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CHAPTER 1

Exploring Hermeneutic Lenses for Reconstructing the Human

Out of the pain of those who have experienced life at the margins new voices have emerged challenging our usual ways of thinking and doing. These voices are not simply content to give “new” answers to “old” questions (answers that, as it is argued, continue to operate within the old parameters); rather, they attempt to raise “new” questions that often jar the parameters of the old questions.¹ This questioning of the old parameters is an expression of a crisis simmering at the heart of our society, a crisis that I would characterize as a crisis of sensibility. I am taking these new voices seriously and this chapter reflects my own struggle to find a different hermeneutic lens for constructing theological anthropology. What follows is a simultaneous double move of deconstruction of some conceptual traps and an articulation of a hermeneutic lens.

From Hermeneutic Manicheanism to Embodied Knowing

The term “hermeneutic Manicheanism” is my reappropriation of William Lloyd Newell’s notion of “methodological Manicheanism.”² Newell characterizes this as a methodology that has forgotten its own historicity. What Newell calls methodological Manicheanism resonates with what others call “disembodied knowing,” a knowing that has forgotten its own embodiedness.³ It is a knowing that has severed the head from the body, as if it were possible to think without our bodies or as if we do not think through our bodies. If I am who I am only through my body, it is inconceivable to imagine a form of thinking that has forgotten the body. But this form of thinking is a pervasive one.

I am aware that with the advent of modernity there has been a greater realization of our conditionedness or a greater awareness that we understand

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as we do because we “exist” as we do and, conversely, we exist as we do because we interpret as we do. This hermeneutic move toward humans’ historical conditionedness points in the proper direction, but the move has been aborted and left hanging before it has touched the ground. By remaining at the ontological level, this move has abbreviated “history” into “historicity.”⁴

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels launched a similar criticism against Ludwig Feuerbach at the turn of modernity.⁵ Feuerbach vigorously challenged speculative thoughts and identified his stand: “I differ *toto coelo* from those philosophers who pluck out their eyes that they may see better; for *my* thought I require the senses, especially sight; I found my ideas on materials which can be appropriated only through the activity of the senses.”⁶

But Marx and Engels found the Feuerbachian-turn-to-the-self or to the realm of the senses unable to touch the ground completely. Engels could only say of Feuerbach that “the lower half of him is materialist; the upper half is idealist.”⁷ Feuerbach remained bourgeois materialist and stopped short in general psychology and anthropology without grounding his subjects in embodied history. In a similar way, many hermeneutic theories stop short in ontology and historicity or in the linguisticity of understanding and interpretation.

Cornel West continues the criticism launched against disembodied knowing. For him, any talk about historicity that does not deal with our embodied sociality (geographical location, class, race, gender, etc.) is “thin” history. In West’s lines:

To tell a tale about the historical character of philosophy while eschewing the political content, role, and function of philosophies in various historical periods is to promote an ahistorical approach in the name of history. To undermine the privileged philosophic notions of necessity, universality, rationality, objectivity, and transcendentalism without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the ideological aegis of these notions is to write an intellectual and homogeneous history, a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about forms of political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege.⁸

Feminists and womanist writers have launched a sustained critique against various expressions of disembodied knowing and its oppressive consequences.⁹ Disembodied knowing usually portrays itself as pure and value-free (pristine logic), and is associated with male rationality: detachment and objectivity. Such a view, feminist thinkers argue, is opposed to embodiedness and subjectivity, which are ways of knowing traditionally identified with women. Disembodied knowing, which is masquerading itself as objective and universal, must be exposed for what it is: “concrete, situated, particular, and limited.”¹⁰

There is, I believe, a need to move away from the view that denigrates our embodiedness toward an embodied knowing: a way of knowing that celebrates our embodiedness.¹¹ Embodied knowing sees reality through the configuration of our bodiliness and seriously considers the effects of ideas as they bear on bodies and vice versa, especially the disfigured bodies of the marginalized. As a form of knowing, it demands that one does not remain content with mere assertions of historicity that mute differences; instead, it pays attention to radical plurality, particularity, and the differences between human beings and other living beings.

Pursuing historical embodiment seriously requires that we take the “who” of our discourse in such a way that introduces into hermeneutics the rich detail of social location, which is crucial to any interpretive enterprise.¹² When we take the “who” of our discourse beyond the ontological level into the rich details of geography and social location, we come to the realization that our interpretations are not separate from, but are tied to, who we are. Not only do we interpret texts, the interpreted texts interpret us. Moreover, *our identities* also interpret the texts.¹³

Embodied knowing calls us to a different way of seeing, opening up new and rich dimensions for constructing theological anthropology. Contrary to the understanding that an embodied hermeneutic is myopic and exclusivist, it is broad and responsive to the particularities of a given context. Embodied knowing opens up novel ways of interpreting various theological concepts, such as transcendence and immanence. In embodied knowing, transcendence and immanence are two sides of the same reality. Transcendence is not moving away from embodiment, but being thoroughly embodied in multifarious specificity. Instead of running away from embodiment, the transcendent is, in fact, experienced in concrete embodiments.

Beyond Totalizing Discourse

Disembodied knowing works along with universalizing and totalizing discourse. Oftentimes without knowing it, we elevate a particular perspective to the level of universality; thereby, we impose it on others under the mask of objectivity and neutrality. “I am increasingly aware,” writes Sharon Welch, “that to speak of the universal is all too often, and perhaps even necessarily, to elevate as universal and normative a particular aspect of human being.”¹⁴ Similarly, James Cone points out that many white theologians “do not recognize the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions. They like to think of themselves as *universal* people.”¹⁵ Our tortuous history testifies that universalizing and totalizing discourse has undergirded many projects of conquest, colonization, and exploitation. Thus, the subversion of totalizing discourse is not only an epistemological, but also a political, necessity.

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Subversion of universalizing and totalizing discourse has been central in the struggle of counter-hegemonic movements. This is certainly true in the case of theological movements identified with the Third World and, more specifically, in a theological current known as contextualization. By contextualization I mean something beyond translation or adaptation of the unchangeable deposits of faith to specific contexts. It is not simply a mode of communication or finding cultural media as vehicles to communicate some eternal truths, but a mode of apprehension that recognizes that context shapes the perception of reality, the way theology is done, and the content that may emerge.

Contextualization has become a common theological term both in the Third World and the wealthy countries of Europe and North America. Nevertheless, there is still that pervasive understanding of the normativity of Western theologies. Many of the dominant theologies of the West readily acknowledge the contextuality of Third World theologies, but they are often forgetful of their own location. Robert McAfee Brown helps to clarify this point in noting a remark made by a Latin American theologian during a conference of North and South American theologians: “Why is it that when you talk about *our* position you always describe it as ‘Latin American theology,’ but when you talk about *your* position you always describe it as ‘theology’?”¹⁶ This is not a simple matter of forgetting; it is deeply grounded in the understanding that Western theology is “normative” and universal, whereas other theologies are “derivative” and particular.

The contextual character of theology has been emphasized for several years now, but it has been the Third World theologians, feminists, womanists, and other marginalized groups who have pursued the contextual thrust with passion. That these groups have pursued the contextual character of theology is not surprising, because to insist on the contextual character of theology is to subvert the normativity of the dominant theological views and create a space for other theological voices. In other words, contextualization is not only made on epistemological and theological grounds, but also because of its extreme political implications. When theology listens to the once submerged voices, it is going to experience dramatic change.

My critique of universalizing and totalizing discourse does not mean that we are forbidden from making claims that have universal validity, otherwise we become imprisoned in our individual boxes of particular assertions that do not take seriously the challenge that others make about who we are, how we constitute ourselves, and what we can be together. What I am targeting is the kind of discourse that elevates a particular perspective to the level of absolute universality, but has forgotten its own particularity and has failed to return to the particular.¹⁷ Critique of universalizing and totalizing discourse as well as master narratives does not mean the abandonment of any meta-narratives or meta-theories.

Meta-narrative is not the problem as such, rather those narratives that employ a sole standard and claim to embody a universal experience while muting other narratives. Counter-hegemonic voices need meta-theories and meta-narratives because of their explanatory power and ability to relate the specific into the broader context. To reject meta-narratives, following the lines of Henry Giroux, “is to risk being trapped in particularistic theories that cannot explain how the various diverse relations that constitute larger social, political, and global systems interrelate and mutually determine or constrain one another.”¹⁸

Power-Knowledge Nexus: Avoiding New Hegemonies

In spite of the many disavowals, various counter-hegemonic movements have not always been vigilant in rooting out their own hegemonic tendencies. As much as we hear about “hermeneutics of suspicion” in counter-hegemonic discourses, the suspicion has not always been carried out with rigor internally. It has not been carried out sufficiently in the choice of tools to destroy the master’s house. At times, in the name of some noble goals, democratic processes are not allowed full latitude. Leaders of people’s movements often become guardians of orthodoxy as new generations challenge the reigning ways of thinking and doing. Cases are commonplace enough that I do not feel compelled to provide a litany of them. In spite of the fact that the ultra-leftists stand in opposition to the ultra-rightists, they have one thing in common: “they both suffer from the absence of doubt.”¹⁹

For a time, liberation theologies (Latin, Asian, black, and others) have been oblivious to the plight of women. Feminists are saying that what has often been referred to as “human experience” is, in actuality, a “male experience” raised to the level of universality. Feminism (especially at its early stage) has also fallen into the trap when speaking of “women’s experience,” while muting the experience of women who suffer because of their color. In fact, white feminism, as womanists argued, has perpetuated “white racism” in the name of “universal sisterhood” and in making “sexism” or “patriarchy” the primary category of analysis. Patriarchy is an inadequate category, Delores Williams contends, because it is silent as to women’s oppression of women. Audre Lorde has expressed this aptly:

If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?²⁰

Counter-hegemonic movements can, I believe, maintain their counter-hegemonic posture if they remain acutely vigilant of the specific contextual loci of their own discourses and, following Michel Foucault, the “regime of

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truth” in which they operate.²¹ The notion of regime of truth helps us to understand that the relationship between truth and power is not simply a relationship of cause and effect respectively. It is not simply that truth is power or that might is right, but truth and power coproduce each other. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault contends:

Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.²²

Using the notion of the regime of truth to critique feminism, Jennifer Gore contends that it “allows us to posit that feminism may have its own power-knowledge nexus which, in particular contexts and in particular historical moments, will operate in ways that are oppressive and repressive to people within and/or outside of the constituency of feminism.”²³ Counter-hegemonic movements, like feminism, do create their own regimes of truth; hence, they must be vigilant of the regimes of truth they establish. “Feminists committed to the articulation of what was ‘other’ in relation to masculine thought,” say Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, must “confront the challenge of other ‘others’ for whom they constituted a *new hegemony* and in relation to whom they themselves stood in positions of power and domination.”²⁴

An alternative hermeneutic framework must incorporate this power-knowledge nexus. The traditional clear-cut division between power and knowledge needs radical overhauling. This division often serves as a mask: It does not expose the productive role of power (i.e., its power to create knowledge and to legislate “truth”) and it allows knowledge to present itself as truly immaculate, unstained or unspoiled by power. “It hides,” in the words of Kyle Pasewark, “the involvement of power with knowledge, allowing knowledge a reign of its own, a royal dress so dangerous precisely because it presents itself as uninterested in power.”²⁵ Counter-hegemonic discourse does not escape from becoming a new hegemony by claiming that it is beyond the power-knowledge nexus, but only by exposing the power-knowledge nexus of all forms of discourse and critiquing them in light of the plight of the most vulnerable. The task is not to soar beyond power-knowledge but, following Foucault, of “detaching the power of truth from the powers of hegemony.”²⁶ Foucault’s point that power is constitutive of any truth or scientific claims or an aspect of the will to knowledge is a way to dispossess the established truths of their mystifying power.

The notion of the regime of truth is a powerful ally in the struggle of liberation theologies to unmask the misuse of the gospel by the dominating classes, which is often “abetted by a good part of exegesis that is thought of as ‘scientific.’”²⁷ Dwight Hopkins sees Foucault’s “micro-physics of power” as complementing Cone’s piercing critique of the macro-structures of domination.²⁸ While regimes of truth are present in various localities, it does not require volumes of writings to show that macro-structures of domination and power-differentials operate in favor of the dominant class and to the detriment of those in the margins.

From Dualistic Thinking to Holistic Thinking

Dualistic thinking relates to disembodied and totalistic knowing. During the Middle Ages dualistic categories were employed between soul and body, spirit and matter, and between the perfect eternal forms and their imperfect embodiment in the world. The second category in each pair serves the first: the body for the soul, matter for the spirit, and the goal of the present life is to prepare for the next. This dualistic thinking did not die with the advent of the modern period but assumed different categories. In fact, John Cobb considers dualistic thinking a hallmark of the modern culture.²⁹ Isaac Newton accepted the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, with human rationality as the mark of human uniqueness.

As in other forms of dualism, the dualized categories are also hierarchized. Karen Warren noted this point: “Oftentimes, . . . hierarchical thinking is applied to conceptual dualisms, so that one side of the dualism is valued ‘up’ and the other ‘down.’”³⁰ That which is valued up or that which is at the higher scale of the hierarchy establishes itself as the norm in relation to that which is at the bottom of the hierarchy. This norm has the “power to oppress,” Elizabeth Dodson Gray rightly points out, “because it is an expression of a social hierarchy or pyramid of status or *power*.”³¹ The norm is a creation of power; power produces norm. It is a creation of the power-knowledge nexus. The “valuing up” and “valuing down” also acquires the status of sacrality because it is seen as part of the natural order created by God; thus it becomes more resistant to change. Anyone who attempts to change this hierarchical dualism or holy order is going against the natural order and is, therefore, an enemy of the Creator.³²

Dualistic thinking has been challenged seriously in various fields. The dualism of mind and body has been undermined by contemporary science and in various fields such as psychology and medicine. The human being is a psychosomatic unity. If at the microscopic level matter does not consist of tiny substances called atoms but relations of energy, then at the very basic level mind and body dualism does not exist. Mind and body, matter and spirit are expressions of one and indivisible relations of energy. The fundamental category is not entities or separate substances, but relationship.³³

I am aware that there are many approaches that claim to have overcome dualism, but they often fail to live up to their claims, for the reason that they simply equate holistic thinking with putting the separate components together: body, mind, emotion, and so on. A unified epistemology must start with the basic presupposition of the nonisolability of an entity from the whole, or that an entity is only as such in relation to the whole. Or, to put it differently, it is the whole that defines the part. The parts derive their being from the whole, even as the parts constitute the whole.

Moving beyond Generic Essentialism

Disembodied knowledge, because it forgets its social embodiment and specificity, not only dovetails with totalizing and dualistic discourse, but also with essentialism. This means that a critique of disembodied and totalistic knowing must also involve a critique of essentialist or foundationalist discourse. What I mean by essentialism is that mode of thinking that seeks to isolate an essence or kernel from the husk. It presupposes an understanding that one can get into the essence of things that is free from interpretation or the noninterpreted essence. This essentialist thinking comes in many forms and disguises. It comes in the classroom when students ask the professor to give the essence of something that would settle once and for all the conflict of interpretations. Likewise, it is present in the students' strong reaction when the professor says that interpretation builds on other interpretations all the way down (much like some concepts of the world that sits on the back of a big turtle, which sits on the back of another turtle, with more turtles upon turtles all the way down). And it comes in the duality asserted between gospel and culture.

Serious questions are now raised against the essentialist mode of thinking. Basic to the challenge against the essentialist mode of thinking is the idea that there is no point of departure or beginning point that is a sanitized, interpretation-free space. Put differently, there is no ground, foundation, or essence free from interpretation to anchor one's interpretation. In fact, the ground on which we want to stand on does not stand by itself. Ludwig Wittgenstein's inversion of one of Descartes' favorite images is helpful here: "I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the house."³⁴ The noninterpreted ground is not available to us because, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, "we always start in the middle."³⁵ It is not even a clean middle but a "messy middle." This is a version, notes Vincent Leitch, of Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist aphorism: "What happens is always some *contamination*."³⁶ We are born in the middle of interpretation. If the gospel of John could say that in the beginning was the Word, I also could say that in the beginning was interpretation.

This is not to say that there is no "ground" at all, but only to say that there is no "noninterpreted ground" to provide a norm across socio-cultural

boundaries that stands outside of the communicative encounter. This ground that I am talking about is made of fragile materials we call interpretations, always shifting and shaky, but it is nevertheless a ground for us to stand on.³⁷ The shaky ground matters to us, for interpretations are not just interpretations. We live by our interpretations, according to our constructed world; so we also let others die by our interpretations.³⁸ Interpretations promote life as well as kill! In this regard, then, I do not take interpretation in the mode of hedonistic play but with all seriousness, even as I take this task with joy and excitement.

In contrast to the image of foundation or to the metaphor of knowledge as a pyramid in which one stone is laid upon another to build a firm foundation, the imagery of a raft or ship would aptly characterize this hermeneutic stance.³⁹ Theological scholars must realize that their construals are made on board a moving ship amidst the waves of the open sea. Though they are trained in the basics of theological navigation to sail into the open sea with some degree of safety and direction, the elemental forces of nature that drive the ship are beyond their full control.

It should be noted, however, that though no interpretation can claim grounding outside of the interpretive arena, the playing field is convoluted by power differentials. In the conflict of interpretations, new participants are not only challenged to advance alternative interpretations, but have to face the reality that those in privileged locations have the advantage to make their interpretations “stick.”⁴⁰ More than that, they also have the means to make those who challenge the dominant interpretations “stink.”

Our notion or interpretation of human nature is a case that is of direct relevance here. Human nature, as understood in essentialist discourse, is that which is essentially human regardless of culture, class, gender, or race. Not only is this discourse oblivious to its universalization of what is particular—“male nature” elevated to the status of “human nature”—but the general notion of “human nature” as well as the more specific “male nature” are themselves social constructs or interpretations.

Counter-hegemonic discourse has also fallen into essentialist epistemology. In relation to women of color, white feminist discourse has, for some time, assumed the privileged position of defining the woman, even as it challenged the dominant white male discourse. White feminists fell into this trap because, unlike women of color, they do not have to qualify their being women in a white racist society. It is a different story for a person of color or, specifically, for a woman of color. A black woman is not simply a woman in a white society, but she has to and is asked to qualify “woman” with “black.” Such is the case with Hispanics and Asian Americans. They are the nonnormative, nongeneric Americans. Essentialist epistemology necessarily seeks to isolate the essence from the “trappings” or “additions.” This comes, for example, in the effort to identify one’s identity. In this way of thinking, Patricia Hill Collins says:

One must be either Black or white...—persons of ambiguous racial and ethnic identity constantly battle with questions such as ‘what are you, anyway?’ This emphasis on quantification and categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked.⁴¹

“What are you, anyway?” presupposes a definitive essence of who one really is, forcing the one being questioned to identify who she or he is, and to make a stand as to which one is given primacy or priority. Racial minorities often get this form of questioning from European Americans, and women get this kind of questioning from men. Many black men ask a similar question to African American women: Are you “black first” or “women first”? Their answer hits the bullseye: “We cannot be black from Monday to Thursday, then women from Friday to Sunday. We are black women seven days a week.”⁴²

A “nonadditive” framework is what is called for here. This move stresses the point that one’s vision of humanity and society cannot take for granted the once-considered “attachments” or “additions” to the self: gender, age, race, nationality, and so forth. And, if class, gender, race, age, and so on are constitutive of who we are and must be seen in nonadditive terms, so is our experience and encounter of various life-negating “isms.” Though I still find value in talking about “triple” or “multiple” oppression, as women of color have done, I do not approach the interconnections of various forms of oppression as if one were simply put on top of another. The configuration of one’s experience of a specific form of oppression is influenced by the extent to which one is affected by other forms of oppression. A woman of color, for example, does not experience sexism as a woman—like any white women—and then experience racism like any woman of color. Instead she experiences sexism as a *woman of color*. Her experience of sexism is not isolable from her color, unless one spins the idea of *generic* woman—a colorless woman, and also an odorless woman, a woman who does not burp, who does not have any of the attributes or actions of living people.

Moving Away from Atomistic Thinking: We Are, Therefore I Am

Working in tandem with other conceptual traps is the atomistic way of thinking. The person who is stripped of historical specificities and reduced to a generic person is also viewed as an atom or a billiard ball that collides with other balls. In what Iris Marion Young calls the “aggregate model,” an individual is viewed as ontologically prior to the collective because group attributes are mere attachments to the individual self—not something constitutive.⁴³ Moreover, consciousness here is conceived as “outside of and prior to language and the context of social interaction, which the subject enters.”⁴⁴

A variety of postmodern thoughts have exposed as illusory the ontology of a “unified self-making subjectivity,” an ontology that postulates a subject of autonomous origin, or a subject with an underlying essence to which attributes of gender, class, family role, nationality, and others might be attached to the generic and atomized human being.⁴⁵ This is the ontology of the many contemporary theories of justice; it is individualist and atomist in its methodology.

Over against atomistic ontology and an essentialist approach, the position I hold, following a host of contemporary thinkers, is that the “self is a product of social processes, not their origin.”⁴⁶ The self is socially constituted and one’s gender, nationality, family role, and so forth are constitutive of one’s very self. In this way of thinking, sociality and relationship are fundamental categories. To use an analogy, it is not the musical note that makes music, but relationship: relationship makes music. At the heart of an entity is sociality, or at the heart of individuality is sociality, which is always a product of social interaction.

This move away from essentialist and atomistic ontology—a way of thinking that puts the individual as ontologically prior to the social and conceives of the self as prior to the linguistic and practical interaction—to the ontology that views the self as totally embedded in and as a product of the social as well as the linguistic and practical interaction, is politically, ethically, and theologically crucial. Subjectivity is no longer assigned to the “apolitical wasteland of essences and essentialism”; rather, it is constructed as an ideological terrain of conflict and struggle.⁴⁷ It is a site of conflict and struggle because, as Teresa Ebert says, subjectivity is the “effect of a set of ideologically signifying practices through which the individual is situated in the world and in terms of which the world and one’s self are made intelligible.”⁴⁸

The Myth of Original Uniformity That Preceded Diversity: Thinking about Difference

Complementary to essentialism is the “myth of original uniformity that preceded diversity.”⁴⁹ This myth seeks to establish the inviolability, singularity, and undiluted identity of the original moment, which is that stage before the fall.⁵⁰ In other words, origin precedes the fall. In the beginning was singularity and uniformity. Not only does uniformity have a historical precedence, it also has ontological precedence. From the point of view of those who are mesmerized and hypnotized by the myth of original uniformity, the “original blessing,” contrary to the message advanced in Matthew Fox’s work, is uniformity.⁵¹ The fall is that time when the singular has been diluted, when the singular has become plural. Diversity is an aberration, a falling away from the original blessing; it is “missing the mark” (sin). Because the original is the uniform and the original is the normal, the

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solution is not in the exploration of an alternative future that takes account of diversity, but to go back to the past, to the founding origin when there was, as it is mistakenly believed, mellifluous uniformity. Diversity has its future or salvation only when it surrenders to the bosom of the original uniformity.

Painful as it sounds, following Foucault, this search or effort to return to the origin is an infantile longing and dreaming of a “pure” stage before the fall.⁵² But there never was such a pure beginning in the history of humanity. The so-called origin may just be a stage in the hazardous play of domination and exploitation. This notion of return to original uniformity has found expression in the “postmodernism of reaction,” which is the temptation to turn the clock back; to stay in the comfort of our old beliefs.⁵³ This return to the comforts of the old beliefs, as expressed in the heightening of Third World immigrant-bashing in the United States (and Western Europe), means a return to the “original whiteness.” But the reality is that there was no such thing as “original whiteness,” and this claim is not even congruent with a society whose *arche* or constitutive self-identity is “from many, one” (*e pluribus unum*).⁵⁴ “Postmodernism of reaction” suffers from what Alvin Toffler calls “future shock,” that is, “maladjustment with the present because of the longed-for-past,” rather than what Letty Russell names “advent shock”—“maladjustment with the present because of the longed-for future of God.”⁵⁵ Because the postmodernist reactors dwell in the glory of the past, they need a medicine or transportation that must take them, to use the title of a well-known movie, “back to the future.”

In contrast to the understanding that diversity is an aberration from the so-called original uniformity, I make the claim that diversity and difference are at the heart of things. Our “original blessing” is not uniformity but diversity and difference. We should not be scared of our rich diversity and difference, because that is who we are. Difference is a critical category not only to counter hegemonic practices but also for seeing the world.⁵⁶ Difference is not the problem, but it is our attitude toward these differences. Audre Lorde puts it rather succinctly: the main problem “is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”⁵⁷

The notion of difference is an asset: it helps us in understanding better who we are and our rich possibilities of being together as a society; it helps us see that equality is not predicated on *sameness* or *identity*.⁵⁸ It is an asset because those who are different, claims María Lugones, “are mirrors in which you can see yourselves as no other mirror shows you...It is not that we are the only faithful mirrors,” she continues, “but I think we *are* faithful mirrors. Not that we show you as you *really* are; we just show you as one of the people who you are.”⁵⁹ In a similar vein, argues Sharon Welch, we arrive at a better understanding of the world and who we are not by denial

of our differences or through the acceptance of one universally valid truth, but by learning “from and with those shaped by other equally partial traditions.”⁶⁰

However, for difference to truly become an asset, it must be allowed to present itself for what it is and not be tamed to suit our interests. When difference is muted, the “others” do not become faithful mirrors. Difference must not only not be muted, if it is to serve as a faithful mirror; it must be recognized that to see difference from a contextually-embodied hermeneutic is to see difference in the plural. Difference annihilates itself when it does not see difference. A notion of difference that does not see differences among the different produces a “boomerang gaze,” in which one’s image is reflected back unto oneself.⁶¹ In this case, difference fails to deliver its promise.

We must be vigilant of the notion of difference that verges on indifference, especially since “difference in the postmodern sense often slips into a theoretically harmless and politically deracinated notion of pastiche.”⁶² I am seeing this notion of difference even among those who are trying hard to be “politically correct,” in nonengaging liberal “niceness,” and in postures of “exoticism” as well as “tokenism.” In many instances, “marginalized groups are told they can celebrate their ‘difference,’ but this difference won’t be allowed to make a difference to those who are in power.”⁶³ The other (different), who brings a “unique” and “special” form of expertise, may be invited to share his or her expertise (exotic subjects like Third World voices), but only in a way that puts her or his discourse in the category of the harmless exotic.⁶⁴ When one steps beyond the confines of the exotic, the response, following Trinh Minh-Ha’s lines: “We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First(?) World, We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us *what we can’t have* and to divert us from the monotony of sameness.”⁶⁵

A response by feminists of color to homogenization, especially as it happens in feminist discourse, is, I think, insightful to us all. Instead of conceptualizing gender subordination from the sole point of women’s experience, which homogenizes all women’s experiences, Aida Hortado, along with Patricia Zavella and others, propose that “social structure should be the analytical focus, which allows for profound differences.”⁶⁶ When gender subordination is seen vis-à-vis social structure, there are profound differences in women’s experience. No woman experiences as a woman per se, but always in relation to other factors that constitute who she is.

Diversity and difference as analytical categories need to be extended to the whole ecosystem, a dimension absent in common discourses on diversity and difference. Though we are not mindful of it, biodiversity is a fact of life. Without it, the earth dies; it sustains life on our planet.⁶⁷ Embracing a hermeneutical viewpoint in which diversity is at the heart of our cosmos is crucial in helping us to value our diversity and differences.

Diversity is not an aberration but the norm. We should not be threatened by diversity because it promotes life and sustains our cosmos.

When we see diversity as a fact of life, we also see the intrinsic value of each being. Intrinsic value, however, needs to be qualified in a world so driven by individualism, for it can easily be construed as promoting an intrinsic monad. Intrinsic worth must be construed within the context of what I call “intrinsic relationality.” Holmes Rolston III strengthens this point when he argues that intrinsic worth must always be seen “in a role, in a whole.”⁶⁸ Nature has a value apart from its usefulness for human beings, but not in isolation from the rest of the biotic community.

Standpoint Epistemology: Viewing Reality from the Plight of Those Who Are Dying before Their Time

We see reality only from specific standpoints. Standpoint epistemology does not claim to view reality from everywhere (*sub specie aeternitatis*), which is tantamount to viewing reality from nowhere, but reads texts and social texts acutely aware of its own social insertion and point of departure. We do not see reality from God’s eyeview, but only as embodied beings who are shaped by the context in which we are located. Context is not merely that space that is the recipient of my actions; it is also that which shapes who we are and how we see things around us.

I hope I am not giving the impression that there is a one-directional straight line connecting location and viewpoint, a weakness in the case of certain forms of Marxism.⁶⁹ While our standpoint is certainly shaped by our context, it is not determined completely by it. If it is determined completely by the context, then there is no point in doing what Paulo Freire calls *conscientização*.⁷⁰ This means that standpoint is not automatically given by location; it is also an “achieved standpoint,” specifically a “critical standpoint.”⁷¹

In this work I have opted to privilege the standpoint of the marginalized and have claimed marginality as a “site of resistance.” I am privileging the standpoint that comes out of the experience of the marginalized not for the reason that this is an “innocent standpoint,” but because the bearers of this standpoint are dying before their time. Scholars who advocate standpoint epistemology have no illusion of an innocent standpoint; rather, they call for the acknowledgement of the “deadly innocence” or the “skeletons in the closets,” as an indispensable component of any liberating hermeneutic.⁷² Donna Haraway’s articulation of the importance of the standpoints of the subjugated contributes to my point:

The standpoints of the subjugated are not “innocent” positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. They are savvy to modes of denial through

repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively.⁷³

Subaltern scholarship does not privilege the experience of the subjugated because of its innocence, but because their plight is a nagging reminder that things are not right, and that it is not all right. Subaltern scholarship seeks to expose the other side of life that the powerful of this world want to push under the rug: that every age of civilization is also an age of barbarism; that the age of reason is also the age of conquest and colonization; that the age of progress is also the age of the exploitation of the most vulnerable.

There is more, however, to exposing the other side of the myth of progress. I privilege the standpoint that comes out of the experience of the marginalized not because of innocence but because of its openness to the not yet. When we see reality from the experience of the marginalized, we are prevented from equating the present reality with the final *telos* (end) of history. The cry of the marginalized not only tells us that there is something wrong with the system, but it is also an expression of openness to the future. There is no doubt that marginalized people have internalized colonization, but their laments reflect an openness to a new social arrangement. Unlike those who occupy the top echelons of power and privilege, they have nothing to lose when the status quo is changed. It is not necessarily that the marginalized have a prophetic consciousness, but their experience is a ground for prophetic criticism and imagination. God is not finished yet with history. The cry of the marginalized obliges the whole of society to search, to innovate, to create something new, and to break down barriers: It is an ongoing ferment of destabilization and invention.

With this unequivocal affirmation of the reality of standpoint and the privileging of the experience of those who are dying before their time, it is clear that I am advocating a kind of scholar who is no longer the “rhapsodist of the eternal,” to use Foucault’s lines, but is organically situated in specific communities of resistance and hope.⁷⁴ Situatedness in specific communities does not mean, however, that one’s attention and action are confined to that locality; rather, it is a base for global imagination and engagement.

Cumulative Voices: Community of Interpreters

The subversion of totalizing discourse is a necessary step in the constructive process, but it may leave us with a disparate cacophony of voices, each struggling to establish its regime of truth. One does not have to be a sagacious observer to notice that balkanization follows in the wake of the disintegration of hegemonic power. While I lament the festering conflicts and our seeming inability to come together, return to hegemonic practices is not the solution. Neither would I entertain the idea of a return to the once upon a time pristine beginning or to the “good old days,” as if

the origin were pure and homogenous. There is no retreat from the challenges of competing interpretations, but we must find our present and our future in the cacophony of interpretations.

How do we find a liberating hermeneutic in the midst of competing interpretations? How do we find a liberating hermeneutic when counter-hegemonic movements are also subject to the temptation of totalizing discourse? How can we arrive at a liberating hermeneutic when counter-hegemonic movements are not beyond the power-knowledge nexus? Standpoint epistemology's acute awareness of the embodied, contextual, interpretive, perspectival, and power-laden character of knowledge and any truth claims indicates an openness to the presence of hermeneutic companions who are equally committed to the formulation of a liberating hermeneutic. As embodied knowers or concrete knowers our views are limited, but through the aid of a community of interpreters the limited views are exposed to the possibility of expansion. It is only in relation to, or in interaction with, hermeneutic others, and in allowing our "safe" enclaves of hermeneutic privilege to be challenged, that we can move beyond reactive and binary oppositional hermeneutic lenses.

Our hermeneutic companions must not be limited to those within our regimes of truth. Neither should our domain of experience be closed to the contributions of other interpreters, though constant vigilance must be maintained. While it is true, for example, that men should not speak for women, or whites should not speak for people of color, the basic question is: Does one's hermeneutic framework allow for the experience of women or people of color to speak through us? What I am suggesting here is that we should not run away from our responsibility to participate in the formulation of a common discourse that would be healing for all. I agree with the idea of Sandra Harding that "men must not be permitted to refuse to try to produce fully feminist analyses on the grounds that they are not women."⁷⁵ Men should not speak for women, or theorize for women, but they can be pro-feminist men: men accountable for their role in the perpetuation of patriarchy and participants in the formulation of a feminist discourse, a discourse that includes men's liberation and healing. Doing this does not mean speaking for or exercising responsibility for others. What is more proper, to follow the lead of Barbara Harlow and Sharon Welch, is not that we are "responsible for" the "other," but primarily for ourselves, "for seeing the limits of our own vision and for rectifying the damages caused by the arrogant violation of those limits."⁷⁶

It is in the context of our involvement in a community of interpreters that the search for the "common" is explored. If the concept of difference is an important category, so is the notion of the common. What is this common? This search for the common is not motivated by the nostalgic loss of a universalizing norm or an attempt to counter the mushrooming of new voices. Its motivation is predicated on our shared life and, more

particularly, it is pursued because it is crucial in challenging discursive and nondiscursive practices that are hurtful, and in calling into accountability all members of this shared life. The notion of the common demands that various interpretations need to be woven. This weaving of interpretations is what Sara Ruddick calls “cumulative analyses” and “cumulative universality,” in contrast to “absolute universality.” The scattered interpretations must be woven, for it is the cumulative interpretations that have the power to challenge totalizing discourse.⁷⁷

Counter-hegemonic movements must engage in a “conspiracy,” that is, following its root, “breathe together.”⁷⁸ To conspire is to share breath: share life-affirming ways of thinking, dwelling, and acting. The term “companion” (*cum+panis* [bread]) complements the term “conspiracy.”⁷⁹ The conspirators are companions sharing the life-giving breath as well as the nourishing bread of the journey. Breathing together and sharing bread by conspirators and companions are necessary to sustain oneself in the long struggle. Conspiracy and companionship are epistemologically and politically necessary: They are necessary because it is only through the frail instrumentality of another that we can be liberated from the regimes of truth that we create, and necessary because it is only through conspiracy and companionship that we gain the power to dismantle and construct alternative ways of thinking and dwelling.

Notes

¹Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 73–74.

²William Lloyd Newell, *Truth Is Our Mask: An Essay on Theological Method* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1990), ix.

³Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 47–54.

⁴Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 131.

⁵Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 6.

⁶Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), xxxiv.

⁷Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 49.

⁸Cornel West, review of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, by Richard Rorty, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 37 (Fall/Winter 1981–1982): 184; also, see his book, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 208.

⁹Mary Field Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 192–213.

¹⁰McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, 52.

¹¹Newell, *Truth Is Our Mask: An Essay on Theological Method*, ix.

¹²Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 58.

¹³See my essay “Confronting the White Noise: Mission from the Experience of the Marginalized,” in Tom Montgomery-Fate, *Beyond the White Noise: Mission in a Multicultural World* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), 97–98.

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¹⁴Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 51.

¹⁵James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 15.

¹⁶Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 77.

¹⁷Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 201.

¹⁸Henry Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), 211–212.

¹⁹Marcio Moreira Alves, cited in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 23.

²⁰Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

²¹Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 51–75.

²²Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27.

²³Jennifer M. Gore, *The Struggle for Pedagogies: Critical and Feminist Discourses as Regimes of Truth* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 61.

²⁴Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 3. Emphasis added.

²⁵Kyle Pasewark, *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9.

²⁶Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 75.

²⁷Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 18.

²⁸Dwight Hopkins, “Postmodernity, Black Theology of Liberation and the U.S.A.: Michel Foucault and James Cone,” in *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas*, ed. David Batstone, Eduardo Mendieta, Lois Ann Lorentzen, and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 205–221. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, particularly pages 3–31.

²⁹John Cobb, Jr., “Postmodern Christianity in Quest of Eco-Justice,” in *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 22.

³⁰Karen Warren, “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections,” *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987):3–20, cited in J.B. McDaniel’s *Of God and the Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 116.

³¹Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Green Paradise Lost* (Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press, 1981), 131. Emphasis added.

³²*Ibid.*, 7.

³³Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology*, 87–88.

³⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, #248, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright and trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 33, cited in William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 26.

³⁵The quotation from Jean-Francois Lyotard is Vincent Leitch’s translation from Lyotard’s *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982–1985* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 157. See Vincent B. Leitch, *Postmodernism: Local Effects, Global Flows* (Albany, N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1996), x.

³⁶*Ibid.*, x.

³⁷M. K. Taylor, “In Praise of Shaky Ground: The Liminal Christ and Cultural Pluralism,” in *Theology Today* 43:36–51; also cited in Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 76.

³⁸See Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 28.

³⁹Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology*, 13–18. Also, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 288.

⁴⁰See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992), xvii; John B.

Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 1984), 132.

⁴¹Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 225.

⁴²See James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980–1992*, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 257.

⁴³Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), 44.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁵See, for example, David Kelsey's essay, "Human Being," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), particularly pages 185–188 for a discussion of this concept.

⁴⁶Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference*, 45; see Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

⁴⁷Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 203.

⁴⁸Teresa Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 22–23, cited in Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 203.

⁴⁹See Dawn de Vries, "Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 129.

⁵⁰Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 79.

⁵¹Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, Inc., 1983).

⁵²Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 79.

⁵³Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), xii.

⁵⁴Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 13–52.

⁵⁵Letty Russell, *Becoming Human* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 41–42.

⁵⁶Katherine E. Zappone, "Women's Special Nature': A Different Horizon for Theological Anthropology" in *The Special Nature of Women*, ed. Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 92.

⁵⁷Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 115.

⁵⁸Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 213, citing Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 176–77.

⁵⁹María Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism," cited in Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 189.

⁶⁰Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 138.

⁶¹Ann Kirkus Wetherilt, *That They May Be Many: Voices of Women, Echoes of God* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 21.

⁶²Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 212.

⁶³Lennon and Whitford, *Knowing the Difference*, 270.

⁶⁴Wetherilt, *That They May Be Many*, 23.

⁶⁵Trinh Minh-Ha, cited by Wetherilt, *ibid.*

⁶⁶Aida Hortado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), 42; Patricia Zavella, "The Problematic Relationship of Feminism and Chicana Studies," *Women's Studies* 17 (1978): 123–34.

⁶⁷See Edward Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 15, cited in Anne Primavesi, "Biodiversity and Responsibility: A Basis for a Non-Violent Environmental Ethic," in *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Cassell, 1998), 47–59.

⁶⁸Holmes Rolston III, cited in Jay B. McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 57.

⁶⁹See Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 49.

⁷⁰See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 17–22.

⁷¹Wetherilt, *That They May Be Many*, 117.

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⁷²Angela West, *Deadly Innocence: Feminism and the Mythology of Sin* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1995); Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 38–40, 75–80.

⁷³Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 191.

⁷⁴Foucault, *Foucault Reader*, 23.

⁷⁵Sandra G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 284–85, cited in Wetherilt, *That They May Be Many*, 122.

⁷⁶Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 139.

⁷⁷Sara Ruddick, cited in Zappone, “‘Women’s Special Nature’: A Different Horizon for Theological Anthropology,” in *The Special Nature of Women*, 95.

⁷⁸Donald Messer, *A Conspiracy of Goodness: Contemporary Images of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 148.

⁷⁹Robert McAfee Brown, *Persuade Us To Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 67.