

**TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: AN EXAMINATION OF A  
WOMANIST PARADIGM AND ITS UNIVERSALITY IN HUMAN RIGHTS**

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will seek to establish a womanist paradigm as a viable model that is transferable in addressing discrimination and injustices on a global level. The central thesis is that women of African decent, specifically African American women are uniquely positioned as outsiders and historically have experiences with oppression. As such, this paradigm is able to provide an analysis of exploitation to diverse groups of equally marginalized people.

The womanist model focuses on the transformative power of individual and communal resistance to the conditions of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, poverty). This is clearly an important component when considering global injustices and oppression. Building on the works of Clenora Hudson-Weems, Alice Walker, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Katherine Neal Cleaver, bell hooks, Delores Williams, Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Angela Davis I will define the womanist paradigm. I will further show the connection to this paradigm to its historical uses by such women as Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Harper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Fannie Barrier Williams, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, among others and by the Black Women's Club Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

From this process will emerge a model for the contemporary global arenas. The context I have chosen to examine is globalization for Mexican maquiladora workers. The womanist perspective provides a critical methodology for the examination of this border community. This examination will serve as an illustration of how the womanist paradigm can be applied to help transform this and other exploited communities throughout the world.

Finally, I will examine the limitations of the womanist paradigm and offer recommendations to minimize marginalizing other groups.

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*We must tell the [our] story with continually accruing detail from the cradle to the grave. From the mother's knee and the fireside of the home through the nursery, the kindergarten and the grade school, high school, college and university—through the technical journals, studies and bulletins of the Association,—through newspaper, storybook and pictures, we must tell the thrilling story. When they learn the fairy tales of mythical king and queen and princess, we must let them hear too, of the Pharaohs and African kings and the brilliant pageantry of the Valley of the Nile; when they learn of Caesar and his legions, we must teach them of Pushkin and Dumas. When they read of Columbus, we must introduce the Africans who touched the shores of America before Europeans emerged from slavery; when they are thrilled by Nathan Hale, baring his breast and crying: 'I have but one life to give for my country,' we must make their hearts leap to see Crispus Attucks stand and fall for liberty on Boston Common with the red blood of freedom streaming down his breast....*

Mary McLeod Bethune, 1937

#### GOALS OF OPPRESSED PEOPLE

As a womanist I begin by stating that this chapter seeks to find avenues to employ a womanist paradigm on a global level in human rights. I am fully aware that all marginalized people have their own rich his/her-stories, struggles and legacies that are indigenous and distinctive to their community. I do not seek to replace, undermine nor supplant other indigenous ethnic models of resistance with a new womanist “essentialist” paradigm. Rather, the hope is to understand the depth and breadth of the womanist model that can ultimately yield transformation for other exploited communities, thereby enhancing human rights in a global context.

*The Rationale* The womanist paradigm is already a global model that speaks to many women of African descent throughout the Diaspora—Africa, South America, Caribbean, North America, and Asia. For the purpose of this chapter I will focus on African American women. Arguably, Black women are positioned to develop a global model for human rights because of the complexities associated with multiple marginalized status; race, class, and gender. Heterosexual status for straight Black women is the only power position Black women have traditionally held. African American women throughout history in the United States have had to face genocide, chattel slavery, a breeding system, forced prostitution, poverty, forced sterilization, rape, torture, abuse, and countless other atrocities and still live and work with their oppressors' descendants, creating a multi-dimensional set of social, political and economic ramifications. Moving from enslaved personhood to full personhood is an ongoing dilemma faced by African American women but one that has seen great momentum advanced greatly with success since their arrival in the United States.

*Universal Freedom Truths* It is the goal of all oppressed people to seek “freedom.” Drawing from the United Nations Human Rights Convention, United States Constitution, Bill of Rights, African People’s Convention, Rousseau’s Social Contract and other important human rights laws, contracts and ideals, I have simplified them in the following “Three Universal Freedom Truths.”

*Truth 1: All persons desire liberty and equality; that is, freedom to be himself or herself and the ability to make a living for decent wages without the fear of exploitation, coercion or restraint due to his/her race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age or gender.*<sup>1</sup>

*Truth 2: The notion of liberty rests in the fundamental core of human beings—all people are created equal.* If we do not agree, “that all people are created equally” in the fullest sense of these words then we begin at a loss. When we fail to see each other as equal in humanity we begin with an unequal measurement of power, status and rights. This denial of humanity, coupled with the notion of an inherent elite will inevitably lead to oppression and exploitation.

*Truth 3: All persons are entitled to self-determination, to name themselves, define themselves and fight for themselves—sovereignty.* The right to protect oneself is universal across cultures. While the tactics and methods are culturally specific, self-determination is universally accepted as a basic human right status by those of the majority community, however this puts the likelihood for liberty and equality for marginalized of minorities of an almost impossible grasp. It is to these goals that I direct my comments and analyses.

## DEFINING THE WOMANIST PARADIGM

*Womanists not only concern ourselves about the liberation of women, we also struggle along with Black men and children for the liberation, survival and positive quality of life for our entire oppressed Black community. We count Black civil rights experiences as community-building efforts we engage along with Black men and children.* Delores S. Williams<sup>2</sup>

Alice Walker is credited with coining the term womanist. Walker describes a womanist as “one who is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”<sup>3</sup> The underlying epistemology of the

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<sup>1</sup> Essentially this simplifies Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract (1762) and H.L.A. Hart 1955 article “Are There Any Natural Rights?” from Philosophical Review 64.

<sup>2</sup> Delores Williams, “Straight Talk: Womanist Words about Salvation in a Social Context”, in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspective on Hope, Salvation & Transformation*, (ed.) Emile M. Townes, Orbis Books: New York, 1997, 97.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 38 and Barbara Smith (ed.) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* pp. xxiv & xxv. Linda Thomas “Christinanh Nku: A Woman at the Center of Healing Her Nation” p. 54 in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation &*

womanist perspective is (1) based on a reliance on women centered kinship networks that are built on West African traditions and cultural values<sup>4</sup>, (2) community focused, (3) collaborative activism, and (4) spirituality.

*Claim 1: Women centered kinship networks are based on West African traditions and culture* This is not the pathological matriarchal model exposed by Daniel Moynihan's in 1965 in his controversial *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as the Moynihan Report. Moynihan concluded that black urban poverty could be traced in part to a breakdown of black family structure (i.e. dominant mother figure). Instead, according to Patricia Hill-Collins,

The centrality of women in African-American extended families reflects both a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and nation. ...Organized, resilient, women-centered networks of blood mothers and other mothers are key in understanding this centrality. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as other mothers by taking on child-care responsibly for one another's children. (p.178)<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Niara Sudarkasa points out in "*The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies*" in West Africa there are three basic kin groups: 1) corporate unilineal descent groups (lineages), 2) domiciled extended families, and 3) conjugally based family units (subdivisions of the extended family). Within corporate unilineal descent groups or lineages, men and women have specific rights and responsibilities that are independent of one another. This could take the form of women meeting specific financial responsibilities (weddings, funerals), for their children, siblings, and/or parents. Women may or may not hold leadership responsibilities but are more likely to do so in a matrilineal structure as opposed to a patrilineal structure. Sudarkasa argues that unlike Western kin groups "African extended families, which are normal coresidential form of family in indigenous pre-colonial African societies, are built around consanguineal relationships; failure to recognize this has led to

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Transformation, Emilie M. Townes (ed) *Embracing the Spirit*, Orbis Books, New York, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> African-centered values of reliance on extended family & other informal kinship networks and the reliance of spirit. African people have a strong belief system in God. While God is defined differently from ethnic group to ethnic group there is a universal belief in a Higher Power. This is at the core of the African nature of the womanist paradigm.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition, Routledge: New York, 2000, p. 178.

misrepresentation of many aspects of African kinship.”<sup>6</sup> The domiciled extended family kin network refers to women occupying several roles as a result of marriage. While a woman is wife to her husband she is also sister-in-law to her husband’s siblings or a wife to another woman or “co-wife”, for example. These roles are what she calls “consanguinity” and “conjuality”, respectfully. Sudarkasa explains that in West African tradition:

The term wife has two basic referents: female married to a given male (or female) and female married into a given compound or lineage...The term husband refers specifically to a women’s spouse but also generally to the males (and females) in her husband’s lineage.(p.31)<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the socialization process falls on subdivisions of the extended family.

The notion of a womanist goes beyond simply being “feminine” but resourceful, strong, creative, dynamic and nurturing; able to listen to the needs of the group and develop specific strategies to obtain those needs. This is not to suggest that softness, sensuality and other more widely traditionally accepted notion of womanhood is not valid or important to black women but these personal needs are balanced against the community’s needs (i.e. men and children).

*Claim II: The community takes priory over individuals.* The importance of community in the African American community is central. Audre Lorde asserts, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between and individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”<sup>8</sup> It requires that each member understand his/her connection to one another. Therefore, we “lift as we climb”<sup>9</sup>. The womanist perspective requires that as an individual moves forward he/she must take someone else along with them. Malcolm X reminded African Americans that we are only as strong as the weakest link. If one sister is without food, decent housing, adequate health care, or child care the entire chain is weakened. Anna J. Cooper underscores this point of connectedness by stating that:

For woman’s cause is man’s, they rise or sink

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<sup>6</sup> Niara Sudarkasa, “The ‘Status of Women’ in Indigenous African Societies”, in *Women in African and the African Diaspora*, (Ed.) Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Benton=Rushing, Howard University Press, Washington, D.C., 1989, pp. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s house,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. The Crossing Press, Freedom, California, 1984, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Black Club Movement motto.

Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free.<sup>10</sup>

*Claim III: It is through activism that African American women achieve their goals* African American women are not super she-roses who are able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Instead, African American women have learned the value of networking and collaborating because of necessity. Activism must be collaborative and affirming if it is going to be useful. Kathleen Neal Cleaver stated that:

Our colonized status was the basis on which we organized for liberation; therefore all members of the Black Panther Party were drawn from the colonized community. We worked with other peoples and groups on the principle of coalition, not combination within the same organization. We formed coalitions with the electoral Peace and Freedom Party, which was predominately white, with Chicano Brown Berets, with the Puerto Rican Young Lords, and with the Asian Red Guards. We challenged racism with solidarity, and violence with self-defense.<sup>11</sup> (p.38)

For African American women activism is not merely a strategy of convenience but an integral mode of operation because of their marginalized status.

Finally, *Claim IV: God [Creator/spirit] is at center of liberation.* African American women were brought to the United States and stripped of their basic rights as set forth in the “Three Universal Freedom Truths” presented earlier on page 3. Early womanist Frances Harper in her 1857 speech “*Liberty for Slaves*” which was delivered before the New York Anti-Slavery Society on their fourth anniversary eloquently stated that:

Could we trace the record of every human heart, the aspiration of every immortal soul, perhaps we would find no man so imbruted and degraded that we could not trace the word liberty either written in living characters upon the soul or hidden away in some nook or corner of the heart. The law of liberty is the law of God, and is antecedent to all legislation. It existed in the

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<sup>10</sup> Sharon Harley, “Anna J. Cooper: A Voice for Black Women,” in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, (ed.) Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press), 1997, p.91.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Neal Cleaver, “Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism.” In *Critical Race Feminism*, (Ed.) Adrien Katherine Wing, New York Press: New York, 1997, p.38.

mind of Deity when He hung the first world upon its orbit and gave it liberty to gather light from the central sun.<sup>12</sup>

Harper's assertion that God ordains these basis rights is at the core of these principles of freedom and the womanist perspective. African American women know that in order to transform a community and a people there must be an operating knowledge that there is a Higher power--guiding and moving in all things. This connection to spirit resurrects dying communities, helps to foster and nurture unity within the community and helps garner strength for the battle of oppression.

Negro spirituals and the blues reinforced and echoed the importance of God and spirit in the movement and transformation process for African American women: "*Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water...*"

What we see is that by waiting on God—He/She will get us through the trouble. There is a strong faith that sustains African American women. Without this faith, passion and spiritual voice the womanist becomes prone and ineffectual.

*Come by here my Lord, Come by here  
Come by here my Lord, Come by here  
Come by here my Lord, Come by here*

*Someone needs you Lord, Come by here...*

*A'int gonna let nobody turn me around...  
Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on  
freedom...  
Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart I will  
pray...*

Ma Rainey's "Hustlin' Blues," also gives voice to prostitution in a riveting spiritual way:

*It's rainin' out here, and tricks ain't  
Walkin' tonight [repeat]  
I'm going home, I know I've got to fight.*

*I ain't made no money, and he dared me  
To go home [repeat]  
Judge, I told him he better leave me alone.*

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<sup>12</sup> Harper, Frances, "Liberty for Slaves" (1857) in *The Rhetoric of Struggle: Public Address by African American Women*, Editor, Robbie Jean Walker, Critical Studies in Black Life and Culture (Vol. 20) Garland Publishing, Inc. New York, 1992 p. 37.

*Oh, judge, tell him I'm through [repeat]  
I'm tired of this life, that's why I brought  
Him to you.*<sup>13</sup>

This notion of spirit should not be confused however, with religion. Womanists do not permit church affiliation or denomination to fracture the transformation process. They understand the inherent oppressive nature of white Christianity that helped to put them in bondage but at the same time know the value of drawing upon the power of the Creator. They have been able to make the distinction between religion and spirituality without ambiguity.

Linda Thomas in her article "*Christinah Nku: A Woman at the Center of Healing Her Nation*" points out that this same spirit that Frances Harper, Alice Walker and others in the African American experience eludes to is also known as *Ubuntu* in South Africa. *Ubuntu* as she defines it "is a term used in the Black South African community to express what it means to be a full human being in the context of the community." She further explains that *Ubuntu* denotes "the centrality of human beings in society". "Personhood" is what is at stake.<sup>14</sup>

Alice Walker in her powerful 1989 message at the Pro-Choice/Keep Abortion Legal Rally at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C. reminded us of the horrific history of African American women. She states that:

Let it be remembered. It was he [the white man] who placed our children on the auction blocks in cities all across the Eastern half of what is now the United States, and listened to and watched them beaten from their mothers' arms, before being sold to the highest bidder and dragged away....

We remember that Fannie Lou Hamer, a poor sharecropper on the Mississippi plantation, was one of twenty-one children; and that on plantations across the South black women often had twelve, fifteen, twenty children. Like their enslaved mothers and grandmothers before them, these black women were sacrificed to the profit the white man could make from harnessing their bodies and their children's bodies to the cotton gin. ...

We see him [white men] lined up, on Saturday nights, century after century, to make the black mother, who must sell her body to feed her children, go down on her knees to him....

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<sup>13</sup>Daphne Duval Harrison, "Black Women in the Blues Tradition," in Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, (ed.) *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles & Images*, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press), 1997, p. 69-70.

<sup>14</sup>Linda Thomas, "Christinah Nku: A Woman at the Center of Healing Her Nation", in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*. Emilie Townes (ed.) Orbis Books, New York, 1997, p.54

We do not forget the forced sterilization and forced starvations on reservations, here as in South Africa....

When we have children you do everything in your power to make them feel unwanted from the moment they are born. You send them to fight and kill other dark mothers' children around the world. You shove them onto public highways into the path of oncoming cars. You shove their heads through plate glass windows. You string them up and you string them out.( 242)<sup>15</sup>

African American women were not considered people but rather as breeders and as such were placed in a subordinated position and dehumanized. Therefore, their purpose was to build the capitalist system by producing free laborers—the more healthy children Black women gave birth to the more valuable the enslaved African woman was as a commodity. The notion of her as woman and mother was inconsistent with the breeding system. African American women were not viewed as emotionally equal to their white counterparts and were thereby incapable of human emotions of attachment, love, and empathy. Bonding with their children like white women bond with their children was inconceivable.

Additionally, African American women have had to fight against sexism. Within the community, Black women on occasion had to face hostility, resentment and abuse by their own men and at the same time fight off the abuse of white men in a patriarchal society. Their ability to resist African American men while offering support to fight racism and community building perhaps has been the most emotionally taxing and psychologically complicated schisms for African American women. Womanists have had to continually fight to balance to issues of internal hostility of some black men and external racism and sexism from white male dominated society. While white male abuse was destructive and dehumanizing it was expected. This is not to suggest that African American women condoned sexual abuse by black men but early womanists understood that timing was essential. Anita Hill was the right woman at the right time.

However, despite the circumstances of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy and sexism many African American women have survived, resisted and thrived. African American women are CEOs of major companies, professors, doctors, lawyers, ministers, university presidents, mentors, teachers, professional athletes, entrepreneurs, and more. The question is how have African American women been able to transform themselves and more importantly how has the community been transformed as a result of the womanist paradigm? We should not confuse individual successes with community liberation again reminded of the metaphor of the chain and its links.

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<sup>15</sup> Walker, Alice, "The Right to Life: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?" (1989) in *ibid*, p. 242.

Even in the early development of the womanist movement many white sociologists discounted the efforts of the womanist movement as a one-dimensional movement-- focused primarily on race. bell hooks points out that black activist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin encouraged white women to work with black women. However, due to racism white women did not welcome their black counterparts in the suffragist movement. "Ruffin maintained that black women needed to organize so that they could lead a women's movement that would address the concern of all women", according to hooks.<sup>16</sup> From the inception of the womanist paradigm it has been broader than the concerns of African American women. Patricia Hill-Collins recounts the words of Anna Julia Cooper further underscoring the humanist perspective of African American women:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness' and injustices of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. ... The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that...not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to the inalienable to all; not till then is white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.<sup>17</sup>

This broad humanitarian approach embedded in the womanist paradigm arose out of the breath and depth of the oppression faced by Black women. The totality of the oppression spurred a humanitarian philosophy.

Conversely, early white feminists were predominately concerned with receiving the right to vote, fighting singularly for gender inclusion. White feminist's approach historically has led to the alienation of many women of color, including African, Caribbean, Latin American and Asian. In addition, conservatives and various religious fundamentals or Orthodox traditions (e.g. Evangelical Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) are also frequently turned off by feminism, admittedly for different reasons than African American women, however, the results are the same—disinterest, frustration, or anger. Certainly the feminist movement has evolved since the 1800s to where it has come to recognize its historical biases and oppression on some level. Some may argue that it is now moving to a more inclusive paradigm, especially as it relates to sexuality. However, the historical underpinnings have not disappeared. Attitudes of skin color and class privilege still remain even as exemplified in

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<sup>16</sup> Hooks, bell, *Ain't I A Woman*, South End Press, Boston, MA, 1981, p.164.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, New York, 1990, p.37.

the numerous references in scholarly arenas that inherently imply white. Constant references to “woman and minorities” reinforce the notion of an operating race model. On the other hand, the womanist movement had to simultaneously consider issues of racism, sexism, and classism. Don L. Lee’s poem eloquently reminds us of the delicate nuances between woman and race:

*First  
A woman should  
Be  
A woman first,  
If she’s black, really black  
And a woman  
That’s special, that’s real special.*<sup>18</sup>

Exploitation is possible to the degree that one group devalues the humanity of another primarily based on ascribed status and the degree to which the marginalized group permits the exploitation to occur. African American women understood that they had to find ways to achieve their rights—liberty, justice and equality. Black women knew they had to resist the obstacles set before them and maintain their true identity<sup>19</sup>. The dominant group met this with obvious opposition. A history of exploitation is arduous to overcome under the best of circumstances. African American women have transformed their community in many instances. Next, I will examine some of the historical applications of the womanist paradigm.

#### HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF THE APPLICATION OF THE WOMANIST PARADIGM

Elsa Barkley Brown argues, “Much of the literature on Reconstruction portrays freed African Americans as rapidly and readily adopting a gendered private-public dichotomy. Much of the literature on the nineteenth-century public sphere constructs a masculine liberal bourgeois public with a female counter public.”<sup>20</sup> However, Black women were eager to receive their emancipation. The mid- and late- 1880s was as a critical time in the emergence of the womanist

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<sup>18</sup> Don L. Lee, “We Walk the Way of the New World” (Detroit: Broadside, 1970), p. 39 in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles & Images* (ed.) Sharon Harley & Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press), 1997, p.74.

<sup>19</sup> Resistance involves becoming informed and educated about the system of oppression and organizing and mobilizing a communal response to the oppression. Resistance strategies can take the form of escape, euthanasia, music, arson, prayer & faith, and poisoning for example.

<sup>20</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, “Renegotiating the Community.” In *Major Problems in African-American History: Volume II: From Freedom to ‘Freedom Now,’ 1865-1990s.* (ed.) Thomas Holt & Elsa Barkley Brown, Houghton Mifflin Co.: New York, 2000, p.103.

paradigm. It was the time in history in which African American women organized and mobilized with a new fervor. The following three examples are offered as illustrations of early applications of the womanist paradigm.

*Example One: The Washwomen Movement* The washwomen movement which began in Jackson Mississippi in 1866; followed by the Great Strike of 1877 in Galveston; and the 1881 Atlanta, Georgia washwomen strike; serve as illustrations of how the womanist model is applied. According to Brown (2000) African American household workers in the South fought for better wages, higher standards of living and decent work conditions. The African American washwomen workers took White America off guard. Many wanted to work from their home and resented being forced to live with their employer because they wanted to maintain a safe, stable environment for their family. Black women wanted to move as far away from their oppressors as possible. They went on strike, which was unprecedented at the time for women. Striking meant no income but they knew that members of the extended kinship network would rally together to assist and support each other. Their success is also a testament to their commitment and faith in the community.

*Example Two: Early Migration Movement* After slavery was abolished many Black women pulled up their roots completely and moved to midwest communities, such as Kansas. Paula Giddings writes that 7,000 Black people moved to Kansas in 1879. Mary J. Garrett a key figure in the migration movement was the founder of the New Orleans committee of 500 individuals to support migration. Some of the reasons for the movement by Black women were both economic and social. First, they relocated to make a decent living and provide a safe environment for themselves and their children, which was the same reason for the washwomen's movement. There were examples of married and single women migrating. Women formed partnerships with other women and managed farms together. The womanist spirit is evident in this case in that we see women relying on extended kinship networks for childcare, food and clothing. Women, mothers and other mothers, were best friends not their enemies. They moved together, worked for a common good and shared in the profits. Furthermore, they organized and mobilized to resist exploitation and oppression

*Example Three: Birth of National Association of Colored Women (NACW)* Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell and others led the fight against lynching in the South. Ida B. Wells, a teacher, mother, wife, journalist, and activist used her pen and determination to galvanize the community. The death of her friend Tom Moss became the catapulting event in her life to move her into national spotlight. Wells saw herself intricately tied to the fate of Moss, thus enabling her to see his death in a very personal way. If Moss could die so senselessly then so could Wells and every other Black man and woman? There was an urgency to organize and mobilize the community. Wells is credited with

leading the fight for justice in the brutal death of Moss in the form of a mass exodus in 1892, from Memphis, Tennessee to Kansas, Oklahoma and other western states.

Wells, again riveted by a heinous lynching of another Black man, Henry Smith, in February 1893, was moved to action. After careful detective work she wrote about the incident. Isabelle Mayo and Catherine Impey read of this crime in Scotland and subsequently invited Ida B. Wells to come to the British Isles to talk about lynching. It was this trip that not only propelled Wells into national spotlight but it also globalized the movement, which led to an international coalition. Of course, this international attention to the race condition in America was an embarrassment to the nation. There was a marked drop in the number of lynchings in 1893, after Wells' trip abroad. Wells became a target for racists in America.

Other Black women at home in the United States knew that British allies were important and they were encouraged Ida but they also recognized that she was in a vulnerable and dangerous position. "Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin issued a call for a national convention in Boston. In July 1895, one hundred women from ten states met to formulate plans for a national federation. This activism led to a community response in the form of the National Federation of Afro-American Women led by Margaret Murray Washington, the third wife of Booker T. Washington. Black women moved to unite other groups into larger more powerful federations. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) led by Mary Church Terrell was born as a result of this action. Church Terrell acknowledged "Self-preservation demands that [Black women] go among the lowly, illiterate and even the vicious, to whom they are bound by ties of race and sex... to reclaim them."<sup>21</sup> Out of this vision grew the motto "Lifting as we climb."

## APPLICATION OF THE WOMANIST PARADIGM IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

### BRIEF OVERVIEW

Mexico has historically had a very complex relationship with the United States. Mexicans have oftentimes been perceived and used as cheap labor; they have perhaps been represented as dangerous and dirty people, they are frequently exploited based on ethnicity, skin color, language, and social class. California's Proposition 187 is a recent case of the steady anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. Mexicans, like African Americans have experienced discrimination not only by white Americans but by other marginalized groups, including African Americans. This resentment is due in part to the perceived loss of employment opportunities by Americans and the willingness of Mexicans to accept a substantially reduced wages for their labor. For example,

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<sup>21</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, p.97.

“in the auto industry, U.S. autoworkers at union plants average \$16.75 per hour, while Mexicans take home the equivalent of \$4.50 per day, according to Charles Bowden. Some may argue that this is an improved economic status but along the border Mexican prices run on average 85 to 90 percent of U.S. prices. While wages of the maquiladoras have risen 50 percent inflation in the same period grew 100 percent.” As Mexican communities in America and at the border seek to become empowered they may want to consciously consider incorporating the four claims of the womanist paradigm: 1) reliance on kin networks, 2) prioritizing the community, 3) collaborative activism and 4) spirituality. Research demonstrates that many activists in the Mexican community are currently utilizing some of these same strategies.

There are many similarities between the Mexican-American and African American communities. Both value the extended families and are community orientated. Family is at the center of life. Aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents live as a unit, sharing resources and providing support to each member.

Mexican-Americans have learned the importance of activism in their ongoing struggle for universal freedom. David Spence writes that:

Carlos González Gutiérrez, director of community affairs for the Program for Mexican Communities Living in Foreign Countries (PMCLFC), describes the growth of Mexican "consular activism" in the United States as a response at least partly to the burgeoning Mexican immigrant population in this country, and that population's working-class character. The consular agenda includes representing the interests of Mexican nationals who run afoul of U.S. immigration and criminal statutes, organizing adult basic education and literacy programs in Spanish, running health awareness campaigns, and sponsoring mutual aid organizations based on Mexican town or state of origin. It also includes an effort by the Mexican government to protect the interests of its citizens in the face of rising anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States, as embodied in such initiatives as California's Proposition 187.<sup>22</sup>

Women on the Border (WOB) is yet another organization that seeks to provide education, training and employment opportunities to those employed by U.S. owned multinational corporation that are physically located in at the U.S.-Mexican borders. WOB seeks to improve the quality of life for maquiladoras.<sup>23</sup> WOB estimates that on average a maquiladora must work four

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<sup>22</sup> Spener, David, "Mexican labor at the center of North American economic integration." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* v. 42 no.2 (Summer 2000) p. 123-36

<sup>23</sup> Maquiladoras are women and children who work in the sweatshops.

hours to buy two pounds of beans. Moreover, maquiladora female worker must submit to mandatory pregnancy tests. They are not protected by labor laws and are oftentimes overworked in dangerous conditions. Still many others are raped, abducted and killed. Mexican mothers are currently seeking assistance from the government in the abductions, rape and killings of their daughters.

While the work of Carlos Gonzalez Gutierrez and WOB are very important and necessary the need to develop broad coalitions is paramount. Katherine Neal Cleaver reminds us from her work with the Black Panther Party that coalitions provide necessary diversity and power for liberation movements. Coretta Scott King (1970) talk on “The Right to A Decent Life” commented on the Civil Rights movement:

Our struggle, like yours—that is, the struggle of Black people—could not be won by us alone, we had to find allies among the Americans of good will, Black, Brown, and White, who are ashamed of poverty in a trillion dollar economy....<sup>24</sup>

A Mexican coalition with traditional African American organizations like NAACP, Black Farmers, and labor organizations, for example, enables everyone to share limited resources while building a broad political base that is able to effectively make change, thus enhancing the freedoms for all involved. Coalition members must commit themselves to the full liberation of the group.

Many Mexicans are Christians, with the majority belonging to Catholicism. There is a strong religious base in this patriarchal community. However, this emphasis on religion will not necessarily move them forward without an emphasis on liberation or spirituality. Caesar Chavez is a prime example of how the community has used “spirit” or liberation to guide change. He organized and mobilized farm worker’s union with passion and spiritual conviction for decency, social justice and humanity. Arguably there may be a need to further develop the spirituality in the context of maquiladora community transformation.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE WOMANIST PARADIGM

There are no perfect solutions to addressing human rights. The United Nations along with all other human rights organizations and vehicles can attest to the complexities surrounding resolving all forms of oppression. The womanist paradigm has three limitations in its universal application to human rights.

- 1) *Racialized Suspicion*: Since race is an intrinsic component of this model some may be alienated put by this factor. Some ethnic minorities and white communities may view the womanist model as a

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<sup>24</sup> Coretta Scott King, “The Right to a Decent Life,” in the Rhetoric of Struggle, p. 354.

“Black thing.” I have labeled this limitation as *racialized suspicion*. As one of my Jewish colleagues told me he feels “marginalized” by this approach. His marginalization was not intended but he felt alienated or uncomfortable by the central focus placed on African American women. However, the womanist approach does not ask any group to forget their culture and heritage but rather to embrace your identity while not minimizing other’s identities. Some human rights activists argue that we have to minimize differences, reminding people of race will create discomfort. But I would argue that in failing to see the differences (e.g. race, gender, etc.) we fail to see the uniqueness and beauty in people. Womanists don’t ask communities to dwell on race but to understand its connection to the whole person.

- 2) *Patriarchal Backlash*: The world is still by in large patriarchal. Many men within most communities may view this as a less valuable model because it is a female centered approach. Current human rights approaches place a high value on physical strengthens and force. Some countries consider female orientated approaches to grievances, such as diplomacy, less meaningful or viable in the fight for human rights.
- 3) *The Spirit Factor*: Unlike many other approaches to human rights this model places a high value on spirituality. The Creator/God cannot be removed, diminished or discounted in seeking to resolve oppression, pain and suffering. Many in Western countries view the separation of church and state as the fairest way to human rights. The womanist paradigm would argue that formal church affiliation or religion should be minimized when considering human rights. Dogmatic traditions and religion can produce the most gruesome results, i.e. Israel- Palestine conflict. Conversely, spirituality should guide the human rights process because any definition of spirituality may lead to the agreement and acceptance of the Universal Freedom Truths presented earlier. Some may argue that defining and/or agreeing on what elements compose “spirituality” will inevitability lead to tensions. I would argue that avoiding this tension would not yield a more beneficial model just an easy way out. If we continue to avoid the necessity or usefulness of spirituality we will fail to make

meaningful change. *“It is part of God’s mission and purpose for His world to bring about wholeness, justice, good health, righteousness, peace and harmony and reconciliation.”*<sup>25</sup> Desmond TuTu

## CONCLUSION

In our current world the fight for human rights is at a new level of urgency. We must find ways to resist and transform our communities that are inclusive, affirming and empowering. The womanist model has been offered as a possible strategy to consider helping enhance human rights, freedom, justice, equality, and liberty in a global context while there are limitations to the womanist model it provides a framework worth of consideration. We have to know: 1) there is strength in our kinship networks, 2) the community is only as strong as its weakest link, 3) collaborative activism garners power and 4) through faith and God we can move mountains.

I am A Black Woman (by Mari Evans)

I  
Am a black woman  
Tall as a cypress  
Strong  
Beyond all definition still  
Defying place  
And time  
And circumstance  
Assailed  
    Impervious  
        Indestructible  
Look  
On me and be  
Renewed.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983, p. 177.

<sup>26</sup> Mari Evans, I am a Black Woman (New York: William Morrow, 1970),p. 12 in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles & Images* (ed.) Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press), 1997, p.83.

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