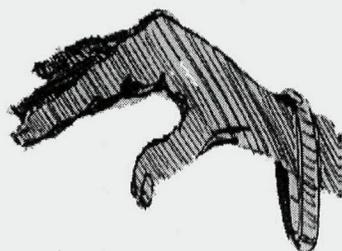


## Non-Euclidean Feminism: Where Parallel Lives Meet

*Through narrative depictions of two personally influential black women (Annie Robinson, who raised the author as a small boy, and Audre Lorde, an ardent black feminist), the author attempts to make sense of their very different responses to institutionalized racism during the late 1940's and beyond. He, as well, seeks to reconcile the doubtless privilege afforded him as a white boy growing up in the south at that time with his current commitment to diversity and cultural awareness. This exploration is conducted by drawing on Robert Kegan's (1982) meaning-making paradigm and Patricia Hill Collins's (1991) model of black feminist thought, both of which are inclusionary rather than exclusionary.*

by  
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### Introduction

Recently in reading Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1994) portrayal of six middle-class Blacks, *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, I was provoked by her portrait of Katie Cannon, feminist, minister, and professor. Cannon in her classes decries, among other things, what she perceives as a limited view that many white students have of her—either mammy or villain. Her assertion has prompted me to look again at two black women who have had an influence on me. Annie Robinson, who raised me from birth to about five in the post-World War II South, was my grandparents' housekeeper, or maid as she would have been called then. Audre Lorde was a noted black lesbian feminist whose writing stimulated my thinking some 40 or more years later about living life passionately and demanding equity among all peoples.

These two very different women have established a grasp on me despite, or perhaps even because of, their diametric re-

sponses to a vast cultural imbalance. This imbalance is one that has no doubt benefited me, although unwittingly—I have never accepted the residing premise that sponsors racial inequity, segregation, or bigotry, namely any people's declared superiority over others. And the time passed some time ago for feeling guilty about the circumstances of my first years of life, since to some extent we are all captive of our cultural and historical surround. How, then, may the conflict be resolved between the benefits that I experienced on the one hand in being raised by Annie, and the support that I feel for Audre Lorde on the other in her burning outrage on behalf of all the Annies too long silent?

The depictions that follow of Annie as she was nearing the end of her life, and of a pivotal event for Audre Lorde as she was just beginning hers, are set within a few years of each other. On the surface the two women's substantially dissimilar responses to the racial culture of the era would appear to have little or no

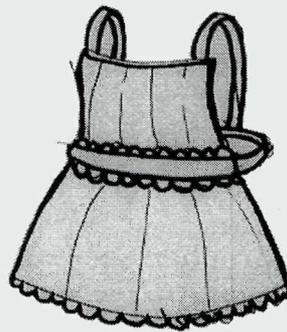
confluence, save in the fleeting and intense passage from old ideas to new. However, Collins's (1991) inclusionary model of black feminist thought and Kegan's (1982) meaning-making paradigm (which posits increasing complexity and acceptance of internal paradox as developmental markers) together offer a harmonic view of these disparate lives and reconciliation of the impact each has had on mine.

As early as I can remember, I have felt a strong, inherently open and affectionate response to black women in the age range of, say, 45-65. One such woman in particular is memorable for me because she is the very first person I am conscious of knowing in my life or caring anything about. The thought of her is highly evocative yet: her smell, her presence, phrases she would say, the feel of her skin, all part of both literalembra and of the spirit that holds some cloudy influence on me still. Somehow, even this far away, she seems the key to things difficult to articulate, things that remain unfinished but beckoning. I wish I had been able to talk with her as an adult, to thank her, to honor her, but she died before I was barely a teen, and I am over 50 now. I knew her only as Annie; I did not know that she had a last name. No matter, for this child new to the world, one name, Annie, was all I needed.

Hers was such a strong, positive presence that she remains at the center of my original memories, supplanting even my parents. She worked for my grandparents in Atlanta in their big house where we first lived following the end of World War II and

had worked there since my father himself was a child. He used to tell me about going on dates, coming back late, and looking up from the driveway out back at the light coming from the high window of Annie's room, knowing that she would go to bed only after being certain that everyone was home safely.

When I recently asked my father about Annie, he told me he had never gone inside that room where she stayed, just looked in once or twice. It was the attic,



hardly proper accommodations, especially in the humid Atlanta summers, for someone who was widely and paradoxically touted as being "part of the family." Her room was small, with one dormer window lined with suitcases that everyone but she would have occasion to use. As a young boy I could not see how cluttered and dim the roughly finished space was. All I knew was that I wanted to be there when Annie was and felt welcomed there. In fact, we all felt a strong sense of nurturing and loving care associated with being with her. The uneasy awareness came only years later

that she was far more truly welcoming of us in a family sense than we were of her.

Annie, of course, was restricted in her movements in a way that I could neither see nor understand. The only main floor domain that could be called hers was the kitchen. Yet, even with the stress of cooking for and looking after an entire household, she remained good-natured, calm, and patient, even when I rode my trike in the kitchen. To my knowledge, she never raised her voice or spoke in anger. If things got to be too much for her she would simply and quietly say, "Go, go, come no more," and I would leave. But just minutes later the exile would be over, to her credit, and I would be allowed in again. These were warm sunny days, at least for me.

When I was four or five my parents and I moved into our own house, and after that I saw Annie only occasionally. Although I still looked forward to her company and felt well-received, we were never as close again. In a way, it was fortunate that my richest memories of her do not include being much older, because the era and culture would demand that she be increasingly deferential and less familial to me. Had she lived long enough, she would have had to put "Mr." before my first name, a convention that even then was jarring to my young ears. For a while, however, it worked otherwise. This momentary and isolated span, when the greater external expectations of separation and privilege could be suspended, was the only time when we would be able to relate to each other more or less freely and

more or less equally. Abundant affection seemed to flow both ways, and it didn't matter to anyone that I was White and she was Black.

I cannot help but think of Annie as I consider Audre Lorde's account of her first trip to Washington, D.C., taken from Janet Zandy's (1993) *Calling Home: Working Class Women's Writings*. It was a combination high school graduation trip for her sister, Phyllis, and eighth grade graduation present for herself. Her sister's class, all seniors, had arranged a trip from New York to Washington at the end of the year. As the only black girl in her class, Phyllis was unable to go because there would be no place for her to stay with the rest of the class at that time, segregation being in full, insistent bloom in Washington. The trip deposit was returned to Phyllis, and her father, determined not to allow his daughter to be rebuffed and let down, decided instead to take the whole family as a special treat.

Lorde recalls the excitement surrounding the events of the trip, from packing loads of food for the long train ride out of New York City, to seeing various famous Washington sights, including the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson had sung after being refused the use of the DAR's auditorium because of her race. Lorde effectively evokes the almost blinding and sweltering July whiteness of the city and its monuments that was compounded by her parents' disapproval of sunglasses.

At one point Lorde writes about how they entered a Breyer's soda shop for cool refreshment,

flush equally with excitement from the trip and its uniqueness, and the heat. Sitting at the counter, they were instead refused service because they were black and departed the ice cream parlor, disgraced. This humiliating event marked the end of Lorde's childhood, and, we are led to believe, also ultimately forged irreversible changes in Lorde, who never again looked at the nation with the same eyes or without being keenly aware of its manifest racism. Judging by her account and its title "The Summer I Left Childhood Was White", these, like mine, were warm sunny days, but for her, on remembrance they evoke little comfort or longing.

In 1947, the time of Lorde's awakening, I was not quite two, and although I could not possibly know it, by then I was well part of the other side of the very discrepant world that had been so painfully and publicly pointed out to her. The memories I have recounted of Annie are of a period only just later, yet contrast the difference between Annie's placid demeanor and Lorde's justifiable rage and active response to institutional oppression. Annie continued to display her characteristic and singular sweetness and seeming lack of bitterness the whole time I knew her, which was the only way my father and others had ever known her to be as well, to hear their stories about her. Yet she was housed in the attic and never once sat down to eat at the same table with other so-called members of the family. Even taking into consideration prevailing attitudes such as mandating that Blacks step off the sidewalk into

the street to let Whites pass, it disturbs me to think that our family's limited response was likely to be the best treatment Annie received at the hands of Whites.

On the other hand, Lorde, indignant and unprompted, immediately wrote a letter to the President of the United States protesting the wrong that she had endured and witnessed. History shows us that she spent the rest of her life advocating for social



justice and fighting oppression in whatever form or guise she encountered it, including bias and discrimination within the feminist movement itself. She approached this task by harnessing what she called the erotic (Lorde, 1984), which translates into a fierce passion that infuses the very soul of women and serves as their "most profoundly creative source" (p. 59).

In different ways, both Audre Lorde and Annie represent the idea of "outsider-within" that Patricia Hill Collins (1991) discusses in her development of a black feminist intellectual ideology. One of the cornerstones of Collins's thinking is the notion that Blacks in general are "outsiders-within," that is, that they are outsiders within a white power structure and that black feminists

in particular exist as "outsider-within" within multiple realms beyond that. They remain outsiders within mainstream intellectual circles by being non-White and non-male, within African-American organizations by being non-male, and within the feminist movement by being non-White.

Audre Lorde adds another factor by being a lesbian in a heterosexual culture. I imagine her standing in a room between two parallel mirrors in which she sees herself reproduced more or less infinitely. Each reflection is progressively less distinct, smaller, and more removed from the flesh and blood person that constitutes reality. Each one represents some outsider-within facet of her life, and each is farther away, thus requiring more voice to be heard. This is something Audre Lorde clearly knew early on.

Which reflection of her is the black woman, which is the Lesbian or the intellectual? This image of great additive distance attracts and fascinates me, even as I have an equal sense that it is one of isolation, of sequestration, of capture almost, and that having such multiple roles must create in those marginalized by society as a whole to begin with, a distinct sense of fun-house disorientation, minus the fun.

Annie's outsider-within position was obvious, well-defined, and not unique, at least not unique in the South. At 211 15th Street in Atlanta, she was outsider-within in the household that claimed her as "part of the family." She knew all about us; we knew and asked little about her. One time Annie and I were sitting on the front porch and she said,

"Wave to her." When I asked who, she said, "To that colored woman there," indicating someone who was walking by. I looked at the woman and turning suddenly back to Annie with a start of recognition said, "So that's what you are!" It was only a few years ago that I found out what her last name was. I also learned then that she had been married the whole time, although not well apparently, without children, and in such a way that allowed her to spend only one night every two weeks or so at her own house, wherever that was. About this my parents only said, "We didn't want to pry." Perhaps most telling about how little we knew about Annie was that after she died, my father, in attendance at her funeral over fifty miles away in her home town, was surprised to find the church fully packed with all black people paying final respects. He, like the rest of us who thought of her only as part of our (white) family, had no sense of her having kin, friends, or a life of her own apart from 211.

Still another possible area in which Annie might be considered outsider-within is within herself. By this I mean that unless she was at peace with her individual responses to the unavoidable oppression she encountered, she could potentially sit in harsh, internal judgment of her actions or lack thereof, never fully accepting herself for and as herself. Although there was an air of peace and conviction around her, one that might be construed as internal commitment and connection, I am uncertain. Perhaps it was just resignation. I hope she never acceded to the then dominant

notion of racial inferiority. There was not enough time for me to find out what she truly thought, even if she would have been willing to let me know. Ours was an artificial relationship, one locked in time and place and cultural values, in which sitting at the same table could happen only for a brief period.

One last arena in which Annie might be viewed as an outsider-within, were she alive today and had she gained a voice of defiance, is within the black feminist intellectual movement. Collins (1991) argues strongly for the need to reexamine the everyday experiences and knowledge of black women who would not necessarily be considered intellectuals or feminists, to draw them into the greater discussion, a discussion that too often bogs down in definitions of who is or is not a feminist. Collins recognizes that the existing approach intrinsically divides people instead of getting at whatever feminism is and how it can be supported, expanded, and strengthened.

Collins calls for finally bringing Annie and Lorde together and provides the reference to non-Euclidean geometry. In Euclidean geometry, parallel lines never intersect, but in non-Euclidean systems they may. Metaphorically, Collins offers a non-Euclidean system where lives that otherwise might not meet finally do. What connects Annie and Audre Lorde is Collins's insistence that a wider, more encompassing range of experiences be presented.

She argues in general for an inclusionary model based on self-definition, rather than one of

determination by race, gender, or other limiting markers that in and of themselves do not signify a black, feminist, or intellectual ideology, separately or in the aggregate. Collins reports bell hooks (who signs her name using lower case letters) as taking this adaptable position, an opening that avoids altogether the thorny problems of definition and exclusion, which are, after all, the constituents of the outsider-within position to begin with. Instead of saying, "I am a feminist," she recommends saying something like, "I advocate feminism." Such a phrase contains the fruits of reconciliation between seemingly disparate styles and responses, voiced or not voiced, angry or calm, as represented respectively by Lorde on one hand and Annie on the other.

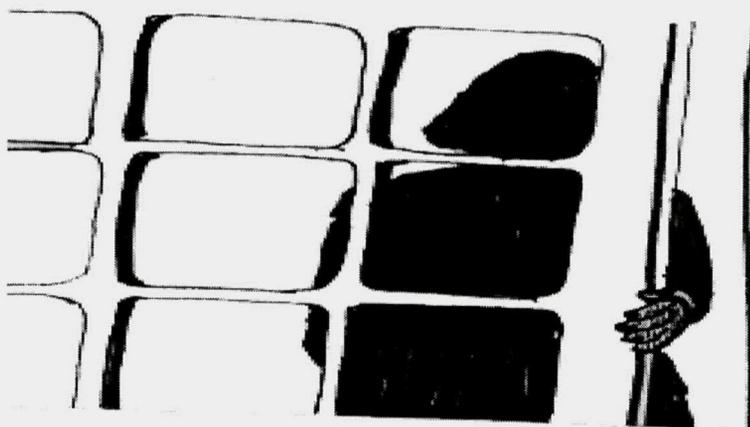
The call in Collins's feminism for broadened inclusion echoes the subject-object relations perspective of constructive developmentalist Robert Kegan (1982). He has proposed that, as we develop, our thinking becomes ever more complex and inclusive, that throughout life, thinking and responses are shaped and shaded by things outside our conscious awareness or control. These may be cultural, familial, or even personal values blindly adhered to. In the process of developing, we gain perspective on them, holding them more at arm's length and becoming less subject to their hidden influence. For Kegan, we move toward the realization that we are the container of multiple roles, values, and experiences, that we are not so much defined by them as by the containing of them.

This means all of them, whether they are discordant or not. In other words, we ourselves are not our jobs; we have jobs.

When someone says, "I advocate feminism," it shows that the speaker is less subject of being defined by the role of feminist and more agent of choice as holder of multiple desires, competencies, or perspectives. Along with this comes a greater acceptance of diverse elements within, a sign itself of developmental growth. In this regard, it could be argued by extension that Collins's black feminist position embodies a significant develop-

who has written extensively about the damage that can result when people are effectively silenced within relationships or within cultures. The position that Collins takes indicates this awareness, as an effort is made to include all speakers along the continuum of voice (and the confidence to use it), without which Annie and Lorde would stand considerably apart. Such a position shows that black feminism as a whole has found its voice or is determined to.

As I have thought further about Annie and read both Audre Lorde and Collins and sought to understand each better, I have



mental shift away from and beyond that embodied in the first phrase, "I am a feminist."

However, such a statement also implies that the speaker has a voice to begin with. In Annie's case, I can only imagine how often and how stingingly she must have borne in silence the burden of living in the heart of a racist and unequal society. Applying to black feminism at large the idea of having a voice is consonant with Gilligan (1982),

been struck by a term that Collins uses to explain roles of African-American women within their communities. In a culture where often the parents are absent, perhaps working long hours, multiple jobs, or in places far away to provide or survive, someone else must care for the children. This person is called the othermother. In Annie's case the term has meaning across racial lines, and would include the several children for whom she was othermother,

specifically my father, his sister, and me, although she was not formally charged with child care. Nonetheless, her care-taking was manifest and consistent.

What must it have been like over time for Annie to care for children of all ages; to be widely regarded as being so open, loving, and embracing of affection; to have children eager to be in her company; and yet to have no children of her own? On top of everything else, at some deep level it must have been terribly painful, being an outsider-within throughout her whole life, even as a woman among women, and then to be an othermother, too. These roles represent her parallel mirrors. However, the resultant voicing of these roles produced a decidedly different sound from that of Lorde's, one not of audible sadness or anger but of calm stability and equanimity, at the base of which must have been considerable resolve. Often such a voice is too soft to be heard or is ignored in the greater clamor, something that Collins has sought to redress through active inclusion of those such as Annie not used to being considered important.

In working to bridge and connect, Collins has also notably recognized that oppression exists everywhere. It does not lie exclusively within the province of particular groups or persons alone, regardless of enduring or extreme restriction. Collins (1991) reaches back to quote Anna Julia Cooper who, in a speech of 1893, states that the cause will be won when and only when the inalienable right to happiness is conceded to "every man and ... ev-

ery woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong" (p. 37). Implicit in this is an invitation to all peoples to participate. Indeed we all have something legitimate to complain about and address, and denying it serves no one.

Outsider-within status is neither alien to me nor relegated to one segment of the population. For me there have certainly been instances, such as during military service in the Vietnam era, when I felt I was an outsider-within, both as an enlisted person with college experience and as someone within the broader culture that had begun to raise its voice against the war and its participants. But it is not the same. The fundamental point of difference is that by being white and male, I have been permitted one thing that neither women in general nor especially women of color are allowed in this culture, namely, to be invisible. By invisible, I mean that to the segment of the population in control, my presence in certain corridors is expected, at least historically, rendering me and others like me functionally invisible to bias, discrimination, and routine exclusion. Although these things have nonetheless happened in my life, they have not been institutionally lifelong and, outside of the military, definitely not body threatening.

When I first began speaking about Annie, I mentioned having a sense of comfort and trust around black women. Of course my response to Annie was from the perspective of a child, one who barely recognized that she and I were of different races. In a sense we were both outsiders

within, each being decidedly on the fringe of power within the household and without. However, it was never intended to be permanent for me.

It is such a realization that gives me pause, because on the one hand it is important to recognize the ways that our culture is repressive systematically, and that even we who superficially fit the job description of privileged, white Anglo-Saxon males have felt the sting of stereotyping, of silencing, of being outsider-within. Witness increasing numbers of men, ostensibly the insiders, getting together to seek a new way of being because the traditional models of masculinity have not proven to work for them, for their partners and family members, or within a changing world view. They, too, perhaps feel isolated from a culture of competitive masculinity that serves really only a few (the winners) and with questionable results.

Yet, on the other hand, it would be presumptuous to claim profound affinity for and identification with the black feminist intellectual movement, despite the appeal of inclusiveness, simply because their oppression is so visible, so incessant, and so undeniably systemic, and that unlike me they can never be invisible in this land, where even in repressive environments a white male has the advantage.

Fortunately, this advantage has not insulated me from a growing awareness of large-scale injustice and inequity all around, nor spared me the necessity of looking at my life and actions in that light. But understanding

alone is not enough. What is also necessary is that something be done with it, whether it be in meetings with other men where such awareness might be best explored, spread, and engaged as an agent of developmental and social change; or through university scholarship, teaching, and publication; or through involvement in political activity.

I have learned from both Annie and Audre Lorde, yet their internalized value has been difficult at times to understand and accept. How have these different lessons—Annie's resolve, equanimity, and patience and Lorde's passionate outrage and commitment to right wrongs—come to reside together and find a common resting place? The answer lies in arriving at a common structure for making meaning of their lives and its impact on mine, whether comfortable or not, which Kegan offers in his recognition of multiple elements within oneself and the dialectical thinking that such awareness presupposes. The capacity to let coexist these elements that otherwise might cause internal conflict signals further movement in the direction of self-definition as *holder* of roles, views, and experiences, however contradictory or paradoxical they may be, and not the *embodiment* of them.

Substantially constituting Collins's ideology of the black feminist intellectual movement is considerable belief in inclusion, activism, and rededication to reclaiming the silenced voices of everyday African-American women. In this movement can coexist Collins, Audre Lorde, Annie, and diverse other outsid-

ers-within long excluded, long denied voice, long restricted to the margins of power and page. The provocative, rigorous, and open examination of thought and action exemplified by Collins challenges and urges similar response among men, notably white men. I suspect, however, that it will be necessary for more men to experience being outsiders-within before they can fully appreciate the magnanimity and grace of inclusion that Collins presents.

Kegan and Collins independently offer models and reinforcement for the desirability of accepting multiple and even conflicting aspects within. Demanding neither homogeneity nor rigid consistency, they instead recognize the value of differing views as enriching thought and colloquy, whether of individuals or movements. Together they provide the resolution and understanding I had previously unsuccessfully sought regarding two women who have been important to me; one whom I knew virtually from birth (in however limited a fashion), and the other whom I never met at all, save in print.

Returning to Katie Cannon's opening statement (mammy vs villain) that spurred this reexamination, I have realized that in the pre-integration South of my first years, it was only through knowing Annie in the role of "mammy" that the essential humanity and goodness of her and others like her could have been made apparent to me. This loving relationship forever prevented the exclusionary and discriminatory tendrils of racism from taking root. Far from embodying a limiting, degrading ste-

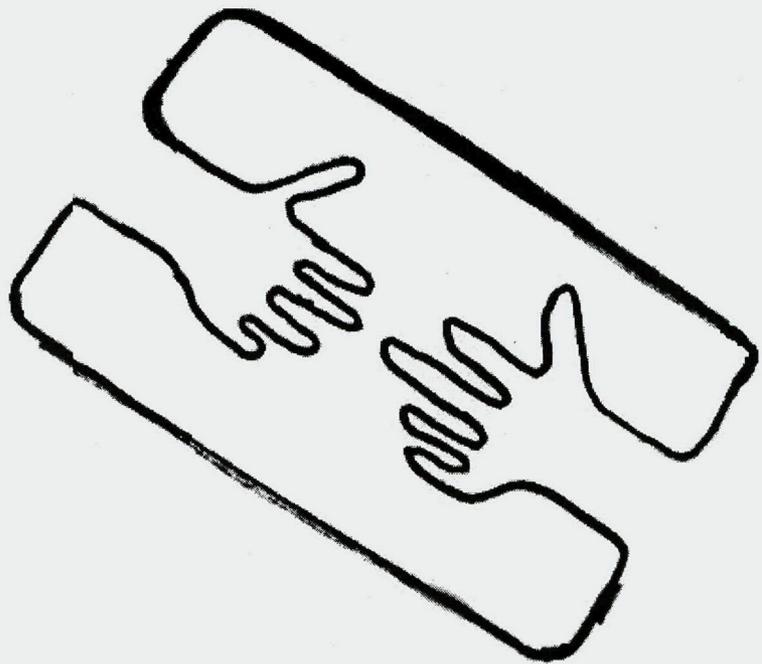
reotype, Annie instead modeled grace, composure, and dignity in the face of intense cultural pressure. Early on, then, it was apparent that numerous attributes displayed by Annie every day were not restricted to one "better" race. I knew this first hand from the ongoing interactions that all children unerringly recognize as either welcoming and loving or not. Later on it was not difficult to see that ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation were similar, which thus prevented my viewing people who struggled to be treated with dignity as villains.

My interactions with Annie, a one-time relationship built on an entrenched cultural foundation of inequality, had an unintended effect. Although at the time I was unaware of institutional racism and what it meant, knowing Annie as a person gave me the first glimpse of the inhumanity of discrimination and of the terrible loss that we suffer when groups are systematically pushed to the periphery or excluded. Later, through her passionate writing, Lorde provided the voice that Annie had never dared raise, one both challenging and deeply resonant. At the same time, Lorde also belatedly voiced the support for Annie that I, as a child, felt but was powerless to raise. Doubtless they will each continue to influence me over the years and fuel my hope for a time when divisiveness will not hold sway.

□

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