areas and types of material to uncover and recover women's experience both of oppression and justice. Carol Christ notes the surprising complexity of women's experience: "At first it seems that women's experience is a simple thing. Yet as soon as one begins to study it, one realizes that it is many things. Black women, white women, rich women, poor women - all share a fundamental alienation from self, but there are many differences in their experiences."[19] Because feminist ethics begins with

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[19] Christ, "Spiritual Quest," 230.

women's experiences to identify oppression or the issues for ethical reflection rather than beginning with an ethical principle or religious tenant, this plurality of experiences can become problematic. Carol Robb in "A Framework for Feminist Ethics" claims that this feminist process allows feminists to expose ethical principles or religious tenets of dominant theology and ethics as social constructions that arise from a particular set of experiences, namely dominant Euro-American men rather than givens. "For this reason, the act of defining a problem is a political act; it is an exercise of power to have accepted one's terms of a 'problem,'"[20] Robb states. Euro-American feminists have typically defined the oppression in terms of sexism, as if the central focal point of all women's oppression is the relationship between women and men.

Second, women's experience is used to identify values or visions that are liberative for women or that stand in contrast to dominant male values and ideals. Katie Cannon notes that Black women's literary tradition provides exceptional illustrations of the values that Black women have found to be liberative. Cannon writes:

> It is my thesis that Black woman's literary tradition is the best available literary repository for understanding the ethical values Black women have created and cultivated in their ongoing participation in this society. To prevail against the odds with integrity, Black women must assess their moral agency within the social conditions of the community. Locked out of the real dynamics of human freedom in America, they implicitly pass on and receive from one generation to the next moral formulas for survival that allow them to stand over against the perversions of ethics and morality imposed on them by whites and males who support racial imperialism in a patriarchal social order.[21]

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[20] Carol. S. Robb, "A Framework for Feminist Ethics" *Women's Consciousness Women's Conscience*, 213.

[21] Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 7.

In the book *Women's Conscience / Women's Consciousness*, the second section of the book is entitled "Mapping Paths and Dreaming Dreams: Retrieving Norms from Experience." The authors of the articles in this section draw positive values and norms for women's liberation from women's experience of friendship, from the Goddess tradition, and from a feminist interpretation of Hebrew Scripture. In this same text, Beverly Wildung Harrison begins her article "Our Right to Choose: The Morality of Procreative Choice," by saying: "If women are to undertake the collective task of revisioning the morality of procreative choice, and of legal abortion as a dimension of that choice, we need both the clarity of a critical feminist analysis concerning procreative choice and *the constructive wisdom gained from values learned in childrearing*."[22] (emphasis mine) Women reflect on their own experiences of life in the context of their social location and use this "women's experience" to identify moral norms. In this example of "revisioning the morality of procreative choice" it is those who have experienced pregnancy and parenthood that have valuable experiences to draw from.

Feminists also argue that because women have been oppressed it is precisely those values developed and learned in oppression that will be liberative because those values challenge rather than support that which is oppressive. For this reason, many womanists and mujeristas argue that the experiences of women who benefit least from any particular set of circumstances "are privileged at the theoretical as well as at the practical level, in the elaboration of liberative discourses and of effective political action, precisely because they are better able to envision a future radically different from the

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[22] Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed., Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 101.

oppressive present from which they benefit the least, if at all."[23] Thus the voices of women from the margins, who stand outside a particular paradigm or perspective are better able to identify and name oppression and injustice.

Finally, what one defines as women's experience is used to evaluate or adjudicate any vision or proposal for ending oppression. Pamela Young notes that experience is not only the source for a feminist understanding of oppression and justice, but a source for adjudication as well: "Women's feminist experience (in concert with the recognition of women's socialized experience) is used as a norm for or judge of any theology..." [24] A feminist analysis of patriarchy begins with the type of analysis articulated here by Linda Hogan: "Women's experiences of the oppressive nature of patriarchal religion have deemed the traditions unusable. Thus women's experience is the arbiter in determining the validity of theological traditions."[25] So ethical norms, ceremonies, institutions, projects and liberative visions all become subject to evaluation by women's real-lived experience to determine if it is, in fact, liberative, or if it is oppressive; there is no neutral ground. "When religious beliefs and practices demean women, they must be challenged. There is no religious reality outside ourselves to which we will sacrifice our dignity as persons,"[26] claims Christine Gudorf.

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[23] Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, "Experiences" *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,eds.*, Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 136.

[24] Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 66-67.

[25] Linda Hogan, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 87.

[26] Andolson, *Women's Consciousness,* xxi.

Women's experience must evaluate and identify oppressive patriarchal practices and theory, but women's experience must also be the test for any feminist ethic or theology as well. One can specify the experience that will be used to identify the problem or to articulate liberative values or strategy. Because women's experience is so varied, no one is denying that the experiences used to define oppression or liberative visions will be multiple and varied. However, who's experience should be used to evaluate the visions and ethics developed by feminism? When searching for a place to stand together, searching for solidarity among women, whose experience will be used to evaluate such proposals? When liberal Euro-American feminists claim that gaining entry into the workplace is liberative, and African-American women claim that having the ability to remain at home and care for one's own children is liberative, to whose experience will feminists defer?

Essentialism

Essentialism has to do with portraying the particular as the universal or identifying one as representative of all; it is the opposite of recognizing plurality and difference. However, many different approaches to and interpretations of essentialism have been explored within feminism as essentialism has manifested itself in feminist theological ethics in different ways at different historical times. Naomi Schor, in "The Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,"[27] identifies four types of essentialism. Schor's distinctions reveal the complexity of all categories she defines for

[27] Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," *differences* 1(2 - 1989): 38.

essentialism; a liberationist critique, a linguistic critique, a philosophical critique and a feminist critique. She associates the liberationist critique with Simone de Beauvoir and her groundbreaking statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."[28] This perspective, Schor claims, is most concerned with the social construction of gender and its effect on women. The linguistic critique is associated with Lacan who argues that essentialism is "an effect of the imaginary."[29] "The essentialist, in this perspective is a naive realist who refuses to recognize the loss of the referent is the condition of man's entry into language."[30] Third is the philosophical critique which Schor attributes to feminist Derridians such as Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray. In this perspective essentialism is defined as the subscription to the binary opposition of man/woman. Fourth is the feminist critique, which Schor claims is the only discussion of essentialism that has emerged from within feminism. In the following Schor notes the numerous sources that make up the feminist critique:

> No proper name, masculine or feminine, can be attached to this critique as its legitimating source; it arises from the plurivocal discourses of black, Chicana, lesbian, first and third world feminist thinkers and activists. ... Essentialism, according to this critique, is a form of "false universalism" that threatens the vitality of the newly born women of feminism. By its majestic singularity Woman conspires in the denial of the very real lived differences - sexual, ethnic, racial, national, cultural, economic, generational - that divide women from each other and from themselves.[31]

It is this feminist critique, which Schor articulates as a working understanding of essentialism that serves as the focus of this dissertation. Essentialism is defined as the

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[28] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 301.

[29] Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed,eds., *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 44.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 45.

denial of the multiplicity of definitions of oppression and liberation which silences or erases the perspectives of women who are different from the theorizer. This ignorance of differences, whether intentional or not, is both oppressive and faulty. White feminists have, in their denial of other voices, created an essentialist definition of women's experience within their theology and ethics. Essentialism from the perspective of the feminist critique is summarized well by Elizabeth Spellman in the following: "For essentialism invites me to take what I understand to be true of me "as a woman" for some golden nugget of womanness all women have as women; and it makes the participation of other women inessential to the production of the story. How lovely: the many turn out to be one, and the one that they are is me."[32]

Reflecting on their own experiences to identify oppression, positive values, and visions, feminists have allowed their particular experience to become the normative definition of women's experience. How can feminists who so explicitly assert this problem in traditional theology and ethics fall prey to the same temptations in their own theology and ethics? Margaret Urban Walker comments, "While most feminist criticism has gone to the content of dominant moral theories, these theories also share a quite specific form. This form represents abstraction, generalization, and uniformity as the normal form of moral consideration."[33] It is this assumption that still exists within feminist theorizing. This assumption is used to guarantee consistency and sameness and give authority to any moral perspective. It is this assumption that continues to shape the

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[32] Elizabeth Spellman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 159.

[33] Walker, *Moral Understandings*, 52.

paradigm within which feminists operate. This paradigm is characterized by either failing to recognize differences or avoiding differences because they were viewed as a threat rather than a strength and opportunity. Feminists have failed to recognize differences due to their inherited racism, classism and other –isms. Even if differences were recognized, feminists have tended to avoid them because of their understanding of differences as negative.

Difference was viewed very differently in the 1960s, in the midst of the women's liberation movement, than it was when the critiques from women of color began to take shape in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, USA women's dialogues with French Feminists and deconstructionist theories again reshaped the context in which this discussion takes place. The changing understanding of and attitude toward difference corresponds to changing manifestations of essentialism.

Feminist ethics was born in the USA in the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and marks something of a starting point for this discussion. Although Simone de Beauvoir had written *The Second Sex* many years earlier, it would be in the 1960s that her ideas caught fire in the United States of America. Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "One is not made, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."[34] As Simone de Beauvoir might say, women began to struggle with their existence and began to articulate that the ideal woman was created by society

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[34] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 301.

and not dictated by nature. With the recognition of a cultural definition of "woman," women began to define themselves as a group. In the 1960s some women had, for the first time, a sense of belonging to a particular group. Instead of speaking of "they" when referring to women, they started to say "we."

In 1980, Hester Eisenstein asked what it was in the first stages of this movement that drove women to overlook their differences and search for solidarity. Eisenstein concluded: "What lay behind these parallel impulses to diminish or to minimize the importance of differences, on the one hand, between women and men, and on the other, among women of all classes, ages, races, and sexual allegiances? I think that they both stemmed from a profound understanding of the political uses of difference. The women's movement had absorbed the lesson of the civil rights movement: "separate," or different, was not equal."[35] In general, differences were not valued, but "implied the creation of comparisons, of competition and of hierarchies, and, therefore, of insuperable obstacles to unity."[36] So in this first stage of feminism, difference was viewed as divisive and as creating power imbalances. In 1974, Marilyn Frye wrote that "women of all races and classes *are* together in a ghetto of sorts."[37] "Whatever features an individual female person has which tend to her social and economic advantage (her age, race, etc.), one feature which always tends to her disadvantage is her femaleness,"[38] Frye contends.

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[35] Hester Eisenstein, *The Future of Difference* (Boston: Hall, 1983), xvii.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9.
[38] Ibid., 31.

This understanding of difference did lead women, and the women most active in developing feminism at the time were white, middle-class women, to generalize and assert that women as a group experienced a similar oppression at the hands of men. They asserted that sexist oppression united women across all differences. Marianne Hirsch comments: "But an even greater concern to us than the risks of this exploitation [by the media] is the danger that our internal conflicts and struggles obscure the commitment to radical transformation that had been so conspicuous a feature of our earlier efforts."[39] When women are critical of other women, either their theory or praxis, the question arises whether feminists can attain any real social change unless they are a united front. What happens when feminists, womanists, mujeristas, Asian-American feminists, liberal feminists, radical feminists disagree? Is someone wrong?

In *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds, Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*, the editors Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner comment in the introduction that their compilation is not focused on the issue of essentialism, but about how women evaluate or critique other women. In a similar work, *Conflicts in Feminism*, Nancy Miller writes about her experience of presenting her own work and being critiqued by another woman, "If I was polemical, my polemic was with men. In my mind I was writing *for* women against some establishment - institution, theory - that was male."[40] And yet, she was critiqued by a woman, in her own words "denounced" by another

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[39] Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-2.

[40] Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism" *Conflicts in Feminism*, Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., (New York: Routledge, 1990), 352.

woman. It was as if some betrayal has taken place, that somehow women were all supposed to stick together, regardless of what happened or of their differences. Many feminists find it difficult to imagine women criticizing other women as productive. In their view, women must always join forces against any outside threat.

This aversion to difference and internal conflict did lead to the essentialism of women's experience and did blind many white, middle-class feminists to any other way to view women's experiences of oppression. In the late 1970s and early 1980s women from locations other than white and middle-class began to speak about their growing displeasure with the white, middle-class feminist perspective. Also in the early 1980s, feminism began to develop not just as a social movement, but women's studies departments began to form.[41] This allowed some feminists to work on developing the breadth of feminist theory and exploring feminist ideas in a more consistent and coherent way.

One of the clearest ways in which feminist essentializing of women's experience has been manifested is in feminisms perpetuation of racism. This is not racism understood as hatred of another race or ethnic group, or conscious feelings of superiority, but simply of blindness to the significance that race makes in life experiences. Adrienne Rich has called this "White solipsism: To think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world."[42] Rich comments: "I believe that white feminists today, raised white in a racist society, are often ridden with *white solipsism* - not the consciously held

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[41] Eisenstein. *The Future of Difference*, xvii.

[42] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1976-1978* (NY: Norton, 1979), 299

belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent, guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness."[43]

Viewing one's perspective as if it were the only way of viewing the world is not limited to issues of racial or ethnic differences. Feminists often make assumptions about economic status, sexual orientation, geographic location, and even ideology. Hester Eisenstein writes that liberal feminists often viewed themselves as "The Feminists." She remarked that not only does this render other forms of feminism virtually non-existent, but "the equation of liberal feminism with feminism also reflects the fact that liberal feminists identify themselves as feminists with little or no consciousness about the particular liberal political theory they adopt." [44] Not only does this reveal how little one is aware of different groups, but it reveals how little one is aware of her own working world-view or ideology. Does this use of language not suggest that there is a prior assumption that the audience is only white women, and the only time feminists need to identify whose experience they are talking about is when it is not "theirs"?

White solipsism can bee seen in Euro-American feminist definitions of oppression as the dominance of white middle-class men, defining oppression as patriarchy, and viewing the world in terms of women and men only. From this liberal feminist perspective, liberation was defined almost solely in terms of gaining access to the power

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[43] Ibid., 306.

[44] Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (NY: Longman, 1981), 4.

that white males possessed. Eisenstein's definition of patriarchy illustrates this perspective, which views the world only in terms of the male/female split, recognizing no other power imbalances within either of those dualistic categories. Eisenstein writes:

> Patriarchy, as a system of oppression, recognizes the potential power of women and the actual power of men. Its purpose is to destroy woman's consciousness about her potential power, which derives from the necessity of society to reproduce itself. By trying to affect woman's consciousness and her life options, patriarchy protects the appropriation of women's sexuality, their reproductive capacities, and their labor by individual men and society as a whole.[45]

Historically Euro-American feminists have defined patriarchy as the primary or first form of oppression. Spelman explains this perspective in her comment: "An additive analysis treats the oppression of a Black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when, in fact, it is a different burden."[46]

Most early feminist theorizing began with some mention of the classic male/female dualistic tension as being basic to all societies. Rosemary Radford Ruether in *New Woman, New Earth* (1975) opens the first chapter claiming that Engles "defined the subjugation of women as the first oppressor-oppressed relation, *the foundation of all other class and property relations*"[47] (emphasis mine). Similarly, Valerie Saving, in her article "The Human Situation" published in *Womanspirit Rising* (1979) relies on the anthropological work of Margaret Mead to give authority to her distinctions between male and female experiences and roles in order to support her critique of traditional understandings of sin as pride. For Mary Daly the primary oppressor of women is

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[45] Ibid., 14-15.

[46] Spellman, *Inessential Woman*, 123.

[47] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and human liberation* (NY: Seabury Press, 1975), 3.

patriarchy: "Patriarchy is the homeland of males; it is the Father Land; and men are its agents. The primary resistance to consciousness of this reality is precisely described in "Sisterhood is Powerful."[48] All of these examples serve to demonstrate the pervasive assumption among Euro-American feminists that women's experience could best be understood in terms of a basic male/female dualism. From this perspective, other prejudices and experiences of oppression were simply additional manifestations of one basic oppressive encounter; the oppression of women by men.

Within this dualistic world-view, women's most essential experience was primarily an experience of gender oppression, which was almost always expressed in terms of white, middle-class women's experience. Untainted by other forms of oppression, a fundamental analysis of women's situation was best reflected in the experiences of white, middle-class women. Betty Freidan in, *The Feminine Mystique,* referred to women's malaise: the middle-class, suburban woman's plight as full-time mother, cook, chauffeur, wife, house-cleaner, without a life of her own, living vicariously through her husband and her children. Also influenced by the work of Simone de Beauvoir, women's liberation from gender oppression was envisioned as economic independence.

The consequences of this narrow definition of oppression coupled with a desire for unquestioned solidarity among women led Euro-American feminists to seriously misinterpret their own experience. Additionally, this dualistic perspective blinded Euro-American feminists to the ways in which they participated in the perpetuation of racism

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[48] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 28.

and ethnic prejudice. Contrasting with this dualistic understanding of oppression, African-American women have asserted that not only does racism intersect with their experience of sexism, but that racism intersects their experience and efforts toward solidarity and collaboration with Euro-American women. Poignant examples can be found in such books as *Ain't I a Woman* or *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men and Some of Us are Brave.* Euro-American feminists correctly assume that both they and African-American women have experienced sexism within their own racial/ethnic groups. However, African-American women claim that Euro-American feminists have failed to recognize the impact of the oppressive and discriminatory relationship between women of different racial/ethnic groups as they have defined women's experience. As a result, Euro-American women focus only on their own particular experience of gender oppression when developing feminist ethics. bell hooks explains the need acknowledge the history of race relations in the United States when defining women's experience and formulating notions of women's liberation:

> Despite the predominance of patriarchal rule in American society, America was colonized on a racially imperialistic base and not on a sexually imperialistic base. No degree of patriarchal bonding between white male colonizers and Native American men overshadowed white racial imperialism. Racism took precedence over sexual alliances in both the white world's interaction with Native Americans and African Americans, just as racism overshadowed any bonding between black women and white women on the basis of sex. . . . While those feminists who argue that sexual imperialism is more endemic to all societies than racial imperialism are probably correct, American society is one in which racial imperialism superseded sexual imperialism. [49]

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[49] bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 122.

bell hooks and other women of color assert that the particular history of race relations in the United States of America impacts the conversations and collaboration between women from different racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups in the United States. Women of color further assert that the experience of Euro-American women is shaped by many factors, only one of which is gender oppression. Other factors that have shaped women's experience are experiences of privilege and of power over another group of women. An awareness of the historical relationships between women in particular contexts is fundamental in order for Euro-American feminists to understand the impact of that history on current relationships and conversations. Past interactions and relationships between different groups of women have shaped Euro-American feminists' theoretical perspective. In a similar vein, Musa Dube describs imperialism in much the same way that hooks has described the effects of racism/ethnic prejudice on Euro-American feminist ethics. Dube comments: "This approach maintains the West as the center of all cultural good, one with a supposedly redemptive impulse, but one that always proceeds by placing all other cultures at the periphery. It works by a process of selection and suppression that portrays the Other negatively while continuously uplifting its own superiority. The approach constructed both the colonizer and the colonized, *and it was so thorough in its method that it permeated even the liberationist feminist discourse.*"[50] (emphasis mine).

Although Euro-American feminists have sought to end oppression and work toward the liberation of women, an essentialist definition of women's experience, a narrow

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[50] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 25.

definition of oppression primarily in terms of gender and an aversion to difference have made that goal impossible. Euro-American feminists have continued to utilize certain methods and held to certain assumptions from the traditional white male dominated culture. In an effort to resist the ranking of differences between women, Euro-American feminists maintained a notion of sameness and solidarity which in reality continued to oppress women of color. Further, the Euro-American feminist vision of an end to oppression has been defined within a dualistic context which sought to give women the same power of men in their social class rather than realign power imbalances across a variety of divisions.

Voices of Women of Color

A significant range and breadth of work by women of color examines the work of white feminists. The questions, evaluations, and criticisms posed by women of color concerning the writings of white feminists and issues of essentialism and difference have centered on several pivotal concepts which illustrate several problematic assumptions within Euro-American feminist ethics. Women of color point to language, ignorance of the liberative work of women of color, definitions of oppression, and a need to be in control of feminist ethics as four central factors to address within discussions of essentialism and difference.

The first factor to consider is the use of language by white, middle-class feminists. The way in which white feminists use the terms "woman" or "women" immediately informs the reader that an assumption is being made that a normative

understanding of "woman" exists. Women of color argue that the use of these terms needs to be explained and more explicitly defined. White feminists have typically used their own white, middle-class experiences to define the normative "woman." Delores Williams writes about the ways in which white feminists erase the presence of other women through this use of language: "It is no wonder that in most feminist literature written by white-American women, the words "woman" and "women" signify only the white woman's experience. By failing to insert the work "white" before "woman" and "women," some feminists imperialistically take over the identity of those rendered invisible."[51] This is also illustrated by white feminists' struggle to determine what is meant by "woman" and "women's experience" and trying to establish a normative understanding of these terms. Rather than struggling with reworking a normative definition of these terms, Euro-American feminists add adjectives to these words. These adjectives are supposed to function to indicate to the reader what group of women is being referenced, or whose experience is being reflected upon. However, that naming methodology continues to suggest that an essential or normative definition exists apart from the descriptive adjective. In contrast, women of color have created entirely new words such as mujerista and womanist. These new words require the reader to consider an entirely different definition of the group being named rather than simply suggesting one group possesses additional nuances. Because no normative definition of woman can

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[51] Delores Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue" *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed., Lois Daly (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1994), 49.

be articulated even adjectives identifying which "women" are inadequate. Euro-American feminists will have to learn the language women of color use for themselves.

Williams also points out that not only are other women rendered invisible through this use of language, but in addition, this normative use of language creates an environment in which other women are not considered fully women unless they conform to this "normative," white, middle-class, western idea of "woman." Williams asks, "Now female theologians must ask if their own anthropological positions forget that in many cultures, for women to be assumed to have any humanity at all, it must be white-woman humanity. If this issue of white women as exclusive model of female humanity is not addressed in feminist and womanist theological anthropology, does the theology - by its silence on the issue - not perpetuate the idea of white-woman humanity as the model of all female humanity?"[52] Williams points out that not only are women here in the United States of America impacted by white-feminist essentialism, but this type of language reaches beyond the continental borders. Women outside the United States of America are also held up to a western, white-woman model of humanity which is reinforced by white feminist language they use when we fail to identify which women and instead use the term "woman."

There is no normative definition of woman or women's experience, only particular working definitions which must be claimed and articulated. This claim goes further than what Lugones calls the disclaimer. Using a more descriptive or adjectival language reveals an awareness that the writer is situated within a complex web of

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[52] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1993), 184.

relationships. Throughout the research or proposal, the writer maintains that complexity of relationships through the use of adjectives. A more descriptive language also enables the reader to imagine how other groups may enter into or relate to the dialogue being created.

A second critique of the normative, feminist definition of women's experience is the lack of attention or importance given to the experiences of groups of women that are not white, middle-class, heterosexual, or otherwise considered normative. Ada María Isasi Díaz writes about this as the invisible invisibility of Latinas. The phrase "invisible invisibility" implies that white feminists are not even aware of their ignorance regarding these other groups of women. Isasi-Díaz asserts that it is not simply that feminist assumptions or white solipsism hide the experiences of different groups of women from the feminist horizon, but that white, middle-class feminists are not even aware of the existence of other groups of women. She writes:

> "Invisible invisibility" questions the very existence of Hispanic Women; it makes us question not only the value of our specificity but the very reality of it. Most of those who totally ignore us do not even know they are doing so; they are not even capable of acknowledging our presence. Their only point of reference seems to be themselves, their reality, their world, and this is often why they can insist that who they are, the way they understand reality, and the way they deal with it is what should be and is therefore normative in society.[53]

Ignoring the other is one reaction to Hispanic women that Isasi-Díaz notes. The other kind of reaction to Hispanic Women is that of "respect." She characterizes this type of respect as "the quick-nod-of-the-head-acknowledgment, the politically correct response that one gets from those in control when they do not want to take Hispanic

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[53] Ada María Isasi Díaz, *En La Lucha* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 188.

Women seriously."[54] Neither of these ways of relating to other women express an interest in or valuing of difference. It is evident in Isasi Díaz's comment that "they are not even capable of acknowledging our presence" that she is pointing to the lack of a working paradigm, or even worldview, that allows for plurality and difference.

Audre Lorde suggests another way in which feminists are ignorant of the experiences of different women in her engagement of Mary Daly, a radical lesbian feminist. Lorde highlights Daly's assumptions about oppression and points out that the only experiences of women of color in Daly's work are those of victimization. Viewing women of color only as victims erases not only the images and resources of strength and resistance to be found in the tradition of women of color, but also erases contemporary work being done by women within those cultures to resist oppression. Lorde writes, ". . . and it was obvious that you were dealing with non-European women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power."[55]

Audre Lorde made a similar assertion in her review of the work of Mary Daly when she responded to the publication of Daly's Gynephobia with "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," published in 1981. She writes: "Your inclusion of African genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools

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[54] Ibid.

[55] Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" *This Bridge Called My Back*, eds., Cherrie Monaga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981), 95.

of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other."[56] Audre Lorde and many other women of color continued to critique white feminist writing and the seemingly unknowing way that Euro-American feminist writing make differences among women invisible.

The operative assumption of many white feminists is that they are in a position to evaluate the lives and environments of other groups of women and make assessments regarding their need for liberation. In this situation, white feminists are aware of the experiences of oppression of other women, but ignorant of the resources or traditions of that group of women to address and oppose their own oppression. Audre Lorde's critique of Daly's work includes the assertion that Daly was lacking in an understanding of that women living in the culture faced with genital mutilation may recognize this as oppressive and that women within that culture are opposing it. Mary Daly's evaluation of this type of oppression, by its lack of mention of women within that culture addressing the issue, erases their voices and gives the false impression that women world-wide are being liberated by white, western women. Lorde asks: "But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about black women and the differences between us, when it is key to our survival?"[57]

Still suffering from white solipsism, unaware that there is a dialogue to join, feminists take it upon themselves to start an "official" dialogue. This official dialogue ends up co-opting the energy and resources of the women within that situation who are

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Audre Lorde, "The Role of Difference" *off our backs* 9, no. 11 (1979), 5.

already addressing the issue. Now this latter group of women has two tasks in addition to resisting oppression: 1) to figure out how to get the attention of white feminists, who probably garner more power and respect than the women who are being oppressed, and 2) to educate white feminists about their experiences of oppression and visions for liberation.

bell hooks attributes feminist's lack of awareness of other women's work for justice and liberation to the mentality of dominant groups. At the same time, hooks indicates that women outside the dominant group cannot afford to make this kind of assumption. hooks writes, "I did not feel sympathetic to white peers who maintained that I could not expect them to have knowledge of or understand the life experiences of black women. Despite my background (living in racially segregated communities) I knew about the lives of white women, and certainly no white women lived in our neighborhood, attended our schools, or worked in our homes."[58] It is the work and responsibility of white feminists to learn the perspectives of other groups of women and to develop pluralistic methodologies that value difference.

A third major point of critique by women of color is the white feminist notion of solidarity. White feminists assume that a common experience of oppression, a common victimization as women, will unify all women across lines of class, race/ethnicity, sexual preference, age, or religion. The response of women of color is poignantly expressed in the title of an article written by Lorrain Bethel in 1979 entitled, "what chou mean we

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[58] bell hooks, *From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 11.

white girl?"[59] In a more contemporary article, but still reflecting the same perspective, Jacqueline Grant remarks, "I think a feminist theology is an oppressive theology rather than a critical tool of liberation if it fails to develop an adequate doctrine of sisterhood, which challenges the universalizing of the perspectives of white middle-class women."[60] Women of color, unlike white feminists, understand solidarity not through common experiences of victimization, but through common commitments to specific goals. Women can have widely varying experiences of oppression, but still join together around specific issues or tasks that would have a liberative effect for women. Audre Lorde says it this way: "But, as with all families, we sometimes find it difficult to deal constructively with the genuine differences between us and to recognize that unity does not require that we be identical to each other. Black women are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other in order to work together."[61]

The power of solidarity surrounds the feminist movement with the student protests in France, union workers in the US affecting labor policies, Cuban-Americans in Miami asserting their collective force in the name of a small boy, civil rights protests that changed the USA. Women need to develop lines of solidarity across differences in order to have political force and to be able to effect societal, structural change. White feminists imagined this solidarity in terms of women's victimization. hooks explains the danger in this form of solidarity:

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[59] Bethel, "what chou mean 'we,' white girl?"
[60] Jacquelyn Grant, *Women Spirit Bonding,* 121
[61] Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 19.

> Bonding as "victims," white women liberationists were not required to assume responsibility for confronting the complexity of their own experience. They were not challenging one another to examine their sexist attitudes towards women unlike themselves or exploring the impact of race and class privilege on their relationships to women outside their race/class groups. Identifying as "victims," they could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy.[62]

bell hooks elaborates further that this notion of shared victimization as solidarity masks the ways in which women oppress other women by allowing them to believe that they are only victims and not victimizers.

A fourth central point made by women of color is that solidarity is impossible, not only because white feminists search for solidarity within victimization or oppression, but also because of the definition of the victimization or oppression suffered by women. White feminists assert that women as a class are oppressed. White feminists defined their own victimization in terms of sexist oppression at the hands of white males or patriarchal society and projected this definition of oppression on to all women. Their language combined with their understanding of women's oppression creates an illusion which hides white, middle-class privilege. hooks suggests a redefinition of oppression:

> A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that "all women are oppressed." This assertion implies that women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalized but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society. Being oppressed means the *absence of choices*.[63]

Women of color reject the white feminist assertion that patriarchal oppression is the umbrella under which other oppressions are sheltered. Further, women of color reject

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[62] bell hooks, *From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 46.
[63] Ibid., 5

the implication that once this overarching patriarchal oppression is dismantled other oppressions will unravel. Women of color assert that evaluations of oppression which reflect only white, middle-class experience only in terms of gender oppression implies that only non-white women's experiences are impacted by race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age. This faulty analysis of oppression reinforces the idea that white women's experience is somehow normative. It means that white women think that race, class, sexual preference, age don't impact their experience of oppression in any significant ways. While white women may not experience these factors as oppressive, these factors impact their experience of oppression precisely because these other factors mitigate or otherwise shift white women's experience of oppression. The argument from women of color is that factors of gender, race, class, sexual preference, age – all these factors, whether they are experienced as oppressive or beneficial intersect with one another and create unique and differentiated experiences of oppression. Women of color assert that the denial that either one is impacted by these other factors or that these factors intersect within a matrix of oppression is problematic. Euro-American feminist proposals that approach the double and triple burden of women oppressed by race and class still miss the analysis from women of color that these factors are not additional burdens, but that they are factors that either enable or block one's ability to make choices. Women of color explain that what they experience is not simply an accumulation of burdens, but that each of the different forms of oppression take different and specific forms when they cross and intersect with one another.

bell hooks explores the way in which Betty Friedan's book the *Feminine Mystique* exemplifies the white feminist definition of women's oppression. Friedan draws upon white middle-class suburban, college-educated, women's experiences of the "oppression which has no name," to articulate how women as a class are oppressed because of their gender. While not denying that the problems faced by these women were real, hooks questions the leap from the experiences of a particular group of women to a generalization of the situation of all women. hooks states: "Specific problems and dilemmas of leisure class white house-wives were real concerns that merited consideration and change but they were not the pressing political concerns of masses of women. Masses of women were concerned about economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination, etc. When Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, more than one third of women were in the work force."[64] By applying the experience of one group of women to an understanding of oppression that all women suffer as a collective, the experiences of women who were in the work force were erased. Delores Williams adds that feminists' interpretation of women's oppression only through an analysis of patriarchy and their inability to recognize both white racial/ethnic privilege and white women's part in oppressing both black men and women is seriously problematic. Williams suggests: "The failure of white feminists to emphasize the substantial difference between their patriarchally-derived-privileged-oppression and black women's demonically-derived-annalistic-oppression renders black women invisible in feminist thought and action."[65]

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[64] Ibid., 2.

[65] Delores Williams, "The Color of Feminism" *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed., Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 49.

Williams asserts that considering patriarchal oppression as the key or foundation of oppression and other types of oppression as add-ons necessarily excludes many women's experiences. Any woman or theory which does not also define oppression as the foundation of the problem would be rejected or excluded. Thus Hispanic women or African-American women who work in solidarity with men in their racial/ethnic group to end racism and define this as foundational to their experience would not be seen as doing feminist work, but would be categorized as addressing racism and thus not included in feminist dialogue or consideration.

Conclusions

In the 1980s feminists began to recognize what they called the "problem" of difference. While many feminists attempted to recognize that their perspectives were limited and broad generalizations were problematic, their attempt to define ethical norms still compelled them to value sameness over difference. As a way of addressing this problem, feminists recognized that their views were partial and limited. However, this initial disclaimer brought no changes to the assumptions and methods of their work.

This dissertation affirms a central assumption, drawn from Lugones' insights, that the issues of essentialism and difference run deeper into the core of how Euro-American feminists theorize and construct ethical frameworks. An examination of essentialism and difference within feminist ethics reveals several working assumptions within feminist theorizing that inhibit Euro-American feminists to avoid essentializing and recognize diversity and difference positively. Because of the working assumptions embedded in

the feminist paradigm, Lugones argues that Euro-American feminists have missed the challenge to their central paradigm and instead used the disclaimer to give the appearance of putting their own experience or perspective within a larger context. Instead they have continued to hold onto assumptions that deny a plurality of women's experiences.

Rather than respond interactively to the question and critique from women of color and recognize the impact of their work on other groups of women, Euro-American feminists' use of the disclaimer simply serves to announce to the reader that it is the responsibility of the reader to determine the impact of the writer's social location and to make appropriate modifications. In this way, the writer reveals that she doesn't really know how or at least is not able to articulate within her work the difference (or impact) that her whiteness, for example, makes in the work she is doing. Lugones' call to move beyond the disclaimer and recognize the interactive aspect of the critique of women of color requires an examination of the working assumptions surrounding the issues of essentialism and difference. Examining the working assumptions of essentialism will focus on Euro-American feminists' definition of women's experience. Examining the working assumptions surrounding difference will include an analysis of Euro-American feminists' understanding of the difference that their difference makes in the dialogue regarding women's liberation.

When feminists have attempted to expand notions of oppression from sexist oppression to include racism/ethnic prejudice and classism this has been done largely in a additive manner. That is, Euro-American feminists have claimed that Black women are impacted not only by sexism, but also by racism, or poor Black women bear the triple

burden of sexism, racism/ethnic prejudice, and classism. While some white feminists have explored other alternatives to this additive approach, most have failed to recognize the impact of race/ethnicity or class as necessarily interlocking factors present in all experience. The failure to recognize multiple and interlocking factors of experience seems to imply that white women's experiences of oppression are simple or pure because we experience only gender oppression, and that only other women's experiences are influenced by their differences in race, ethnicity and class. White, middle-class women's experience of victimization may, in fact, only entail oppression based on gender. But women of color assert that until white feminists incorporate an analysis of race/ethnicity and class into all analyses of women's experience, even if those experiences are those of privilege, Euro-American feminists will never understand and be able to value the differences within women's experience. This change will require a paradigm shift which addresses the way Euro-American feminists understand and define women's experience, difference and solidarity. In addition, this shift will require that Euro-American feminists step outside their own experiences and see the world from many different perspectives.

Chapter II

LOOKING WITHIN

Feminist ethics does not begin with abstractions about the good life or the ideal woman. Instead, as Carol Robb claims, it begins "by reflecting on very concrete historical experiences, and attempts to arrive at more general understandings of the ethical situation by that 'reflection on praxis,' to borrow liberation theology terminology."[1] Somehow, even in the midst of a clear focus on very concrete historical experiences, a paradigm of feminist theorizing which contains essentialism, universalizing and normalizing tendencies has emerged. The essentialism found within feminism became an ethical dilemma as women of color reflected on and identified the effects they experienced from white theorizing. Defining the problem of essentialism within the concrete historical experiences of women of color grounds this issue in the concrete. Sharon Welch and Sheila Davaney are two feminists addressing the issue of essentialism; in fact, their work intersects as both women address issues of essentialism and difference within feminist theology. The work and ideas of these two women intersect as Welch engages and critiques Davaney's assessment of the feminist appeal to women's experience as a source for ethical reflection in "The Limits of the Appeal to

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[1] Carol S. Robb, "A Framework for Feminist Ethics" in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, eds. Barbara Andolson, et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 213.

Women's Experience"[2].

Using Welch's assessment of Davaney as an entry into a comparison of these divergent perspectives, this chapter will first present, then compare and contrast the views of Welch and Davaney regarding essentialism and the future of feminist theology. This chapter attempts to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of these perspectives by focusing on each woman's analysis of the essentialism of feminist theology and ethics, the definition and appropriate use of women's experience, the theological underpinnings of each woman's perspective and then presenting each one's proposal for engaging difference.

Welch's attention to the heuristic use of women's experience and Davaney's attention to the theoretical ramifications of essentializing women's experience offer a unique balancing of the life of an idea as it exists in a text and as it impacts the lives of its readers. Each perspective offers important insights into feminist assumptions regarding the definition and use of women's experience in both theology and ethics. Each perspective uncovers important assumptions that until questioned and challenged, remain powerful. Welch and Davaney each present a different analysis of the role of women's experience within feminist ethics as well as the directions they propose for the future of feminist work and addressing the issue of difference. Davaney urges women to recognize women's experience alongside any other source for beginning ethical reflection while Welch defends the particular richness to be found within women's experience.

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[2] Sharon Welch "Sporting Power," in *Transfigurations*, eds., C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St.Ville, Susan M. Simonatis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1996.

Sheila Davaney

Sheila Davaney, currently Professor of Theology at Iliff School of Theology, is a white, middle-class feminist who developed her scholarly viewpoint in the fields of history, philosophy, and process thought. She admits that she has been influenced by Gordon Kaufman's constructive theology and William Dean's radical empiricism. Davaney "was a graduate student of Kaufman and John Cobb, and throughout the vagaries of history ... found [herself] teaching at Iliff School of Theology, long a bastion of naturalism and radical empiricism."[3] Within this context Davaney has developed a perspective which she calls pragmatic historicism. She arrives at this perspective after exploring the essentialism of feminist theology. In an article "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience,[4]" published in 1987, Davaney argues that feminists' search for sure foundations by which to validate their perspective and their proposals for women's liberation has led feminists to an essentialist definition of women's experience. Davaney comments: "Centered in a common female nature or authoritative experience that, on the one hand, corresponded to the essence of religious traditions and, on the other hand, to

the constitutive purposes of divine reality, feminist theology argued for the unique validity of its perspective."[5]

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[3] Sheila Greve Davaney, "Directions in Historicism: Language, Experience, and Pragmatic Adjudication" *Zygon* 26 (June 1991): 203.

[4] Sheila Davaney, "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience" *Shaping New Vision*, eds. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 79-96.

[5] Sheila Davaney, "Continuing the Story, But Departing the Text" *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, ed., Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis:

Committed to taking seriously the critiques of women of color, Davaney challenges the theological assumptions involved in feminist theology developed by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Mary Daly. Faced with the plethora of experiences competing for attention resulting from denying a place of privilege to any particular perspective Davaney focuses on adjudicating amongst different visions and theological perspectives. She terms this approach pragmatic historicism.

Davaney asserts that feminist proposals exist within specific historical locations, as do all proposals for liberation, and as a result can only be evaluated and given authority based on "the pragmatic consequences of living in each."[6] This perspective informs Davaney's reading of Ruether, Fiorenza and Daly. For while she recognizes that feminists have profited from the historical critical analysis of traditional ethics and theology and the recognition of the perspectival nature of knowledge in their critique of patriarchy, she claims that feminists have not applied this critique to their own ideas when searching for foundations and justification for their feminist liberative visions. Davaney asserts that feminists have claimed ontological status for their perspectives thus denying the historical nature of their particular interpretation of reality. It is this search for "sure foundations," Davaney says, that has impelled feminists toward essentializing and the creation of universal feminist norms which blocks genuine conversation between and among women's varying perspectives.

Fortress Press, 1997), 202.

[6] Ibid., 209

Essentialism and Women's Experience

While Davaney stands in agreement with feminist critiques of patriarchy, she turns this same critique on feminists for simply changing the players, but following the same rules. Much of her early work centers on this critique of feminism and feminists' search for ways to validate feminism's claims. Davaney claims that:

> Feminist theology's . . . major proponents have denied that norms for adjucation and evaluation reside either in the past, in some deposit or residue of special revelation, or in a supposedly universal, neutral reason accessible to all. Rather, women theologians working out of a feminist perspective deeply informed by the canons of historical consciousness, have argued that such "elevated" norms are male products reflecting the patriarchal character of their creations and that cultural feminist theology has had as a central task the criticism of male-centered theology for its failure to recognize the perspectival character of its visions and it propensity to universalize its claims for normativity.[7]

Davaney asserts that feminists have not been self-critical enough in their use of women's experience as source and norm for theology and ethics. As a result, they have employed women's experience in essentialist ways. Euro-American, heterosexual, middle-class feminists have universalized their own experience and excluded others from discussions and developments of the norms and values of feminist theology and ethics. Davaney specifically critiques the work of three prominent feminist theologians: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Mary Daly. Davaney uses

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[7] Davaney, "Appeal to Women's Experience," 31.

the work of these three women as prototypes of "... North American feminists' appeal to women's experience as this appeal has been developed by leading white feminists theologians."[8] While all feminists do not stand in the shadows of these three women,

Davaney asserts that they have forged major patterns and assumptions that feminists have tended to follow. In other words, she attests that the ideas and methods of these feminists constitute the context out of which much of feminism has developed. In addition, Davaney asserts that feminists make this essentialist claim in order to give legitimacy to their own perspective. Davaney challenges feminists' essentialist assumptions with her radical historicism and asserts that all critiques of oppression and visions of liberation are equally valid for consideration. Furthermore, she argues that women, the poor, and the oppressed have no special privileged access to reality simply due to their position in society or experiences of oppression. The authority of one vision rests not on the privileged position of its authors or its resemblance to divine reality or any other ahistorical foundation, but rather on the actual or expected consequences of living out that vision.

Davaney has distilled her analysis of feminist's use of women's experience into four specific claims. First, feminists have assumed that there is a common experience of patriarchy among women that crosses all other differences. Second, feminists asserted that women's experiences of oppression and resistance to oppression could be used "as

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[8] Ibid.32.

the normative site against which theological assertions were tested."[9] Third, feminists asserted that within their religious tradition, be it Christianity or Judaism, there existed some liberating core or essence. Finally, feminists asserted that women's social location, as an oppressed group, gave them access to visions of liberation that corresponded with divine reality or purpose.

The definition of experience is used both as source for identifying norms within their feminist theologies and for evaluating visions of liberation. Davaney focuses on the work of Ruether, Fiorenza and Daly, asserting that each have defined in similar ways the type of experiences that comprise the "women's experience" on which they base their work. Davaney understands Fiorenza to be advocating "woman-church," a community of both women and men who are conscious of sexism and struggle against it. Similarly, Davaney claims that Ruether does not accept women's experience in general, but rather identifies only women's experiences of struggling for liberation as significant. Ruether argues that it is in struggling for liberation that God is experienced and revealed. Davaney concludes: "Like Schussler Fiorenza and Ruether, Daly does not understand the appeal to the experience of women as a turn to women's experience in general. She too sharply circumscribes her critical point of reference, locating it in the experience of self-identified women who live out of what she terms 'biophilic' or 'materpatirachal' consciousness."[10]

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[9] Sheila Davaney, "Continuing the Story, But Departing the Text" *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 200.

[10] Davaney, "Appeal to Women's Experience," 39.

Davaney contends that this restriction of useable women's experience to the experience of "women centered women" and their struggle against patriarchy is the first step towards essentialism. By including some and excluding other types of women's experience feminists are limiting and shaping valuable experiences to those of sexism and of ending sexism. Furthermore, it is not all women's experience of oppression or liberation that is being used. Because feminists focus upon women's experience and then raise up only a particular group's experience as universal, Davaney claims that feminists have done exactly what they critiqued patriarchal theologians for doing. Feminists have created a false universal. While male patriarchs based the idea of a universal human being on only upper-middle class white male experience, feminists have based the idea of a universal woman on only upper-middle class white female experience.

Secondly, Davaney argues that feminists have claimed that due to their particular social location they are able to see reality as it is. "Despite their differing rationales, all three thinkers claim a validity for feminist interpretations of reality which they refuse to grant to the visions of patriarchal males (and perhaps non-feminist women), which they label, false, distorted, and perverted,"[11] Davaney notes. Due to their ability to see things as they are, Davaney asserts that Fiorenza and Ruether suggest that any vision of reality rises or falls on its ability to further women's liberation, in other words "whether they advance or impede women's struggle for 'self-affirmation, power and liberation'."[12] In

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[11] Ibid., 42.

[12] Sheila Davaney, Barbara Hargove and Jean Miller Schmidt. "Religion and the Changing Role of Women" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (July 1985): 118.

contrast, as historicized subjects, Davaney claims no one has privileged access to reality; reality is a social construct. Davaney clearly states that, "We have no access to reality separate from our value-laden, power-infused conception of it."[13] Davaney works within several assumptions about reality: people construct and interpret their environments at every moment; truth cannot be known and in all practicality it does not exist as such; it is each one who creates the reality that she lives in.

Davaney concludes that Daly goes even further than either Ruether or Fiorenza and suggests that women by nature have some essential ability to perceive reality as it is. Davaney's assessment of Daly leads her to conclude, "This is so, she believes, because there exists a profound and natural correspondence, apparently lacking in males, between the minds of musing women and the structures of Reality."[14] Davaney argues that this type of claim denies the subjectivity of all perspectives. No group or individual can claim to know things as they are. Through their claim that women do know reality as it is, essentialism thrives.

Davaney also questions a third claim she attributes to feminists, namely that within the Christian or Jewish tradition there is a liberating core. "Thus Ruether normatively referenced the prophetic-liberating strand within the Hebraic and Christian traditions, Letty Russell distinguished the liberating center of the traditions, and Sallie McFague called for the correlation between contemporary positions and the basic Christian paradigm,"[15] Davaney asserts. She says that feminists have misrepresented the

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[13] Davaney, "Appeal to Women's Experience," 46.
[14] Ibid., 41.
[15] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 201.

Christian tradition as having an "identifiable center which could be established and which was interpreted as lending authoritative weight to the vision articulated by feminist thinkers."[16] Again, Davaney argues that feminists are ignoring or denying the subjectivity of any interpretation of their religious tradition. Instead, they are claiming that they are able to identify it's "core" liberating message. Davaney finds this highly questionable because it presumes that one group can clearly identify that true core. An assertion which is at odds with Daveney's premise of the subjectivity of all interpretations of the Christian tradition.

This third false claim made by feminists leads to and corresponds to the fourth: since a core message of liberation has been identified within the religious tradition and the feminist vision is one of liberation, Davaney asserts that feminists then identify a correspondence between their own and divine reality. In this excerpt, Davaney succinctly states this critique:

> Is it because Schussler Fiorenza believes this is the best human norm available at this historical point or simply that as a woman committed to women it is her stance? It is my contention that Schussler Fiorenza assumes, though without explicit argument, that this feminist norm is not only historically compelling but also has ontological grounding; that is to say, it is also normative because it reflects divine reality and purposes and corresponds to "the way things are." In her work, Schussler Fiorenza assumes the ontological reality of God, and further, that such divine reality is the source of the equalitarian possibilities she perceives in the Christian tradition. Alongside these assumptions, I suggest, is the implicit supposition that the principles or values that most closely correspond to this divine reality are the most normative and that it is precisely the feminist principle that fulfills this requirement. Hence, the feminist principle is normative both because it

[16] Ibid., 201.

> reflects a commitment to women and because it corresponds to the nature and purposes of the divine.[17]

Once again, Davaney concludes that feminists have forgotten the subjectivity of not only their own interpretation of what liberation would be, but feminist have also forgotten the subjectivity of their interpretation of divine will. Davaney sees feminists projecting onto God their particular historical interpretation. Once these feminist ideals are given such divine authority and backing any argument or critique against this feminist perspective is now also perceived as an argument against the divine.

The problem for Davaney is not simply essentialist claims, but also the pragmatic consequences resulting from these faulty claims. Feminists argue that their vision is more valid than others because it has been drawn from women's experience or women's understanding of divine reality and the correspondence of their perspective to divine reality. Mired in essentialist assumptions and claims, the criteria by which they have argued for their perspective has been problematic, Davaney claims, since they have argued for their vision using ahistorical, metaphysical language. Because feminists relied on arguments stemming from the authorship of a certain viewpoint, vision, or a particular groups's perspective they have been forced to essentialize those views. This goes hand in hand with the problem of adjucating differences. Not only have feminists universalized their own experiences but their point of verification for asserting their perspective has been at the wrong place. Davaney asserts that it is a circular argument to validate a

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[17] Sheila Davaney, "Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations" *Embodied Love*, eds., Paula M. Cooey, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 88.

vision using criteria derived from the experience and vision of the same group that created the vision. Thus the problem is not only essentialism, but adjucating differences.

Davaney suggests that any vision must be evaluated by its impact on other outside groups: "The weakness of earlier feminist arguments is not that they sought to articulate a coherent, internally connected set of theological claims or that they appealed to experience, tradition, and God. It is rather that they did so in a manner that was in tension with their own strong historicist tendencies and that finds less support in our present theoretical milieu."[18]

Davaney's position stems not simply from an internal critique of feminist theorizing, but also from her own evaluative criteria of the pragmatic consequences of feminist theorizing. She asserts that by making these claims and building feminist theology and ethics on an essentialist understanding of women's experience, white, middle-class feminists have excluded women not like themselves from the development of feminist theology and ethics. Further, white, middle-class feminists have propagated racism, classism and ethnic prejudice against women who do not share their particular experience of oppression.

Davaney cites the words written and spoken by women of color as they attest to the pain and oppression inflicted on them by white feminists' definition and use of women's experience. In articles such as "What Chou Mean We White Girl" and "Where is the Love" women of color have stated that they have not found their experiences to be reflected in what white women have defined as "women's experience." Davaney

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[18] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 208.

summarizes her reading of women of color: "Taking localized experience and universalizing its importance is precisely the tendency which many women of color find so objectionable. Black feminist theorist bell hooks argues eloquently that the appeal to commonality, made primarily by white women, not only obscures the other factors besides gender that shape women's lives but mystifies the role white women have played in the exploitation of women of color."[19]

Neither Davaney nor women of color object to using women's experience, but when one set of experiences is presented as representative of all women's experience the dynamics of oppression and liberation within the category of "woman" is lost. Davaney asserts that excluding the experiences of women of color does more than make the discussion partial, it actually creates an environment that denies the relevance of other viewpoints. Davaney asserts: "Because in a predominantly white society, greatly influenced by the politics of race, the experience of women of color has been almost completely erased by those including white women, who have had access to the academic and professional institutions that carry out historical inquiry and theological reflections."[20] Davaney goes on to comment that it is not only the experiences of women of color that have been left out but also the experiences of white working-class women. One could add any number of other different perspectives.

Throughout her analysis of white, middle-class feminists, Davaney argues not only that the content of feminist theology and ethics is problematic, but that core

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[19] Davaney, "Appeal to Women's Experience," 43-44.
[20] Davaney, "Changing Role of Women," 118.

assumptions within feminist's working paradigm have caused problems. The result of claiming that one's perspective corresponds to divine reality is the devaluation of perspectives that differ. Feminists' use of women's experience in an essentialist manner devalues the experiences of any woman who is not Euro-American, middle-class, feminist, and heterosexual. For example, many women of color do not experience sexism as their primary form of oppression. Davaney constantly asks not only why feminists argue that their perspective corresponds with divine reality or truth, but why any particular perspective should be made normative.

Davaney argues that when feminists claim ontological status for their perspective the implication is that anyone who disagrees with it is wrong, not simply different, but wrong. When women of color claim that their experience of racism or some intertwining of racism and sexism is more fundamental to their oppression, there is no room for dialogue because feminists have already claimed that their perspective corresponds to divine reality. The feminist community that is created from this grasping to ontological validity is oppressive to anyone who disagrees. Again, Davaney presses her point not simply through argument, but through an appeal to the experience of women of color:

> Black women have argued that the almost exclusive emphasis upon sexual oppression without attention to the dynamics of racism and classism results in an incomplete and superficial analysis of oppression that does not address the condition of women of color. Speaking of the white bias of much feminist theology, Jacqueline Grant asserts that it is not only inadequate but oppressive insofar as it universalizes the experiences of white women.[21]

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[21] Ibid., 130.

Davaney asserts that feminists' inability to recognize the radical historicity of all perspectives, including their own, has created an oppressive environment for women struggling against racism. Feminists have denied that their own interpretation of oppression is as limited by its historical location. Blind to the limits of their own definition of oppression, Davaney argues that feminists have dismissed black women's arguments that any definition of oppression must also consider racism and classism. In this context, white women have limited the discussion to sexism and created an oppressive environment for women struggling with any interpretation of oppression that exceeds sexism.

Davaney's conclusion, however, is not that feminists should simply "add and stir" a multitude of perspectives into their pot. That concept simply reinforces the idea that all of women's experiences can be normalized or melted into one. Rather, she asserts that feminists must acknowledge and abandon their essentialist paradigm and abandon their search for sure foundations. Feminists must recognize that the wealth of their experience exists alongside all other varying experiences and they must find a new way of adjudicating among different proposals for liberation. Only then, Davaney, asserts will women be able to be in dialogue with one another.

Pragmatic Historicism

Pragmatic historicism places all perspectives radically within their *historical* location and, thus, on a level playing field. Individuals, groups, traditions, visions, theology are all social constructs of a certain time and place. Having moved away from

finding authority for a vision based on its authorship, Davaney proposes evaluating perspectives on the *pragmatic* consequences of living within that perspective. She writes: "The only way to evaluate these internally and to adjucate their competing claims is therefore by reference, not to a self-attesting reality, but only to the pragmatic consequences of living in each. . . . Hence the test of its validity continues to be the insight and guidance it gives us, not suddenly its adequate correspondence to the 'way things really are'."[22]

Davaney's definition of the problem of essentialism identifies one end of a spectrum that she wishes to avoid, which is an appeal to sure foundations as she has just critiqued in the work of white feminists. The other end of the spectrum that she wants to avoid is total relativism. She proposes historical pragmatism "in order to avoid the twin dangers of ahistorical appeals to validity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the surrender of assertions of greater adequacy."[23] While radically historicizing all perspectives and placing them on a level playing field Davaney attempts to avoid total relativism. Thus her proposal of pragmatic historicism necessitates developing criteria for adjucating among varying proposals and visions for liberation. Davaney's proposal is mostly concerned with the criteria by which differing perspectives are evaluated and only briefly does she discuss any of the criteria specific to her proposal. Devaney elaborates on the difficulty in proposing particular norms: "A fully elaborated pragmatic historicism requires sustained attention to these questions and to whether any pragmitic norms can be

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[22] Davaney, "Directions in Historicism," 209.
[23] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 208.

articulated that apply generally to human communities or whether our norms are always so context specific that nothing can be said apart from a particular setting."[24]

Davaney asserts that all perspectives or visions are created within specific historical and cultural contexts and do not gain authority from the author's gender, economic or social situation or any aspect of one's historical context. However, Davaney also asserts that this radical historicity does not "lead ineluctably to a chaotic relativism or a nonoffensive but vapid tolerance in which no judgements, relative or absolute, can be proffered."[25] The reason chaos is not the result of this disposal of sure foundations is that the historical pragmatic perspective evaluates visions based on the pragmatic consequences of living out of that vision. Thus Davaney's critique of the feminist essentialist paradigm has been based on the consequences of that paradigm. In particular those consequences, identified by women of color, have been the continued erasure and oppression by this feminist paradigm. For example, as already noted, one of the major reasons that Davaney finds feminist theory inadequate is the "pragmatic repercussions" feminist theorizing has had on women of color, namely the exclusion from dialogue. Any paradigm that feminists adopt, then, could be judged in part on its ability to foster an environment that encourages dialogue between and among women of differing experiences, rather than silencing other voices.

Determining what the desired pragmatic consequences are becomes another issue. On the one hand, Davaney begins to identify her desired consequences she maintains on

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[24] Sheila Davaney, ed., *Changing conversation; religious reflection and cultural analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 40.

[25] Davaney, "Directions in Historicism," 206.

the other hand that a universal norm may not exist. "What should count as a positive or life-giving repercussion versus a dangerous or life-denying one is not clear."[26] The reader is left to wonder who will begin to define and describe these positive and negative repercussions.

In two particular articles, ""Mapping Theologies: An historicist Guide to Contemporary Theology" in 1996 and "Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicism Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology" in 1997, Davaney further explores not only the need for adjudicating among norms, but she begins to develop a clearer picture of the desired outcome that can serve as criteria to judge any vision or perspective. The evaluative consequences that Davaney proposes are simply a vision's ability to further this historical process. History, or rather the existence of the world and all that is in it, is what women experience; it is what women see, hear, smell, touch and taste. If human experience ceases, the historical project ceases. Davaney offers this summary:

> That is, I think we must evaluate our proposals according to how they nurture the emergence of selves able to creatively constitute themselves and their worlds out of the welter of plural and contradictory influences, how they facilitate the creation of communities that support and defend the development and extension of this subjectivity, and finally how they enhance the larger web of communities and the natural world on which all subjectivity is based. For feminist visions to be judged more adequate than competing visions, we need to explicate how they will, indeed, further this historical process.[27]

Thus far, women of color have claimed that feminist visions have silenced them, have not enabled them to "creatively constitute themselves." Davaney claims that

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[26] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 213.
[27] Ibid., 213.

feminist visions should not be evaluated on their correspondence to divine will, but rather on their ability to engage and foster dialogue that enables women to determine avenues toward liberation from any type of oppression that do not simply result in the oppression of a different group. As Davaney's own work suggests, at the point Davaney articulates

the goal or desired consequences that any vision will be evaluated upon, she leaves the realm of theory and presents her own vision for pragmatic evaluation. As an empiricist, a theologian, and a historicist, Davaney takes a step past offering a proposal for evaluating the value of any proposal for liberaion and brings together her own unique past, present and personal agency in this vision of pragmatic historicism.

Assumptions and Theological Underpinnings

Such a bold proposal requires further exploration. Davaney's proposal stems, in large part, from differences in assumptions and theological perspectives between her and other feminists. Three major assumptions will help to further clarify Davaney's pragmatic historicism. First, Davaney's proposal rests on her pluralistic, synthetic understanding of the self and the environments and traditions within which the self develops. Second, she asserts a projectionist/functional understanding of theology and the divine. Third, Davaney espouses a dialectical/conversational model of truth or reality.

As Davaney's proposal for a pragmatic historicism suggests, the understanding of the self and how the self develops and flourishes is the basis for her adjudicating differences. Each vision is evaluated on its ability to create a life-giving environment in

which the self, as both individual and member of a community, can exist and flourish. Davaney describes the life-giving environment: "The perspective I call pragmatic historicism grounds itself in the assumption that human beings, as biological and cultural creatures, reside within the complex fabrics of interwoven realities, realities that depend upon both each other and the fabric as a whole to exist, survive and flourish."[28]

Women are products of their specific historical and social location. Each person's particular location is not monolithic, static, or pure. As individuals and members of various communities, women are constantly being shaped by and reinterpreting various contexts. Davaney attempts to understand the subject in a way that recognizes the plural and varied experiences that are encountered at any moment, while not allowing the subject to totally disintegrate. Part of what comprises the subject is the community or communities in which she finds herself. Davaney states:

> In this view, we are synthetic selves whose identities emerge out of the comingling of varied, contradictory, and always plural influences. Such composite selves are neither the unified essentialist selves of modernity nor the curiously similar disconnected subjects of much postmodern lore. Instead, historicized subjects are continually consitituted by the creative interplay of inheritance, contexts, and agential negotiation that results in historically particular identities and experiences. In this approach antiessentialism does not imply antirelationalism, and contextuality and agency are not opposites but two interconnected dimensions of historical existence.[29]

When attempting to evaluate various visions or environments, the one given preference will be the one that enables the self to flourish. The self, of course, not only as an individual attempting to cohesively navigate several communities, but the self in

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[28] Davaney, *Changing Conversations*, 35.
[29] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 12.

relationship to other selves. In addition, Davaney suggests that the environment that enables both not only individuals, but communities, to relate in positive ways that validate the plurality of the self, rather than suggesting the self's static existence.

Theology as a piece of this environment is also evaluated on its ability to engender such environments. Davaney understands theology to be partial inheritance and partial continual creation, influenced by many factors. Contrary to the claims of Christian feminists, theology is not about interpreting religious experience or divine revelation, theology is a tool by which ideas and visions are given authority. Davaney's claim that feminists are simply articulating the projection or creativity of women's experiences and assigning it ontological, ahistoical, metaphysical authority issues from this assertion that theology reveals more about those who create it, than about divine intentions. Davaney explains:

> The mode of theology under consideration here increasingly appears as a form of cultural analysis, critique and reconstruction, and as such seeks conversation with those disciplines and methodologies that will better equip theologians to enter the world of lived beliefs and practices. To that end, pragmatic historicists advocate that theologians attend to the developments in social and cultural theory, the shifting theories of the physical sciences, and developments in history of religions as we forego the quest for timeless truth or an assumed to be adequate past but rather immerse ourselves in the concrete specifities of historical existence. For pragmatic historicists, this is the direction theology must pursue if it is to be a viable voice on the current cultural scene.[30]

Feminists are not interpreting divine will, however historically couched, but are projecting their values and beliefs onto the divine. God and how feminists construct their relationships to the divine, is understood in functional terms by Davaney, not as some

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[30] Davaney, *Changing Conversations*, 40.

cosmic force ultimately in control of the universe. Humans have the power to destroy life or create it. This assumption within Davaney's view has been greatly influenced by Gordon Kaufman. Kaufman was attempting to understand the role of theology in defining human responsibility for the creation and use of nuclear weapons. Davaney notes, "In light of this situation, Kaufman asserts that the responsibility to reexamine our traditions in terms of their adequacy for today is imperative if humanity is to survive and if it survives, to create more humane and just forms of community."[31] For Davaney, women are not only products of historical location, but also agents of our lives. People create meaning and the meaning, in turn, creates environments in which people thrive or fail to thrive. In order to survive, Kaufman asserted that people would have to recognize that humanity is responsible for creating the world in which it lives. Humanity's survival is necessary simply because life is all that there is. Creating more humane and just forms of life is necessary because of the recognition of the interconnectedness of life.

Rejecting an essentialist definition of women's experience also requires the rejection of an essentialist understanding of both the human subject and traditions. When the self and traditions are understood as pluralities rather than pure, feminist paradigms would have to recognize histories beyond white, middle-class, heterosexual women's history. There is no woman who exists that is affected only by the categories of gender and not impacted also by others, such as ethnicity, class, sexual preference, geography, history, and political orientation. To give up the illusion of either universal women's experience or a traditional core requires that one not only take into account different

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[31] Davaney, "Directions in Historicism," 207.

traditions or experiences, but also the ways in which these traditions and experiences have been interwoven; how they have been shaped by others and how they shape others.

These ideas are illustrated in an article "Religion and the Changing Role of Women"[32] written in collaboration with several other feminists. The writers begin not with a disclaimer, but with an acknowledgment that the information available to them to explore the changing roles of women in the church was partial. However, this acknowledgment is not made in order to ignore the partiality of information. Women are not discussed in general, but rather the particular group of women being studied is identified. In addition the role of white, middle-class women is put in the context of their relationship to both other ethnicities and other classes of women.

In this manner, Davaney's understanding of truth is revealed as she asserts that feminist theologians will have to listen to and take into account traditions and perspectives that previously were not considered part of their own traditions. Truth, like both the self and tradition, is found and continually created at intersections of differing perspectives. Truth is found in conversation, in the interaction of multiple voices. So when feminists are not in conversation with other groups of women, any vision developed would not only be partial, but could not relate to truth. In the same way that Davaney inherits Kaufman's understanding of the nature of theology, Davaney also seems to use Kaufman's model of truth which supports her pragmatic historicism. Davaney comments: "The conversation model of truth which I am proposing here, in contrast, is not hierarchical and linear, but is instead essentially dialectical. It is democratic, open

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[32] Davaney, "Changing Role of Women," 117-132.

and public - a model which encourages criticism from new voices, and insights from points of view previously not taken seriously."[33]

For Davaney, truth requires that a plurality of voices and perspectives be in conversation. In addition, the conversation must start with certain assumptions, such as recognizing that the self or tradition is not a monolith, but a plurality and that truth cannot be known through a singular perspective. In each case Davaney asserts the need for recognizing that the self, tradition or truth are all results of particular historical-social locations which cannot be given universal or historical status.

Findings

Davaney's major critique is that feminists have sought authority for their visions in the authorship and correspondence to divine reality of those visions; arguing that because women have been oppressed they are the appropriate authors of a liberative vision and that because both feminist vision and their interpretation of divine vision are liberative they correspond to one another. Davaney would have feminists shift from these focal points to giving authority (although only temporarily) based on any vision's ability to create an environment or situation in which further dialog with divergent perspectives is made possible. In light of this critique, Davaney outlines three elements for a feminist pragmatic historicism to explore and develop. First, is a reevaluation of women's experience in light of the historicist understanding of the self. "In such an approach

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[33] Gordon Kaufman. *God, mystery, diversity: Christian theology in a pluralistic world* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 201.

human subjectivity is a historical product, emergent within and dependant on the complex possibilities and limitations that have emerged within particular strands of history,"[34] Davaney notes. Second, feminist theology must develop theoretical methods that acknowledge the multiplicity of both the self and traditions. Third, within these notions of plurality and the situatedness of the self, Davaney demands that feminists "maintain our hard-fought sense of female agency."[35] Davaney concludes:

> Finally, however, the form of feminist historicism taking shape here must acknowledge that, for either our more localized debates or these wider arenas of critical consideration to be sites of anything other than Rorty's choice between weapons and luck, feminists must recommit ourselves, not to a solidarity that is given, but one that is hoped and worked for; we must, from all our varied positions, renew our commitment to a radically democratic engagement that continually attends to and redresses historical and present inequalities of power, that seeks coalitions across lines of difference, and that sees our future, not as the repetition of the past, but in the bold if utterly fallible envisioning of new possibilities.[36]

While recognizing that women are historical products, feminists must also recognize the way in which they bring together multiple traditions and histories to construct new identities. "It is because we not only inherit plural histories but also forge new identities out of them that we can speak both of responsibility and of hope,"[37] Davaney adds. It is, in fact, as active agents in dialogue with differing perspectives that feminists can continually reinterpret and create criteria for adjucating among differing visions. Out of this paradigm for evaluating differing perspectives there will not come one perspective that can be normative forever more. Paradigms are dynamic and

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[34] Davaney, "Continuing the Story," 209.
[35] Ibid., 210.
[36] Ibid., 214
[37] Ibid., 210.

continually being reshaped and calls us, as Davaney remarks, to be open to self-examination and critique. Toward that end, even those feminist paradigms and assumptions concerning women's experience that have led to essentialist and racist theorizing should not be ignored in order to erase the past. Rather, those past paradigms are part of the history and tradition that feminists inherit and can learn and grow from. Those paradigms, however damaging, are part of the dialog that has led to the current conversation and debate.

Perhaps the strength of Davaney's argument is not its correspondence to truth, but its pragmatic effect of forcing feminists to reflect on their appeals to sure foundations and of their understanding of women's experience. Davaney concretely illustrates the effects that feminist theorizing has had on women of color and calls feminists to attend not only to theory, but to the interactive question behind the critiques of women of color. A further strength of Davaney's proposal is challenging feminists to look beyond their own traditions and experiences in recongnizing the plurality of traditions and experiences out of which they come. It is too easy, as feminists try to contextualize and historicize women's experience, to place it within a monolithic context or history. With further developments in technology and the emerging voices of many different groups of women, feminists must recognize the ways in which they are shaped by diverse forces. The colors within women's quilts are not all from the same material. Figuratively speaking we borrow ideas, images, and stories from traditions not our own if they help us to make sense of our own worlds.

As Davaney discussed in the three elements a feminist pragmatic historicism should develop, the responsibility of the individual as agent is continually stressed throughout her work. There seems to be an urgency to push the reader to take responsibility for creating new meaning out of one's past, present, and community. Again, she echoes Kaufman's basic critique of religion; that persons posit responsibility for the present state of affairs in a religious tradition or God, rather than recognizing their own responsibility for its creation. Here, Davaney's radical empiricism is revealed. At times Davaney seems to assert as unquestioned fact that the divine is simply a projection of human construction. While patriarchal models of God as monarch and humans as subjects tended toward a world in which people did not take responsibility for their actions, feminists have explored other understandings of and models of God that do not require the radical empiricism of Davaney. Davaney's perspective assumes that revelation and the divine do not exist; she takes the perspective not only of radical relativism, but of radical projectionism. Using her own critique against her, one might argue that her claim, that religious symbols and the notion of God function only as ways for people to order their lives, is itself a product of history and culture. Stressing human agency and the metaphorical nature of language and images for the divine, however, is an asset in her argument.

While I find Davaney's proposal of historical pragmatism very appealing, later in her work she begins to develop particular criteria by which differing visions might be evaluated, namely the furtherance of this historical project, which I find lacking. In this argument, Davaney relies on the logic of a basic "if ... then" statement to determine the

criteria by which all visions will be evaluated. "If women and men are not humans in general but always concretely, then we need to ask ourselves what might result from living one way rather than another, out of one set of values and one imaginative rendering of life instead of different ones,"[38] Davaney explains. *If* women and men are humans, *then* the authoritative vision will be one that allows them to be human. Davaney states the idea with these words:

> That is, I think, we must evaluate our proposals according to how they nurture the emergence of selves able to creatively consititute themselves and their worlds out of the welter of plural and contradictory influences, how they facilitate the creation of communities that support and defend the development and extension of this subjectivity, and finally how they enhance the larger web of communtites and the natural world on which all subjectivity is based.[39]

Feminists are left, however, with no clear direction as to who will define what it means to creatively constitute oneself or to be human. Is the defining to be simply a replaying of history, that those in power define what is acceptable and normative? Davaney herself identifies with the feminist community and seems to look to that community for a diversity of voices and visions, not to all communities in general. Following her claims, Davaney appeals to this community not based on the gender of the authors, or their commitment to women's liberation, but the evaluation of the types of communities their ideas and theories promote and encourage. According to Davaney, this evaluation is the only acceptable historicist paradigm is one based on this type of evaluation.

Davaney's proposal of pragmatic historicism has many strengths to offer to women's communities. Davaney challenges white, middle-class feminists to analyze and

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[38] Ibid., 212
[39] Ibid., 213

modify their assumptions to recognize the pragmatic effects such essentializing has had on the dialogue amongst women's communities. Her proposal for ajudicating among different visions is constructive for use within and among women's communities who are aware of and addressing issues of oppression and liberation. Women's communities addressing these issues share many assumptions and values. However, in order to adopt this paradigm for adjudicating different proposals outside women's communities, the issue of how and who defines what pragmatic consequences are desired will need to be further developed.

Sharon Welch

In contrast to Davaney's critique of feminist appeals to women's experience, Sharon Welch finds herself defending and supporting that appeal. Welch defines feminist use of women's experience not as a metaphysical claim – a claim about what is real – but rather as a hermeneutical tool feminists use which shifts and changes with time. Welch comments, "We are referring to a process, a discursive strategy, not a fixed content, an assumed 'universal female experience'."[40] Welch argues that the result of white, middle-class feminists' appeal to their own particular and concrete experiences to shape theology and ethics has been to prompt women with different experiences to speak for themselves. Welch suggests that focusing on the weaknesses and the limitations of feminist theories and labeling them as essentialist or racist will not enable feminists to move toward the goal of liberation from oppression, but is rather a reflection of the

[40] Welch, "Sporting Power," 174.

despair of the middle class. Instead, Welch places the current struggle within her paradigm of an ethic of risk. Within that paradigm, Welch advocates celebrating the small victories, learning from mistakes, and continuing to engage one another in the ongoing struggle for liberation.

Welch specifically addresses the current discussions on essentialism and difference and engages Davaney's assessment of the feminist appeal to women's experience in an article, "Sporting Power" published in 1993 in *Transfigurations*. Her critique of Davaney is part of her larger focus on spirituality and political activism. Welch explores the assumptions found within the paradigm of middle-class Americans which block sustained work for social transformation. The disempowering paradigm that Welch reveals contains assumptions about responsible action and models of the divine which she contrasts with an ethic of risk. Several of these factors articulated by Welch directly relate to white, middle-class feminists' inability to effectively respond to the issue of essentialism posed by women of color. Both situations reveal paradigms that contain faulty assumptions which lead to an inability to sustain activity toward social transformation. Welch challenges these assumptions and develops a new paradigm in which small victories and on-going opportunities for growth and liberation are celebrated and valued.

Heuristics and Women's Experience

Unlike Davaney, Welch endorses feminists' appeal to women's experience as they have struggled to shape and develop feminist ethics. As Welch listens to the voices of

women of color, she hears a very different story than the one portrayed by Davaney. Rather than hearing a negative critique of feminist use of women's experience, Welch sees positive directions and developments within the women's community. Welch claims, "My narrative account of the success of the appeal to women's experience is initially grounded in the writings of women of color who state that this hermeneutic leads them to describe their own experiences and the complex relationship between their experiences and those of other women."[41]

Welch's interpretation of the appeal to women's experience is that other women have been motivated to express their own experiences precisely because they differ from those expressed by white, middle-class feminists. Rather than being silenced by the definition of women's experience portrayed by feminists, women of color have responded by articulating their own experiences. The central metaphor that enables Welch to understand the effect of feminist theorizing on women of color in this way is one she borrows from Nell Morton and Rita Nakashima Brock. Brock introduces Welch to the notion of hearing another into speech. Brock originally finds the concept of hearing another into speech in Nell Morton's book *The Journey Is Home.*

Morton's book is filled with examples and stories from what could be termed consciousness-raising groups. Within those groups, women listen to each others' stories and in that active listening the stories are drawn out; or in other words, these women hear each other into speech. Welch writes, "As Morton reports from her experiences, when the empathetic, receptive listening of others allows a woman to tell her own story of

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[41] Ibid., 175.

suffering fully from beginning to end, that woman is heard into her own liberating speech."[42] Using this metaphor to understand and evaluate the current situation within and among women's communities, Welch concludes that white feminists have not silenced other groups of women. Instead as white feminists have stepped forward to make their own experiences heard, other women have also been compelled to tell their stories. Welch claims that the white, middle-class experience did not describe all women's life experiences and it was the compelling factor leading other women to share their own stories. Welch states, "It is my contention that the specificity of the appeal to women's experience (that white women did and do describe white middle-class experience) has invited politically transformative dissent. It is far easier to see the contrasts between one's own experiences and those of other people if the experiences are described concretely and vividly, as they are in feminist theology."[43]

While Davany, among others, have lodged claims that white feminists' definition of women's experience is essentialist, Welch argues that feminists have not been trying to define a normative concept of women's experience, but rather have been using their own particular experiences as a process by which to both critique and develop ethics; a process of development that Welch argues is on-going. Welch explicitly disagrees with Sharon Davaney's assessment that white middle-class feminists have used their own experience to create a normative definition of women's experience. In response to Daveney, Welch contends, "The narrative set forth by Davaney is simple and damning: white middle-class

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[42] Ibid., 177.
[43] Ibid.

women, appealing to women's experience as a basis for criticizing male oppression of women, reinforce the privileges of class, race, and the constitution of women as fundamentally different than men."[44]

Welch's objection arises from a difference in the understanding of how essentialism is defined and how it is manifested. She argues that it is the specificity with which feminists have described the experiences to which they appeal that reveals their heuristic use of women's experience, rather than an essentialist one. Welch claims that by articulating their own stories, feminists have had an evocative rather than silencing effect on others. Welch states, "Far from silencing women who are "different," the appeal to women's experience as discursive strategy, has elicited and validated the voices of women from a continuously expanding range of contexts and social locations. It has elicited and welcomed the critiques of women of color."[45]

Rather than interpret the present challenge of women of color as a sign of failure to appropriately reflect on women's experience, Welch instead interprets this as a signal that white feminists have not universalized their own experience. According to Welch, essentialism or claiming one's perspective as universal would present a vague and abstract understanding of any particular experience such that the particular is no longer recognizable, but becomes so abstracted that anyone can see themselves within it. Feminists, however, have been very specific and concrete and thus avoid this universalizing tendency. Welch contends, "When we follow this hermeneutic and

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[44] Ibid., 173.
[45] Ibid.,174.

actually describe the texture of our lives, we elicit reflection and action in others, reflection that may, if we are successful, lead as easily, as readily to dissent as to assent."[46] The fact that white feminists concretely describe the experience to which they appeal, that women who do not share those experiences raise their voices in disagreement and express and utilize their own differing experiences indicates to Welch that feminists do understand and articulate their own particular social location.

Welch contrasts feminist appeals to the particular and concrete experiences of women with the abstractions of male theologians. She notes, "Reading such abstractions, many people can fit themselves into the schemes and categories of liberal theology without seeing the fundamental difference between their experiences and those serving as the basis for theological abstractions."[47] She refers to Paul Tillich's use of the term "nonbeing." She suggests that Tillich rarely defines this term and then only hints at what conquering this "nonbeing" might entail. For Tillich, nonbeing is an individual's temporal existence, the particular context which is given, but holds no ultimate value outside of that particular context. Welch indicates that this concept is a male way of experiencing the world. However, because Tillich does not describe any concrete experience of nonbeing, but simply asserts that nonbeing is part of human existence, it is difficult, if not impossible to conclude that one's own experience does not match Tillich's experience of nonbeing. As a result, one can neither agree nor disagree that Tillich's experience of nonbeing is part of the human condition. Because one cannot make this

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[46] Ibid, 177.
[47] Ibid.,178.

conclusion, Tillich is guilty of essentialism, but not "feminist theologians [who] speak concretely and vividly of experiences of suffering, healing, joy, and endurance,"[48] Welch concludes.

Mary Daly is often evoked as an example of a radical, white feminist who is not paying attention to the experiences and voices of other women. Where Davaney finds evidence that Daly has not engaged or responded to the critiques of women of color, Welch finds evidence that she has listened to other perspectives, but that Daly continues to disagree theoretically. Welch explains:

> White women have taken up, for example, Audre Lord's critique of Mary Daly, arguing Daly's work reflects the universalizing of white women's experience and that Daly has not listened to the voices of women of color. It is clear, however, in *Pure Lust* that Daly has listened to women of color. Writings of women of color are predominantly featured there as examples of endurance, creativity, and liveliness, and the relationship between racism and patriarchal oppression is recognized. Daly continues to differ with many women of color, however, on the interpretation of the relationship of racism and sexism. This disagreement comes from taking seriously the analyses of women of color yet continuing to see things differently. The differences here are not accidental, and not at all due to universalizing. Rather they reflect particularities of vision and of experience.[49]

The issue at hand for Welch is not that Daly disagrees with some feminists and women of color on the relationship of racism and sexism, but the interpretation of the meaning of this disagreement. Welch asserts that the discomfort that feminists feel with Daly's perspective is because of their desire "for a discourse that is complete, final, and free of conflict."[50] She implies that feminists misinterpret the meaning of genuine dialogue to mean that agreement will be the deciding factor. Feminists wrongly conclude

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[48] Ibid., 179.
[49] Ibid., 179-180.
[50] Ibid., 180.

that dialogue resulting in disagreement or dissent must reveal that someone still is not listening. Welch asserts that women's agreement or disagreement on any particular issue is not the appropriate measure for essentialism.

Even when the use of women's experience does get it wrong, Welch still finds value in the process. "The appeal to women's experience has been politically effective and the source of theoretical insight as much because it is 'wrong' as because it is 'right.' It has been a powerful catalyst for social change, not in spite of its political limits and theoretical errors but through those errors,"[51] Welch wrote. The value found in the process is that it has acted as a catalyst for other women. Welch suggests that even if a proposal for liberation of evaluation of oppression is regarded as incorrect or faulty, it has still served the larger goal of liberation because the conversation and discussion has, at the very least, been extended.

What Welch identified as problematic in discussions about essentialism and difference is not the debate about the meaning and implications of difference, but rather the way in which accusations of essentialism are used as justification to silence or discredit. Welch questions the intention behind labeling and then dismissing anyone's work as essentialist. "We need to distinguish between critiques that are based in

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[51]Sharon Welch, "Virtuosity in the Face of Limits. Women's Identities and Subjectivities: A Conversation Among Liberationist and Postmodernist Approaches," (Presentation at the AAR November 25,1996), 5. During an American Academy of Religion presentation, Welch paused to play some jazz music performed by Ella Fitzgerald. Welch used jazz to analogize the past and future use of women's experience and feminist dialogue. Women, Welch asserts, are like jazz players, not following a written score, but bouncing and playing off each others work, involved in the creation of something new, something moving, not the search for anything final or set.

'attending to' arguments and claims, and critiques that are simply dismissive,"[52] she stated. Welch urges feminists to move away from dismissive critiques of one another in large part because of the value and growth opportunities she finds in taking risks and experimentation. Found within this critique is Welch's commitment to process and praxis rather than doctrine. It is clear that Welch finds value in conflict and disagreement because it part of the process toward liberation and justice. However, she is just as clear that there is no single process or definition of liberation and justice. Thus conflict and critique aimed at dismissal rather than dialogue is inappropriate in Welch's perspective. Welch elaborates:

> It is somewhat ironic, but our differences are less fruitfully explored when we make too much of them, rather than too little, assuming that the discovery of the single correct foundation for ethics or the single most appropriate metaphor for the sacred would free us. Misplaced theoretical fervor arises as we forget that what defeats us is not incorrect theory per se but brute force, coercion, and social control.[53]

Welch reminds her readers to be wary of the desire to avoid or resolve all conflict. She cautions against the many feminist critiques of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Rosemary Radford Ruether for their essentialism. Welch asserts that there is as much to learn from their successes as well as their failures. Their work should not be ignored or dismissed because of their limitations. Within their historical context, these women made significant strides in feminist theory. Because later feminists have made additional strides in the development of feminist theory, there is no reason to disregard the contributions of those women who have laid the foundations. The on-going dialog and

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[52] Welch "Sporting Power," 182.
[53] Ibid., 184.

development of feminist ethics is a continuing process. Contemporary feminists learn as much from the limitations of earlier feminist theory, as from the paradigm shifts these early theories caused. This assessment is illustrative of Welch's paradigm for moral reasoning: a feminist ethic of risk values risk-taking and success as much as failure as long as further opportunities for risk-taking are engendered.

In her own work, Welch appeals to the writings and values of other groups of women: African-Americans in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, and Native-Americans in *Sweet Dreams in America*[54]. Welch appeals to the writings of African American women for two reasons. Within them, she finds hope. The second reason for this selection, Welch explains:

> In this book I have listened to the voices of African-American women, not because theirs is the only "true voice" (replacing the vantage point of the proletariat in the nineteenth century), but because these voices disclose a knowledge of gender and race oppression, of ethical response and strategies, that is critical of my social location and thus of the visions that I and other Euro-American women and men have of the possibilities for social change.[55]

Welch reflects on several fictional works by African American women in an effort to ask how one can continue to risk resistance against such a pervasively oppressive world. She appeals to the diversity of this writing and the lives and experiences it reflects, not because African-American women have succeeded in middle-class American terms, but because they have been enabled to continue the struggle. Welch comments:

> I cannot speak for African-American women or offer a definitive interpretation of the moral tradition expressed in their lives and in their writing; I speak, rather, as a

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[54] Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge), 1999.

[55] Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 129.

> Euro-American and middle-class woman who has been deeply moved by the wisdom of black women. I find in my political and academic work with African-American women resources that bring healing and hope. I find in many of their lives, and reflected in their writings, a moral wisdom that I wish to study and emulate, a tradition of strength and persistence that is one of the richest heritages of humankind.[56]

Within the work of several African-American women writers, Welch identifies elements of a different world-view than the one she finds so disempowering for middle-class, white American women. The values and hope that Welch finds in the writings of black women enables her to develop a feminist ethic of risk. Welch disagrees that feminist appeals to women's experience have been essentialist and even views some essentialist critiques as dismissive rather than productive. She claims that because white feminists reflected on identified and concrete experiences, women who's experiences were different were "heard into speech." Welch's approach to the address the differences among women, to the interactive question is to ask what keeps Euro-American women from risking interaction, involvement and being engaged in the conversation.

A Feminist Ethic of Risk

Welch names her perspective a feminist ethic of risk, an ethic of conflict, which at its core continues the effort to enable environments/situations for further resistance against oppression with no guarantees of success. Part of the risks taken are the risk of failure, the risk of being wrong, the risk of making a mistake. As Welch interprets the feminist appeal to women's experience, she finds that feminists have taken a risk by offering proposals and visions for feminist ethics. The result has been a continued

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[56] Ibid., 16.

dialogue among women, sometimes with agreement and sometimes with dissent. For Welch, either reaction is valuable as long as the momentum of working toward justice and liberation continues. Welch explains:

> Within an ethic of risk, actions begin with the recognition that far too much has been lost and there are no clear means of restitution. The fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success. Such action requires immense daring and enables deep joy. It is an ethos in sharp contrast to the ethos of cynicism that often accompanies a recognition of the depth and persistence of evil.[57]

Welch begins not with an idea of the ideal or the perfect vision for women's liberation, but with questions about why middle-class Americans are not able to maintain a prolonged struggle against injustice.

What are the barriers that keep feminists from being engaged in the ongoing dialogue concerning women's liberation? What are the assumptions of the paradigm that interprets feminist appeal to women's experience as an essentialist claim? Welch disagrees with Davaney that feminists are guilty of essentialism. Instead, she argues that those who interpret the current conflict and dialogue within feminist ethics as a result of feminist essentializing are working out of a faulty paradigm. Their interpretation springs from a traditional understanding of responsible action and operates from an ethic of control. In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Welch engages the perspective of African-American women and their stories of resistance as expressed in novels to address the inability of white, middle-class activists to maintain opposition to the nuclear arms crisis. Similarly, in "Sporting Power," Welch speaks of "An Ethic of Criticism:" "Within this ethic, power

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[57] Ibid., 68.

is not grounded in a guaranteed access to truth, not based in an accurate understanding of the universal human experience. Rather, power emerges from processes of listening, inventing, and responding to very particular challenges, to very particular lives and opportunities."[58]

Welch's ethic of criticism is best articulated in her later work, *Sweet Dreams in America*, Welch claims: "My focus is on the conflicts that occur within groups that share a commitment to social justice and yet find themselves in debilitating and destructive power struggles."[59] In this work, Welch again stresses accountability, rather than guilt and continued work against injustice rather than the search for ultimate truth. Welch refers to this perspective as the art of ambiguity. Regardless of the title or name, Welch's paradigm contains several consistent ideas, "The ethic of risk is characterized by three elements, each of which is essential to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds: a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic risk-taking."[60] Welch finds these three elements lacking from current the feminist paradigm. It is precisely because these elements are lacking, that feminists are not able to positively engage differences and participate fully in the dialogue with other women working toward liberation.

Assumptions and theological underpinnings

How is it, in the face of such a daunting task of ending oppression - the task of

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[58] Welch, "Sporting Power," 183.
[59] Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America*, xv.
[60] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 20.

generations - that one can be empowered to continue to work for justice? Welch points out that the work for justice is not a hobby. The work for justice is a responsible action.

At the heart of Davaney's perspective is an understanding of how the work toward justice happens – communicative ethics – and a particular understanding of the divine. Welch states, "Communicative ethics combines, therefore, pluralism and social responsibility. . . . From the perspective of communicative ethics, we cannot be moral alone. The discernment of both norms and strategies requires the interaction of different communities."[61]

Welch considers the responsible reaction to the voices of women of color not to be one of retreat or resignation of defeat. Developing ethics and searching for liberation is not a task undertaken by one group and announced to others, it is something that evolves out of continual interaction between diverse groups and communities. Welch states, "A communicative ethic takes as its standpoint the interaction between 'concrete others.' The ideal situation for moral discernment is thus a collective, historical process. Moral reasoning cannot be carried out by any one theorist but requires dialogue with actual members of different communities."[62]

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[61] Ibid., 127.

[62] Ibid., 28. "Beverly Harrison makes a similar claim, arguing that "objectivity" or freedom from subjective bias in moral decision-making, requires conversation with people from different groups. 'Objectivity' here means openness to other's history and to the critical claims that history bears and also the ability to learn from other's historical experience."

In addition, a community's memories of resistance to oppression or memories of liberation, termed by Welch dangerous memories, and a different understanding of responsible action are pivotal. Welch borrows the idea of dangerous memory from Johann Baptist Metz, who asserts that the Christian message is a bearer of dangerous memories. Welch explains her use of Metz's concept, "Christians remember the freedom of Jesus and the call of God to all people to be subjects before God. According to Metz, this memory leads Christianity to a critique of what is commonly accepted as plausible; dangerous memory leads to political action."[63] While the Christian message offers a dangerous memory of freedom, dangerous memories may also be memories of oppression or memories of resistance to oppression. "Memories of oppression and defeat become dangerous when they are used as the foundation for a critique of existing institutions and ideologies that blur the recognition and denunciation of justice,"[64] Welch explains. The search for dangerous memory was a motivating factor for Welch in engaging the work of African-American women in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* as Welch feels there is little that is dangerous in the memory of white-middle class women.

However, not so many memories would be dangerous without a particular understanding of responsible action, or at least a different understanding than that found in an ethic of control, the ethic of the middle-class that Welch critiques. In an ethic of risk, responsible action is not action that is successful, final or complete, responsible action is "constituted as much by the possibilities it creates as by its immediate results;"[65]

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[63] Ibid., 154.
[64] Ibid., 155.
[65] Ibid., 75.

responsible action does not require that one solve a problem, but rather that oppression is resisted and further opportunities for resistance are created. In fact, responsible action involves not only the actions and future opportunities of an individual, it more fully involves the actions and future opportunities for resistance of an entire community. Welch speaks in terms of maturity to describe a community who is able to sustain the practice of an ethic of risk. It is the quality of maturity that enables continued action rather than cynicism. Maturity constitutes justice as a way of life rather than a goal. Welch writes:

> The ethic of risk offers a model of maturity that challenges the equation of maturity with resignation, with an acceptance of the improbability of fundamental social change. Within an ethic of risk, maturity means recognizing that ideals are far from realization and not easily won, that partial change occurs only through the hard work and persistent struggles of generations. Maturity entails the recognition that the language of "causes" and "issues" is profoundly misleading, conveying the notion that the work for justice is somehow optional, something of a hobby or a short-term project, a mere tying up of loose ends in an otherwise satisfactory social system. Within an ethic of risk, maturity is gained through the recognition that evil is deep-seated, and that the barriers to fairness will not be removed easily by a single group or by a single generation. Maturity is the acceptance, not that life is unfair, but that the creation of fairness is the task of generations, that work for justice is not incidental to one's life but is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive.[66]

For Welch, it is exactly this process of action and reaction that constitutes the process of ethics, specifically communicative ethics, that is the basis for an ethic of risk. "The moral critique of structural forms of injustice emerges, rather, from the material interaction of different communities,"[67] Welch notes. Women of differing communities, such as mujeristas, womanists, white feminists, and Asian-American feminists, are

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[66] Ibid., 70.
[67] Ibid., 124.

currently engaged in material interaction. The current dialogue, even conflict, is not something in need of resolution for Welch. Rather, feminists simply need to become more comfortable with conflict and the process of moral discernment and decision making. Welch claims this process of moral discernment is communal.

Welch's interpretation of the current dialog within and among women's communities regarding essentialism is not an interpretation of the failure of feminist theorizing, but rather the process of moral discernment and moral reasoning. Welch's understanding of communicative ethics echoes Ada María Isasi-Díaz's saying that "la vida es la lucha."[68] The struggle, the constant interaction, and the give and take between groups is what achieving liberation is about. The goal is not the creation of a single, or even multiple, finished systems. The goal of communicative ethics is not merely consensus, but mutual critique leading to more adequate understandings of what is just and how particular forms of justice may be achieved. When such critique occurs, feminists may well find that more than their definitions of what is just are challenged; the prerequisites of acting justly may be challenged, as well.[69]

Welch recognizes connections between patriarchy and the theology that allows forms of domination and oppression to exist. Welch elaborates:

> It is possible that there is an inherent connection between the universalism of theology and its elision of specific forms of evil and the existence of structures within society and the church that devalue women of all races, men of color, nature, and the body. Institutional structures of exclusion are akin to traditional theology in their disdain for the concrete, in the diminution of the value of the historical and

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[68] Translated: "Life is the struggle."
[69] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 129.

> specific, in their emphasis on what is universal or enduring as the locus of truth and significance. [70]

While not conceding that feminists have been guilty of essentializing women's experience, Welch points out that using measures of universality or endurance to determine something's truth and significance is problematic. The validation or confirmation for ideas and projects will not be found by establishing their universal application, but rather in their grounding in concrete, social location and their ability to provide fertile ground for the ongoing struggle toward justice.

In order to support this view and in contrast to traditional understandings of God, Welch develops a theology of immanence. In her understanding of theology, the divine is found within concrete experiences where the communicative ethic is achieved. The divine is precisely found in the liberating, non-oppressive interaction of two people. "While Heyward claims that "god" is the source of our relational power, I argue that the divine *is* that relational power, and that it is neither necessary nor liberating to posit a substance or ground that exists outside of relational power,"[71] Welch explains. However, Welch recognizes the problem of the divine being reduced to its manifestations and does include transcendence in her theological understanding. Truth, like understanding the divine, is not static it is a process, a becoming. The divine is not reduced to a particular occurrence, but transcends static manifestation and thus is immanent. Welch explains this understanding of truth:

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[70] Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1975), 56.

[71] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 173.

> The truth claims made in this form of theological discourse are both verifiable and transitory. It is possible to develop a liberating, and therefore true, understanding of eschatological hope, for example, but this particular eschatology is fundamentally transitory in two senses. First, it is true for a specific situation, but the same formulation may function oppressively or be ineffective in other situations. Second, even as "true," a particular theological construction contains the seeds of its eventual replacement. If a formulation is actually liberating, it helps create a new situation in which different problems and challenges arise, and often symbols and doctrines will be required to address the challenges and opportunities of that challenged situation.[72]

It is these experiences of truth or the immanence of the divine, the beloved community, or as some might say, the in-breaking of the kin-dom of God, that provide relational power and momentum as well as the dangerous memories that sustain resistance to oppression. Taking risks is therefore a necessary action in the work of justice. Whether right or wrong, taking action, engaging in relationships and dialogue provide concrete opportunities for divine immanence and liberation.

Findings

Welch interprets the work and development of feminist ethics in a positive light. While not always successful in achieving the goal of women's liberation, feminists have acted responsibly, that is, they have struggled with and resisted oppression. They have entered the dialog and generated further discussion. She writes, "The function of telling particular stories of oppression and resistance is not to find the 'one true story' of subjugation and revolt but to elicit other stories of suffering and courage, of defeat, tragedy and resilient creativity."[73] It is in this risk-taking and the resulting interaction and

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[72] Ibid., 158.
[73] Ibid., 139.

dialogue that momentum and power are generated for the on-going struggle.

Welch takes risks, sports with power, and easily handles ambiguity. She is neither looking for absolute foundations upon which to build ethics, nor is she claiming to have developed "THE" answer. Women's experience is used in her paradigm as a heuristic tool; a way of sharing stories so as to elicit other stories. Self-reflection and critique are necessary ingredients within her paradigm. The ability to playfully work with ideas, explore and gather what is useful in feminists' efforts against injustice is a strength offered by Welch. Her paradigm allows the reader and the feminist participating in the dialog to articulate visions and learn from mistakes without feelings of guilt or despair.

A question remains, however, why women of color claim to experience invisible invisibility at the pen of feminist theory. As Welch claims, women of color have been prompted to tell their own stories; but the telling of their stories has not always been easy or without pain. While the past cannot be changed and is not served by present day guilt, Welch leaves unanswered the question of the ethics of regarding the use of women's experience as an heuristic tool. Feminists have told their stories concretely so that women whose stories are different have been prompted to tell their own. But women of color argue that Euro-American feminists have often told their story as if it was everyone's story. Other than claiming that we have as much to learn from our mistakes Welch does not specifically address Euro-American feminists' racism. One can only read into her perspective that as the dialogue continues, progress will be make because at least risks are being taken and the dialogue continues.

Welch finds a richness and wisdom in the stories of African-American and Native

American women. The values and stories of these groups reflect those of people struggling against oppression at the hands of another, struggling to survive and maintain their dignity. However, they are not the stories of those who have been the oppressor and struggled against oppressing another. One cannot help, but wonder if in appealing to those experiences, Welch misses some wisdom that is needed for white middle-class Americans, the very wisdom that would teach feminists how to mitigate their role as oppressors and their participation in on-going oppression. Welch does addresses the power of the white middle-class as a power that needs to be used for liberation instead of oppression. She does not support a feminist model of power with those who are oppressed as a model for the white middle-class, but says that those with power must learn to use it responsibly. Welch comments, "Rather than being asked to feel guilty and then give up power, privileged people, 'oppressors,' are challenged to use their privilege, and thereby put it as risk, in the interest of justice."[74] Welch resists the urge to call the oppressor to focus on what went wrong, but rather to focus on the resources at hand to be used to create equity between different genders, races and classes. Welch continues, "The challenge is not one of sacrifice – sacrificing power, access, and group identity – but rather of constituting another form of group and self identity, using power to facilitate diversity and ongoing self-critique rather than to maintain control."[75]

Recognizing Welch's desire to avoid despair and guilt, she too quickly lets those with power and privilege off the proverbial hook. Women of color have written of the

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[74] Welch, *Sweet Dreams*, 101.
[75] Ibid., 103.

catalyst that feminist theology and ethics has been in their own struggles, but so too have they written of the pain it has inflicted on them – the silencing effect it has had at times. It is easy to agree with Welch that those with power and privilege should learn to use it for liberation, but so too should they learn how they participate in and perpetuate systems

of oppression. While guilt and self-sacrifice hardly count as motivational tools, benefits from one group often come at the expense of another. Without recognizing and analyzing the relationality implicit in oppression we may still miss the interactive part of the question.

Learning from Davaney and Welch

While Davaney and Welch seem to be at odds in their assessment of Euro-American feminist definitions of women's experience, their proposals for addressing difference share much in common. Davaney accepts the charge of essentialism and analyzes its roots within feminist assumptiosn. She concludes that feminits have sought to validate their views by asserting their universal character and application in addition to their correspondence to divine reality. She corrects this view by arguing that all analysis and all proposals for liberation are equally socially located and partial. Turning then again to the question of criteria for evaluating differing proposals and perspectives and being in conversation with others working toward liberation, she concludes that only by reflecting on the consequences or actual lived environment that any proposal produces will provide the evaluation needed to discern movement and work toward liberation and justice.

Welch on the other hand, resists the charge of essentialism as a dismissive tactic. Instead she provides evidence that Euro-American feminists' definition of women's experience has been concrete and particular enough to avoid universal implications and has actually evoked a response from other women leading them to name and describe their own experience. Welch claims that women's experience has seved as a heuristic tool.

Rather than becoming entangled in an analysis of essentialism, Welch claims that conflict and disagreement are not signs of failure or oppression but are necessary parts of the ongoing work toward liberation. In this ongoing work Euro-American feminists can learn as much from their success as from their failure. The key is to continue to take risks and be engaged in the struggle. Welch suggests, as does Davaney, that we must evaluate proposals and projects for liberation not on whether they produce agreement or conflict, but rather by the opportunities they provide for moments of resistance, liberation and further struggle against injustice. Welch elaborates: "Our criteria, our means of adjudicating these claims, remains as contested and open as ever. I argue that we need a critical humanism to check our claims about deity, about the good, and that the check to fanaticism is not religious but political, a critical examination of the actual impact on people of a community's construction of good, order, truth and power."[76]

Within the perspective of women of color there is much to support Davaney's analysis of the "limits of the appeal to women's experience" and critiques of essentialism. I must concur with Davaney here that the Euro-American feminist definition of women's

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[76] Welch, *Sweet Dreams*, xxii.

experience, while particular and concrete, has had a more oppressive effect on non-white women than Welch's suggestion of understanding of heuristic tool allows. Listening to the voices of women of color, Welch's heuristic tool seems to have sometimes been coercive and achieved its ends through brute force as women of color have not so much been heard to speech as they have been so angered and hurt, that in self defense they have broken through their silence. However, within the writing of women of color there is not an objection to the interpretation of the divine will as one of liberation. Nor are the accusations that white feminists were making ontological claims about their definition of women's experience of oppression. Davaney's empiricism prohibits her from accepting an argument from divine will, which seems much less problematic for women of color.

Like Davaney, Welch concludes that a vision or ethic can be evaluated by its concrete results. Welch says, "The truth of such theological construction is not measured by its 'coherence' or 'adequacy' but by its efficacy in enhancing a particular process of liberation."[77] Feminists' appeal to women's experience is not simply either a heuristic device or a metaphysical tool. It is not simply a way of silencing "different" voices or a heuristic device that has heard others into speech. Feminists' appeal to women's experience has been both / and. This appeal has been both a heuristic tool and a metaphysical assertion. Feminists' use of women's experience has silenced and prompted voices. For this reason, the strengths of the arguments from both Davaney and Welch are crucial for an adequate understanding of the necessary paradigm shift. While

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[77] Ibid., 158.

Welch critiques Davaney for having misinterpreted the situation, Welch echoes the need for a paradigm shift.

> I propose a simple change in vision. Rather than denouncing or bemoaning the partiality and weakness of others responses, we may see them as something to be responded to, played with, and worked with. Our response, then, to limits, chaos and failure, is not resignation in the face of limits, not attempts to master or control chaos, not cynicism, despair, or humility in the face of failure. Our response is virtuosity in the face of limits.[78]

Welch claims that her white, middle-class heritage does not provide her with many memories that are dangerous or empowering in the work against injustice, so she looks to the memories of African-American women writers. While the memories of resistance are indeed powerful, they do not contain perhaps an additional piece of analysis that white feminists need - an analysis of our own power, an analysis of their own participation in systems of oppression. Welch looks to the work of African-American women because their vantage point is critical of her social location, yet it seems to me that this perspective would be unable to offer corrective models to imperialist thinking. Those who are different from the dominant culture have always known they were different. The question remains, how do we, who have not always recognized difference, learn to acknowledge our differences and the difference our difference makes?

Welch suggests that repentance is necessary to heal racism. She suggests that racism can be amended with careful work, but does not specifically address the impact of the reality of racism added to every relationship. Welch comments, "The healing response of whites to racism, of men to sexism, is quite simple - repentance. Out of love

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[78] Welch, "Virtuosity in the Face of Limits," 10.

for others, out of love for oneself, as a person who respects all people, it is possible to admit fault, to examine social patterns that perpetuate racism and sexism, and to begin the careful work of making amends, of building egalitarian social structures. This latter process is not a torturous, life-denying one, but is life giving."[79] Healing is not a torturous process, or should not be, but it goes beyond simple repentance. It requires not simply building different social structures, because as she puts forth, injustice is not something that is conquered in a day. Racism and the ways in which racist systems are perpetuated will require persistent resistance, on the part of those who perpetuate such systems, not the victims.

There seems to be an implication that since individuals cannot be moral alone moral action requires the interaction of differing groups where individual and communal behaviors can be evaluated on their oppressiveness. Both Welch and Davaney offer insights into the dialogical nature of the work of liberation and justice.

Communicative ethics requires that those groups engaged in dialogue already be on equal footing. How is a communicative ethic hampered or skewed when white feminists have more power in academia than do women of color? How are other voices silenced and unable to participate in a communicative ethic when few will publish the works of lesbian womanists? Welch eloquently employed the analogy of jazz to the bump and grind of communicative ethics in her presentation at the American Academy of Religion. But in order for various people to join together and spark and spin off each other's notes and experience the joy of the music, a certain level of knowledge is

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[79] Ibid., 174.

necessary, a certain boldness and confidence is required, and an instrument is essential. Elizabeth Spellman, writing an article in cooperation with Maria Lugones, uses a similar musical analogy and warns of the danger that can still exist in this model. Spelman writes, "feminist theory has not for the most part arisen out of a medley of women's voices; instead, the theory has arisen out of the voices the experiences, of a a fairly small handful of women, and if other women's voices do not sing in harmony with the theory, they aren't counted as women's voices – rather they are voices of the woman as Hispana, Black, Jew, etc."[80] What does it mean for white feminists to act responsibly in situations where power imbalances continue to exist? Situations where others do not have instruments or knowledge, or boldness? Welch leaves these questions unanswered. Davaney reminds us to seriously grapple with essentialism and the oppressive effects it has had on women of color.

Welch's response to Davaney is not to bemoan her, but to take Davaney's idea and play and work with it. She helps white feminists to avoid the guilt of their mistakes and allows them to see that, in a way, many women of color have made the best of an oppressive situation. Welch reminds white feminists that they are not, finally, in control. When white feminists have made mistakes and perpetuated oppression rather than evoking liberation, other women have still struggled to survive and have succeeded. This analysis of the situation is more empowering and liberating than wallowing in collective guilt or being paralyzed by the fear of being racist / oppressive. Welch also emphasizes

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[80] Elizabeth Spellman and Maria Lugones, "Have We Got A Theory For You: Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for the 'Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983): 574.

preserving what feminists have created and gained in the past two decades. Perhaps the feminist past has not all been good, but Welch contends that neither has it all been bad.

Welch warns: "The longing for a discourse that is complete, final, free of conflict lingers in the interpretive strategies practiced by many Euro-American feminists."[81] But Davaney also reminds feminists not to accept all conflict as inevitable. Conflict should be avoided, but not prohibited. From both authors, women learn that visions and proposals must provide opportunities and environments for further liberation to warrant our acceptance and support. From both women, feminists learn that the liberation and oppression of all peoples are bound together. Their conclusions indicate that the path to liberation is far reaching.

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[81] Welch, "Sporting Power," 180.

Chapter 3

ENGAGING DIFFERENCE

How will Euro-American feminists recognize the difference that difference makes? And then how will they enter into conversation with other women working towards the end of oppression? In the preceding chapters this dissertation has suggested that in order to address these issues feminist theological ethics must undergo a paradigm shift and redefinition of women's experience. Women of color have brought to the attention of Euro-American feminists the oppressive assumptions and tendencies in their work calling them not only to recognize the limits and flaws in their own theory but as well to remember that all work toward liberation is done within the context of relationships with other women as well as with men. Women of color critique feminist theology and ethics not because of white feminists' appeal to women's experience per se, but because of the essentialist definition of women's experience used by Euro-American feminists and because of the oppressive effect this definition has had on non-white women. Women of color have made it clear that certain assumptions within the paradigm of Euro-American feminists do not promote their liberation. The critique of women of color and the ongoing struggle within feminist ethics with issues of essentialism and difference do not signal failure. Rather, recognizing and attending to these issues, marks an on-going process of struggle and facilitates dialogue and collaboration. Women of color invite Euro-American women to participate in a dialogue. However without a paradigm shift Euro-American feminists will have neither the tools to hear the discussion, nor the capability to respond without taking control.

In this dissertation I have identified essentialism and difference as the key assumptions within the Euro-American feminist paradigm that blind Euro-American feminists to their own racial/ethnic prejudice and prohibit genuine dialogue among women. Essentialism and difference are distinct and yet interlocking issues within this paradigm. On the one hand, addressing essentialism focuses our attention on problematic theoretical assumptions within feminist theological ethics. Examining difference brings our focus back to Euro-American feminists in relation to and in community with other women working toward liberation. Racism/ethnic prejudice (essentialism), an ethic of control (aversion to difference), and the search for sure foundations (solidarity as sameness) are at the core of Euro-American feminists' essentialist assumptions. Essentialism assumes that there is a norm on which all else should be built which denies differences. Erasing differences assumes that liberation and justice can be determined from a single perspective. Recognizing the socio-historical location of women's experience will require attention not only to oppression but to privilege as well. In this way, Euro-American feminists will be able to embrace difference rather than being threatened by it. Finally, understanding solidarity among women as collaborative work between communities of women working toward liberation is a necessary shift in the paradigm.

This paradigm shift will enable not only the contextualization of Euro-American definitions of women's experience, but it will also enable Euro-American feminists to remove the blinders of white solipsism and engage in dialogue and collaborative work for justice. Pulling together the insights gleaned from the case study of Welch and Davaney with the initial assessments from women of color gathered in the first chapter of this

dissertation, there are three elements which hold the key to eradicating essentialism, understanding the difference that difference makes and causing a paradigm shift in the work of Euro-American feminists. The first element is clearly situating women's experience in it's socio-historical context. In order to understand more fully women's experience, both their own and other women's, I propose what I call a matrix of relationality. The second element is embracing differences among women. The third element is understanding solidarity among women as collaboration toward the work of liberation and justice. At first glance, these elements may seem obvious or overly simplistic. However, given the analysis thus far in this dissertation, such a conclusion would be clearly shortsighted. Responding to the issues of essentialism and difference in feminist theological ethics, Welch and Davaney have engaged the work and insights of women of color. Both Welch and Davaney have responded to the invitation of mujeristas, womanists and Asian-American feminists to explore the meaning of difference and to engage in dialogue that will foster women's liberation. An examination of the actual work and dialogue of two Euro-American feminists grappling with these issues suggests several elements necessary to a feminist ethic which can be used to build coalitions among women. Certainly finding resonance between the work of Welch and Davaney and the critiques of women of color helps to affirm Welch's and Davaney's appraisals of these issues, but it also suggests ways to build and expound on the ideas these two women set in motion.

This paradigm shift, however, is predicated on an initial action by Euro-American feminists. Stephanie Y. Mitchem, a womanist theologian, has stated, "a commitment to justice means that after the voices are heard, communal actions to address the complaints

of the injured or to assist their own development, will begin."1Euro-American feminists must assess, accept and acknowledge their role in women's oppression; they must honestly acknowledge the harm and oppression caused by their essentialist assumptions and make reparations. Davaney attends to the oppressive effects of feminist theorizing by recognizing the subjective, historically situated qualities of white feminists' definition of women's experience. Both Welch and Davaney clearly emphasize the radical socio-historical particularity of any experience, calling for Euro-American feminists to base their work on a subjective approach to their own definition of women's experience. Davaney has argued that Euro-American feminists have created an essentialist definition of women's experience. Welch, on the other hand, argued that Euro-American feminists have enabled other women to examine and define their own experiences and encourages feminists to continue to take risks and to learn from mistakes, as well as from successes. I agree with Davaney's assessment that the Euro-American feminist definition of women's experience has been essentialized. Welch seems to ignore the oppressive and silencing effect of this heuristic tool that women of color have articulated. At the very least, she considers it to be part of the struggle and conflict that is inevitable in dialogue between different groups. Davaney seems to place more importance on attending to the oppression that Euro-American feminists have perpetuated.

> Without an appreciation of the past, for instance, many whites are unable to appreciate the injustice and brutality that have been necessary to maintain them in their privileged position. This in turn makes them more unwilling to accept measures necessary to undo, to the extent possible, what has been done. Thus they continue to feel entitled to their privileged position and utterly fail to appreciate the accumulated injustices upon which it rests.[2]

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1 Stephanie Y. Mitchem, "No Longer Nailed to the Floor," *Crossroads* 53 (spring 2003), 72.

[2] Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race (*University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 19.

Exploring the historic interactions between women of differing socio-historical locations, specifically between white and black women in the US, for example, requires an exploration of racism/ethnic prejudice from an interpersonal as well as structural/cultural perspective. Specifics about the nature of the historical realities that have shaped relationships, the use and abuse of power, and the factors impacting the perspective of oppressor and oppressed is key to understanding the nature of work toward liberation and justice. This may be particularly difficult work for Euro-American feminists. History will not always portray white, middle-class women as liberationists. While knowledge of this history may not guarantee that Euro-American feminists will acknowledge the consequences of those historical relationships, ignorance of the historical context of oppressive relationships guarantees that the factors supporting and sustaining oppression will remain hidden and repeated.

This recognition of past injustices and prejudice does not lead to despair and resignation. Self loathing or guilt when reflecting on privileges is counter-productive to this process. Women of color are searching for interaction, for alliance building. Euro-American feminists should hear in the interactive question a desire to move into the future to forge liberative and just relationships. The acknowledgement of the hurt inflicted on women of color serves as a practice of recognizing essentialist assumptions and creates a sense of accountability for the impact of one's actions on others. It develops a self-awareness which enables dialogue between women who are different.

Disengaging definitions of women's experience from essentialist moorings requires more than a recognition of the relativity and partiality of experience. A definition of women's experience that recognizes both oppression and privilege is needed

for Euro-American feminists to engage difference and continue to work toward women's liberation. Responding to the interactive question, as Lugones has so aptly articulated it, calls Euro-American feminists to consider the oppressive characteristics of their relationships with other women. Beginning first by addressing the issue of essentialism rooted in its blindness to the significance of the additional dimension of privilege in white, middle-class women's experience, feminist theological ethics can engage difference and find new grounding and vision. As new voices and perspectives are recognized within the matrix of relationality, Euro-American feminist ethics have a tool for examining their relationship to this new voice. Misconceptions about individual isolation, superiority and disconnection will not be possible within this matrix.

A Matrix of Relationality

The first element in a paradigm shift is to recognize the relationships among women. Building coalitions with other women will require that Euro-American feminists focus not simply on their own experience of oppression, but focus on the ways in which they relate to women with different socio-historical locations. In order to understand more fully women's experience, both their own and other women's, I propose what I call a matrix of relationality.

Euro-American feminists will continue to circle back to exactly where they started, an essentialist understanding of women's experience and silencing other women, unless they change the very definition of women's experience to take into account the socio-historical location of women's experience from the very start. Only an full understanding of the multifaceted character of white women's experience will enable the

ongoing dialogue on difference to spiral and spark rather than to turn like a broken record.

Oppression is a relational experience. That is, oppression is not a state of being in and of itself, but is a statement about one's location within a relationship with another. Experiences of both oppression and liberation are experiences of being in relationship to another. Oppression is the description of the inequality or imbalance of power within a relationship. Beverly Harrison remarks, "The final and most important basepoint for a feminist moral theology is the centrality of relationship. . . . a feminist moral theology insists that relationality is at the heart of all things."[3]

While feminists have usually grounded their own theorizing in their experience of oppression, women of color have invited feminists to respond to the interactive question – namely a question about the way in which Euro-American feminists interact with women who are not white and middle-class. In order to address the essentialist assumptions within their theorizing, Euro-American feminists will have to acknowledge a larger context for white women's experience which includes privilege and domination. Recognizing the difference that difference makes requires not only that one be aware of her socio-cultural context, but that one develop an awareness this context in relation to and within a variety of social locations and relationships. At the very least, for the context of feminist theological ethics in the US at the beginning of the 21st century, significant elements in that social location are gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual preference. Being in dialogue with any group requires that the participants be aware of these elements as they impact and shape the relationship of those in dialogue so that both

[3] Beverly Harrison, "Making the Connections, p.15.

the dialogue and the participants are located within a matrix of these elements, a matrix of relationality. This matrix facilitates the development of cognative as well as experiential awareness and appreciation of difference.

Risking over-simplification, Patricia Hill Collins provides a paradigm to interpret these observations at a systemic level. The critiques of women of color stem, in general, from a central challenge to the feminist assumptions about oppression, in which other perspectives are only seen as additions tacked on. Thus, oppression is first defined as gender oppression, experienced by white middle-class women's experience, from which all women must be liberated. One may add to this other oppressions from which the victim needs to be liberated, racism/ethnic prejudice, classism -- often referred to as the triple burden of women of color. This perspective implies that white feminists' experiences of oppression are constituted only by the disadvantage of their gender, but fails to recognize the realities of the advantages of their class and racial/ethnic privilege. Because white feminists belong to the dominant groups of class and race/ethnicity, they fail to recognize the many facets of their own situation. Being a part of the status quo has a blinding effect.

Collins suggests an alternative analysis which she refers to as a matrix of domination. Within the matrix of domination any individual or group (including Euro-American feminists), must consider not only their powerlessness, but their power. Collins comments:

> Replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones creates possibilities for new paradigms. The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. Race, class and gender represent the three

> systems of oppression that most heavily affect African-American women. But these systems and the economic, political, and ideological conditions that support them may not be the most fundamental oppressions, and they certainly affect more groups than Black women.[4]

Collins's proposal connects several significant elements which shape oppression. Recognizing the interconnections between systems of oppression serves to include multiple elements rather than attempting to exclude elements in order to define an essential definition of oppression. The flexibility of this model allows the matrix to shift and change in order to include specific elements of interconnecting oppressions in any particular context. In contrast, Euro-American feminists have adopted an exclusionary model for defining oppression as they have attempted to identify patriarchy as the foundational experience of oppression for all women. This exclusionary model led Euro-American feminists to attempt to add additional elements of oppression as burdens rather recognizing the ways in which multiple elements intersect to actually change an experience of oppression.

Supporting this assessment, Gloria Yamato articulates the danger in critiquing racism only in terms of prejudice and not also as racial privilege: "With the best of intentions, the best of educations, and the greatest generosity of heart, whites, operating on the misinformation fed to them from day one, will behave in ways that are racist and will perpetuate racism by being 'nice' the way we're taught to be nice. You can just 'nice' somebody to death with naïveté and lack of awareness of privilege."[5]

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[4] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1990), 225.

[5] Gloria Yamato, "Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name" in *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Book, 1990), 21.

By neglecting to take into account the way in which their "whiteness" affects their experience of oppression, Euro-American feminists remain unaware that their perspective includes an interpretation of gender oppression which assumes racial/ethnic privilege. It is not that their perspective lacks the affect of other elements that women of color also identify as oppressive, but that these elements are not experienced as oppression. Feminists incorrectly assume that privilege and oppression can be separated, much like many white feminists would separate racist/ethnic oppression from classist oppression and other forms of oppression. Mary Elizabeth Hobgood comments, "Whites cannot and will not move effectively against white supremacy until we understand how the fundamental cultural and material structures of society work together to reproduce routine individual privileges for us and racist outcomes for people of color."[6]

Davaney connects this singularity of experience with Euro-American feminists' search for sure foundations – something that would allow them to validate their own perspective while denying its subjectivity and limits. By narrowly defining women's experience as gender oppression, they attempted to unify all women within this singular experience. In particular, Davaney identified one of the essentializing claims made by feminists as the claim that there is a common experience of patriarchy among women that crosses all differences. It is specifically this definition of women's experience as that of oppression in terms of sexism that is at the core of the essentialist critique. This assumption enables white feminists to control the shape of the dialogue and continue to ignore the differences among women. In other words, blinded by white solipsism to other experiences of oppression, Euro-American feminists believed that the only quality

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6 Mary Elizabeth Hobgood. Dismantling Privilege: An Ethic of Accountability (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 38.

significant to her experience is her experience of gender oppression. When, in fact, her skin color, ethnicity, sexual preference and other politicized elements all significantly affect the definition of her experience. Women's experience of gender oppression must be nuanced by their experiences of these other elements and privileges.

Whiteness affords Euro-American women certain choices that are absent for other groups because of their ethnicity/race, or economic status. Euro-American feminist experience is shaped not only by gender oppression, but also by the availability of choices in other ways because of their race/ethnicity. White feminist analysis of their experience of oppression as sexism must include an analysis of the ways in which their racial/ethnic privilege interacts/intersects with their experience of gender oppression. Collin's matrix of domination begins to introduce Euro-American feminists to an analysis of oppression that can acknowledge the difference that their race and class make as they address oppression and work on liberation.

Using Collin's matrix of domination, first provides feminists a paradigm in which to place their experience of oppression within a larger matrix of elements impacting experience. Interpreting their experiences through this matrix enables feminists to not only acknowledge difference, but to integrate differences into their development of theory. Understanding the significance of these different elements in white, middle-class experience may be learned best by viewing them not from inside that experience, but from outside.

Building on this matrix of dominance, I propose a matrix of relationality. While understanding that one's experience is shaped not only by oppression but also by privilege (a matrix of domination) a matrix of relationality attempts to maintain the

connection between an individual's or a group's privilege with another's oppression. Within a matrix of relationality, Euro-American feminists cannot assert that their experience of oppression is foundational to all other oppressions because the effect of the multiple elements that impact and shape experiences of oppression are brought to the foreground. The matrix of relationality is a first step in recognizing that women's experience is made up of many elements – not just gender. It is also a step toward recognizing that Euro-American feminists experience both oppression and privilege. However, oppression and privilege are always experienced and structured in relation to another. Rather than focusing exclusively on domination or oppression, being able to maintain the connections between the privileges and burdens and the imbalance they represent focuses visions of liberation and justice on resolving not only the injustice of oppression, but also the injustice of privilege. This further enables participants to be aware not only of one's personal matrix, but also the matrix of relationality in which the participants are located and the dialogue happens.

Engaging Difference

Welch and Davaney agree that any movement toward liberation and the end of oppression requires that the actual environment created in such movement be the focus of evaluation; the key is understanding that Euro-American feminists cannot act and then wait for women of color to tell them how it went. Working to anticipate and in some sense traveling to the worlds affected by their work in order to be aware of the potential and probable impact of one's words and actions is the most basic step towards liberation and justice.

Davaney's assessment regarding the cause of white feminists' essentialism corresponds with Welch's insights into two characteristics of the dominant white-middle class culture's inability to engage in sustained work for social justice, which she names an ethic of control. An ethic of control has two key elements: the first is an understanding of responsible action as that which can guarantee its desired result and the second is the method used to guarantee results, namely control. This ethic of control brings with it the desire for complete and final resolutions.

As a result, "Difference and disagreement are then viewed as products of either ignorance or ill-will, unfortunate factors to be eliminated. Difference comes to be equated not only with 'potential rival' but with potential chaos, something to be eradicated so that the good can be achieved."[7] Inasmuch as Euro-American feminists replicate this ethic of control, they have perceived differences among women as a challenge to solidarity and something to be overcome. When challenged by women who did not define oppression simply through their gender, white feminist exhibited an aversion to difference, "a fundamental disdain for the views of others."[8] The controlling tendency of white feminists is noted by Jacqueline Grant in *Woman Spirit Bonding*, asserting that white feminists invite others to join what they have begun, or they have nothing to do with them. Ada Maria Isasi Diaz shares her experiences of coming to the realization that the women's movement as defined by Anglo feminists was not to be her "home" in *Inheriting Our Mother's Gardens*. Isasi Diaz comments:

> Soon I proceeded to plant my own garden here; however, that brought conflict into the sisterhood. As long as I toiled in the garden of Anglo feminism, I was

[7] Welch, *An Ethic of Risk*, 35.
[8] Ibid., 41.

> welcomed. But as I started to claim a space in the garden to plant my own flowers, the ethnic/racist prejudice prevalent in society reared its head within the Womanchurch movement. ... But the Anglo feminists, being part of the dominant culture, deal with Hispanic women - other racial/ethnic women - differently from the way they deal with each other. They take for granted that feminism in the United States is *their* garden, and therefore they will decide what manner of work racial/ethnic women will do there.[9]

Euro-American feminists' possessiveness of feminism in the US reflects their sense of responsibility as control. In their efforts to act responsibly, white feminist attempted to control what was normative or acceptable women's experience and further what would be acceptable feminist theology or ethics. Within this paradigm of an ethic of control, Isasi Diaz accurately articulates that difference is "defined as absolute otherness, mutual exclusion, categorical opposition."[10] While Welch refers to this as an element of an ethic of control, bell hooks identifies it as a facet of racism/ethnic prejudice: "Racist socialization teaches bourgeois white women to think they are necessarily more capable of leading masses of women than other groups of women. . . . Racism teaches an inflated sense of importance and value, especially when coupled with class privilege."[11]

In order to embrace differences and develop a sensibility to the work and liberating efforts of other women, Euro-American feminists will need to learn what Maria Lugones calls "world-traveling."[12] Euro-American feminists, as part of the dominant culture, are not usually as adept or practiced at world-traveling as are women on the

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[9] Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, "A Hispanic Garden in a Foreign Land." in *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Letty M. Russell. (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1988), 96.

[10] Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 80.

[11] bell hooks, *From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 52-53.

[12] Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" Hypatia 2(Summer 1987), 3-19.

margins. To a certain extent world traveling means stepping into another's worldview and being present there to the extent that one understands and learns how to navigate that world. Within this other world, for example, whiteness is no longer the norm. Not only is the subjective quality of race experienced, but the meaning and significance of race within each world can be discovered. At the extreme world-traveling cultivates a knowledge of language and idioms, shared experiences and familiarity with others in that world. World traveling is more than acknowledging the subjectivity of one's own perspective. It is not just listening to those who inhabit a different socio-economic world as they respond to and reflect the impact of another's work, world-traveling is entering their world and seeing oneself from the other's perspective.

Through this practice of traveling to other worlds, Euro-American feminists acknowledge that these worlds exist. Euro-American feminists also demonstrate a willingness and interest in traveling to other women's worlds. Euro-American feminists, display to the women who inhabit those worlds a desire to engage in dialogue and build relationships from the inside out. Exploring the multiple elements that intersect within a matrix of relationality will require that white feminists take the initiative to learn about and travel to other worlds.

However, Lugones and Spellman warn, that in order to participate in this process and not dominate it, white feminists must also recognize the need to "learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons."[13] As discussed above, responsible action interpreted as action in control of situations and outcomes which can guarantee results can only be

[13] Lugones and Spellman, "A theory for You," 58.

achieved through coercion and force. An ethic of reconciliation aimed at healing relationships cannot be achieved through force. Welch suggests an alternative understanding of responsible action which allows for ambiguity and conflict in the struggle for liberation. Welch describes the work of people who assume this type of responsible action: "Their work has both immediate and long-term goals: they work for as much change as possible in the present and realize that an important part of that work is providing a matrix of love and respect that enables further resistance in the future."[14]

Situating experience within the matrix of relationality, combined with the knowledge and insights gained from world traveling, Euro-American feminists will develop an awareness that moves beyond a simple recognition of the subjectivity and relativity of Euro-American feminists' perspective. They will begin to develop an awareness of the impact and significance of their locations within multiple relationships. This will not only enable Euro-American feminists to hear and respond to the interactive question, but it will demonstrate to women of color a desire for justice and not simply a desire for an end to gender oppression.

Therefore it seems appropriate to me that work toward liberation would focus on repairing broken and oppressive relationships. In this way, feminists theological ethics responds to the interactive question; which is a question about our relationships with one another. Recognizing both the oppressor and the oppressed, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, illuminates our solidarity with one another in the restoration of right relationship reflecting our love both for ourselves and for one another. Euro-American feminists may find it difficult to recognize our advantages and the ways in which we

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[14] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 76.

perpetuate oppression, but such knowledge will enable us to genuinely engage in dialogue with other women as we work toward liberation. Recognizing the difference our difference makes requires not only that we know ourselves, our culture – but that we know ourselves in relation to and within a variety of social locations. Being in dialogue with any group requires that the socio-historical factors that impact and shape the relationship be brought into the conversation. In this way each participant in the dialogue is located within a matrix of these elements. When we engage our differences, we engage our relationship – the relationality between us. In order to respond to the interactive question posed by women of color, Euro-American feminists must also hear the request to recognize the brokenness and imbalance of the relationships among women. Work toward liberation will be work toward the creation of just relationships through an ethic of collaboration. "Personal identity is created not by the domination of others, but by justice making in solidarity with others."[15]

An ethic of collaboration embraces this notion of responsible action; that is, action which realizes as much reconciliation and healing as possible. While acknowledging that all actions are partial, responsible action fosters future opportunities for ongoing reconciliation. Welch states, "We can accept that we can only do our best, with a style of not expecting perfection or saintliness from ourselves and others. It is then easier to act in ambiguous situations, not being defeated or paralyzed by the mere fact of ambiguity."[16] Recognizing the limits of any action also provides motivation to take risks and to experiment. Welch, as well as Lugones and Spellman, impress upon their readers that ideas should be held lightly, expecting to achieve only momentum

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[15] Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, Dismantling Privilege, 61.
[16] Welch, *Sweet Dreams*, 123.

toward liberation and reconciliation rather than expecting a final and complete end to oppression. Work toward liberation and justice is not evaluated on the guarantee of success; instead, responsible action is that which participates in the ongoing, spiraling work toward those goals. Welch reminds us that this work will not be free of conflict. Conflict that results from attending to each others' work rather than dismissing it, is however, productive. Euro-American feminists can learn as much from success as failure.

Solidarity as Collaboration

Not only did Euro-American feminists define oppression essentially as sexism, they also claimed that women were united across all differences by this experience of sexism. Interpreting their experience only in terms of oppression masked the ways in which white feminists participated in silencing other women and created a false sense of solidarity. bell hooks comments:

> Women are enriched when we bond with one another but we cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberationists. According to their analysis, the basis for bonding was shared victimization, hence the emphasis on common oppression. ... This meant that women had to conceive of themselves as "victims" in order to feel that feminist movement was relative to their lives. ... Identifying as "victims" they could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy. They did not acknowledge and confront the enemy within.[17]

hooks articulates the way in which women's experience, defined only as gender oppression, not only masks other factors significant for understanding white, middle-class experience, but is used to create a false sense of unity but to. Along with other women of

[17] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

color, hooks suggests that solidarity among women cannot be built on this false notion of common oppression.

However, both Davaney and Welch emphasize that the pursuit of liberation and justice is a dialogical process. Welch articulates this succinctly: "we cannot be moral alone. The discernment of both norms and strategies requires the interaction of different communities."[18] This last element in the paradigm shift is a culmination of the knowledge discovered in the first two elements: 1) knowledge of ourselves in relationships both as oppressed and oppressors, and 2) knowledge of the finitude and relativity of our own perspective gained from experience traveling to other worlds. This is the third shift in the paradigm, a shift to solidarity found in a common commitment to liberation and justice. Women are co-laborers; working together. Not only are oppression and liberation relational – but the process of struggling for justice is relational as well.

Both Davaney and Welch stress that any project or work toward women's liberation receives legitimacy based on the results it engenders rather than any claimed or perceived authority of the author or source, or correspondence to divine reality. Placing Euro-American feminists' visions of liberation on equal par with other visions of liberation, Davaney suggests that these proposals should "be judged by the modes of human life they make possible"[19] Welch suggests: "Our criteria, our means of adjudicating these claims, remains as contested and open as ever. I argue that we need a critical humanism to check our claims about deity, about the good, and that the check to fanaticism is not religious but political, a critical examination of the actual impact on

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[18] Welch, *An Ethic of Risk*, 127.
[19] Davaney, Zygon, 209.

people of a community's construction of good, order, truth, and power."[20] In order to evaluate and check the actual environment or culture that any liberative activity produces, women must be in collaboration and dialogue with one another. These three elements enable women of diverse socio-historical locations to engage in a dialogical process that may enable reconciliation and liberation. An awareness of the historical context of women's relationships also brings with it a clear understanding that the participants in the dialogue do not enter the conversation on equal footing

Therefore, I think it is appropriate that Euro-American feminists approach this conversation with an ethic of collaboration which will reflect a shift in emphasis from a simplistic focus on oppression and liberation to a more nuanced discussion of the relationships between different socially and culturally constructed communities. At this point in time, at this place in history, Euro-American feminists still have an inordinate amount of power. Justice calls us to recognize that liberation is not only concerned with ending one's experience of oppression – but that it also requires the oppressor to change. Justice occurs when a change happens for both oppressed and oppressor, when the unjust relationship is healed. John W. De Gruchy expresses a similar relational emphasis in his interpretation of biblical justice. De Gruchy comments, "God's justice is the justice of restored relations, an understanding of justice inseparable even if distinguishable from love, and one which find expression in liberation from oppression and reconciliation within both personal and social relations."[21]

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[20] Welch, *Sweet Dreams*, xxii.

[21] John W. De Gruchy. *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 202.

The change for the oppressor must go beyond using her privilege or power to altruistically help the oppressed. Rather than being motivated by feelings of altruism or guilt, justice implies that both oppressor and oppressed are liberated in the repair and restoration of right relationships. An ethic of collaboration is motivated by mutual benefit and friendship. All participants in a relationship benefit when that relationship is restored because ultimately all people are interconnected. Having traveled to the other's world, seeing and experiencing the pain and oppression experienced there cultivates connectional awareness. Stepping into another's worldview, actually practicing this not just as a cognitive exercise, allows the oppressor to see the pain or transformation possible in that world. This can lead those in positions of privilege to recognize the connection of their privilege to another's oppression and work positively for change out of compassion and a sense of collaboration with the other towards justice. Sandra Lee Bartky calls this love – solidarity – sisterhood. "Finally then, it is an effect – something akin to love or to the yearning for a more solidary world in which one might love others and be loved by them in return . . ."[22]

Because ours is a racist, sexist, classist, imperialist society, there will continue to be new ways that these evils manifest themselves. One cannot yet argue that these prejudices have been overcome. An emphasis on collaboration builds upon an assumption that one exists primarily in relationship and that work toward liberation and justice must be done within relation. "bell hooks has concluded, "Geniune solidarity with the poor is rooted in the recognition that interdependency sustains the life of the

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[22] Sandra Lee Bartky, *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and Other Essays*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.

planet."[23] Oppression is a symptom of an unjust relationship; a relationship that includes one who is oppressed as well as one who is oppressing. We may speak of both oppressor and oppressed as being liberated from this unjust experience when a balance is restored. Lugones' assertion that Euro-American feminists had missed the interactive question was (and is) fundamentally a question about relationship. Womanists, mujeristas, Asian-American feminists attacked Euro-American essentialist definitions of women's experience, because essentialism denied difference and incorrectly led white feminists to believe that they were responsible for and controlled the future of women's liberation. Acknowledging the multiple elements that make up white feminist experience as well as the dual status of Euro-American feminists as both oppressed and oppressors opens the door to engaging differences and dislodging essentialism is open.

An ethic of collaboration provides Euro-American feminists with a paradigm which affirms the interconnections and interdependence of women working for liberation and justice and allows white feminists to respond to the interactive question. Simply being able to respond and engage in dialogue is a cause for celebration. If even this simple action opens the door for ongoing work for liberation by the standard of evaluation set forth in this dissertation, it is a liberative action which leads toward justice.

Suggested within an ethic of collaboration is a particular understanding of justice. Desmond Tutu calls it restorative justice. He writes,

> We contend that there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. here the central concern is not retribution or punishment. In the spirit of ubuntu, the central concern is healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a

[23] Hooks, *where we stand*, 130.

> seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offense.[24]

It is this conception of justice which grounds an ethic of collaboration and empowers Euro-American feminists to examine their assumptions, address their role in injustices, and continue to work for justice and liberation. Within this justice, differences can be celebrated and all efforts for liberation can be honored. Justice, right relationship, is the goal that women and men can, together, work towards. The methods by which that goal is pursued must correspond with and promote this goal. Collaboration, when conceived within the context of a matrix of relationality, which values differences, becomes a liberative practice that corresponds to this conception of justice.

These activities are possible because of a paradigm shift in Euro-American feminist ethics, which is realized through three corresponding shifts, namely a relational approach to understanding women's experience, engagement of the differences among and between women and a collaborative approach to liberation and justice. Maria Lugones has reminded us, it is not enough to acknowledge one's social location – one must also be aware of the meaning of their social location and it's implications for their work. The interactive question, as Lugones articulates, is not only an invitation to continue in dialogue, it is also an invitation into another's world. Euro-American feminists will understand the difference their difference makes by traveling into another's worldview, and working alongside other women – in collaboration – to create a future where living in each world brings hope, engenders justice, and creates an environment for love to flourish.

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[24] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 54-55.

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