Reckoning with Our Ghosts:
A Reconsidering of Early White Female Theorists in Contemporary Philosophy of Education

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This paper examines the relationship between contemporary white feminist educational theorists and their predecessors—women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Catharine Macaulay, and Emma Willard. Though notably resurrected during feminism's second wave as feminist scholars sought to claim them in service of the movement, these women, I contend, leave contemporary white feminist theorists in a state of what might best be described as akin to Donna Haraway's "trouble" for the ways in which they (rightly)—despite the recognition they have received—continue to "stir-up" and "disturb" the waters, as they cajole us for our attention as part of educational philosophy's larger social justice project.[1] Thus, I argue in this paper that while the contributions of female theorists like Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard are invaluable and continue to make them worthy of contemporary educational theorists' attention, their presence continues to haunt contemporary white feminist theorists of education for their racially problematic language, ideas, and practices, leaving between the generations a history not yet reconciled.[2]

To this end, if we choose to understand the past—and I do, as Avery Gordon does—as something that "always haunts the present," then we must find a way to engage with "those apparitions, those ghosts that tie the present subjects to past histories."[3] In what follows, I develop this paper in two sections. In the first, I focus on the connections between the past and the present, arguing that feminist theory's history exists in the present and cannot (nor should it) be ignored. As feminist historian Wendy Kolmar observes, a neglect of the past challenges our ability to create new knowledge and instead consigns us to relying

on a present that is unmoored, reflecting only upon itself; if this is so then we lose our ability to truly understand our present and all of its complexities—how we got here—and to think about how we might approach our future.[4] Then, in the second part of the paper, I take-up Adriana Cavarero's "empathic trap" and "altruistic ethics," offering a way for contemporary white feminist theorists, perhaps challenged by what they will encounter, to engage in this conversation with the past and its ghosts.

Haunting and Cajoling Apparitions, Justice, and Early White Female Educational Theorists

"That life is complicated may seem a banal expression of the obvious," writes Gordon.[5] And yet, she continues, it is perhaps the most "profound theoretical statement" of our time.[6] Two dimensions guide this idea. The first is that relationships of power are never as clear or transparent as they purport themselves to be, and, relatedly, that elements of race, class, and gender combine to constitute complex social relations that lead to historical inequalities. The second is that individuals are complicated. Such an understanding of the complexities of life leads us to approach social categories with a thoughtful attention to the subtleties of their "dynamics and consciousness."[7] Such a theoretical statement, Gordon concludes, compels us to consider our personhood with greater depth. This occurs via the experiences that are afforded us in the absence of the individual—just as an individual's presence in our lives leaves a mark so too does their absence. It is here, in this space created by absence, where the ghost resides, and from here that it cajoles us to consider its nature and what manifests in its not being here, in this space; it is from here that the haunting begins.

Gordon then offers us three characteristics of haunting. The first is that the ghost imparts "a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting"; it unsettles "the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge."[8] The second characteristic is that the ghost is "a symptom of what

is missing"—a representation of what was once there and is now absent. The third characteristic of haunting understands the ghost to be something that is in a way alive. The ghost exists, contends Gordon, as something that we are in "relation" with, possessing aims and purpose, to which in response, she adds, it is incumbent upon us in the present to "reckon with . . . graciously."[9] And, in particular, what is essential in this final statement for Gordon is that this incumbency derives from a "*concern for justice*."[10]

In her argument, notably, justice is being sought by the ghost on its own behalf. Thereby, continuing with Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard in mind, it is necessary to inquire what the justice is that is being sought for them. As earlier mentioned, a certain reconciliation and drive toward justice for these women is represented by the multiple biographies, articles, and other scholarly works that began emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s about these women and their experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11] This research aimed to reclaim and resituate these women's lives in a light that did not represent them merely as victims of circumstance, but rather offered a certain reconciliation for history's neglect. In doing so, it underscored their dignity as agentic beings through the reframing of their identities in the telling of new ("versions" of their) stories. To think of them as ghosts today, though, still with this same agenda of seeking justice for themselves, does not fulfill the social justice charge. Indeed, critical to the charge provoking *this* paper is that justice has already been served for these ghosts in the scholarship of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. Wollstonecraft, Macauley, and Willard, having achieved a sort of vindication, are now released from their purgatory.

And yet, it seems as though they necessarily linger, as conversations circulate among feminist theorists debating the relevance of these earlier scholars in today's world. This lingering follows from the relationship that exists between contemporary white feminist educational scholars and their predecessors in the wake of recent larger societal shifts in consciousness around race, gender, and class. Specifically, I am here referring to scholarship in the field of critical whiteness studies that has emerged over the last two decades and also to (more recently) increased attention to whiteness in popular media. As Barbara

Applebaum writes, "[w]hiteness is . . . a doing: less a property of skin than an enactment of power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways."[12] It is the perpetuation of a systemic injustice through which "all white people benefit from their relationship to these systems in varying ways."[13] The understandings that have subsequently emerged from discussions of whiteness and its role in upholding systemic injustice create opportunities for white feminist scholars to consider their own complicity in upholding patterns of whiteness within their research—one instance of which may be found in the neglect of the complex personhoods of their own predecessors.[14] Although Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard have rightly been recognized for their contributions to feminist educational theory, they, like the second wave feminists who reclaimed their writing, have a problematic history vis-à-vis race. Among white feminist educational theorists, and white feminist theorists more generally, while attention has increasingly been given to this neglect in the intervening decades, in failing to turn to our own predecessors' imperfect reckoning with whiteness, we have yet to reconcile with our ghosts, which thus continue to haunt us.

In 2004, Carol Howard observed that "the body of scholarship" available on Wollstonecraft's use of slavery and the term "slave" to describe the situation of white middle class women in the late eighteenth century "is slight."[15] Little attention had been paid to the analogy between chattel slavery and Wollstonecraft's use of the term since the issue was raised in 1992 by two scholars: D. L. Macdonald, who contended that Wollstonecraft "anticipates Hegel's master-slave dialectic," and Moira Ferguson.[16] As Ferguson observes, Wollstonecraft, herself an abolitionist, regularly made use of the terms "slave" and "slavery" in her writing. However, while it is evident that Wollstonecraft took up the analogy in response to increased tensions surrounding the slavery question in England, Ferguson also makes clear that Wollstonecraft used the words in order to champion female liberation and the rights of "white, middle class women."[17] Further, she observes, Wollstonecraft was influenced to use the words by Macaulay's own use of the terms to describe the situation of woman in her 1790 *Letters on Education*.[18] As Ferguson contends toward the close of her essay, Wollstonecraft's and Macaulay's use of these terms "is problematic"

for how it first "presupposes the presence of women of color and assumes a white, patriarchal class system as its [colonial slavery's] common enemy."[19] And second, it establishes an alliance portraying an equality of circumstance between black women and white women at the time—impossibly, insofar as one may exist between the colonizer and the colonized.

Similarly, while Willard—a leader in the female seminary movement of the early nineteenth century and the expansion of the common school system in the middle of the century—was actively and extensively involved in efforts to first prevent and later end the Civil War, her response to the slavery question was based on her understanding that "negroes" were inherently inferior to whites. Indeed, Willard's work more generally in response to the problem of slavery, writes Mark David Hall, has been frequently condemned as "racist, conservative, and/or cowardly."[20] In her 1862 essay "The African in America," writing of the physical features that "the colored man" possesses, Willard observes that "his extended apparatus for breathing" makes him more suited to working outdoors in the warmer climate of the south; while the white man, with his "small mouth and compressed nostril" requires that he seek shelter in order preserve his "superior brain."[21] In addition, she is known to have supported resettlement in Africa for slaves liberated in America following the Civil War. In an 1865 letter to President Andrew Johnson, Willard writes:

> Indeed, I have already shown myself the friend of your race, by supporting our government to help build up an equal nation with our own in Africa, where colored people may go and in their native climate if they are qualified, may have the same chance to be senators and representatives there, that white people have here.[22]

And while this was not an uncommon opinion among antebellum Americans, including abolitionists, public sentiment today, as well as academic scholarship, rejects such ideas on moral grounds. Willard also, in keeping with general practice at seminaries across the country, refused to admit black girls and women to her Troy Female Seminary.[23]

Given such instances, the ghosts of Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard, continue to linger as part of a larger social justice project that remains unfinished—whose arc has yet to unfold in its entirety—as we have yet to delve into their complexities of personhood and the contradictions of their lived experiences. As Gordon writes, all persons are "beset by contradictions."[24] And living in any circumstance, people "possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents."[25] Rather, recognizing people as complex individuals, she contends, has its own purpose—that of bestowing upon them the respect of recognizing that lives are simultaneously straightforward and complicated, and that the spaces that those lives occupy are enriched by this recognition.

What concerns me here is that in neglecting the racial aspects of Wollstonecraft's, Macauley's, and Willard's work, their contemporary reclamation suggests that they somehow bring forth a messianic agenda on behalf of their own, and contemporary women's, redemption. In addition, their descendants, contemporary (white) feminist theorists, seem to be acting as "white saviors" themselves, on behalf of themselves and of their predecessors. Indeed, the complex personhoods of theorists such as Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard can be explored by contemporary feminist scholars of any race, and there are other stories—such as those of the black women and girls who went unadmitted to Willard's seminary—that just as urgently need telling. With this said however, my intent here is to give attention to the particular relationship between contemporary white feminist theorists of education and their predecessors in order to call attention to it in the face of previous neglect; it is to contend that contemporary white feminist theorists practice complicity in upholding whiteness within the academy if they fail to address the lived contradictions of their historical predecessors.

Thereby, the respect that Gordon speaks of, to be given to Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard in recognizing their lived contradictions, may serve the purpose of not just filling the space with their own presence but with the presence also of those whom their work has discounted, misused, and misun-

derstood. In bringing to bear these pieces of their personhood, we also bring forward another relationship, or set of relationships, of power that though not invisible has heretofore been ignored and thus been allowed to persist in upholding a false understanding of Wollstonecraft, Macaulay, and Willard as "superhuman agents." While (arguably) necessary for establishing feminism's second wave in a movement of focused solidarity, this false understanding has broader implications for the unfolding of that movement—the voices that are heard and the bodies that are represented—moving forward. In bringing this history to bear, we can envision these predecessors as more substantiated individuals within whom we in turn may see our own contradictions.

As Gordon observes, haunting is an affective exchange; the ghost is there to remind us that something is missing, and it is there to speak to individuals in a "way that is specific to them."[26] The ghost "makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition"—a recognition in this instance perhaps of likeness.[27] By this likeness, I intend shared gendered and raced—and further, in some instances, it may be argued, classed—identities. Though separated at some length temporally, white feminist educational theorists today remain a part of a lineage that as Kolmar mentions has both intentionally and unintentionally impeded the progress of other women based on race and class, among other identities. In facing this past, however, Kolmar reminds us, white feminist theorists can find themselves encountering shame where groups of like women have actively worked to hamper one another or take stances that we would now wish to shed. Caught-up in these likenesses and a sense of shame, any attempt to engage with these ghosts risks failure if a way cannot be found to create perspective around, and the courage to face, these relationships. In such instances, movement toward reconciling with the past and toward fulfilling the project of social justice will be stymied, if not halted altogether. As Kolmar further reminds us, it is necessary to grapple with these complexities and difficulties in order to better help us to "explain our present and direct our future."[28]

In the next section of this paper I turn to how we might think about approaching this challenge. How do we both reckon with and reconcile with our

ghosts? How, for instance, might we think about Emma Willard, who established Troy Female Seminary (which still functions today), who lobbied government on behalf of women's education, who published textbooks to great extent, and who logged thousands of miles late in life on behalf of expanding the common school system, making her one of the most influential figures in establishing women's education in this country, alongside her support of resettlement and also her willingness to shutter the doors of her school to black female students? How do we enter into these conversations—this trouble—when indeed we may encounter feelings of shame or the desire to distance ourselves from a certain past?

Entering into the Trouble and Talking with Our Ghosts

If haunting is an affective exchange, the knowledge created from this interaction leads to what Gordon, referencing Raymond Williams, refers to as a "structure of feeling"—"affective elements of consciousness and relationships":[29]

> A structure of feeling is precisely that conception, or sensuous knowledge of . . . experience and belief, feeling and thought, the immediate and the general, the personal and the social. A structure of feeling 'articulates *presence*' as the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences. Such a tangle—as object and experience—is haunting.[30]

However, being haunted, adds Gordon, does not mean that the individual must "adopt a set of rules or identity" in response to any set of affects.[31] Conversing with ghosts is about "making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located."[32] It is, as Gordon identifies, about a reckoning that ultimately calls upon the individual being haunted to transform themselves; this transformation is about the "passion of what is at stake"—reconciliation toward a larger social justice project in addressing the contradictions of early feminist theorists in education.[33] And, while not ultimately individualistic, continues Gordon, reconciliation is something that the individual must try for their self. In reckoning with a ghost, the individual must consider

what is required of them in order for them to both change their self and also the conditions that make them who they are—those conditions that "set limits on what is acceptable and unacceptable, on what is possible and impossible."[34]

For contemporary white feminist scholars, such an approach may offer a more accessible way of reckoning and reconciling with their ghosts, as it affords them an agency in setting the terms of their compelled reckoning with their predecessors. Nonetheless, as earlier observed, while it is necessary to grapple with the complexities and difficulties of a past, to reiterate Kolmar, encounters that may bring shame in a sense of shared identity challenge those concerned in facing these relationships and risk stymying and even halting progress toward reconciliation. The experience of emotions such as shame can "diminish one's power to act."[35] For white feminist theorists, their likeness with their predecessors and shared sense of complicity may be the very thing that prevents them from engaging with their ghosts.

Adriana Cavarero's discussion of the "empathetic trap"—the risk that feminists take of falling into the relationship that they have established between a need for self-possession ("starting from oneself") and connection to other women—however offers a possible path toward reconciliation.[36] Indeed, Cavarero analyzes the feminist practice of "consciousness-raising," of bringing awareness from this perspective.[37] She contends that feminist emphasis on narrative legitimates the individual, recognizing a need to express one's "uniqueness." And yet, simultaneously there is often interwoven into these narratives a "tendency to recognize one's own self within the other's story," in particular if that story is grounded in one of "suffering and misery."[38] As is often the case in such situations, Cavarero continues, the need for comfort in shared experience often triumphs over any dissimilarities that may exist between individuals. Thus, rather than distinguishing who "I" am from who "you" are, both are passed over for an assumption of "we."

Such a scenario may be found in the scholarship of feminist theorists of women's education. Take, for example, the research that has been done since the 1970s on the trope of "separate spheres"—domestic and public, female and male, respectively—in antebellum America. In the intervening forty years,

scholarship on this subject has evolved from describing the situation of women at that time as one of oppression and suffering, to one in which women have been increasingly recognized for their agentic capacities and the ways in which they have found opportunity to occupy and influence both public and private spheres in the nineteenth century.[39]

It may be something of a leap to make the following claim. However, I find grounding in historian Gerda Lerner's contention that feminists of the 1960s and 70s, writing on women's situation in 1800s America, believed "with a missionary zeal" that the history of women could only be "represented as the history of an oppressed group."[40] They "praise[d]," she adds, anything that women of the nineteenth century had done to further the situation of women. Similarly, Clare Hemmings identifies a "preoccupation with unity and sameness" in the feminist theory of the 1970s.[41] In keeping with Cavarero, earlier second wave feminist theorists, seeing their own oppression in that of their predecessors, had fallen perhaps into her "empathetic trap."

Cavarero however argues for setting aside this ethic of empathy in favor of what she calls an "altruistic ethics," in which "I" am distinguished from "you" and each is necessary for the existence of the other. An individual, she contends, cannot be diminished to anything less than their fully unique self:

> No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself in *you* and, even less, in the collective *we*. I do not dissolve both into a common identity, nor do I digest your tale in order to construct the meaning of mine.[42]

For Cavarero thus what is critical is that "[u]niqueness is an absolute difference."[43] Despite our similarities, "I" am always in some way different from "you." This is not, however, because "I" am free from others. Rather, for Cavarero, exposure to others—relation to others—is *necessary* for the distinction between individuals. However, she furthers, as this ongoing engagement is an essential

part of our unique identity, so too then is it incumbent upon us to determine how we will respond in our relationships with one another. Will we succumb to the "empathetic trap" and be subsumed by the other, by our ghosts, or will we follow an "altruistic ethics" which allows us to express our distinctive selves?

What I think Cavarero offers here is a "way out," as it were, from the challenge of "likeness" and possible shame in that likeness—the awareness of a complicity that both compels and challenges contemporary white feminist educational theorists to engage with the ghosts of their predecessors who haunt them. To be certain, I am not suggesting taking up Cavarero as a way of ignoring or avoiding the shame that we may face in engaging with our ghosts. A necessary part of reckoning requires that we directly acknowledge the parts of our past that make us uncomfortable. Thus, in attending to existing temporal and subsequent experiential separateness, for instance, we begin to address the particular uniqueness of the situation of contemporary white feminist theorists as a way of opening space to reckon with and to reconcile with our past.

To this end, Gordon observes that "[r]eckoning is [also] about knowing what kind of effort is required to change ourselves and the conditions that make us who we are."[44] Haunting, she contends, is not static but is an "emergent" process. In this way, just as ghosts set limits on individuals in seeking to direct their "agency," in haunting they also offer a solution—"a something to be done."[45] As concerns the situation of contemporary white feminist theorists, this "something," I offer, may be found in the affective and social relationship with their predecessors. The structure of feeling, to turn one final time to Gordon, is where social experience lies and where, again, *presence* is articulated in the space of an absence that the ghost asks the haunted to fill. Indeed, in delving into the contradictions of our predecessors, into the trouble and the complexities of their personhood, what this haunting offers us by way of a solution—what it offers contemporary white feminist theorists—is a chance to address into their own contradictions—their own "humanity and subjectivities"—through which respect may be bestowed and shame managed toward advancing philosophy of education's larger social justice project.

1 Katie King, *Theory in its Feminist Travels: Conversations in U.S. Women's Movements* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

2 In saying this I also acknowledge that there exists a similar haunting by male theorists for their racially problematic lines of thought. In example, scholarship in this area has focused on Hegel, Rousseau, and Kant. A continuation of that discussion is not within the purview of this paper. However, for further reference, please see Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2009); Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); and Amy Shuffelton, "The Creature's Creole Education," in *Creolizing Frankenstein*, ed. Michael Paradiso-Michau (under-review).

3 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), ix.

4 Wendy Kolmar, "History," in *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies,* eds. Catherine M. Orr, Ann Braithwaite, and Diane Lichtenstein (New York: Routledge, 2012).

5 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 3.

6 Gordon, 3.

7 Gordon, 5.

8 Gordon, 63.

9 Gordon, 64.

10 Gordon, 60 (emphasis in the original).

11 Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9-39.

12 Barbara Applebaum, "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 868.

13 Barbara Applebaum, "Reframing Responsibility in the Social justice Classroom,"

Race Ethnicity and Education 12, no. 5 (2012): 616.

14 For more information on "white complicity" see the scholarship of Barbara Applebaum.

15 Carol Howard, "Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on Slavery and Corruption," *The Eighteenth Century* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 61.

16 See D. L. Macdonald, "Master, Slave, and Mistress in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 11 (1992): 46-57, and Moira Ferguson, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery," *Feminist Review* 42 (1992): 82-102.

17 Ferguson, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery," 82.

18 A similar university library catalog search turned-up only one article concerning Macauley's use of slavery and of the term 'slave' to describe the situation of white middle class women in the eighteenth century.

19 Ferguson, ., "Mary Wollstonecraft," 98.

20 Mark David Hall, "Emma Willard on the Political Position of Women," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6, no. 2, CHANGING PICTURE SETTINGS (Fall, 2000): 19. For further reference Hall cites: Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of America Culture* (New York, New York: Knopf, 1977); Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1984); Alma Lutz, *Emma Willard: Daughter of Democracy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Mifflin, 1929).

21 Emma Willard, *Via Media: A Peaceful and Permanent Settlement of the Slavery Question* (Polkinhorn: Washington, 1862), 3.

22 Emma Willard. Letter to President Andrew Johnson, October 25th, 1865.

23 Mary Kelly, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

24 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 3.

25 Gordon,, 4.

26 Gordon, 24.

27 Gordon, 63.

28 Kolmar, "History," 231.

29 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 198.

30 Gordon, 200.

31 Gordon, 22.

32 Gordon, 22.

33 Gordon, 20.

34 Gordon, 202.

35 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

36 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood.* (Warwick Studies in European Philosophy. London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 91.

37 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 91.

38 Cavarero, 91.

39 See Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1: 9-39; and Kerber's, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

40 Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4.

41 Clare Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories," *Feminist Theory* 6, no. 2 (2005): 115.

42 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 92.

43 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 89.

44 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 202.

45 Gordon, 201-2.