Wild Geese and Solidarity: Conjunctural Praxis for a Spirit-filled Ethics

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Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things. 1

Introduction

IN OUR CURRENT condition of postmodern globalization, capitalism infiltrates and commodifies the nooks and crannies of our personal lives and our world. This dislocation of our spatial, social, historical, and intimate connections presents new difficulties for building justice and peace and mending creation. In the absence of credible political alternatives, people's energy and hope for change can weaken and fade our vision of a common good. How can people link across particularities for the sake of justice and community? Mary Oliver's poetic voice moves us to pursue shifting patterns of conjunction. Like wild geese who resist domestication, we need to preserve energy in the rhythm of ongoing movement, to participate in a journey without assured outcomes, to share leadership and rest, and never to forget the most vulnerable. In this harsh and exciting world, we will conjoin social relations with the mystery of God's creation.2

2. My hearty thanks to Liz Bounds, Michael Bourgeois, and Alyda Faber for their constructive response to earlier drafts of this essay.

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Beverly Wildung Harrison is a contemporary prophet who considers theological ethics as a material practice. She has mentored many of us near and far in the political project of making Christian theology genuinely critical enough to escape cultural provincialism, especially by making ethics and radical social change accountable to women’s lived-world experience, particularly that of those most marginalized. She urges us to undertake a complex, interstructural account of human suffering through a faithful “praxis” (critical action done reflectively) that understands human-divine-cosmic relationships holistically and critically. This theological ethic assumes that we never speak of God in isolation from other relations and that human life is embedded in cultural, social, political-economic, historical, and cosmic relationships. As a Christian feminist she asserts that we are most godly when we share power and act-each-other-into-well-being. She affirms that all basic theological and moral questions are, therefore, about power-in-relationship. Theological work begins with questions about our relationships in context, how existing power distorts and alienates relationships and community, and how persons can act together to transform social life into genuine (non-alienated) community. This is to say that confession is a critical response to our situation. Confession is resistance, a call not to accept existing bondage as either divine intention or the last word about our lives or God’s creation. 3

As radical thinkers and theologians like Beverly Harrison attest, dominant theological discourse has failed to give critical attention to historical situations and their material culture as the context of churches and societies. This neglect has disastrous consequences. For example, impoverished peoples’ lives, women’s lives, and indigenous cultures have often been ignored or suppressed. Instead, we aim to love the gift of life itself through the materialities of our particular lives in relation to one another, especially those made other, to eco-social movements, and by cultural engagement.

Within theological discussions, culture is a rich, ambiguous, and contested arena. 4 And rightly so. The impact of globalization on cultures is


4. In this discussion of materialist cultural criticism, I am indebted to Elizabeth M. Bounds for her acute discussion of postmodernism under conditions of late capitalism and her commitment to a materialist hermeneutics for ecclesial and social solidarity. See especially Coming Together/Coming Apart: Religion, Community, and Modernity (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-43; see also Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Towards a Materialist Christian
pervasive and scary, commodifying intimate personal, geographical, religious, and social landscapes. Liberation and other political theologies work to develop critical and constructive hermeneutics to warn that there is no “innocent” vantage point for churches outside cultures and societies from which to find the truth. Against any separation of religion from politics, the ethical task is to learn how we are embedded in cultural formations that influence and limit our perspectives and to develop options and strategies for effective dialogues and living a “faith-filled ethics.”

Most pointedly, Beverly Wildung Harrison teaches us to imagine and empower women’s moral agencies in their communities of accountability, to facilitate collaborative projects across differences towards more inclusive and egalitarian institutions and practices. Can the construction of more complex plural identities connect our personal and spiritual lives with wider social and global horizons? Likewise, can more fluid ecclesial identities energized by the Holy Spirit open up an ecology of ministry dedicated to working simultaneously on issues of identity, justice, homelessness, the oppression of women, and the impoverished? If Christians are to shape identities and ministries in connections that sustain energy for change, we will do so by “taking our places” in diverse locally committed communities and global networks.

Because Beverly Harrison has always taken justice—the making of right relations—as starting point, the key issue raised for liberative theologies (which assume theology is never neutral but always partisan) lies in their concrete point of reference: In this case, what kind of practice does a feminist theological ethics shape? I sketch a conjunctural method as a preliminary response.

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6. Beverly Harrison announces this way forward: “Grassroots activism [with and for community] together with the rough-and-tumble of actual global networking are the only sources of the knowledge we need. These are the two sites—the only two—where lessons most needed can be learned.” See Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Feminist Thea(o)logies at the Millennium,” in Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell, ed. Margaret Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 158-60, 164.
I believe that shaping the moral vision of Christians in this postmodern globalized world (our material context) requires concrete attention to conjunctures of structures, events, moral agents, social movements, cultural formations, identities, and communities, with projects for change in church and society. I contend that a conjunctural method best helps us with this task. A conjunctural method enables us to practice critical analysis of "the conjuncture" or current historical moment we live in, using structural analysis of social relationships and political analysis for action and incarnational practice.® Theologically, it is a version of a faith-and-justice hermeneutical spiral of praxis that links our spiritual and communal lives with a vision of the Jesus story and its key, the Reign of God. Most helpfully for our first-world context, it integrates questions of history, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nation, and politics with local and global efforts for change.

Keeping these connections alive is a spiritual discipline practiced in community. It also challenges us to understand sin and grace, repentance, forgiveness, and hope in concrete material terms. Importantly too in a feminist vein, a conjunctural method critically relates the personal and political, culture and faith, church and world. I will present key elements for a feminist theological ethic of justice-in-the making in a globalized context: a conjunctural cultural materialist hermeneutics grounded in principles of love and justice, community and difference; in intersubjective identities that reintegrate politics and ethics, based in self-critical connection and compassion, for the sake of repentance, forgiveness, and accountability; and in communities of multiple crisscrossing accountabilities and solidarities.

Several resources exist for this approach, including an earlier radical Christian tradition in Canada, the conjunctural analysis of cultural materialism encouraged by activists and pastoral practices of transformation, and feminist social theory and ethics. In the first section I will introduce my version of a materialist conjunctural analysis in relation to an earlier

7. For reminding me of this term and stimulating my interest in conjunctural analysis, I am indebted to Dian Marino, and to Robert Clarke and Chris Cavanagh, with Ferne Cristall, "Introduction," The Wild Garden: Art, Education, and the Culture of Resistance (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1997), 11. Deborah Barndt has also developed conjunctural analysis from a Latin American link in Naming the Moment: Political Analysis for Action (Toronto: The Jesuit Centre for Social Justice and Faith, 1989, reprinted 1991), 7, 85. She states that "[i]n Naming the Moment, we look critically at the present situation and identify actions we can take now. While these actions respond to the present moment, they also help build the awareness and organizational skills we need for the long haul" (12). I specify and expand the spirit of conjunction into a feminist theological materialist ethic.
Canadian faith-and-justice trajectory, and then refer to the cultural
dynamics of postmodern globalization. In the second section I will turn
to one implication, moral agency in emergent networks of dialogue and
action. In closing I will name some principles for sustaining energy for
transformation in ecclesial and community formations dedicated to net-
working for change.

**Conjunctures: A Cultural Materialist Hermeneutics of Justice/Love**

To begin, let us turn briefly to an earlier materialist Christian tradition,
the 1930s faith and justice movement in Canada, the Fellowship for a
Christian Social Order (FCSO). The Fellowship for a Christian Social
Order's Gregory Vlastos argued most adamantly against the Niebuhrian
ethical formulation that assumed that the world, incapable of love, was
quite capable of justice. He claimed instead that the basis of justice was to
be found in:

> [a] community of purpose and reciprocity of service. Is there any sure foun-
dation of justice save a recognition of mutual need and mutual respect, a
sense of unity, partly existing, partly to be realized in the common future?
The imperative of justice is: Do not exploit. The imperative of love is: Admit
all to the community of ends.8

In this faith-and-justice stance, God is love, a pattern of life described as
mutuality. According to Vlastos,

> [t]he inalienable connection between love and justice had its source in mutu-
ality: Where the two are separated justice becomes legalistic and love senti-
mental: justice becomes a defence of the established order, and love a
weapon of the will to power. Both love and justice will fail, unless grounded
together upon material community. . . . They call for no sacrifice, save that
which will promote the growth of mutuality itself. They tolerate no surren-
der of rights, save for the one purpose of achieving rights more secure and
more equitable for all.9

The deep valuation of human life and well-being is robustly clear in the
insistence on ending all sacrifice except that which is chosen to repair and
sustain mutuality. In a holistic venture suitable to a gospel of full and
abundant life, the FCSO found that the two ideas, community and per-
sonality, are strictly correlative. Here personality is understood as person-

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9. Ibid.
hood, which is best interpreted in terms of a moral agency that encompasses both being and doing shaped in relationship and thus forms community. "Thus the ethic of love is the ethic of the co-operative community. And just because it is that, it is also the ethic of free and mutual personality."10 These values of cooperation, personhood, mutuality, and community require ongoing celebration and practice in the face of systemic sin and massive imposed suffering.

For Vlastos and the FCSO sin included "all acts and processes that yield affluence, or even sufficiency, to some while impoverishing others, or that cause power to be used in unreciprocal ways over the will and freedom of others."11 Capitalism was understood to be the world's major sinful structure. In recognition of this evil, one could enjoy the fruits of repentance by taking an active part in transforming those conditions of injustice. Because love is ultimately recognized in community, Christian discipleship inhered in right living rather than right belief.

This movement of radical social Christianity in Canada interpreted the gospel imperative, then, as working toward justice as a more inclusive mutuality. The love commanded by Jesus was to be embodied "in a community of interest effective in protest and concerted endeavour towards social justice."12 Jesus' ethic of love and mutuality was also conceived in embodied, material terms:

If love exists at all, it exists as a material activity: the material interaction of separate beings recognizing each other's interests and seeking common fulfilment. The spiritual meaning of love is only the felt meaningfulness of this "brute," material fact, directing cooperation, anticipating its further development, celebrating its present reality. Love does modify my consciousness. . . . But it modifies my behaviour just as much. I no longer act alone but with and for another. . . . The first maxim of the ethic of love, therefore, is concern for material values. Without material values there can be varieties of conscious experience but no co-operation; without co-operation there can be no community, no genuine love. The test of our sincerity in the pursuit of spiritual values will come back to the question: How seriously do we take their [our] material conditions?13

A materialist analysis like this one argues that human nature is inherently social and engaged, able to conceive simultaneously of personal well-being, "my neighbor's interest," and the "common good." It cannot understand community and personhood apart from political economy. It exemplifies a materialist hermeneutics, based not on the abstract "rational self-interest" of Western capitalism but one that connects personal narratives with economic and social moments.

Given the deep upheavals fragmenting church and society, ways to connect faith and everyday life are required. The Canadian preacher Salem Bland, a radical social gospel Christian, thought in 1913 that: "[c]ulture is power gained to enter into other lives and modes of thought foreign to our own. . . . God's truth comes to us in fragments and people need to share these fragments with each other." This movement is eschatological, open, and ongoing, yet embodied here and now. Hope emerges in the connection of the fragments by questioning complacent assumptions and by energizing non-competitive conjoining through difference.

A conjunctural method coheres with this materialist hermeneutic. It aims more specifically to help us situate our spiritual and ecclesial lives in relation to local and global efforts for wider change. This requires an incarnational, materialist cultural hermeneutic. Musimbi Kanyoro writes of the necessity of facing squarely the cultural complexities of relating gospel to context. She states that "[c]ultural hermeneutics can open our eyes to possibilities which might move us to different commitments." A conjunctural analysis is ethical in its attempts to construct a bigger picture of what is happening economically, politically, and culturally, and to keep up with shifts in forces and events in order to generate more effective strategies for action toward short-term goals while maintaining long-term objectives. In a theological framework, these are evaluated in relation to Christian norms of love/justice, virtues, values, obligations, and visions. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson acknowledges,

16. Barndt, Naming the Moment, 5.
17. See, e.g., Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989).
[w]e must frame the unavoidable immersion of Christians in the social formation in terms that recognise this reality. A liberation theology of culture must take seriously the fact that culture is a dynamic and circulating reality . . . [and] it is the production of everyday realities that cannot be escaped. Out of its specificities persons carve out identities and projects. They do not do this as a neutral making of choices, but through a priori cultural meanings that produce desire and pleasure; culture creates the things that matter for subjects—"mattering maps" as Lawrence Grossberg calls them. 18

Engaged intellectuals such as pastors and other leaders in ministry, lay or ordained, can helpfully use a conjunctural materialist theory and method. It is part of a spiritual discipline of making ourselves aware of the "mattering maps" already circulating in and through our personal lives and institutions such as churches. The partial vision and tenuous bonds of community need constantly to be negotiated in order to focus energies and resources for building diverse communities that love life, neighbours, and those in need.

Churches are locally situated as congregations and parish centres and in wider ecclesial and social networks. They engage in various forms of parish activity, with different communities and their plural agendas, and in wider denominational, ecclesial, and social structures. In a conjunctural analysis, Christians theorize about their commitments and actions at any given moment in terms of the conjuncture of three particular sites or forces that are intersecting and conjoined, i.e., the political (state), the economic (mode of production), and the cultural (civil society—the ways of ordering lived experience through institutions and activities such as education, religion, family, arts, and media).

A conjunctural materialist method uses Antonio Gramsci's notion of conjuncture. In writing against fascism in Europe in the 1920s, he emphasized the importance of ideology, of the way people's thinking had been shaped by their social relations. Strategic actions had to start with where the people were and move to greater levels of awareness and to more coherent action. 19 Gramsci used the term hegemony for the dynamic social process that is aimed at securing people's acceptance of the status quo. 20

Civil society (that sector of society that is neither the market or the state—the space of arts production, religion, volunteer groups, schools, nongovernmental organizations) is the arena for this ideological struggle for hegemony that organizes popular consent to the ideology of the status quo.

In keeping with the FCSO introduced above, British cultural critic Raymond Williams picked up on Gramsci’s use of hegemony in his project of theorizing culture as social and material: it is a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual. In this view, culture is inherently connected to the social relations and to the forces of production and politics that constitute those specific relations. Hence Raymond Williams defines hegemony as “a ‘culture’ but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.” While we would add to Williams’s cultural analysis terms of power relations constructed by race and gender, Williams identifies various structural aspects of cultural formation that account for the determining power of culture, and hence of church and society.

He specifies three ways cultural processes work within a hegemonic formation: dominant, residual, and emergent. These can readily be related to theological discourse and Christian practice (how we act on our beliefs and work toward our goals). Dominant is the hegemonic, legitimated worldview; residual are elements of the past that shape culture, some of which may offer critique of current society; and emergent processes are new meanings, practices, values, and relations. Therefore, hegemonic discourses are never total, always contested. We should not assume or seek after some perfect solution but realize that change will always be partial and uneven and sometimes effective given this notion of “the family of things.”

Williams also introduces the notion of “structures of feelings” to discuss potentially counter-hegemonic emergent cultural elements, a notion we will return to shortly. At the start of a new millennium, cultural formation is shaped by global capitalism and liberal democracy. The backdrop of efforts in the arts of resistance and constructive transformation is global change in the configuration of political economic power. Obvi-

22. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 115ff. For “structures of feeling” see 132-33. For example, Fulkerson notes feminist woman-church liturgy as an emergent formation that resists women’s subordinate status.
ously the complexities of global power arrangements and shifts are not easy to interpret and must be done through ongoing conversation with activists and diverse communities. Nonetheless, a relevant theological ethic must be able to grasp what’s at stake and offer some guidelines for action as well as a sense of where divine power is moving. To show how a cultural materialist analysis helps situate our work, let us turn to a brief naming of the translocal and transnational nature of global forces that impinge on theological ethics today. This depiction will enable us to recognize the ways in which Christians are part of the political landscape, whether we like it or not.

A Cunning Global Culture: Postmodernity and Globalization

The context we inhabit now is indelibly shaped by the postmodernist hegemony of globalization. Postmodernity signals ambiguity, diversity, and plurality. We may experience these undeniable realities in a sense of fragmentation, loss of taken-for-granted identities, and the crisis of confidence in Western conceptual and liberal ecclesial systems. Postmodernism is marked by a plethora of different sorts of relationships, many life-denying but also some offering possibilities for well-being and community. Most pervasively, postmodernism means globalization. Globalization is unparalleled in human history. It is a system that orders our social relations and refers to the profound shifts in twentieth-century capitalism that shape our foundational institutions and overarching social consensus.23 As James Laxer tells us, globalization has become a false god.24 Ursula Franklin assesses globalization as “a war against people” because the world economic order is premised on international competition for the lowest labour and minimal ecological standards in order to reap the most return on investments. Postmodern forms of slavery have arisen, particularly among those with the least economic power, such as women and children. Instead of peace after the end of the Cold War, since 1989 things have become far worse.25

As a nation, Canada faces major debt and structural adjustment programs, with foreign loans accounting for 40 percent of our national debt. We have major federal and provincial cutbacks to health, education, and social safety-net programmes. More and more people rely on food banks. Traditional economies based on the fishery and renewable resources have collapsed. Radical social theorists say that Canada increasingly bears the marks of a two-thirds-world country with a growing underclass and an even more powerful elite. One fact encapsulates the staggering disparities between countries today: The combined recorded economic activity (GNP) of the forty-eight least developed countries is less than the assets of the three richest people in the world. In short, the postmodern scene is bleakly anti-community and anti-solidarity in its neglect and degradation of nature and of civil society. The globalization of capital and the restructuring of the world economy within this framework have had a variety of effects, but we note especially the impoverishment of cultures and destruction of communities where people in the lower margins bear the brunt.

An example of a conjunctural materialist hermeneutic is Kathryn Poethig’s investigation into the effect on cultures of postmodern conditions of globalization. She researches how globalization as a form of “disorganized capitalism” is no longer contained by nation-states and how the production process is fragmented across national economies. This new form of global postmodern capitalism has its own “cultural logic of cunning” that shapes the “mattering maps” with which we have become most familiar. The map is characterised by the dominance of Western ideas and English as its new international language. The homogenization is pervasive but not total—Buddhism, Christianity, and McDonald’s mean something different in Tokyo than they do in Toronto. The dominant force is an homogenizing Western ethos and is disseminated through a global culture, whether spiritual or fastfood. It is not easy to question constantly if having many choices of spiritualities or fastfood is indeed a good thing. Where is the choice of not wanting to consume? While heterogeneity proliferates in consumer choices, some theorists find that it is an empty signifier. Global mass culture appears to

27. For an excellent critical and balanced assessment of the role of civil society—its potential and limitations—against the forces of globalization, see Jamie Swift, Civil Society in Question (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1999).
celebrate heterogeneity and local capitalist projects but the dominant Western strategy continues to work through them. So we live in the tension of having our choices shaped by predominantly competitive, dehumanizing, and ecologically rapacious global cultural dynamics and yet also drawing some connections locally and globally with alternative values and visions, some of which are circulating in cultures. In short, worldwide we find new forms of global economic and cultural power that are multinational, hierarchical, Western, and yet partially decentred and sometimes alternative or emergent, with fluid and syncretic "scapes" that transgress national borders.

Drawing on the cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai, Poethig maps these "scapes" which include ethnoscapes, financescapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. Ethnoscapes are produced by flows of people: tourists, immigrants, the internally displaced, and exiles. Financescapes are currents of capital on the global stock exchange. Technoscapes are transfers of technology via multinational enterprise and government agencies. Mediascapes' vast networks of electronic capabilities for images and information erodes the distinction between political "reality" and fiction. Finally, ideoscapes comprise in some way all of these scapes in the dissemination of state or counter-state ideologies. These scapes constitute our culturescapes which impact how we interpret and imagine our lives and the world.

The inception of ideoscapes is located in an Enlightenment worldview conveyed in its keywords: "freedom," "welfare," "rights," "sovereignty," and the master term, "democracy." Today these meanings are differently contested around the world, many in overt violence. It may be agreed that the local is effected by transnational dynamics but theorists argue about how these in turn can be effected by local or transnational cultural and political movements. It is newly apparent that global culture, as a feature of high modernity or postmodernity, is imbricated with culturescapes that flow with erratic speed and unpredictable direction across the globe. These culturescapes are buffeted by economic and political factors, and yet are set within an increasing interconnectedness of

local cultures that make up world culture. The complex and interpenetrating relationship between the local and the global stands as a serious and unresolved issue. The cultural arena in a critical materialist sense is key for a religious practice that concerns itself with shaping values, networks, and politics for a transformed world.

We can agree that global change is fraught with ambiguity and that culture is marked by an organization of diversity rather than the replication of uniformity. But how much of the diversity is the same? Are choices real or do they sustain us in a meaningful way? This investigation of current conjunctures challenges us to ask the question about hope, key to any practice of a Christian social ethics that aims to instigate and sustain compassion and commitment, solidarity and self-criticism in a world of uncertainty, pluralism, and rapid change. Is there any local action that can construct a positive path to change? Given the exigencies of massive suffering amidst plenty, we turn to one small but concrete option, the project of engaging in dialogues across difference—to deepen moral awareness and agency, to increase trust and motivation for collective action, and to encourage ties among people with divergent class and social backgrounds to build up local cultures of resistance that figure out together how to relate in public and political ways. In these emergent local, national, and international networks for change, hope springs afresh and even becomes contagious.

**Moral Agency in Emergent Networks: Identity, Community, and Solidarity across Differences**

While options for transformation under current global arrangements that infiltrate our daily lives may be few, Christians can join with others in valuing personal, local, and wider connections. For example, can we imagine women’s networks and other social movements aiming to generate alternative communities and religious practices as “structures of feeling”? “Structures of feeling” is Williams’s conceptualization of cultural margins or emergent alternatives where social experiences are embryonic, composed of impulse, tone, and affective elements of consciousness. These resistant cultural processes are “in solution,” a social phenomenon that “might just be” emerging to expose and contradict dominant ideologies and practices. Christians can and do participate in these dynamic, oppositional movements—to end apartheid, to insist that rape is a violation of human rights, to shelter abused women and children, to reunite countries divided by war, and to house the homeless. If we join in move-
ments that nurture emergent or alternative communities, two dynamics must be heeded: the complexity of identity formation in relation to difference and principles for a self-critical solidarity.

Ruth Smith confirms the notion of moral agency as a complex process of personal and communal activity. The norm of participation of marginalized voices is key in shaping the common good:

Agency involves responding to the needs, responsibilities, and choices within the constraints of our experiences and situations. Agency also involves the changing of historical conditions of our particular nexus of relations and the critical self-consciousness and activity through which we become aware of our relations and seek to change them. . . . To become a moral subject is itself a moral task, if not the central moral task. 32

Like the materialist hermeneutic of faith-and-justice movements, Smith understands that we are socially formed individual persons whose lives are rooted in specific conjunctural moments. Women’s desire for shared, meaningful activity in shaping their own lives and their communities is the basis for solidarity; and because women’s cultural bases are diverse, networks of solidarity and compassion are created across difference. Thus, our work to shape persons and communities rooted in alternative values and cultures is imbued with hope when conceived as joining in “structures of feeling”—local but wider networks that practice activities of resistance and struggle cognizant of but not totally defined by the hegemonic effects of late global capitalism. And as Aurora Levins Morales puts the significance of moral agency, we need “[a] revolution capable of healing our wounds. If we’re the ones who can imagine it, if we’re the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it.” 33 Our moral agency will be rooted in fragmentary healing of persons and social systems and will sustain our movement together to help us link across particularities.

The touchstone of all feminist theological ethics is women’s concrete lived-world experience. A conjunctural analysis is an artful complication of particular situatedness so that critical reflection on experience is developed as a primary source of moral wisdom. 34 Morality asks people to


understand themselves as bearers of particular identities and as actors in various relationships that are framed by certain values and cultural formations. Beverly Harrison celebrates “the very real historical power of women to be architects of what is most authentically human.” To specify and explore women’s experience in different contexts and configurations and feminist engagement with them requires that we make “women’s experiences” available once again, “not as an innocent foundation for Christian feminist liberationist claims, but as complex, textured amalgams of resistance and collusion demanding critique and invocation.”

Difference is thus central to the complicated struggle of fundamentally transforming highly objectified, rationalized and commodified narratives, societies, cultures, and theologies. Multidimensional representations of women’s lived-world experience requires that the voices of many women be heard, through reading texts and augmented, as Pamela Brubaker correctly asserts, in face-to-face dialogues and networks for an “integrative global feminism.”

In order for our framework to integrate neglected areas of concern, namely, the conjunctures of personal and local amidst the political-economic and global, the public space and gender, race, culture, and class, a conjunctural method will attend to an ethics that takes up some familiar categories in feminist theory—identity, community, and solidarity—using a specific lens to specify the material and theological connections. We do this by using the norm of difference. Shawn Copeland astutely names the purpose: “to pluralize, to destabilize, to dismantle, to problematize any propensity to asphyxiate or suppress difference in critical theologies committed to the radical liberation of women.”

Difference then is not to be celebrated as liberal pluralism which falsely equalizes cultures and evades, for example, the racial dominance of whiteness. Sherene Razack makes this bold challenge: “The point of theorizing difference among women is not for the sake of inclusion but for the sake of anti-insubordination. There is little chance of disturbing relations of domination unless we consider how they structure our subject positions. . . .

Innocence [is] a determined non-involvement in the social relations being analysed. If we are to understand critically our lived-world experience in conjunctural terms, it is crucial to grasp the hegemonic constraints as well as options for alternative identities and networks.

Difference among women implies, therefore, not a search for identity of moral agency; rather, and crucially, the hope in women engaging across difference, for example, among First Nations aboriginal women, African Canadian women and white Euro-Canadian women, is how we are related historically, politically, and ethically, so that we can learn to read our lives with respect for ourselves and others and through the prism of complex connectedness, alliances, and power. To become the subject of our own lives in relation or, as Beverly Harrison often says, "other-regarding persons in community," requires both complex identity formation and networks of solidarity. For example, Diane Fowlkes helpfully discusses some challenges for white feminist theories based on sisterhood from radical lesbian women of colour who live under complex domination. She alerts us to the need for those rendered "other" to construct themselves as intersubjects in the interstices (i.e., conjunctions) of multiple and simultaneous conflicting power structures, to account for responsibilities in contributing to what is oppressive and what is privileging, and to recognize that no one alone, not even all together, can have full knowledge of "the problem" or "the solution." Dialogues of this sort would be tantamount to engaging a feminist materialist standpoint of intersubjectivity that occurs in social movements that engage difference. Here we aim not for any total or overarching community. We imagine fluid notions of self and community, non-possessive, crisscrossing and shifting for the sake of reconfiguring them in plural, vital, and substantive ways.

In short, to conceive of networks of liberative praxis across difference, we will take account, as Beverly Harrison insists, of the conditioned material nature of all knowledge, including theology. This hermeneutics assumes that all theologies are culture-bound and that the ethical task is


to shape specific networks addressing particular issues rather than a uniform recipe for resistance. It accounts for the production emerging from different theological praxes, for example, the cultural themes from particular communal histories such as the emphasis on wholeness, survival, and community in womanist work; on life-centredness, pluralism, and compassion in Asian contexts; and on geography, national identity, and multicultural interrelatedness in Canada.

To understand these personal, local, and wider power relations in ethical terms is far trickier and more complicated than those of us in privileged positions have allowed when we have suppressed difference and assumed an essentialized subject. If we are to claim difference as the very root of intersubjective construction, which I do, this challenge requires that we must both name the very real divisions among us while simultaneously and dialectically approaching difference and “the other” with the hope of seeking what Audre Lorde evokes as interdependent, nondominant, creative difference which offers that “raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.” Audre Lorde also advised:

Difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. . . . Without community there is no liberation. . . . But community must not mean a shedding of our differences nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. 42

We must also not forget the ambiguities and differences of power. A discourse of difference requires attention to power in relationships that have been historically shaped by dominance and subordination. Hence, these differences do not always spark with creativity but with justifiable rage, leaving us not in a dialectic but in a stalemate of alienation. Here complex identity formation is crucial to the task of solidarities for justice-in-making. We need to share wisdom and energy to grow in self-critical moral agency through dialogues and networks of difference. As Ofelia Schutte puts it,

[Although solidarity is an old term, long familiar to activists, the present circumstances at the turn of the century demand that we rethink and reawaken its meanings. Feminists from dominant global cultures and better-off economic sectors need to connect more closely with projects involving women and feminists from the periphery. We need to lobby actively for the inclusion of voices from the periphery so as to shake off the weight of colonialism

and other oppressions that still mark the centre’s discourses... to sponsor alternative ways of relating and knowing that no longer shut out from ‘home’... marginalized peoples... will come to view ourselves as subjects of cultural difference.43

Solidarity across difference requires mature dialogue in terms clarified by Emilie Townes as “self-critical inclusivity.” If ethics is to be about more than refusing to be dominated, it is also then about refusing to dominate. “The task constantly remains for us to evaluate goals and standards in light of the gospel understanding of justice. This justice is dynamically revelatory—always within our grasp and just beyond it.”44 In this regard, the Jesus narrative of the Reign of God can be told to encourage the forging of communities that are open and in which complex identity formation in terms of intersubjectivities emerge in the mutuality that difference offers. But not automatically and never once and for all.

In relation to self-criticism and accountability, Sharon Welch offers a good pragmatic way to overcome the fear of and live with moral and political ambiguity. She writes that “there are three criteria for the truthfulness of our analyses and strategies: (i) their actual effect on the lives of people, (ii) their openness to further critique and hence modification, and (iii) their resiliency in the face both of critique and unintended consequences—positive and negative, unpredictable opportunities for further acts of responsibility and creativity... Basically, we become ready to clean up after ourselves, to reevaluate actions, all with the style of humour and openness to failure.”45 While I agree that integrity is found in a willingness to face uncertainty and ambiguity, to be responsible, and thus to be self-critical in relationships, a liberative feminist theological ethic is concerned with the material as incarnational. It explores how God is present and named—for example, are we living graciously in Justice/Love experienced in the joy and power of “a coordinated multiplicity, a polyvocal mutuality” of plural relationships and communities?46

45. Sharon Welch, Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work (New York: Routledge, 1999), 34, 123.
When we do "act each-other-into-well-being," we experience the grace of Holy Power. Dorothee Soelle puts it poetically this way: To be created in God’s image means that “[m]y creative power is my power to renew the world for someone or for a community. Through it I attempt to rebuild the house of life out of the ruins in which we now live.” This praxis signals that there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the political, the individual and the community, the church and the world. As the mysterious presence of God moves and acts in the midst of creation and cosmos, transcendence is not “out of this world” but in and through partial commitments and material connections for human and cosmic well-being. The significance of conjunctural theological meaning, then, lies in its perspectival epistemology which integrates the social world as formation of concrete historical, cultural, political-economic, social, ecological, and personal dynamics, where private and public realities are joined and inform one another, like the birth of a child and the work for safe day care, the creation of a poem and a viable economy and health care.

For Christians who have a home in ecclesial spaces, compassionate solidarity respectful of difference is the basic norm of theological praxis. As Shawn Copeland writes, “It could not be otherwise, for the incarnation is God’s own radical act of solidarity, God’s act of love, hope, and life enfleshed in Jesus. And is this not the task of authentic Christians of different histories, cultures, times and places—to enflesh love and hope and life wherever love and hope and life are fragile?” A conjunctural practice is an incarnational one. Solidarity will no longer be understood as cooperation among many collective singular groups; rather, religious people will face the fact of pluralism with a principled praxis that takes account of “the polymorphous nature of dominant power.” We will join networks of variously and complexly identified moral agents created in local and global networks among those who persevere together “because we are mutually convinced of the need to challenge together the structures of complex domination.”

50. Fowlkes, “Moving from Feminist Identity Politics,” 121. Here is an example of an ecclesial step in this direction: “We commit ourselves to facilitating linkages between
This vision would transform ecclesiologies of dispirited institutional maintenance into ones that thrive because they would move within a plural politics of struggles for life in local and global networks. Because "all difference is not the same difference," a key challenge in our work as feminist theologians and ethicists is to raise critical questions of accountability and advocacy in collaborative communities. For example, how is the agenda for feminist theology set? Who is included and to whom are we accountable? Where do we locate and narrate our practices of anti-subordination? How does our access to resources for shaping our own lives affect the way we relate to the church and our broader social and cultural context? In short, with others we will create complex intersubjectivities, and will learn to name our own eco-social locations and to question where our particular experiences of power, privilege and oppression fit within current social relations (near and far, given our globalized world) and what practices sustain hope. Beverly Harrison beautifully describes what it means to live faithfully:

From this theological perspective, faith is understood chiefly as the power (and it is power, a shared and communal power) to live one’s life fully, genuinely engaged in receiving and communicating a sense of life’s joy and possibility. To live by faith means to accept one’s own power, always partial and finite, always power-in-relation, but nonetheless real, to engage with others and to tenderly shape the processes of nature/history for genuine human and cosmic fulfilment. Such faith, according to an ancient Christian theological formula, requires hope as its ground and love as its foundation.

If we hope that genuinely self-critical cultures and societies are possible, we can also imagine religious communities radically connecting to pockets of struggle and movements for change. In theological education and religious spaces, we need to create more fluid and locally grounded iden-

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women throughout the world particularly with and among partner churches and organizations, with a focus especially on marginalized women. . . . " Gender, Justice and Partnership Guidelines, Division of World Outreach, United Church of Canada (Toronto: February 9, 1998), 12.


52. Ann Ferguson recommends a process of building “bridge identities.” This involves the reinterpretation of personal and group social history to help challenge social domination and to practice “caring not just for our families but for strangers and those ‘othered’ from us by social class, race, or national divides.” See “Resisting the Veil of Privilege: Building Bridge Identities as an Ethico-Politics of Global Feminisms,” in Hypatia 13, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 105-6.

tities, both personal and ecclesial, that are respectful of and engaged with difference. This will open up an ecology of ministry dedicated to more sustained solidarities in communities of multiple crisscrossing accountabilities and compassionate solidarity. Beverly Wildung Harrison also assures us that the process must go on endlessly: "to do feminist liberation thea(o)logical work then is to stay on the journey home-to-liberation/freedom and is a lovely thing to do."  