

AFRICANA WOMANISM: RECLAIMING OURSELVES

Clenora Hudson-Weems

**with a Foreword by 'Zulu Sofola, PhD
Introduction by Daphne W. Ntiri**

Cover Design by Floyd Newsum

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Foreword

Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves is not simply a scholarly work, one of those in the mainstream, but our own. It is a new trail blazed with incontrovertible revelations on the African heritage and gender question. Hudson-Weems bravely takes the bull by the horns, confronts the Eurocentric avalanche of words on questions of gender, and puts forward the Afrocentric point of view.

It is and has been an automatic position taken by Western scholars and some Africans of European orientation, that the Eurocentric perception and definition of life is all that is and all that should be. And for fear of being intellectually alienated from what they call the mainstream of thought, the Afrocentric position is seen by even some African scholars as anathema. Thus, under the pressure of intellectual harassment by Eurocentric solipsists, many African scholars incline toward a resignation to the prevailing order, believing that Afrocentric cosmology would make little difference in the world order.

This general position in all things concerning African life becomes particularly disturbing as it relates to gender questions. It leads many Africans to develop an intellectual blind spot on these matters, although daily on the streets of Africa, in the social, political, and professional life of traditional Africa, the Eurocentric perception of gender questions is belied and negated. African history is well filled with powerful women who rose to great heights through the traditionally established gender powerlines. Yet, there is a connivance by many scholars who see the African woman as belonging with European women within the Eurocentric cosmos.

Hudson-Weems, having engaged in serious scholarly research on these matters, dares to challenge the Eurocentric *status quo* in *Africana Womanism*. For the first time, the African position on gender issues is fearlessly presented with a global spread,

leading from African roots to the diaspora, while the author x-rays and analyzes her own identity, realities and multifarious dimensions in family life, social organization and history, as well as in her reflections of herself in her creative writing.

As a race, the most painful part of our experience with the Western world is the "dewomanization" of women of African descent. It is true that to successfully destroy a people its female component must be first destroyed. The female gender is the center of life, the magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive. Destroy her, and you destroy life itself.

Hudson-Weems sees this clearly in the gender battle that rages on through Eurocentric perception, and moves quickly to define the Afrocentric position with an astute scholarship that should make heard the distinct voice for the Africana woman. In its title and content, daughters of Mother Africa at home and in the Diaspora are presented as belonging to the same heritage as that in which the female gender has a distinct reality.

On the gender question, *Africana Womanism* is fresh air in the stuffy closet of Eurocentric verbiage. This is our own point of view, well-researched, articulated and validated.

Africana Womanism strongly makes the point that the Eurocentric definition of woman is alien and destructive to the woman of African heritage. Consequently, subscribers to the disparate Eurocentric and Afrocentric definitions cannot share in a common movement whose essential definition and course of action are anathema to the Afrocentric world view.

'Zulu Sofola, Professor, Head
Department of the Performing Arts
University of Ilorin
Kwara State, Nigeria

PART ONE:

Theory

Women who are calling themselves Black feminists need another word that describes what their concerns are. Black Feminism is not a word that describes the plight of Black women. . . . The white race has a woman problem because the women were oppressed. Black people have a man and woman problem because Black men are as oppressed as their women. (Dr. Julia Hare Quoted in Phillip, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, March 11, 1993, p. 15)

Chapter I

AFR/CANA WOMAN/SM

Black Feminism, African Feminism, Womanism...

Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women (Ama Ata Aidoo, 1986).

Central to the spirit of Africanans (Continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora) regarding feminism in the Africana community is the above quotation by internationally acclaimed African novelist and critic, Arna Ata Aidoo. One of today's most controversial issues in both the academy and the broader community is the role of the Africana woman within the context of the modern feminist movement. Both men and women are debating this issue, particularly as it relates to Africana women in their efforts to remain authentic in their existence, such as prioritizing their needs even if the needs are not of primary concern for the dominant culture. The ever-present question remains the same: what is the relationship between an Africana woman and her family, her community, and her career in today's society that emphasizes, in the midst of oppression, human suffering, and death, the empowerment of women and individualism over human dignity and rights?

While many academics uncritically adopt feminism, the established theoretical concept based on the notion that gender is primary in women's struggle in the patriarchal system, most Africana women in general do not identify with the concept in its entirety and thus cannot see themselves as feminists. Granted, the prioritizing of female empowerment and gender issues may be justifiable for those women who have not been plagued by

powerlessness based on ethnic differences; however, that is certainly not the case for those who have-Africana women. For those Africana women who do adopt some form of feminism, they do so because of feminism's theoretical and methodological legitimacy in the academy and their desire to be a legitimate part of the academic community. Moreover, they adopt feminism because of the absence of a suitable framework for their individual needs as Africana women. But while some have accepted the label, more and more Africana women today in the academy and in the community are reassessing the historical realities and the agenda for the modern feminist movement. These women are concluding that feminist terminology does not accurately reflect their reality or their struggle.¹ Hence, feminism, and more specifically, Black feminism, which relates to African-American women in particular, is extremely problematic as labels for the true Africana woman and invites much debate and controversy among today's scholars and women in general.

It should be noted here that there is another form of feminism that is closely identified with Africana women around the world. While African feminism is a bit less problematic for Africana women than is feminism in general, it is more closely akin to *Africana Womanism*. According to African literary critic Rose Acholonu in a paper she presented in July 1992 at the International Conference on Africana women in Nigeria:

The negative hues of the American and European radical feminism have succeeded in alienating even the fair-minded Africans from the concept. The sad result is that today [the] majority of Africans (including successful female writers), tend to disassociate themselves from it.²

Hence, in spite of the accuracy of Filomina Chioma Steady in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* in her astute assessment of the struggle and reality of Africana women, the name itself, African feminism, is problematic, as it naturally suggests an align-

ment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from its inception. This is particularly the case in reference to racism and classism, which are prevailing obstacles in the lives of Africana people, a reality that the theorist herself recognizes. According to Steady:

Regardless of one's position, the implications of the feminist movement for the black woman are complex ... Several factors set the black woman apart as having a different order of priorities. She is oppressed not simply because of her sex but ostensibly because of her race and, for the majority, essentially because of their class. Women belong to different socio-economic groups and do not represent a universal category. Because the majority of black women are poor, there is likely to be some alienation from the middle-class aspect of the women's movement which perceives feminism as an attack on men rather than on a system which thrives on inequality. (23-24)

In "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective," from *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, Steady asserts that

For the majority of black women poverty is a way of life. For the majority of black women also racism has been the most important obstacle in the acquisition of the basic needs for survival. Through the manipulation of racism, the world economic institutions have produced a situation which negatively affects black people, particularly black women ... What we have, then, is not a simple issue of sex or class differences but a situation which, because of the racial factor, is cast-like in character on both a national and global scale. (18- 19)

It becomes apparent, then, that neither the terms Black feminism nor African feminism are sufficient to label women of such complex realities as Africana women, particularly as both terms, through their very names, align themselves with feminism.

Why not feminism for Africana women? To begin with, the true history of feminism, its origins and its participants, reveals its blatant racist background, thereby establishing its incompatibility with Africana women. Feminism, earlier called the Woman's Suffrage Movement, started when a group of liberal White women, whose concerns then were for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for all people regardless of race, class and sex, dominated the scene among women on the national level during the early to mid-nineteenth century. At the time of the Civil War, such leaders as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton held the universalist philosophy on the natural rights of women to full citizenship, which included the right to vote. However, in 1870 the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States ratified the voting rights of Africana men, leaving women, White women in particular, and their desire for the same rights, unaddressed. Middle-class White women were naturally disappointed, for they had assumed that their efforts toward securing full citizenship for Africana people would ultimately benefit them, too, in their desire for full citizenship as voting citizens. The result was a racist reaction to the Amendment and Africanans in particular. Thus, from the 1880s on, an organized movement among White women shifted the pendulum to a radically conservative posture on the part of White women in general.

In 1890 the National American Woman Suffrage Association (**NAWSA**) was founded by northern White women, but "southern women were also vigorously courted by that group" (Giddings, 81), epitomizing the growing race chauvinism of the late nineteenth century. The organization, which brought together the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association, departed from Susan B. Anthony's original women's suffrage posture. They asserted that

the vote for women should be utilized chiefly by middle-class White women, who could aid their husbands in preserving the virtues of the Republic from the threat of unqualified and biological inferiors (Africana men) who, with the power of the vote, could gain a political foothold in the American system. For example, staunch conservative suffragist leader Carrie Chapman Catt and other women of her persuasion insisted upon strong Anglo-Saxon values and White supremacy. They were interested in banding with White men to secure the vote for pure Whites, excluding not only Africanans but White immigrants as well. Historians Peter Carrol and David Noble quoted Catt in *The Free and the Unfree* as saying that "there is but one way to avert the danger. Cut off the vote of the slums and give it to [White] women." She continued that the middle class White men must recognize "the usefulness of woman suffrage as a counterbalance to the foreign vote, and as a means of legally preserving White supremacy in the South" (296). These suffragists felt that because Africana people, Africana men in particular with their new status as voters, were members of an inferior race, they should not be granted the right to vote before them, which did not come until much later with the August 1920 Nineteenth Amendment. Thus, while the disappointment of being left out in the area of gaining full citizenship, i.e., voting rights, for White women was well founded, their hostility and racist antagonistic feelings toward Africanans in general cannot be dismissed lightly.

Feminism, a term conceptualized and adopted by White women, involves an agenda that was designed to meet the needs and demands of that particular group. For this reason, it is quite plausible for White women to identify with feminism and the feminist movement. Having said that, the fact remains that placing all women's history under White women's history, thereby giving the latter the definitive position, is problematic. In fact, it demonstrates the ultimate of racist arrogance and domination, suggesting that authentic activity of women resides with White women. Hence, in this respect for White women, Africana

women activists in America in particular, such as Sojourner Truth (militant abolition spokesperson and universal suffragist), Harriet Tubman (Underground Railroad conductor who spent her lifetime aiding Africana slaves, both males and females, in their escape to the North for freedom), and Ida B. Wells (anti-lynching crusader during the early twentieth century), were called pre-feminists, in spite of the fact that the activities of these Africana women did not focus necessarily on women's issues. Considering activities of early Africana women such as those mentioned above, and countless other unsung Africana heroines, what White feminists have done in reality was to take the life-style and techniques of Africana women activists and used them as models or blueprints for the framework of their theory, and then name, define, and legitimize it as the only real substantive movement for women. Hence, when they define a feminist and feminist activity, they are, in fact, identifying with independent Africana women, women they both emulated and envied. Such women they have come in contact with from the beginning of American slavery, all the way up to the modern Civil Rights Movement with such Africana women activists as Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Louis Till,³ and Rosa Parks, the mother of the Modern Civil Rights Movement-and the after-math. Therefore, when Africana women come along and embrace feminism, appending it to their identity as Black feminists or African feminists, they are in reality duplicating the duplicate. *Africana Womanism* is a term I coined and defined in 1987 after nearly two years of publicly debating the importance of self-naming for Africana women. Why the term "*Africana Womanism*"? Upon concluding that the term "Black Womanism" was not quite the terminology to include the total meaning desired for this concept, I decided that "*Africana Womanism*," a natural evolution in naming, was the ideal terminology for two basic reasons. The first part of the coinage, *Africana*, identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base-Africa. The second part of the term,

Womanism, recalls Sojourner Truth's powerful impromptu speech "And Ain't I A Woman," one in which she battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood. Without question, she is the flip side of the coin, the co-partner in the struggle for her people, one who, unlike the White woman, has received no special privileges in American society. But there is another crucial issue that accounts for the use of the term woman(ism). The term "woman," and by extension "womanism," is far more appropriate than "female" ("feminism") because of one major distinction--only a female of the human race can be a woman. "Female," on the other hand, can refer to a member of the animal or plant kingdom as well as to a member of the human race. Furthermore, in electronic and mechanical terminology, there is a female counterbalance to the male correlative. Hence, terminology derived from the word "woman" is more suitable and more specific when naming a group of the human race.

The Africana womanist is not to be confused with Alice Walker's "womanist" as presented in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. According to Walker, a womanist is:

A black feminist or feminist of color ... who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexual. Appreciates and prefers women's culture ... [and who] sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female ... Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (xii, xii)

Clearly the interest here is almost exclusively in the woman, her sexuality and her culture. The culminating definition, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," firmly establishes the author's concept of the affinity between the womanist and the feminist. There is hardly any differentiation, only a slight shade

of difference in color. The Africana womanist, on the other hand, is significantly different from the mainstream feminist, particularly in her perspective on and approach to issues in society. This is to be expected, for obviously their historical realities and present stance in society are not the same. Africana women and White women come from different segments of society and, thus, feminism as an ideology is not equally applicable to both.

Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, *Africana Womanism* is not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. *Africana Womanism* is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that *Africana Womanism* and its agenda are unique and separate from both White feminism and Black feminism, and moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, *Africana Womanism* differs from African feminism.

Clearly there is a need for a separate and distinct identity for the Africana woman and her movement. Some White women acknowledge that the feminist movement was not designed with the Africana woman in mind. For example, White feminist Catherine Clinton asserts that "feminism primarily appealed to educated and middle-class White women, rather than Black and White working-class women" ("Women Break New Ground" 63). Steady, in her article entitled "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective," which appears in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, admits that:

Various schools of thought, perspectives, and ideological proclivities have influenced the study of feminism. Few studies have dealt with the issue of ra-

cism, since the dominant voice of the feminist movement has been that of the white female. The issue of racism can become threatening, for it identifies white feminists as possible participants in the oppression of blacks. (3)

Africana men and women do not accept the idea of Africana women as feminists. There is a general consensus in the Africana community that the feminist movement, by and large, is the White woman's movement for two reasons: First, the Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women. According to Africana sociologist Clyde Franklin II:

Black men are relatively powerless in this country, and their attempts at domination, aggression, and the like, while sacrificing humanity, are ludicrous. (112)

Joyce Ladner, another Africana sociologist, succinctly articulates the dynamics of the relationship between Africana men and women and does not view the former as the enemy of the latter in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*:

Black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women and children. (277-78)

Since Africana women never have been considered the property of their male counterpart, Africana women and men dismiss the primacy of gender issues in their reality, and thus dismiss the feminist movement as a viable framework for their chief con-

cems. Instead, they hold to the opinion that those Africana women who embrace the feminist movement are mere assimilationists or sellouts who, in the final analysis, have no true commitment to their culture or their people, particularly as it relates to the historical and current collective struggle of Africana men and women.

Second, Africana women reject the feminist movement because of their apprehension and distrust of White organizations. In fact, White organized groups in general, such as the Communist Party and the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.), have never been able to galvanize the majority of Africana people. On the whole, Africanans are grassroots people who depend on the support and confidence of their communities and who, based on historical instances of betrayal, are necessarily suspicious of organizations founded, operated, and controlled by Whites. In general, unlike members of the dominant culture, Africanans are not issue-oriented. Instead they focus on tangible things that can offer an amelioration of or exit from oppression, which are of utmost importance for survival in the Africana community. Those Africana intellectuals who insist on identifying with organizations that offer them neither leadership nor high visibility generally subordinate their Blackness to being accepted by White intellectuals. Unfortunately for those Africana intellectuals, philosophy and scholarship surpass even self identity, and they seem to be sufficiently appeased by merely belonging to a White group.

Having established that the major problem with the African feminist is that of naming, what is the major problem with the Black feminist? Briefly stated, the Black feminist is an Africana woman who has adopted the agenda of the feminist movement to some degree in that she, like the white feminist, perceives gender issues to be most critical in her quest for empowerment and selfhood. On the outskirts of feminist activity, Black feminists possess neither power nor leadership in the movement. Black feminist bell hooks obviously realizes this, as she makes a call for Africana women to move "from margin to center" of the

feminist movement in her book entitled *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Receiving recognition as heralds of feminism by way of legitimating the movement through their identification with it, Black feminists are frequently delegated by White feminists as the voice of Africana women. However, this peripheral promotion of Black feminists is only transient, as they could never reach the same level of importance as that of White feminists. It is quite obvious, for example, that Bell Hooks will never be elevated to the same status as either Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem. At best, she and other Black feminists like her are given only temporary recognition as representatives and spokes- persons for Africana people in general and Africana women in particular. Black feminists advance an agenda that is in direct contravention to that in the Africana community, thereby demonstrating a certain lack of African-centered historical and con- temporary perspective. Although White feminists contend that the movement is a panacea for the problems of Africana women, they have been unsuccessful in galvanizing the majority of Africana women as feminists. In fact, there is no existing group of White women controlling the majority of Africana women to the extent of directing and dictating the latter's thought and action.

While Africana women do, in fact, have some legitimate concerns regarding Africana men, these concerns must be addressed within the context of African culture. Problems must not be resolved using an alien framework, i.e. feminism, but must be resolved from within an endemic theoretical construct- *Africana Womanism*. It appears that many Africana women who become Black feminists (or who are inclined more in that direction) base their decisions upon either naïveté about the history and ramifications of feminism or on negative experiences with Africana men. For example, because there are some Africana women who pride themselves on being economically independent-which was the way of life for Africana women long before the advent of feminism-and because one of the chief tenets of feminism in the larger society is that a woman is economically independent, many Africana women unthinkingly

respond positively to the notion of being a feminist. To be sure, Africana women have always been, by necessity, independent and responsible co-workers and decision-makers. But while this naïveté can be easily corrected, negative personal experiences cannot be rectified so readily.

True, one's personal experiences are valid ways of determining one's world view; however, the resulting generalization that many Black feminists share—that all or most Africana men are less worthy than women—is based upon intellectual laziness, which requires effortless rationalization. By the same analysis, it is easy for some people to believe that all White people or all people of any race or sex are a certain way, and it is difficult for them to treat people as individuals. This is important because in reality, relationships are based upon individual particularities rather than upon an overriding group characteristic. For example, an Africana brother having a bad experience with an Africana woman might conclude that all Africana women are undesirable, thus castigating this entire group of people. A classic example of gross exaggeration based not on facts but on polemics or limited personal experiences, is Michelle Wallace's book entitled *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman* (1980). In this book, the author makes a serious attack on Africana men by categorizing them as super macho men who physically and mentally abuse Africana women. It is apparent that the author's personal negative experiences with Africana men, which she relates throughout the book, influenced her ideology. The tragedy is that her book, which was encouraged in different ways by the many feminists listed in the Acknowledgments, received such wide exposure that it consequently influenced the thoughts of an entire generation, thereby representing a watershed in the development of modern Black feminist thought.

If one considers the collective plight of Africana people globally, it becomes clear that we cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues. A supreme paradigm of the need for Africana women to prioritize the struggle for human dignity and parity is presented by South African

woman activist Ruth Mompati. In her heart-rending stories of unimaginable racial atrocities heaped upon innocent children, as well as upon men and women, Mompati asserts the following:

The South African woman, faced with the above situation, finds the order of her priorities in her struggle for human dignity and her rights as a woman dictated by the general political struggle of her people as a whole. The national liberation of the black South African is a prerequisite to her own liberation and emancipation as a woman and a worker. The process of struggle for national liberation has been accompanied by the politicizing of both men and women. This has kept the women's struggle from degenerating into a sexist struggle that would divorce women's position in society from the political, social, and economic development of the society as a whole.

From the South African women who together with their men seek to liberate their country, come an appeal to friends and supporters to raise their voices on their behalf. (In Daphne Williams Ntiri's *One is Not a Woman, One Becomes*, 112-13)

Overall, "human discrimination transcends sex discrimination ... the costs of human suffering are high when compared to a component, sex obstacle" (Ntiri, 6). Furthermore, according to Steady in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*:

for the black woman in a racist society, racial factors, rather than sexual ones, operate more consistently in making her a target for discrimination and marginalization. This becomes apparent when the "family" is viewed as a unit of analysis. Regardless of differential access to resources by both men and women, white males and females, as members of family groups, share

a proportionately higher quantity of the earth's resources than do black males and females. There is a great difference between discrimination by privilege and protection, and discrimination by deprivation and exclusion. (27-28)

Steady's assessment here speaks directly to the source of discrimination that Africana women suffer at the hands of a racist system. There is the oppression of the South African woman who must serve as maid and nurse to the White household with minimum wage earnings, the Caribbean woman in London who is the ignored secretary, and the Senegalese or African worker in France who is despised and unwanted. There is the Nigerian subsistence farmer, such as the Ibo woman in Enugu and Nsukka, who farms every day for minimum wages, and the female Brazilian factory worker who is the lowest on the totem pole. Clearly, the problems of these women are not inflicted upon them solely because they are women. They are victimized first and foremost because they are Black; they are further victimized because they are women living in a male-dominated society.

The problems of Africana women, including physical brutality, sexual harassment, and female subjugation in general perpetrated both within and outside the race, ultimately have to be solved on a collective basis within Africana communities. Africana people must eliminate racist influences in their lives first, with the realization that they can neither afford nor tolerate any form of female subjugation. Along those same lines, Ntiri summarizes Mompoti's position that sexism "is basically a secondary problem which arises out of race, class and economic prejudices"(5).

Because one of the main tensions between Africana men and women in the United States involves employment and economic opportunity, Africanans frequently fall into a short sighted-perception of things. For example, it is not a question of more jobs for Africana women versus more jobs for Africana men, a situation that too frequently promotes gender competition.

Rather, it is a question of more jobs for Africanans in general. These jobs are generated primarily by White people, and most Africanans depend on sources other than those supplied by Africana people. The real challenge for Africana men and women is how to create more economic opportunities within Africana communities. Many people talk about the need for enhanced Africana economic empowerment. If our real goal in life is to be achieved-that is, the survival of our entire race as a primary concern for Africana women-it will have to come from Africana men and women working together. If Africana men and women are fighting within the community, they are ultimately defeating themselves on all fronts.

Perhaps because of all the indisputable problems and turmoil heaped upon the Africana community, much of which is racially grounded, Africanans frequently fail to look closely at available options to determine if those options are, in fact, sufficiently workable. Rather than create other options for themselves, Africanans become confluent with White privileged-class phenomenon, as in the case of feminism. On the other hand, when a group takes control over its struggle, tailoring it to meet its collective needs and demands, the group is almost always successful. When success in one's goals is realized, it makes for a more peaceful reality for all concerned, and one is more inclined to a wholesome and amicable relationship with others, knowing that the concerns of the people are respected and met. Africana Womanism rather than feminism, Black feminism, African feminism, or womanism is a conceivable alternative for the Africana woman in her collective struggle with the entire community, it enhances future possibilities for the dignity of Africana people and the humanity of all. In short, the reclamation of Africana women via identifying our own collective struggle and acting upon it is a key step toward human harmony and survival.

ENDNOTES

¹ For many reasons, many White women as well as African women have become disenchanted with feminism.

² Rose Acholonu presented a paper entitled "Love and the Feminist Utopia in the African Novel" at the International Conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka, July 1992.

³ Emmett Louis "Bobo" Till was the 14-year-old African Chicago youth who was lynched in 1955 in Money, Mississippi for whistling at a 21-year-old White woman. For a detailed explanation of Till's importance to the Modern Civil Rights Movement, read Clenora Hudson's (Hudson-Weems') 1988 doctoral dissertation entitled *Emmett Till: The Impetus for the Modern Civil Rights Movement* and *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*

PART TWO:

Five Africana Womanist Novels

Africana Womanism is a plausible and workable concept, a theoretical framework useful in expressing the reality of the Africana woman within the context of the Africana community. A constant salient concern of the Africana woman has been the security of her family, and that concern has been represented time and again in her writings. Many have debated the question of whether Africana Women's Studies should fall under the Women's Studies or Black or Africana Studies programs or departments. Given that ethnic identification precedes gender identity in the name Africana Women's Studies, it seems plausible that the race factor is more crucial. Therefore, the consensus of many that Africana Women's Studies should fall under the umbrella of Black or Africana Studies seems more valid.

Many feel that Africana women fiction writers have a critical mission to accomplish, which is to "tell it like it is." And since literature in general should reflect life, it is important that the literature of Africana womanist writers speak the truth-the whole truth. When the Africana womanist writes about male-female relationships, for example, she must present them in all dimensions. She must explore the dynamics of the relationships, which go far beyond the mere surface interaction between the man and the woman. She must realistically and objectively examine the dominant forces at play, forces that dictate the very nature of the conflicts and the ways they are handled. These forces, in many instances, are deeply rooted in economics, particularly the economic failure of the Africana man.

When one looks at the economic problems within the Africana family, one invariably comes back to the problem and interference of racism, which strongly impacts upon the economic realities of the Africana family and community. Thus, while the Africana womanist writer should not make blanket justifications for the failures, frustrations, undesirable behavior, and financial

predicament of some of her menfolk, which are oftentimes interconnected, she is not expected to abandon them or badger them with the too-frequent generalization that all Africana men are no good and irredeemable. Such a personal self-serving mislabeling inevitably ends in an unjustifiable and relentless lashing out at men in general, thereby sentencing them to perpetual verbal and emotional castration by their women.

The true Africana womanist novel is the manifestation of the Africana woman in literature. Most of the earlier cited features of the Africana womanist can be found in the main characters in these works. While the female characters are depicted in search of wholeness and authenticity, these characters are also concerned with the destiny of their family, be it their immediate or extended family, including the men. Moreover, while some of them aspire to material gains (a natural inclination, given the reality of living in a capitalistic society) they do not expect their male counterparts to single-handedly provide for all their financial whims. Instead, they participate in efforts to realize their needs and wishes by working along with their partners. When their partners become unable to assist them in this area (they may become unemployed from time to time), the Africana womanists try to stand by their male counterparts and help them maintain their sense of pride. However, while they may very much love their male companions, they love themselves also-enough to not allow themselves to become their companions' scapegoats in their moments of despair, degradation, and low self-esteem. If it becomes necessary to give their male companions space or even give them up altogether for their own self-esteem, they do so, thereby providing the male companions the opportunity to redeem themselves.

One of the biggest bonuses of reading a true Africana womanist novel is gaining the renewed strength and encouragement to do what must be done. In many Africana womanist novels, the protagonists rescue themselves from defeatism and doom within circumstances that have created their victimization. For example, Janie Mae Crawford of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God rescues herself from two pathetic unfulfilled marriages with chauvinist husbands before she finally discovers "Mr. Right," the one man who can respect her as his equal. Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* dramatizes how external forces from other cultures, such as non-traditional African religion and European colonialism, have disrupted what Zulu Sofola refers to as the original "dual-gender system of socio-political power line fully developed by peoples of Africa." According to Sofola, this disruption of the system of co-rulership has resulted in the "de-womanization" of the African woman's psyche, which the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, embodies so well in this novel. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson, in her quest for authenticity grows to truly become what she was named and destined to be, Avatara, freed from the domination of Westernized cultural ideals and imbued with the full acceptance and appreciation of her African heritage and her birthright mission to hand down the rich legacy of her Ibo ancestry. Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* ultimately learns to appreciate herself, taught by her male counterpart that she is her "own best thing." In addition to Sethe's newfound self-esteem, she embodies the family-centered nurturer for her children. Finally, McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* presents the female protagonist, Zora Banks, as the supreme paradigm of the Africana womanist, one who commands respect, thereby making possible salvation for her man, her child, and herself. Each of these protagonists exemplifies some of the basic characteristics of the Africana womanist.

Without question, the Africana woman and *Africana Womanism* address issues critical to the entire Africana community, many of which we are able to see dramatized through the characters in the above-mentioned Africana novels. The characters are able to rise above adversities after coming to grips with the realities in their communities as Africana women. One can surmise that *Africana Womanism* has definite possibilities. If given the respect it deserves, we could possibly begin witnessing the bridging of the existing gap between women in particular and people in general. Inevitably, then, we may all begin to move

more expeditiously toward ameliorating tension, strife, and injustices in today's restless, complex, and ever-changing society. The five Africana novelists have succeeded in offering representations of a movement toward this ideal through their main characters, all of whom prove to be true Africana womanists in concert with their families and communities in the on-going struggle for their birthright privileges as human beings.

Chapter V

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Seeking Wholeness

For over a decade, scholars have been rereading and reconsidering the elements and nuances of Africana culture as reflected in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's most popular and most highly acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,¹ has inspired tremendous interest. In their interpretations of the text, scholars almost invariably mislabel Hurston a "pre-feminist." This label is inappropriate, as the novel lacks the true characteristics espoused by feminist theory and ideology. In Hudson-Weems' "Tripartite Plight of African-American Women as Reflected in the Novels of Hurston and Walker," she asserts that:

Hurston's novel abounds in female subjugation, although her strong indictment of racism cannot be overlooked. The very title of the novel is taken from a scene expounding on racism, not sexism nor classism, which strongly suggests that the author regards this as a critical issue. (193)

For mainstream feminists, racism is not a priority, as they are more concerned with the empowerment of women. They attempt to place the woman in total control of her life, oftentimes without participation on the part of her family (males included) in this endeavor. Generally speaking, mainstream feminists aspire to divorce themselves from familial responsibilities as a priority.

While the quest for wholeness of Hurston's protagonist,

Janie Mae Crawford, could be ostensibly linked to feminist thought, her individual quest is more closely akin to the position of the Africana womanist since it is inextricably linked to positive male companionship. The Africana womanist recognizes her triple plight (racism, classism, and sexism respectively) and realizes that her struggle has been intertwined with that of her male counterpart from early on. Together they have had to combat the various forms of oppression in society.

There are several main components of the Africana womanist characterized by Janie's quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Among them is the protagonist's desire to name and define herself; which is demonstrated throughout the work. For example, Janie ignores the opinion of others regarding her chosen male companion, Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. She decides for herself who or what is good for her. She chooses Tea Cake, in spite of what society says or believes about him, for she defines herself in her own terms, despite the stares and harsh words of her neighbors. In her unconventional behavior, she is unrepentant, thereby demonstrating self-actualization. Janie's discovery of self is made possible by relinquishing her past dependence on her grandmother and her first two husbands, Killucks and Starks. She evolves into a self-defined figure who embraces her independence, encouraged by her last husband, Tea Cake. She says to her best friend, Pheoby, "Two things everybody's got to do fuh theyselves. They got tub go tub God, and they got tub find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 285). As Cheryl A. Wall observes, "with Tea Cake as her guide, Janie has explored the soul of her culture and learned how to value herself" (Wall 389).

Also characteristic of the Africana womanist in Hurston's novel are the protagonist's family-centeredness and her uncompromising concern with the welfare of her immediate family, Tea Cake and herself. Demonstrating her great regard for family, which extends to her guardian-grandmother, Nanny, who is very close to her, Janie marries Logan Killicks so Nanny can die and rest in peace. In a conversation between Nanny and Janie, Nanny

makes the following request:

"Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate." (37)

Shortly after that, Janie hastily marries Logan.

There is also a strong respect for elders depicted in the novel as demonstrated by Janie's relationship with her grandmother, Nanny. Janie goes against her will and better judgment to marry her grandmother's choice for her, Logan Killicks. All that she knows, she learned from her grandmother, the elder, and so she trusts her grandmother's advice.

Yes, she would love Logan after they were married. She could see no way for it to come about, but Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so. (38)

Out of true reverence for Nanny, Janie obeys her grandmother's wishes, burying her own desires of finding true love.

Later in the novel, Janie leaves Logan and marries Joe Starks, determined to give this new marriage all she has and wanting very much to have a happy family. Although this marriage goes sour, too, she ultimately does find the right man for herself, Tea Cake. Until his unfortunate death, she shows in her commitment to him and their marriage that she appreciates family-hood and that she will go to any lengths to maintain her life with her loved one. She works unceasingly to keep her little family together, and even when her true love dies she is loyal to the memories of the happy marriage they shared.

Sisterhood is another element in the character of the African womanist that can be seen in Hurston's novel. This is found in the genuine friendship between the protagonist and her confidante, Pheoby Watson. Janie trusts Pheoby and confides her true feelings about not mourning her second husband's (Joe Stark's)

death. One senses the essence of this strong bond between the women in the opening conversation when Janie returns to her hometown:

"Hello, Janie, how you comin'?"

"Aw, pretty good, Ah'm tryin' to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outa mah feet. She laughed a little.

"Ah see yo. is. Gal, you sho looks good. You looks like youse yo' own daughter. They both laughed. "Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' woman-hood."

"G'wan! G'wan! You must think Ah brought yuh somethin'. When Ah ain't brought home a thing but mahself."

"Oat's a gracious plenty. Yo' friends wouldn't want nothin' better."

"Ah takes dat flattery offa you, Pheoby, 'cause Ah know it's from de heart. (14)

Indeed, Pheoby is the only one who welcomes Janie home while the other women in the community have nothing but harsh words to say. Unlike the others, Pheoby does not condemn Janie for her acts and her choices in men and, like a true friend, she attentively listens to the story that Janie must tell. Janie is able to confide in Pheoby because, as she says, "we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint" (19). Toward the very end of the novel when almost all has been said and after all that Janie has gone through, including the tragic death of her last husband, "Pheoby hugged Janie real hard and cut the darkness in flight" (285).

Another dominant quality of the Africana womanist portrayed throughout Hurston's novel is that of strength. Janie survives three ill-fated marriages, the first two with male chauvinists, and the last one tragically ending in her husband's unfortu-

nate death. Demonstrating true inner strength, Janie returns to her hometown of Eatonville with her head up, in spite of the vicious petty gossip of the townspeople:

When she got to where they were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy "good evenin'" and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking. (11)

This strength is earlier evidenced shortly after Janie's marriage to Tea Cake when for a while she fears that he has abandoned her:

The thing made itself into pictures and hung around Janie's bedside all night long. Anyhow, she wasn't going back to Eatonville to be laughed at and pitied. She had ten dollars in her pocket and twelve hundred in the bank. (179-80)

After she goes through Tea Cake's painful death with him, she accepts things as they are, her heart satisfied that she had done everything humanly possible to save her loved one before finally resorting to killing him in self-defense. Indeed, this took a lot of strength-to kill one whom she loved more than any other man before him.

The Africana woman's desire for positive male companionship is also described in Hurston's novel through Janie's unyielding quest to find it. She epitomizes this quest, for throughout her life she demonstrates her desire for emotional support from a man. Beginning with her childhood when she ponders the idea of true love under the pear tree, she dreams of the perfect male companion, one who will love and cherish her and regard her as his equal. She finds this in Tea Cake, who respects her intellect as she wants. She wants a man as an integral part of her life, that

is, one who can complement her and make her whole, such as Tea Cake, who is her lover, her friend, her protector. He is her true companion. He treats her as his equal, teaches her to play chess, teaches her to drive a car and shoot a gun. Janie finds it all in Tea Cake, a man who makes her laugh and cry, who makes her want to do the things she had not cared to do before, a man who enables her to realize her full potential as a woman, for the first time, fully aware of her femininity and the limits of her sexuality. Janie, in demonstrating her desire for positive male companionship, shows her need to find a true soul mate. Janie speaks to God about her fear of losing Tea Cake:

But oh God, don't let Tea Cake be off somewhere hurt and Ah not know nothing about it. And God, please sub, don't let him love nobody else but me. Maybe Ah'm is uh fool, Lawd, lak dey say, but Lawd, Ah been so lonesome, and Ah been waitin', Jesus. Ah done waited uh long time. (180)

Generally speaking, a White mainstream feminist would not take the position of needing and depending on male companionship for wholeness. On the other hand, an Africana womanist can admit to such a need and desire. Without it, she is incomplete, as is suggested in Janie's mental despair and physical immobility (overburdened, she retires to bed) from being without her ultimate male counterpart. Janie demonstrates her eternal love for her companion, even after his death, as his spirit continues to motivate her:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course, he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled

in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see. (286)

The notion of role-playing in the family structure is another issue for the Africana womanist in Hurston's work. Janie operates within a flexible or relaxed role environment, which is demonstrated when she and Tea Cake show their willingness to share the chores equally, both inside the home, where he shares the household chores, and outside the home, where she works alongside her husband in the fields:

So the very next morning, Janie got ready to pick beans along with Tea Cake ... But all day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back made her popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on. Then Tea Cake would help get supper afterwards. (199)

Indeed, Janie and Tea Cake unite here, abandoning the traditional male or female roles established by the dominant culture to become equal partners. Janie, a new spirit for the woman, abandons the traditional female role, and ultimately emerges as emancipated and unshackled from the limitations her society impose on her. This new component of her personality is carried a step further through male-female collective participation in Janie and Tea Cake's struggle against oppression in the novel, which we see when they are allies against bigotry.

One thing that rings out loudly in the novel is Janie's search for both wholeness and cultural authenticity, as represented in her quest-both recognizing her needs as a woman and acting according to the dictates of her own culture in regard to her role as woman. She searches for wholeness in both herself and in her marriages but finds it only in her last marriage to Tea Cake. After giving her that great scare, Tea Cake returns home and Janie,

contented and complete, looks down upon her sleeping loved one, feeling now "a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (192).

To be sure, Janie ultimately demands respect and recognition. When she is denied it, she leaves (as was the case with Killick Logans who disrespects her because of his own insecurities) or she calls a halt to the relationship in some way (as with her marriage to Joe Starks, who also acts negatively toward her out of insecurity, mostly about his age). However, with Joe, she is forced to verbally castrate him when he publicly humiliates her:

"Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tub cut up plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not ... Yea, Ah'm nearly forty and you'se already fifty. How come you can't talk about dat sometimes instead of always pointin' at me? ... Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old? When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (122-23)

Later, she comes to his deathbed and insists on giving him a piece of her mind before he dies from both failing health and mental depression:

"Ah knowed you wasn't gointuh lissen tub me. You changes everything but nothin' don't change you-not even death. But Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. (133)

And so Janie lives alone until she meets one who can give her both love and respect, Tea Cake. Only when she achieves these things can she be content with herself and her mate. Only then can we sense her true inner peace.

Ambition is another quality of the Africana woman found in Hurston's novel. One can see Janie's ambition in her un-daunted quest for the right man, her soul mate. Unlike many women who too frequently succumb to just the idea of a man, failing to see his many shortcomings, Janie continues her search for some twenty-five years until she is successful.

Finally, there is strong evidence of the Africana womanist as nurturer embodied in both Janie and her grandmother. In caring for and protecting her granddaughter, Nanny demonstrates the nurturer perhaps at her best. She sacrifices all to ensure Janie's security. When Janie's classmates humiliate her for living with her grandmother in the home of her White employers, for example, Nanny saves her money and buys land for them. When she later advises Janie to marry Logan, a man of some property, Nanny does so only out of her maternal instincts and desire to ensure Janie's happiness and security. Nanny says, "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (30). There is also a beautiful passage with Nanny and Janie rocking in a chair, and Nanny realizes that soon Janie must be left to live her own life. With unconditional love, she heaps upon Janie mothering love and devotion, making possible for her the opportunities she was herself denied as a slave and ex-slave woman.

Janie, too, displays nurturing qualities, for she is unyielding in her tender care for Tea Cake earlier in the novel after he is bitten by a rabid dog and goes mad. Insisting on taking care of her husband-and refusing to admit him to a hospital, she shows herself to be a nurturing and loving woman, a devoted wife. "Tea Cake began to cry and Janie hovered him in her arms like a child. She sat on the side of the bed and sort of rocked him back to peace" (267).

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is prophetic in its anticipation of both a new kind of novel and a new kind of

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Woman, the Africana womanist. With all these qualities, the protagonist ultimately is able to find herself, as she goes through her *rites de passage*² from girlhood to womanhood. Indeed, Janie comes across as a true Africana womanist, and hence, the novelist,

ENDNOTES

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978). All subsequent references to this work will be given by page number only.

² For further discussion on the rites of passage, see Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites de Passage* (1960).

Chapter IX

McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*: In It Together

*"... He thinks I have absolutely no concept of what he might be feeling. And on the other hand, he seems to think that this problem is his alone. But it's not. It's ours."*¹

Of all the captivating, realistic portrayals of female protagonists in contemporary Africana womanist writings, Terry McMillan exceeds the works of others such as Zora Neale Hurston, Mariama Ba, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. McMillan's chief concern is the desire for a positive male companion, a cornerstone for the Africana womanist and a critical issue, as male and female interaction is the only means by which the perpetuation of the human race can be ensured. Zora Banks, McMillan's protagonist who is the supreme paradigm of the total Africana womanist, possesses most of the main qualities. She exudes a naturalness in her acts and mannerisms, almost effortlessly carrying out the appropriate motions in her everyday life in order to secure peace, harmony, and success in both her home place and her workplace. When one speaks of one's life in the home place and workplace, one invariably evokes the primacy of the family, including the male counterpart and how one's life fits into those constructs.

Among many things, Zora Banks is self-naming and self-defining, family-centered and compatible, flexible with her roles and ambitions, demanding of respect and strong, reverent of elders and authentic, and, last but not least, nurturing and mothering.

The author defines the Africana womanist in this portrayal, taking into consideration many of the complexities surrounding men as well as women. It must be noted that the dynamics of the Africana woman cannot be placed in proper perspective without consideration of her male counterpart:

More and more we believe smart women are discovering that self-fulfillment cannot be realized through career and self-mastery alone. Neither can it be gained from love alone. Self-realization comes from the achievement of both love and mastery. (Cowen and Kinder 13)

This ideal is precisely what Zora is attempting to work out during the course of the novel. And in order for her to do this, she realizes first that her relationship with Franklin, the father of her child, is of key importance.

Given the external pressures inflicted upon Zora and Franklin's relationship, let us concentrate on the dynamics of Franklin, for a moment. He portrays many of the internal flaws brought on by external circumstances, such as limited job opportunities due to racism. Franklin must work through these issues himself, as all Africana men must do. It is through Franklin and his frustrations that one is better able to understand the Africana man's reaction to the devastating sense of no control. One sees his need for respect and acceptance from the Africana woman. Too often Franklin's goals in life are stunted, unjustly defeated by racist stereotypes about who he really is. For example, when Franklin is unsuccessful in getting a taxi to stop for him and resorts to having Zora get one for them, which she does in only a few seconds, he responds:

"If you big and black in America, that's two strikes against you-did you know that, Zora? They think all black men is killers and robbers and that we gon' cut their throats, then take all their fuckin' money.

Ain't that right, sir?" (124)

His rhetorical question to the taxi driver shows that he doesn't expect equality for himself and African men in America. According to Janet Blundell, "the repeated blows the oppressive white society dishes out make him increasingly depressed and hostile" (109). Be that as it may, the African man "is subjected to societal opprobrium for failing to live up to the standards of manhood on the one hand and for being super macho on the other" (Staples 2). Since all good relationships are based upon sharing-and Franklin is unable to give his share because of his limited resources-one senses that a breakdown in Zora and Franklin's relationship is inevitable. The obvious ensues; his ego is damaged. To restore himself and save his relationship with Zora, Franklin must work on self-mastery, which he does when he goes back to school. In going back to school, Franklin increases his marketability, which could enhance his finances. Only after taking the first step-school-can he go back to Zora, a confident man on equal terms with her. Without question, he needs to feel good about himself.

Zora, on the other hand, seems to have it together for the most part. To begin with, she both names and defines herself. In the very first chapter she states, "One thing I can't stand is people telling me what to do" (14). She decides for herself who she is, her worth, and what she wants in life, even though she knows she is not perfect.

None of this is to say I'm perfect. I just know what I've got to offer-and it's worth millions. Hell, I'ma strong, smart, sexy, good-hearted black woman, and one day I want to make some man so happy he'll think he hit the lottery. I don't care what anybody says-love is a two-way street. (17)

Her acts, too, demonstrate Zora's insistence upon naming and defining herself. One instance in particular bears out this fact.

When Zora tells her best friends, Marie, Portia, and Claudette about Franklin and his profession as a contractor, she is not dissuaded by the negative things Portia, in particular, has to say about him:

"Honey, if he don't have at least two major credit cards, a modern car, a one-bedroom apartment, and a college degree, I say leave his ass alone-he ain't going nowhere in life." (55)

Instead, Zora holds to her own values and standards and when it is time to do so, she makes those things that were important to her very clear to her friends: "Well, let me put it this way. I'll take happiness and love over money any day" (56).

Zora also demonstrates a strong sense of family-centeredness. A career in music means everything to her, but she still puts family needs and concerns first. She wants very much to have a family with Franklin, to marry him and to have his children. She wants a complete family, not just him, not just a baby:

Lots of women are having babies these days without being married, but I never imagined myself giving birth without having a husband to go along with it. I can take feminism only so far. (144)

But more important, Zora unselfishly puts the welfare of Franklin's two sons above her own desires, and she refuses to put her longing for a piano, which could certainly advance her musical pursuits, above their needs, in spite of Franklin's offer: "Franklin you can't be serious. You shouldn't be giving me all this money ... What about your kids? The piano can wait" (101). When Franklin receives another large check, which does not happen very often, he proudly comes to her with it. Again, she takes a similar stance:

"You don't have to give me this ... What about you

kids? ... Christmas. I know you plan on giving those kids something ... So that's what we'll do with this money." (1. 7).

Franklin is reminded of just how special Zora is to him. She is totally in his corner, in concert with him in their struggle to make a good life together:

Hell, when you meet a woman who likes you 'cause you. you, l}Ot because of how much money you bring home ... tells you she wants to be in your corner a hundred percent and means it; asks you about your dreams ... I mean, she asked me what did I see myself doing five, ten years from now? Ain't no woman never asked me no shit like that. I told her the truth. Damn, it felt good being able to tell somebody. Felt good being able to talk to a woman about some real shit for a change. To tell the truth, we ended up doing more talking than fucking. Which was cool. A real nice change ... I told her my dreams, all right. That I was tired of working construction, never having no money. That one day in the near future I was planning on being my own boss. And she listened. Asked questions. Didn't laugh or think I was being Outrageous and shit. A man needs a woman who makes him feel like he can do anything. (70)

And Zora is, indeed, all that he says and more. She not only listens to him, but she makes him feel and believe in himself, notwithstanding the obstacles that confront him again and again. She goes an extra mile to help him realize his dreams:

Zora bought me one of those books on how to be a carpenter, plus she sent away for all kinds of information from the Small Business Association on how to start my own business. (98)

She is, without question, committed to him, to their relationship. She had said at the outset, "So yes. I would like a man to become a permanent fixture in my life for once" (15). And now that she has found him, she is more than willing to do her part in preserving the relationship. In a discussion with Franklin about his education and employment, Zora suddenly has this epiphany:

Damn, not only was he black as midnight and my kind of handsome, but it just hit me that he's my man. I love him. I don't care if he never goes to college. I don't care how many kids he has. As long as he makes me happy, makes me feel glad I'm a woman, and as long as he keeps his word and gets his divorce, I'll be here for- ever. So far, he's been the only man I've seen beside me when I have dreams that happen twenty years from now (96).

Clearly Zora has a definite need and respect for positive male companionship.

Not only is Zora connected with her loved one, she is also connected with her roots, her cultural past, via literature, music, and the church. And Franklin is, too. Both have their book collections and both enjoy reading Black books and listening to Black music, be it gospel, blues, jazz, or modern Black music. Zora admits she finds strength in the Black church and asserts, "I'm going back to church and sing where it's always made me feel best. And I'll write music" (381). Feeling at peace and in harmony with Black culture and the Black community demonstrates Zora's authenticity. Zora is made whole with all these things, along with her man, her job, family, and self-love.

Zora knows too well, though, that good things come from discipline and strength. In spite of her love for Franklin, she cannot let him take out his frustrations and feelings of failure on her. She has to be strong, strong enough to stand up to him and

insist that he respect her. After a disappointing birthday, Franklin walked out on her in frustration because he had no money to celebrate her birthday. Zora concludes:

I know one thing-I cannot handle him taking his frustrations out on me, and I don't even want to think about popping phenobarb again, just so I can cope with him being all stressed out. No way. And the lying. There's nothing I hate more than a liar. I'll just tell-simple as that. I don't need this kind of shit, and if we're going to get through this-through every- thing-he's going to have to find a better way of dealing with disappointment. Period. (126)

So Zora continues to struggle with Franklin, paying the rent, buying the groceries, paying the tab for extra-curricular activities, all because Franklin does not have the funds to do so. She does all this without regrets, knowing that whenever Franklin does have the funds, he gladly and anxiously assumes responsibility.

Zora becomes the primary breadwinner, and Franklin necessarily has to take care of the house, which he does well. In one of her reassuring conversations with Franklin, Zora tries to make him feel comfortable with things as they are:

"Things may be a little lopsided right now, but it comes with the territory, doesn't it? Look Franklin, as long as I know you're trying, I can be patient. I love you, and I'll hang in here as long as you don't give up." (140)

Franklin tries to accept their situation for the time being, but, of course, he has a difficult time not maintaining the traditional role of breadwinner.

Disappointments in job retention continue for Franklin. He becomes more frustrated and ultimately resorts to drinking. With

drinking comes abuse, and it isn't long before Franklin physically attacks Zora. In spite of his apologies, Zora holds strong, demanding her much-deserved respect:

"Promise me something ... That you'll cut down all this drinking ... And this I'm not asking. If you ever so much as raise your hand to me again, if I don't kill you first, your ass is going to jail. I mean that from the bottom of my heart." (293)

More disappointments follow, and finally Zora feels so uncomfortable with Franklin that, for both her safety and her baby's security, she ends the relationship. Zora's concern seems to be more for the baby than for herself, though it is clear that she fears what Franklin may do to her, too. The child is her responsibility, and as a mother, Zora is the one who must nurture and protect him. In spite of her love for Franklin, she loves herself and the child enough to insist, with the help of the police, that he leave. It takes a lot for Zora to come to this decision, but she realizes that this is the only way Franklin can save himself and their relationship. He has to redeem himself. She is not able to do it for him, although she has tried so many times before.

In the end of the novel, Franklin does redeem himself, vowing three things shortly after he is forced out of their home:

Number one, I was gon' have to cut out all this fuckin' drinking. Number two, I was going back to school. And number three, even though I missed Zora and my son already, I wasn't gon' show my face over there until I felt strong enough to look her in the eye and tell her that I was sorry.

It took three months. (371)

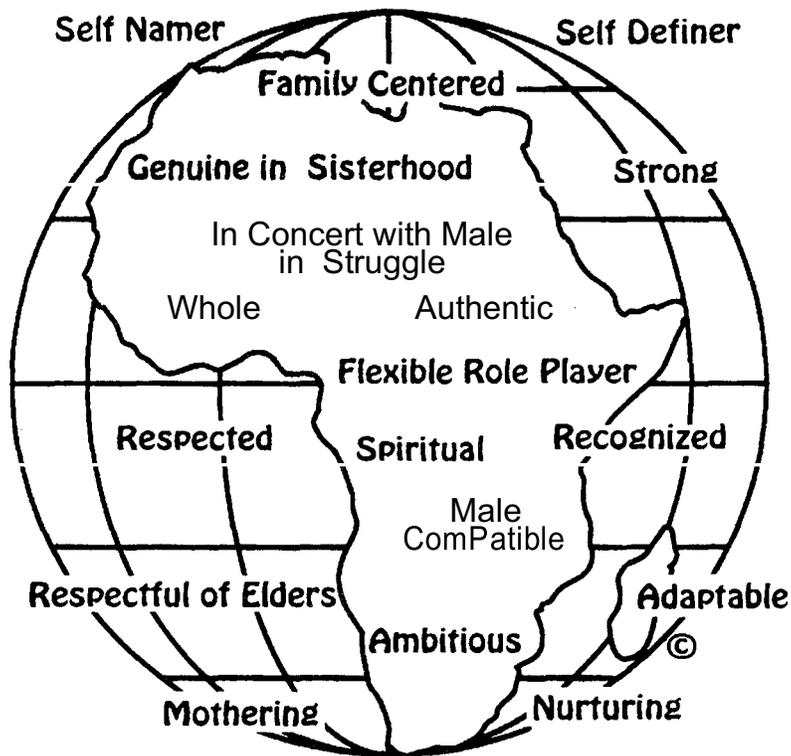
Out of true love for Franklin, Zora does not scorn him when he comes back to visit her and the baby. Instead, she shows her concern for his welfare, her approval of his change, and her con-

tinued love for him and what they had shared together. It is, after all, the relationship between the male and the female that is crucial in this novel, as it is in life in general. Through it all, Zora remains the loving, strong, and committed Africana womanist, realizing that she has presented herself in the right way, and that love, respect, and loyalty will ultimately come back to her, as it must naturally do. Thus, the Africana womanist triumphs, sacrificing neither her family, her community, nor her character.

ENDNOTE

¹ Terry McMillan, *Disappearing Acts* (New York: Viking, 1989). All subsequent citations from this work will be given by page number only.

AFRICANA WOMANISM



From Africana Womanism

Clenora Hudson-Weems, PhD