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# Toward A Sankofa Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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*Here Mosely reflects on sankofa as a value embraced by womanist theologians in terms of its philosophical meaning and its practice. She presents a sankofa ethics that emphasizes the importance of protecting one another, especially the young, resisting all that demeans black people and black life, and living lives of justice.*

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The multilayered symbol, concept and practice of *sankofa*, an Akan word that means “It is no taboo to go back to retrieve that which has been forgotten,”<sup>2</sup> can provide insight into full human flourishing. *Sankofa* and the proverb it captures are part of a complex philosophical system that provided order to the lives of the Akan people. Today the Akan can be found in present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast in western Africa where Adinkra symbols are a part of daily life and are found in cemeteries, on clothing, and in a variety of other places.

*Sankofa* is one of hundreds of Adinkra symbols that contribute to the philosophical system of the Akan people.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* V (2011): 51-88.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust, & Eve's Bayou as Histories* (Landham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000), 26.

Other Adinkra symbols that are conceptually related to *sankofa* include the following: *adinkrahene* is the most highly prized symbol that captures the spirit of “authority, greatness, prudence, firmness and magnanimity”; *akokc nan*, which literally means “hen’s feet,” points to a balanced discipline of mothers and others that is “tempered with patience, mercy and fondness”; *nyame dua* literally means “an altar of God” and affirms belief in the presence and protection of God.<sup>3</sup> Adinkra symbols affirm Akan values and virtues that contributed to a good Akan life in the past, and these symbols can likewise shed light on the ethical life of people today.

African American<sup>4</sup> women in general, and womanist theologians<sup>5</sup> in particular, have been doing *sankofa* since these first sisters retrieved jewels from their past and shared them with their descendants. For as long as African American women have had breath, they have lived instructive lives by simply surviving or by holding up the lives and the works of foremothers. In this way, these women encourage black women to be their best selves and to be successful in navigating terrain in a world that does not value black life.

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<sup>3</sup> W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra* (Washington, D.C.: The Pyramid Complex, 1998), 62-63; 70-71; 158-159; 188-189.

<sup>4</sup> I use the terms black and African American interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> A womanist theologian is a black feminist or a feminist of color who is responsible, serious, in charge, and acting grown. She may love other women and/or men sexually and nonsexually, and she is committed to the “survival and wholeness of entire people.” See Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), xi-xii.

There is coherence between the concept of *sankofa* and the lived experience of African American foremothers and other wisdom women. By studying this coherence, it will be possible to begin to outline a *sankofa* ethics.

I have observed certain patterns of behavior in the lives of many African American women, past and present. (1) These women have literally and figuratively provided safe passage for our young sisters and brothers. The world of drugs and violence can distract one's fulfillment of the dream, and white supremacy can have a deleterious effect on the hearts and minds of all who are not white. (2) Black women have a history of organizing and embodying a spirit of resistance. They know there are resources that already exist in the community for developing strategies of resistance even though new tactics may have to be employed for new situations. (3) Many black women have persevered in these and other pursuits by living spiritual lives of contemplation. Strengthened by the strong and loving presence of God, they have found courage for the journey. These creative women have displayed evidence that a life of homegrown contemplation and action is a discerning one that is centered on God. These three patterns of behavior are important dimensions of a *sankofa* ethics. They signal the importance of protecting, resisting, contemplating, and holding fast to the work of justice. In the pages below I will elaborate on these three patterns of behavior critical in the development of a *sankofa* ethics.

### **1. Providing Safe Passage**

When I think about the excessive violence that touches the lives of African American youth in urban areas, I am reminded of upstanding community members, women and men, who are visible on the streets while students go to and from school. I am also reminded of all the before and after school programs that nurture bodies and souls. Proponents of these efforts are providing safe passage for these youth. African American women are among them because they too wish to preserve the bodies and souls of black folk, especially the youth.

There is a great need for safe passage because our present times are like a wilderness experience.<sup>6</sup> Delores S. Williams has written persuasively about black women's wilderness experience. A host of factors leave African American women exposed to the elements and looking for a way out of no way. Arguably, a culture of white supremacy has contributed to this state of affairs. Knowingly or unknowingly, members of the dominant culture have historically used black people as a foil in an effort to prove the superiority of whiteness. This has resulted in African American women and their communities being the recipients of all kinds of disrespect and terror.

This is evidenced in many black folk who are confused, misled, caught up in violence, burdened by nihilism, and losing the last flicker of hope they ever had. One step in

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<sup>6</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 108-139.

Williams' response to today's wilderness experience is that of encouraging social salvation. Definitive salvation with and from God is about otherworldly affairs, and Williams believes we would do well to leave those particulars to God.<sup>7</sup> In the here and now there is plenty for us to do to promote salvation *from* all that depletes the lives of human beings and prevents full human flourishing. This will simultaneously free up individuals to be about promoting salvation *for* the good of sisters and brothers and all of creation. The challenge is clear: protecting and encouraging are part of a *sankofa* ethics.

For those of us who are African American and possess a rudimentary awareness of our situation, we know that we live in an anti-Black racist society. The examples are legion. Some are subtle and covert, while others are blatant and overt. Philosopher George Yancy has written cogently about ideological and hegemonic understandings of whiteness in our society. That is, white supremacy as the way truth is distorted to benefit those in power and the way some groups maintain dominance over other groups. The white gaze of Caucasians has fallen upon black bodies for centuries, and this has troubled the waters of whiteness. Yancy has stated,

[t]he history of the Black body in North America is fundamentally linked to the history of whiteness, primarily as whiteness is expressed in the form of

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<sup>7</sup> Delores S. Williams, "Straight Talk, Plain Talk," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed., Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 98.

fear, sadism, hatred, brutality, terror, avoidance, desire, denial, solipsism, madness, policing, politics, and the production and projection of white fantasies. From the perspective of whiteness, the Black body...is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality.<sup>8</sup>

The assumed superiority of whiteness has resulted in the abuse and destruction of black bodies and minds. When black sisters and brothers love themselves-- body and soul—they show young people how to love themselves, and encourage them to preserve a future full of hope. A *sankofa* ethics demands such self love for the overall good of the community.

## ***2. Resisting all that Diminishes the Black Community***

Long before there was such a thing as White Studies or before Peggy McIntosh began unpacking her “invisible backpack” “and naming “white male privilege,”<sup>9</sup> James Hal Cone was leading the way. Commonly known as the Father of Black Theology, Cone’s theological work, beginning in the 1960s, questioned how it was that white theologians could

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<sup>8</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2008), xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Peggy McIntosh’s classic, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” <http://www.nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf> (accessed on February 14, 2010).

ignore the sin of racism in their work? Cone and other black theologians and their allies continue to pose this very same question. Then and now Cone responds to the signs of the times. In the “Postscript to the Fortieth Anniversary Edition” of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he wrote,

I was upset that American white theology had ignored God’s solidarity with the poor (especially in the African American community), as the heart of the gospel. In Protestant and Catholic seminaries, white theologians were virtually silent about the most important religious and social movement in the history of America—the Civil Rights Movement. Why were they talking about the ‘Death of God’ and secular theology and not about the black freedom struggle, especially when talk about God seemed to dominate the life and work of America’s greatest religious figure—Martin Luther King, Jr.?<sup>10</sup>

James Cone resisted the silence of theologians and affirmed the somebodiness of African Americans. Cone continues to agitate for the full liberation of all who are oppressed.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s African American women began to articulate some limitations of black theology, particularly the exclusion of sexism as another mode of oppression. This was a catalyst for black women to come to define their God-talk as distinct from both their black

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<sup>10</sup> James H. Cone, “Postscript to the Fortieth Anniversary Edition” in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, ed. James Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2010, 1969), 153-4.



brothers addressing anti-black racism and their white sisters searching for the amelioration of sexism and the affirmation of housewives to claim their right to enter the public sphere. When black women studying in seminaries accompanied Alice Walker in search of her mother's gardens, they discovered womanism.<sup>11</sup> This descriptor captured their imagination because it simply fit. Since then, womanist theologians have nurtured their womanist selves, thus strengthening them to resist all who wish to diminish them and their communities.

Then and now manifestations of anti-black racism are a given in society and the churches. An anti-black social ethos was evident all throughout the campaign and first years of Barak Obama's presidency. News pundits and candidates alike found a variety of ways to label Obama as "other." Specifically, Rush Limbaugh noted on his national television program that Obama resembled the devil.<sup>12</sup> Sarah Palin spoke in ways that affirmed her beliefs that Obama was not like other Americans.<sup>13</sup> Organizations and news outlets

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<sup>11</sup> This phrase comes from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. On pages that preceded the text, Walker provided a four part description of a womanist. See xi-xii.

<sup>12</sup> Andy Barr of Politico writes that Rush Limbaugh says, "President Obama looks demonic lately," <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1010/43821.html> (accessed on December 9, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Douglass K. Daniel, AP Writer, <http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D93KD6Q00> (accessed on November 30, 2011).

attempted to promote the belief that Obama was a Muslim.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the travesty concerning the authenticity of Obama's U.S. citizenship followed him into the presidency.<sup>15</sup> Another wake-up call was when Joe Wilson, a republican congressman from South Carolina shouted out, "You lie!" during Obama's address to Congress.<sup>16</sup>

In the wider society, we have the example of Hurricane Katrina that included a tepid response from the U.S. government to this natural disaster.<sup>17</sup> Scholar, Michelle Alexander, has written about mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow.<sup>18</sup> Skin lightening is a widespread global problem.<sup>19</sup> In some dominant culture settings, black students are

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<sup>14</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan on Politifact, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/aug/26/why-do-so-many-people-think-obama-muslim/> (accessed on November 30, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> On the Daily Paul, <http://www.dailypaul.com/114841/very-quietly-obamas-citizenship-case-reaches-supreme-court> (accessed on November 30, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> On HuffPost Politics, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/09/gop-rep-wilson-yells-out\\_n\\_281480.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/09/gop-rep-wilson-yells-out_n_281480.html) (accessed on December 9, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Amanda Vignone on Awareness of Disaster, <http://www.iveknownrivers.org/read-2.0.php?id=165> (accessed on December 8, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michelle Alexander's book, <http://www.newjimcrow.com/> (accessed on November 30, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Skin Whitening on NPR, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106419771> (accessed November 30, 2011).

accused of “acting white” when they achieve academically.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, some middle class African Americans hyper focus on achieving and amassing the signature goal of the dominant culture: money and all it will buy. In so doing, they take on the unseemly values of the dominant culture.<sup>21</sup>

Whether these situations target individuals or the entire black community, the entire community is affected by the messages that are conveyed and form the consciousness of our world and of our community. As African Americans hear about these events or read the research on the present status of black America, we are reminded that we are in hostile territory. Going back to consider these abhorrent experiences is a wake-up call, a reminder to not drop our guard. This is urgent and critical because “the white gaze upon our black bodies” can change us if we are not vigilant and always ready to affirm our subjectivity.

To be sure, anti-black racism, together with a host of other forms of oppression such as sexism, economic disparity, homophobia, and colorism only exacerbate the overall situation. Womanist theologians have noted that the import of these oppressions is not additive, but rather multiplicative. That is, racism multiplied by sexism, multiplied by economic

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<sup>20</sup> See Erin McNamara Horvat, Carla O'Connor, editors *Beyond Acting White: Reframing the Debate on Black Student Achievement* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

<sup>21</sup> bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), 180-183.

disparity, multiplied by homophobia, multiplied by colorism, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Our African American artists have found many ways to convey the experience of anti- black racism. For instance, Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, tells the story of little Pecola Breedlove and her insatiable desire for blue eyes. Pecola believed that her family problems would disappear and her beauty would enthrall everyone if only she had blue eyes. For Pecola, eyes represented all the accoutrements of being white. Morrison explains,

[e]ach night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.<sup>23</sup>

Pecola's penchant for candy led her directly to the Mary Jane candies at the local store because of the small picture of the little white girl on the wrapper. Pecola saw beauty in Mary Jane and Shirley Temple.

Like Pecola Breedlove, when I was six or seven, I too desired something I was not. During the summer months my sisters and I attended day camp not too far from our home.

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<sup>22</sup> Diana L. Hayes, *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* ( Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, with a new Afterward by the author (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 46.

We were the only black children at this camp. I was fixated on a girl at camp, named Jeanine, who was eleven or twelve. Jeanine's long flowing hair kept falling in her face, and with the sweep of her hand and the tilt of her face, she took charge of her unruly hair. When I was a little girl, despite my mother's best efforts, my hair did not grow as fast as that of my two older sisters. Nevertheless, my mother fixed our hair in a similar manner with pretty barrettes and bows. In the midst of badly wanting long hair, I began to imitate Jeanine's habit of pushing her hair back with that peculiar tilt of the head. Right now, the image of the vocalist Cher comes to mind-- from her earlier days with Sonny. Not too long after this camp began one summer, my mother noticed that when I returned home, my thin bangs were pushed back. After asking my sisters about it and not getting any answers, my mother asked me why my hair was pushed back. I shrugged my shoulders. I do not know when my desire for Jeanine's long hair subsided, but, like Pecola, I desired Jeannine's long hair to the point of imitating her habit of pushing her hair back even though I had very little hair to push back. Pecola desired blue eyes and whiteness, and I had desired flowing long hair and whiteness. For Pecola, blue eyes brought with them a beauty that elicited family happiness. For me, the long flowing hair meant that I was like everyone else.

In the section above, I have painted a brief picture of life in a culture that upholds whiteness and denigrates blackness. This spirit seeps into the consciousness of an entire society wreaking havoc for all because it is based upon a dangerous falsehood. *Sankofa* promotes a communal spirit that insists that "it is not taboo to go back to retrieve that which has

been forgotten” for the good of the present and the future. We know of the struggles of our African and African American ancestors and the way they were captured and forced into slavery. This created a complex economic system that was perpetuated because of greed and the belief that persons of African ancestry were not fully human. In fact, some planters believed that the enslavement of people from the continent of African was actually a blessing because it provided them the opportunity for conversion to Christianity. Little did they know of Africa’s Christian past or the African-derived religions that gave the lives of Africans meaning centuries ago.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emancipation from slavery was followed by the brief time of reconstruction. Enter the rise in the number of lynchings of black folk, Jim Crow, and the legalization of segregation. Under the leadership of iconic figures during the civil rights movement like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, many black people were able to practically enter the cause of resistance.<sup>24</sup> Some became martyrs for the cause. Remember Medgar Evers and the four girls killed by the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church: Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins and Carol Robertson?<sup>25</sup> Despite their loss of life, these martyrs and other persons of African ancestry affirmed their African heritage and their blackness. When we go back and

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<sup>24</sup> See James Cone’s *Martin, Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> See *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

learn about the lives of these heroes, we are strengthened to enter into the resistance that a *sankofa* ethics demands.

The twentieth century saw numerous recessions. The beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked by an economic downturn that brought the country to the brink of a depression. Thwarted off by our first African American president, Barack Obama, the economic situation has resulted in consistent double digit unemployment rates for persons of color.

As we enter the twenty-first century we realize that we continue to face some of the same forms of injustice that our ancestors did. Additionally, there seems to be a different ethos evident in the confusion and a loss of purpose and meaning that characterizes certain sectors of the black community. This malaise and nihilism may be due to the setbacks that have come for African Americans. This is particularly true of young African Americans, especially males. Marian Wright Edelman, founder and director of the Children's Defense Fund, recently wrote about how the failing economy has affected black young people:

Black young adults, and especially Black males, had the highest labor underutilization rates, at 40 percent and 43 percent respectively. As the Children's Defense Fund relaunches the Black Community Crusade for Children to strengthen our children's futures, these vanishing employment

opportunities are one part of the huge crisis for which we need to find solutions.<sup>26</sup>

Too many of our children are not motivated to learn for a variety of reasons. One factor certainly is a sense of hopelessness—that is not unfounded. Statistics like the ones above can certainly crush dreams. By telling our story, wisdom woman, Marian Wright Edelman, enables us to resist all that contributes to the perpetuation of such circumstances.

In the midst of the first term of President Barack Obama, black folks have witnessed all kinds of acts of anti-black racism and white supremacy against him, and by association, against all of us. What is a *sankofa* response to these and other race-based ills?

### *Womanist Ways of Resistance*

Womanist theologians and ethicists have consistently maintained the fluidity between theology and ethics. Many have also written about practical ways that black people can survive. In her important essay, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk,” Delores S. Williams discusses “Black common sense” “as the collective knowledge, wisdom and action of Black people as

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<sup>26</sup> See Marian Wright Edelman’s Child Watch Column, “Young People Falling Back Economically,” at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/newsroom/child-watch-columns/child-watch-documents/young-people-falling-behind-economically.html> (accessed February 13, 2011).



they tried to survive, to develop a productive quality of life and to be liberated from oppressive social, political, economic and legal systems.”<sup>27</sup> What is significant about black common sense is the affirmation that black people are not bereft of examples and strategies for experiencing social salvation and well-being. This collective is our legacy. What follows are select strategies that have and may be used to rouse the black community to full wakefulness and responsibility.

### *Resurrecting the Modern Civil Rights Movement*

Even before Delores Williams wrote about social salvation in, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk,” she affirmed that humanity knows salvation through right relationships, that is, Christ-like engagements with our sisters and brothers without prejudicial concern for gender, sexual orientation, and other differences of nature.<sup>28</sup> One way to be in right relationships is to find concrete ways to remember and retell the stories of our ancestors. Then, we can be in right relationship with them as we honor their lives. This is indicative of the BaKongo cosmogram which is formed by two lines intersecting and forming right angles. The circular dimension of this cosmogram is meant to point to the belief that all of life is one. So, remembering ancestors and the stories about how they got over reveals the right relationships that exist

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk,” 105.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 164-165.

between the living and those who have passed over.<sup>29</sup> Many womanist theologians and ethicists have written about our enslaved sisters and our devoted church women of the first half of the twentieth century. Williams suggests we turn our gaze to the modern Civil Rights Movement because of the manner in which discrete groups organized and mobilized for the liberation of our people. Williams goes further by affirming that we also need to resurrect the modern Civil Rights Movement to find comparable strategies that will work today to transform the present racial landscape and give people hope.

To be sure, at the beginning of the second decade of this new millennium, we find considerably more diversity within the black community than existed in the 1950s and 1960s. At the present time, the black community is hard pressed to identify with and stand behind one significant leader who can both inspire and broker on behalf of the masses in our community. A recent event in Chicago bears this out. After the mid-term elections of 2010 Chicagoans quickly turned their attention to the upcoming mayoral race. Months before, the Black Caucus of the City Council gathered regularly to try to select a consensus candidate. The members of this caucus knew that if they did not take action, the African American vote in Chicago would be splintered, and it would be impossible to have an African American mayor. Theoretically this may have been a strategic idea, but

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<sup>29</sup> Aribidesi A. Usman, "The Nineteenth-Century Black Atlantic," in *The Atlantic World 1450-2000*, eds. Toyin Falola and Kevin D. Roberts (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 128-9.

many black folks were not having it. Some wanted to know who had selected this group to determine a consensus candidate. As the election began to take shape and some black candidates weighed the likelihood of winning, individuals eventually began to drop out of the race and throw their lots in behind the most talented and experienced candidate.<sup>30</sup>

Any student of the modern Civil Rights Movement knows that the various organizations working for justice at the time did not always agree on the approach or the timing of events. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at times conflicted with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Malcolm X and the black Muslims believed in a separatist approach to the racial situation, while Martin Luther King and his followers advocated for an integrationist approach.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the lack of overall consensus did not prevent the movement from moving forward. This is the part of the modern Civil Rights Movement that Williams believes should be resurrected.

One womanist task of promoting well being and salvation is teaching our young people about the modern Civil Rights Movement so that it can be resurrected. Although this work may not be as dramatic as Ezekiel's prophesying to the bones

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<sup>30</sup> "Davis Drops Out, Endorses Braun," *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 2010. "Did Race Force Meeks Out of Chicago Mayoral Election? December 28, 2010, [www.thegrio.com/.../did-race-forced-meeks-out-of-chicago-mayoral-campaign.php](http://www.thegrio.com/.../did-race-forced-meeks-out-of-chicago-mayoral-campaign.php) (accessed February 13, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> See *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

and other body parts to rise up at God's behest, it is exciting to consider resurrecting this Movement. Since the beginning of the 1960s, participants in the Movement penned manuscripts and recounted stories from their perspective. That is when the little known names of valiant women came to the fore and exposed the considerable sexism that infiltrated the movement.<sup>32</sup> As a result of this research we are also given insight into the daily workings of different groups and how some of these groups attempted to speak with one voice. We learned about the foibles of the leaders and the way the U.S. government had certain leaders under surveillance because their power and influence was feared. We are fortunate that enough time has passed to provide us with additional information and insight about people and circumstances—events we would never have known had we lived during the years of active protest.

The intention here is that we look to the modern Civil Rights Movement to learn about individuals and how they mobilized to effect change. Can black people mobilize for the well being of our communities? Yes! We can begin by telling the stories of the modern Civil Rights Movement wherever we can: in churches, community centers, afterschool childcare, billboards, wherever and whenever we can raise up the story of an unsung hero, we must. When I was in my thirties, I watched *Eyes on the Prize* tape by tape, and learned

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, see Shannon Frystak's *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967*, (Louisiana State University Press, 2009) and Linda Crawford, et al, *Women in the Civil Rights Movements: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

about the modern Civil Rights Movement.<sup>33</sup> Today we can challenge our young people to know the names and circumstances of the people in the videos as well as they know the statistics of their favorite ball player or the lyrics of an outstanding artist. Young people could learn about other pieces of M. L. King's writing besides, "I Have a Dream," for instance, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."<sup>34</sup> Another focus might be to consider the local heroes who contributed to society where they live.

As individuals learn about the people and places of the modern Civil Rights Movement, they will find themselves in the company of intrepid leaders and followers who knew all too well about anti-black racism. Thus, the epistemological community for young people is enlarged to not only include ancestors by blood, but also ancestors by spirit. That is, young people will be able to resonate with some of the struggles their ancestors experienced, thus enlarging the number of people (past and present) who understand anti-black racism. This is vintage *sankofa* as we are invited to remember our past and apply it to our future.

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<sup>33</sup> On PBS,  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepize/about/index.html>  
(accessed on January 23, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> MLK's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated\\_letter\\_from\\_birmingham](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham) (accessed on January 23, 2011).

### *In-House Principles*

Besides Delores Williams' ideas about resurrecting the Civil Rights Movement, she has also written about what she calls, "in-house principles" in "Straight Talk, Plain Talk."<sup>35</sup> These principles, if embraced, will allow African American women and their communities to be poised to embrace black common sense.

Williams' first principle tells it like it is. We have formidable examples of individuals whose lives have shown us that virulent examples of racism still exist and that genuine efforts at integration have left some black people broken and confused. During the modern Civil Rights Movement, black people created and joined a number of organizations to work toward justice. What are the organizations we can create and/or join for the overall well-being of the community? Black common sense is the backdrop against these in-house strategies, and Williams believes that this first principle of remembering and retrieving needs to be done in a systematic way in churches, schools, and community centers where our people gather.

The second in-house principle is centered on black folks changing their consciousness from CAN'T DO to CAN DO. It has been easy for individuals to become discouraged at the setbacks and retrenchments that have characterized the past

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<sup>35</sup> Delores S. Williams, "Straight Talk, Plain Talk: Womanist Words About Salvation in a Social Context," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation & Transformation*, Emilie Townes, editor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 105 ff.

few decades. When we turn to some black organizations and churches we see how contexts are being set in place to remind people that CAN DO is a real and viable option.

The third principle is an important invitation. Williams contends that this strategy “encourages constructive critical thinking and careful planning, rather than emotional reaction to issues affecting Black people’s quality of life.”<sup>36</sup> While Williams links this principle primarily with black churches, the same can be said for black organizations and other settings where groups of African Americans come together to support each other within or outside of white cultural settings.

### *The Nguzo Saba/ Seven Principles*

Another approach to engendering a spirit of resistance is Dr. Maulana Karenga’s gift of *Kwanzaa*, an African American and Pan African celebration of “family, community, and culture.” The *Nguzo Saba* or Seven Principles are values that are celebrated in honor of the cultural beginnings of people of African ancestry. These principles frame this feast. A quick glance of the seven makes clear that the *Nguzo Saba* are timely for every season.<sup>37</sup> They include the following:

*Umoja* (Unity) is of the utmost importance as we work toward dismantling racism. Unity differs from unanimity.

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk,” 115.

<sup>37</sup> See Maulana Karenga, *Kwanzaa a Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture* (Los Angeles, CA: The University of Sankore Press, 1998). Karenga first shared Kwanzaa in 1966.

Women and men of African ancestry in the United States feel differently about what it means to be an African American. These differences can enrich discourse and affirm the gift of our hard-fought freedom.

*Kujichagulia* (Self-determination) invites African Americans to embrace their subjectivity. This includes coming to voice, dreaming dreams, and being committed to bring one's dreams to fruition.

*Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) reminds the community that we as individuals must support each other during particularly difficult times. We are our sister's and brother's keeper.

*Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics) encourages black folks to build and support black businesses so that we can all be successful. I remember the day when I was a little girl and my mother took me aside and reminded me that as black people we need to support black businesses, because so many people (black and white) just assume that white businesses are superior. Here is still one more example of the reach of white supremacy.

*Nia* (Purpose) reminds the black community that we need to be supportive of one another especially across class lines. To be sure, there will be times when different ways of supporting the black community come in conflict. One such example would be Bill Cosby's book, *Come on People*, challenging black parents to discipline their children and themselves and Michael Eric Dyson's response, *Was Bill Cosby*



*Right?*<sup>38</sup> Despite these strong differences, the pursuit of wholeness and healing in our community can move forward.

*Kuumba* (Creativity) personal gifts abound in our community, and each of us should find ways to share our gifts in a manner that uplifts our people. Each gift shared needs to be evaluated to determine if it enhances the community or not.

*Imani* (Faith) challenges us to have faith in God, in our community, ourselves, and select people. God will not disappoint. In the Second Testament we are reminded that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, we can be confident that God will use the good work and good intentions of women and men for the fulfillment of the reign of God.

Karenga created this celebration during a time of considerable upheaval in the United States. At that time Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were important leaders in our community. King promoted views about the integration of the race, while Malcolm X promoted views about the separation of the race. In both approaches, the *Nuguzo Saba* can be used to affirm and build up black people

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<sup>38</sup> See Bill Cosby and Alvin F. Poussaint, *Come on People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007) and Michael Eric Dyson, *Was Bill Cosby Right?* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Civitas Books, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Philippians 1:6. All passages from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, (Nashville, TN: Catholic Bible Press, 1993 and 1989).

and their communities—in the context of the celebration of *Kwanzaa* and beyond.

Some years ago I had the joy of being present for a liturgical celebration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. It was an absolute delight to see beautiful African American youth processing in with banners—each with one of the *Nuguzo Saba* lettered on them. As each one came to the microphone she or he loudly proclaimed the principle and what it meant. God bless those teachers and catechists who planned that liturgy. I was emboldened by the fearlessness of these young people. Perhaps this is a reminder of the giftedness of our young people and the fact that we must draw these gifts out.

### *Other Resources for a Womanist Resistance*

In her well-known essay, “Wading through Many Sorrow” Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective, M. Shawn Copeland shows the heinous suffering that enslaved women in the Americas endured. From this obscene display of suffering, Copeland culls important resources.<sup>40</sup> Christianity, engaged through the critical consciousness that enslaved women brought to it, was an important resource of womanist resistance. The inner compass of these women enabled them to freely and confidently sift through the Scripture to find passages that affirmed that they, too, were

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<sup>40</sup> See M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading Through Many Sorrows,” in *A Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie Townes, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 121-122.

images of God and that God desired freedom for all God's people. For many this also meant not giving equal credence to all passages, such as the ubiquitous, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters..."<sup>41</sup> The spirituals, understood by W.E.B. Du Bois as "sorrow songs," were also resources of resistance.<sup>42</sup> Not only did women and men find spirituals important ways to communicate with God, sung with others they also promoted a spirit of solidarity. Spirituals also provided a release for enslaved persons who often endured suffering in silence. Copeland also states that memory was an important resource for womanist resistance. This is at the heart of a *sankofa* ethics. By remembering stories of those who "got over" they were able to keep their hope strong and remain attentive to the time and place that an opportunity for freedom might present itself. Lastly, and most memorably, Copeland identifies the role of language as a resource of resistance. Enslaved women used the language and attitude of sass to resist. Sass is back talk or mouthing off that functions as a shield by which these women could protect their bodies and minds.

Whether we use the language of resurrecting the modern Civil Rights Movement or resources of resistance, what is important is that individuals and groups find ways to promote and lift up black communities. There are many other efforts that I could name. The 2005 Covenant with Black America is one such enterprise. The brainchild of Tavis

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<sup>41</sup> Ephesians 6:5.

<sup>42</sup> William Edward Burghart DuBois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," in *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903) 250-264.

Smiley and other African American leaders, this effort outlined ten concrete areas of black life that needed reform from the right to healthcare and equal education, to jobs, wealth, and economic prosperity. The book, *The Covenant with Black American* was a #1 *New York Times* best seller. Just two years later, the book, *The Covenant in Action* was published and gave an account of case studies that chronicled the way that some in the African American community worked to improve life for our community. In *God Don't Like Ugly*, theologian Theresa Fry Brown recounts her formation of a S.W.E.E.T. (*Sisters Working Encouraging Empowering Together*) group that consisted of intergenerational and interreligious African American women.<sup>43</sup> In "Using Power from the Periphery"<sup>44</sup> and "Overcoming Susto: Restoring Your Soul,"<sup>45</sup> Rosita de Ann Mathews provides practical ways to navigate worlds like the military and the marketplace with directness and integrity. There are also many other examples of womanist theologians and ethicists sharing strategies for resistance.

Everyday there are onslaughts against individual African Americans and also the collective group. There should

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<sup>43</sup> Theresa Fry Brown, *God Does Not Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Rosita de Ann Mathews, "Using Power From the Periphery," in *A Troubling in My Soul*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 92-108.

<sup>45</sup> Rosita de Ann Mathews, "Overcoming Susto: Restoring Your Soul," in *Embracing the Spirit*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997)29-40.

likewise be concrete ways to push back, resist, and stem the tide of white privilege manifested in acts of racism.

Unfortunately our conscious or unconscious desire for whiteness can and has weakened our resolve to love our black sisters and brothers and believe in our gifts. Whiteness can be considered property, and the more we want this property, the more we fixate on obtaining it so we can enjoy the accoutrements of white privilege. Black folks live in this world, and it does not take long to understand that whiteness is something that many desire, and blackness is understood as undesirable and evil. Pecola Breedlove understood this with considerable clarity. She knew that only white people had blue eyes and that those eyes rendered a person beautiful. Likewise, Pecola knew that the owner of the candy store held her in disdain because of who she was. This angered her, but made her feel strangely alive. This was a wonderful sign of a growing critical consciousness. Closer to home, I was conversing with a friend at a workshop. This woman clearly has black/African features that came from her father's side. Her lips and hair were particularly noticeable. In fact, she joked with me about needing to wear her "dew rag" at night to manage her hair. When I suggested that we share this with others attending the workshop, panic came over her face and she put her hands out to reinforce the fact that she did not think this was a good idea. I will never forget her face and her desire to keep her African ancestry quiet. Perhaps there is a call here to resist such duplicity in the spirit of *sankofa*.

Even more memorable is a conversation I had with another dear friend. She shared with me her desire to retire in the Central American country of Belize. She went on to explain that she wanted to live in a place where she would be surrounded by people who looked like her. This beautiful womanist spirit affirms the important love “for the folk.”<sup>46</sup> It is a blessing to know and be surrounded by African Americans who truly love our people. Imagine how the black community would be if we all grew in our love for each other.

Many other resources for black women exist and are actually at our fingertips. Perhaps now is the time for a clarion call to initiate action and care by engaging these resources or by finding other ones.

### ***3. Contemplation and Politics***

Since the majority of womanist theologians identify themselves as practitioners of a variety of religions, predominantly Christianity, I would like to consider the strength that can be culled from living a life of commitment to our people with a contemplative spirit. Christianity, in addition to other world religions, have long prized contemplation because of its ability to help individuals quiet their spirits. This practice provides the space for discernment for those embracing a sankofa ethics. Additionally, it can promote patience as one faces setbacks in the process.

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<sup>46</sup> This phrase comes from Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. On pages that preceded the text, Walker provided a four part description of a womanist. See xi-xii.

This contemplative spirit that I refer to is characterized by one being united with God—or the divine. This unity or oneness can manifest itself in artistry or wonder. Who can forget how Alice Walker wrote about the beauty that her mother brought into the world and their home through the flowerbed that she planted and maintained?

...my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.<sup>47</sup>

This is what I mean by a contemplative spirit. Walker noticed that when her mother was working on her garden, she was radiant as she molded the earth.<sup>48</sup> This is the legacy that Walker's mother left her and all black women. Against

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<sup>47</sup> Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 241.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

all odds, in the most unlikely places, gifted and talented black women created beauty with a contemplative spirit.

In this same essay Walker also acknowledges the creativity of black female artists. We might insert the names Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin. Other artists might include sculptor Edmonia Lewis or writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Their lives and their musical, sculpting, and writing talents brought beauty into the world.<sup>49</sup> If they had been stifled and unable to use their gifts, how would they have managed? Would they have gone mad or found other outlets for their creative life? Walker later goes on to muse that perhaps the gifts that so many foremothers were unable to use have been given to us.<sup>50</sup> How lovely!

In her book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara A. Holmes makes a wonderful contribution to an underdeveloped topic in black and womanist theologies and in black church studies. Holmes makes this trenchant observation:

Retrieval and recognition of African American contemplative practices will enhance existing Africana worship traditions, expand spiritual options for an increasingly diverse community, reconnect diasporan contemplative practices to the broader contemplative tradition, and increase

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



awareness of the rich diversity in the black church.<sup>51</sup>

Holmes' efforts toward reviving and recognizing contemplative practices is of the utmost importance because it is primarily a contemplative spirit and subsequent practices that have and will enable African American women and our communities to persevere in working toward justice. Holmes work also points to the fact that contemplative practices are both solitary and communal.

Later in her monograph, Holmes writes about the contemplative life of Rosa Parks. Parks appears to have maintained a peaceful demeanor that would have certainly enriched a contemplative stance. The strength she received from her union with the divine may have given her what she needed to sit down when she was told to stand up. Her biographer wrote about Parks' "strength through serenity." During the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Parks eschewed the limelight, was emboldened by her belief in justice, and prayed that something positive would come from it.<sup>52</sup>

As an unsung hero, before and after her arrest, Parks spent her life committed to activism for the good of the black community. She co-founded the Parks Institute as a

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<sup>51</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 22.

<sup>52</sup> See Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 119-36 and the entire book.

testimony to her love for young people and her belief in what they could become. In Rosa Parks, the Mother of the modern Civil Rights Movement, we can observe an engaging example of the integration of politics and contemplation. In a spirit of *sankofa* ethics, we might see Parks' life as an invitation to adopt such an integration in our present situation.

### *Eschatological Proviso*

A contemplative spirit will remind and reinforce disciples of Jesus Christ that our lives are in God's hands, and that God will ultimately reign victorious over powers, principalities, and all manifestations of evil. Nevertheless, the efforts of women and men to promote justice still make a difference. Some theologians who have written about this understanding have referred to it as the "eschatological proviso." Flemish theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx writes about this proviso and says,

...religion, even Christian faith, is politically relevant, in that it opposes a *complete identification* of human salvation with politics. God's proviso, which for [human beings] takes the form of an eschatological proviso, makes it impossible for the believer to absolutize politics... For if the ground of the possibility of all existence lies in God, and on the other hand our human existence is threatened, not only from outside (by nature, [women and men] and by society), but also most profoundly from within (through one's own permanent possibility of being able not to be), then

salvation in the full sense of the word is possible only where [the human person] can entrust [herself] to the ground of the possibility of [her] existence. ..Thus religion criticizes both the *status quo* and also the absolutizing of a mere political and social renewal, which [women and men] must undergo whether they want to or not.<sup>53</sup>

These words by Schillebeeckx highlight very important claims. Politics, understood as “action for the purpose of social transformation,” is not the same as human salvation.<sup>54</sup> Human beings are finite, and despite the best plans to change a corner of the world or the entire world, plans, like humans, are limited. This article acknowledges and celebrates the ingenuity of African American women as they have worked for social transformation. This engagement is motivated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Contemplation can deepen in those doing political work, an understanding that their salvation, and that of their sisters, brothers, and future generations, is based on the God of Jesus Christ who is the ground of their being. A life apart from informal and formal opportunities for contemplation risks losing sight into the God who does not want human beings to suffer.<sup>55</sup> Consequences of this “impaired vision” can result in

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<sup>53</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, Translated by John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 776-777.

<sup>54</sup> Mary E. Hobgood, “Politics” in *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, Orlando O. Espin and James B. Nickoloff, editors (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 1055.

<sup>55</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 724, 730.

disintegration that can be manifested in the absolutizing of political efforts or the experience of despair when social transformation happens at a slower pace than had been expected.

The three patterns of behavior that can and ought to contribute to a *sankofa* ethics are protecting our people, especially the youth, resisting all that demeans black people and black life, and adopting a life of contemplation and political action in an effort to discern rightly and to persevere. There are so many ways to go back to fetch the examples of strong African American women or their pearls of wisdom in order to live a meaningful and balanced life of love and service. This is a glorious invitation to engender and promote virtues and values that can contribute to such a lifestyle.

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