

**“I Am Because We Are: Africana Womanism as a Vehicle of  
Empowerment and Influence”**

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project has been to shed light on the experiences of Black women in Afrocentric groups—Nation of Gods and Earths, the Black Panther Party, and Rastafarians—that operated on the fringes of society during the 1960s through the early 2000s. This work articulates the gender dynamics between the men and women of the groups. In it, I trace the history of Black nationalism and identity in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century which set the framework for the formation of the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE), the Black Panther Party (BPP), and Rastafarianism and its members to see themselves as a part of the Black nation or community and the women of these groups to see their identity tied in with the goals and desires of the group not as one set on individualistic ambitions.

The Africana womanist did not see herself as an individual but rather a vital part of the entire Black community. From a feminist perspective, it would appear as though the women of these Afrocentric fringe groups were marginalized and oppressed by the men but this perspective fails to give credence to the fact that Rasta women, Earths—the female members of the NGE—and women Panthers saw race and racism as a more pressing issue than that of sexism. That is not to say that women in these groups did not question or challenge some of the sexist actions of their male counterparts. When there was a challenge it was done so in a way that reminded the men of the tenets of their respective group and their responsibility to uphold those principles; principles that required the men to consider the women as equally valuable in the cause of the group and deserving of just treatment.

While adhering to a gender order that afforded the male members a more visible position, the women of this study did not view their positions as mothers, wives, and sister members as a hindrance to their own personal joy or freedom. In fact, using an Africana womanist point of view, they would argue that it was in the best interest of the entire Rasta, NGE, or BPP and by extension, the Black community for them to own their statuses as a form of empowerment. For it was through their wombs and nurturing that the next generation would be born, through their providing a stable home that would allow their husbands to focus their attentions on the issues concerning their communities outward and through their role as supportive “sisters” encouraging the men that the community could advance socially.

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**“I Am Because We Are: Africana Womanism as a Vehicle of Empowerment and Influence”**

*“A woman exercised her greatest influence on behalf of the race in her role as wife, mother, and teacher. For them, this did not imply notions of woman’s inferiority to man because woman is man’s equal intellectually. The history of Black female and Black male ideological and relational differences, which extended across class and geographical lines, is a testament that Black women were active and assertive in varying ways”.<sup>1</sup>*

-Deborah Gray White

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor. “Negro Women Are Great Thinkers As Well As Doers”. *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 12 No.2 (Summer). 2000. 114

## Introduction:

Throughout history, Black women have found themselves struggling against racism and sexism simultaneously. They have actively debated questions of gender and racial oppression; some have chosen to rank this oppression by prioritizing racial oppression, while others have prioritized gender oppression. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of women who chose to prioritize issues concerning race over those concerning gender. This study examines women in the Rastafarian culture, Black Panther Party, and the Nation of Gods and Earths and explores issues of gender dynamics within, and compliance with these dynamics.

This research makes an important contribution to the current body of literature concerning women in Black nationalist groups. Many of the publications of members in these groups delve into the matter of male-female experiences as it pertains to sexism and patriarchy. Often, these books are written by the men. In his *Gods, Earths, and 85ers*, Pen Black instructed both women and men on the proper ways in which Earths ought to behave in spite of what he understands to be their devious and jealous nature. In *We Want Freedom*, Mumia Abu-Jamal did not shy away from sharing his first-hand knowledge of the fact that women in the Black Panther Party did sometimes find themselves on the receiving end of abuse dealt out by men attempting to assert their manhood. In other cases, the arguments were presented by scholars who are on the outside looking in and surmising that these women were victims of sexism. Barry

Chevannes, a forerunner in studying Rastafarian culture, often alluded to women's subjugation within the Rastafari.<sup>2</sup> The body of work produced by women within these groups is far too limited compared to that of the men. It is important that scholars make sure that the voices of women who are in these groups are heard.

I would like to offer a diverging supposition to the perception of women's powerlessness. When learning about these groups and what may appear on the surface to be an "oppressive regime" for the women, I wonder why, then, would women willingly enter themselves into such conditions—for those who come in their teenage and adult years—or why those women who were born into these groups would choose to stay throughout their lives. I found that there was power in the sister and mother roles in the groups as well as a sense of self-importance.

My aim is to apply a particular articulation of their behavior in order to understand the women's reasons for elevating race over gender. I argue that by doing "womanly" things such as bearing children and taking a directional lead from the men with whom they were allied caused these women to feel empowered as well as to exhibit influence over other women and men alike, thus, strengthening their ability to live out the main goals of the particular lifestyle, socio-political agenda, and culture they sought to establish and maintain. The role of woman as caretaker of the home

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

certainly was reflective of an immersion in a predominate Eurocentric culture however the path of gender role acceptance that the women in these groups pulls from a more Afrocentric framework.

There are several core questions raised by this research: How did Rasta women, Black Panther women, and Earths perceive their role in their respective groups? What are the origins of their views on gender? Was it gleaned from some conceptual European model of gender roles? How did the members adhere to these roles? What motivated them to join and stay a part of the group? What did they believe their purpose within the group was? How did they express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their position? In what ways were they empowered? What strategies did they use to encourage their male and female counterparts to uphold the precepts of their group?

This paper will first trace Black nationalism from the late-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. Nationalism in the form of collective community action within a nation was a key component to garnering members' dedication to the goals of these movements; they had to first see themselves as a like-minded people concerned with moving toward the same destiny. In order to see oneself as a part of a community, differences that had the potential to arouse conflict had to be downplayed or interpreted in such a way that they were considered strengths—in this case, gender.

Secondly, womanism and Africana womanism will be discussed as tools utilized by Black women within the Diaspora to provide a sense of self and purpose in light of

the feminist movement (both, first and second waves) which did little to address the particularities of the experiences and histories of Black women and other women of color. It is my contention that Africana womanism was a strategic platform that women in counter-hegemonic groups such as the Black Panther Party, Nation of Gods and Earths, and Rastafarians could employ for themselves.

Lastly, I will address the ways in which the women in these groups held power as sister members and mothers while adhering to an Africana womanist ideology. I am not arguing that the women consciously identified as Africana womanists, however their behavior and commitment to their respective groups exhibited the very agenda of an Africana womanist—a dedication to ensuring the continued existence of their community by prioritizing community over individual needs. Some of the primary sources that I will use for this project include journal publications, music lyrics, poetry, books written by members of these groups, and memoirs.



## Chapter 1: Nationalism and Identity Building

*The concept of negritude was the emotional if not logical antithesis of that insult which the white man flung at humanity*<sup>3</sup>.

*-The Wretched of the Earth. Frantz Fanon*

The creation of a Black identity was crucial in that it was a direct challenge to the cultural appropriation of Blackness that emerged in the United States during the 1500's and portrayed Black people as ignorant, primitive, slovenly, overly jovial, salacious, and virtually any other negative characteristic. The initial images of people of African descent made public were those generated in a Western, White, colonial framework and have continued to exist to the present.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse accurately tracked the historic misrepresentations of Africana (of African descent) people in his work. Images of the *noblesse sauvage* (noble savage), the redemption-seeking African in an Edenic setting, became popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century which Europeans used as proof that Africa's people needed to be controlled by an outside force and the *mission civilisatrice* became the cause behind the Christian invasion of the "Dark Continent".<sup>4</sup> Derived from this primitive persona, the Sambo, Tom, Coon, Mammy, brute, and Jezebel became the new line of assigned Blackness in the United States as race theory grew popular. While these characters each embodied varying levels of ineptitude, the idea was such that all were in need of a European-

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<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963). 212

<sup>4</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse. *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (Yale University Press, 1992).

based hegemonic guidance. Born from a desire to resist and debunk such negative images, early Black nationalists sought to create a new Black identity that formed the foundation for later movements that focused on establishing race pride.

Since the 1960s, creating a cultural Black identity has been one of the principle goals in the efforts of many Black leaders. Unlike the goals of Civil Rights leaders who fought for inclusion in the greater society, alignment with all people of African descent and disassociation with a prevailing European culture was a fundamental tool for the socio-political organization of Black nationalism in order to achieve both sense of pride and equal rights under the law. The Black nationalist agenda is similar to what Fanon described as *negritude*, which was based on his contention that in order for oppressed peoples to decolonize their minds, they had to understand the colonizer and be cognizant of their own experience of colonization. It was the colonizer who defined the so-called “native” and the job of this very native now was to redefine himself. Black nationalism was a method of wresting one’s nomenclature from the “other”. Wilson Moses defined *Black nationalism* in the following way:

....“Black” is a special status, owned by any person who is recognized or identified as having ancestral origins among the Black peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. A nation may be defined as any group of people who view themselves as bound by virtue of common beliefs, behaviors, and ways of thinking as well as a distinguishing and unifying history and thus, distinct and separate from other groups.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. (New York University Press, 1996). 4

Black nationalism was never a static movement. There existed an array of interpretations and expressions of the agenda from its leaders over time.

**Early Nationalism, mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries:**

Classical Black nationalists cannot be so readily likened to the more recent “cultural nationalists” because they often did not embrace the entire African continent as a valid point of departure for building pride. The racial pride of the early Black nationalists resided in ownership of an ancient Egyptian aesthetic not in the celebration of a mass culture that was associated with slavery.<sup>6</sup> This reliance on an Egyptian and Ethiopian past as having been great civilizations of old while consciously or subconsciously distancing themselves from a strong connection to the rest of Africa—especially sub-Saharan regions—was no doubt a reaction to the region’s dealings in slaving as well as a result of the overwhelmingly negative portrayal it constantly received in newspapers, fictional and non-fictional works, novelty items and cartoons. The predecessor to the more culturally based Black nationalism sought to connect African societies and communities worldwide and to counter historical deceptions with respect to the marginalization of the African race.<sup>7</sup>

In his treatise, “Republic of Liberia”, Martin Delaney a pioneer in Black

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. (New York University Press, 1996). 2

<sup>7</sup> Tolagbe Ogunleye. “Dr. Martin Robinson Delany, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century African Womanist: Reflections on His Avant-Garde Politics Concerning Gender, Colorism, and Nation Building”. *Journal of Black Studies* (May 1998 Vol. 28, No. 5) 629

nationalism argued against the emigration of Blacks from the United States to Africa in 1861. He advocated establishing a Black nation within the United States. Delaney asserted that if anyone had a claim to the Americas, it was Black people based on their alliance with the indigenous peoples who were present prior to the European invasion and similarly had experienced widespread abuse and devastation inflicted upon their people by the same perpetrator.<sup>8</sup> This was the first of many attempts to establish a collective Black identity for the purpose of social advancement. Eventually, Delaney began a campaign for the settlement of the African east coast by what he called “enlightened freemen” for the purpose of establishing a profitable trade route and garnering worldwide respect for the undertaking of such a “fearless, bold, and adventurous deed of daring—contending against every odd”.<sup>9</sup> There would not be such a powerful voice that spoke of repatriation until the 1920s.

For many Black immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century, it was important to forge relationships with native-born Blacks. Irma Watkins-Owens’ *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (1996) described how newly arrived West Indian immigrants became active in social groups that mirrored that of the Black-American elite. Many of these groups were based on one’s island of origin and they often served as liaisons between the United States and their home islands to help their friends and family who were suffering economically.

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<sup>8</sup>Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. (New York University Press, 1996). 116

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 122-124

Despite the West Indians attempts to emulate the Black middle class, there remained a contention between native and foreign-born blacks. "We were all strangers. The black American, the black foreigner, and we did not like one another, and the white foreigner liked us less and the white American hated all of us".<sup>10</sup> The cause for this was most often linked to the battle between the two groups for greater economic standing in a society that placed them at the bottom. Another likely cause was the closer connection West Indian immigrants had to traditional African culture. Exhibiting these traditional cultures would have been seen as a setback for Blacks concerned with social advancement. Citing a shared oppression, a Jamaican immigrant would later inspire Blacks from every national ilk residing in the United States to become involved in the largest back-to-Africa movement to date.

Blackness has been the amalgamation of a wide scope of different Black cultures across the Diaspora. In his "The Uses of Diaspora", Brent Edwards cited revered U.S. Black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois' *The World and Africa* to explain from where the monolithic Blackness concept came:

*The idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States. Here various groups of Africans, quite separate in origin, became so united in experience and so exposed to the impact of new cultures that they began to think of Africa as one idea and one land.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Irma Watkins-Owens. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). 29

<sup>11</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards. "The Uses of Diaspora". *Social Text* 66 (Spring 2001). 46

Competition over the scarce resources of a segregated community as well as cooperation on multi-political and social levels framed the character of a new historical development in American urban life – African intraracial ethnic community.<sup>12</sup>

Named after Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born Pan Africanist of the 1920s and 1930s, Garveyism laid the foundation for a transformation in the thinking of Blacks through the reinforcement of past achievements and future possibilities. His 1920 premonitory announcements that Blacks in the Diaspora ought to “look to Africa, for the crowning of a king to know that your redemption is nigh” came to fruition with the 1930 crowning of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor of Ethiopia- the sole African nation that had not until that point seen themselves under any long-lasting control by a European nation.<sup>13</sup> This elevated Garvey’s social position to one where his Garveyite philosophy was completely liberating in its denial of the innateness of White supremacy and its converse, Black inferiority; a sentiment that ran rampant the world over during the time period.<sup>14</sup>

Garvey identified ‘race’ as the defining characteristic of a Black nationality, thereby giving a sense of common identity and power.<sup>15</sup> Pioneers of the Back-to-Africa movement fought to establish a black state in Africa while a majority of Black

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<sup>12</sup>Irma Watkins-Owens. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). 29

<sup>13</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 10

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 10.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 29

Americans wanted to stay put and gain equal rights and respect from White America. Through his Universal Negro Improvement Association and in direct opposition to the Western White empire, Garvey argued a separatist agenda that eventually won over many in the Black community who agreed with his push for an economic-based nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Marcus Garvey called for all Blacks to transcend any physical boundaries to establish their nationalistic base. Race, and not location, was to be the determining factor in pledging one's allegiance.<sup>17</sup> The Pan-Africanism that Garvey called for Blacks to unite under dealt with an absolute rejection of what the West dictated as Black which, at the time, was synonymous with destitute, uneducated, uncivilized, and of a primitive culture that ought to be elided in favor of more urbane European customs. It was also extended to a concern with the political and economic colonialism practiced on the African continent by Europe.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that like his forebears, Garvey did not find much strength behind a cultural Blackness that took into account all of Africa. His focus was on common heritage and a selective Blackness that did not give much credence to the sub-Saharan part of the great continent. An Ethiopic Africa was the more desirable model no doubt in part due to its continued resistance to the Italian army. The goal of Pan-

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 114

<sup>17</sup> Michelle Ann Stephens. *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962.* (Duke University Press, 2005). 100

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Bryan and Rupert Lewis. *Garvey: His Work and Impact.* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1988). 19

Africanism at the time was to work to bring the entire Black race up to a socio-economic standard that would make it a nation (in the most liberal sense) to be reckoned with, economically.

The cultural ideals of some nineteenth-century Black nationalists often resembled those of middle- and upper-class Europeans and White Americans, rather than those of the “native” African or Black American masses.<sup>19</sup> Classical Black nationalists stuck to an agenda of “uplifting the race” in the United States and abroad. They attempted to “civilize by spreading Christian doctrines of morality, comportment, and refinement based on Western ideals. Recent Black nationalism approach has been vastly different from classical nationalism.

#### **Nationalism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century:**

Garvey’s message stretched much farther than his immediate population in Harlem. The message had reached all the way to Omaha, Nebraska influencing the father of a cultural revolutionary. Malcolm X’s memories of his father, Earl Little, were of a man proud of his Black heritage and heavily involved in a local chapter of Garvey’s UNIA organization. These early experiences sowed the seeds of race consciousness in tandem with a full spiritual awareness that he underwent during his incarceration.

Malcolm’s evolution from a Black youth integrated into a White society that was uncomfortable with his presence to a Black man arguing the strength behind social

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 3



separation from Whites closely followed what Cross and other scholars described as the *nigrescence model*. Malcolm X's social politics of the 1950s and 60s closely mirrored the expanded model of nigrescence in that his progressive movement began with a social unawareness of the complexities of race to revilement at the racism that prevailed and his venomous attack on White hegemony to the acceptance of White sympathies in the "Black plight".

Like Garvey, Malcolm X spoke to the entire Black community in the United States with a message of social and economic empowerment, resistance, and racial separatism. It is fair to say that he wanted the legal integration of Blacks so that they could have the same rights as those enjoyed by Whites, while at the same time he advocated for social separation. Unlike early Black nationalists and intellectual leaders such as Garvey and DuBois, there was no specificity given to the importance of an economically stable or an educated "Talented Tenth" population within the greater Black community lifting the poorer Black masses into an enlightenment stage. Historically, socially "elite" groups, regardless of race, have often had the same oppressive effects on the less advantaged as did those who were part of the hegemonic culture. Malcolm X's background appealed to a young Black constituency who came from working-class backgrounds. Unlike Garvey, there was the absence of pomp and circumstance when Malcolm delivered his speeches. His language was peppered with much of the inner-city "Black-speak" that he had picked up as a young man growing up

in Boston and Harlem. This sowed the seeds of Black pride within the Black youth that would take up the struggle for Black rights in the years following his death. Here was a fiery orator who stirred up in young Blacks the belief that it was fine for them to be who they were without experiencing any shame because of a background that included poverty or enslaved ancestors.

With their backs against the wall, Black youth had grown tired of kowtowing to non-violent and docile methods of achieving social respect. Largely inspired by the rhetoric of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, the Black Power Movement was a hard-hitting attack on the social agenda of the 1960s and 70s. The gradual progression of African nations gaining their independence during the sixties was political fodder for the Black nationalist. If Blacks in Africa were able to wrest their independence from their colonial aggressors why could the same not be said of Blacks in the United States?<sup>20</sup>

Youth-led Black Power groups such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense helped to catapult Black nationalism from a socio-political movement to one that incorporated an appreciation for a Black aesthetic. There began a wholesale appreciation for Black music, Black physical features, and Black culture.<sup>21</sup> The new Blackness was one that embraced an

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<sup>20</sup> James L. Conyers, Jr. *Engines of the Black Power Movement*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007)

<sup>21</sup> Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. (Duke University Press, 2005). 30

African heritage beyond Egypt and Ethiopia. Wearing Dashikis, afros or other non-chemically treated hairstyles, and learning Swahili was just part of the new Blackness. Anyone who rejected or could not live up to these representations of an Africana heritage was labeled as a race traitor, counterrevolutionary, “sell-out”, or simply, “not Black enough”.

Aligning oneself with the emerging feminist movement was a “White thing”. Many Black nationalist women subverted any concerns about sexism in favor of challenging racism. Amy Jacques Garvey, wife, and later, widow of the Pan-Africanist pioneer, argued that Black Power was an effective “weapon of defense” against injustices.<sup>22</sup> Elaine Brown was just one of many women deeply involved in the Black Power Movement. As she familiarized herself with the message of the BPP, she became “Blacker”- growing her hair out in its natural state and educating herself in a more Afrocentric environment rather than in Eurocentric universities. These women expressed their desire to grow closer to their Black community not the female community. That did not mean however that they held no concern whatsoever about issues of gender and sexism. Taylor asserts that a close reading of Jacques-Garvey’s work clearly indicates the ways in which she attempted to find balance between:

intrinsically oppositional forces—nationalism (a doctrine that first and foremost advocated popular freedom and sovereignty in order to achieve self-determination) and feminism (a doctrine of equal rights for women that

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<sup>22</sup> Ula Yvette Taylor. *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). 229

challenged women's oppression and subordination)—and brought them together in one theoretical construct.<sup>23</sup>

Taylor describes Amy Jacques-Garvey as a “community feminist” focused on assisting both the men and the women in their lives along with initiating and participating in activities to uplift their communities.<sup>24</sup> I am not making the argument that Jacques-Garvey and scores of other women who have come after her were not dedicated to their communities and families, I wish instead to more carefully choose a better name to describe their actions. As I discuss in the next chapter, it was futile for women of this ilk to self-name or be labeled by others as feminists—largely because of the historical racism against Blacks that has existed within the feminist movement in its first and second waves. A more Afrocentric paradigm would be helpful to address the relationships between Black men and women and the dedication to the community.

An interesting observation to make centers around discussions of gender relations within some Black nationalist ideologies. Most often, men expected women to occupy an auxiliary position to the leader, who was often male. While attempting to embody some form of Africanized lifestyle and understanding, the gender dynamic present in multiple African societies—Maat and Twa—which speaks to order and balance as well as males and females who are just being equally empowered to govern every phase of society, quite a few nationalists seemed to take up some of the very

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<sup>23</sup> Ula Y. Taylor. “Negro Women Are Great Thinkers as Well as Doers: Amy Jacques Garvey and Community Feminism in the United States, 1924-1927”. *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12. No.2 (Summer 2000). 105

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 105

characteristics they considered to be a part of the White, middle-class hegemonic order, in their efforts to empower the community.<sup>25</sup>

The idea that a “supreme patriarch” was needed for the “integrity of the race” has become something of a mantra for Black nationalist thought since the days of Martin Delaney who initially argued that masculine power was fundamental to nationalist doctrine and that women were to be educated exclusively for motherhood.<sup>26</sup> This very notion of Black male supremacy and Black female respectability were widespread during Garvey’s era as a nationalist leader. , W.E.B. Dubois’ idea of community “uplift” led by the “Talented Tenth” —an educated and predominately middle-class Black population—included conformity to the leading hegemonic gender roles. With the upper crust elite of the Black community educating the poorer classes about hegemonic social mores, came the espousal of men’s role as family leader and women’s playing the role as supporter who never challenged her mate’s position. It was argued that by “sticking” together they protected themselves against life-threatening situations brought about by racism and were better able to uplift the men and women of the rising generation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Oba T’Shaka. *Return to the African Mother Principle of Male and Female Equality, Vol. 1.* (Oakland, CA: Pan Afrikan Publishers and Distributors, 1995). 59

<sup>26</sup> Ula Yvette Taylor . *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey.* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). 29

<sup>27</sup> Ula Yvette Taylor . *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey.* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). 43

As a leading figure in Black Nationalistic Movement, Malcolm X presented what bell hooks called in her *Outlaw Culture* a form of “benevolent patriarchy”. She posited that while fundamentally sexist, Malcolm X urged Black men to assert their manhood in taking care of their families by respecting their women and raising their children; doing anything else meant that you were a contributing factor to racist brutality. In fact, Black men were supposed to be the ones to take over the politics of their community.<sup>28</sup> Spurned on by past relationships in his life with his mother, sisters, and various lovers, Malcolm had grown to distrust women over the years. These personal experiences fueled his misogynistic and sexist rhetoric yet he did not cast Black women as inherently evil, but blamed Black men for failing in their duties to maintain the upkeep of the Black family and male-to-female relationships. hooks’ analysis of Malcolm X was unique in that it offered a critique of his actions that cast his views on gender in a less harsh light than critiques by other feminist and womanist scholars. Additionally, Delaney can also be recast as one who campaigned for women’s inclusion in all matters concerning the community. It was his belief that Blacks in America would not progress socially if men and women did not work together<sup>29</sup> as the latter’s contributions were equally as important as men’s.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994). 217

<sup>29</sup> Tolagbe Ogunleye. “Dr. Martin Robinson Delany, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Africana Womanist: Reflections on His Avant-Garde Politics Concerning Gender, Colorism, and Nation Building”. *Journal of Black Studies* (May 1998 Vol. 28, No. 5). 637

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 634

Following his break from the Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm X began to change his view of women's place in the movement. Most likely influenced and moved by the overwhelming support he garnered from women after he left the NOI, Malcolm began to voice his opinion that women ought to be fully included and play an equal role in the fight against a racist regime all the while recognizing how they had already enriched the movement with their presence: "I am proud of the contribution women have made. I'm for giving them all the leeway possible. They've made a greater contribution than many men".<sup>31</sup>

Malcolm X was important in bringing about a new understanding of Black empowerment that focused on more than economic gain. Malcolm and his political progeny espoused a cultural appreciation that had not been seen before. More sub-Saharan traditions were adopted as authentic Blackness. Additionally, Malcolm X's changing gender politics within the movement gave Black women the much needed encouragement to continue to persevere as freedom fighters working for the good of their families and those like theirs. It was the ascription to hegemonic gender roles and the pressures of conforming to prescribed Blackness that added undue pressure to those involved in the struggle. This had the damaging effect of estranging the Blacks who did not wish to follow closely the prescribed tenets of "Blackness". By and large, Black women have had more unique experiences as a result of social disparities than men

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<sup>31</sup>bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994) . 228

because of the interplay between sexism, racism, and classism in which they earn less on average than their male counterparts. Despite this, many Black women's commitment to the struggle against racism has held fast within certain counter-hegemonic groups.



## Chapter 2: Africana Womanism as a Useful Tool of Analysis

Women in counter hegemonic Black nationalist groups in the United States and Jamaica have since the 1960s used Africana womanism as a tool of empowerment in such a way that it did not disturb the dynamics within these groups. Doing so could cause a rift in the fabric of a connected community.

In feminist scholarship patriarchy and the resulting sexual exploitation—one based on social modes of production, divisions of labor, and property relations—as the primary form of women’s oppression.<sup>32</sup> Issues concerning but not limited to economics, politics and mass culture formed a pattern called *gender arrangements* or *gender order* in a contemporary society.<sup>33</sup>

As per these Afrocentric sectarian groups, the gender arrangements were such that men occupied a higher order than women. Women could only gain admittance and acceptance into these sectarian groups through a male conduit. Once they became a part of the group, women were instructed to follow the male lead. Within the BPP, Nation of Gods and Earths, and Rastafarianism there were women who were felt it productive to comply with such a social framework. Women in these groups used Africana womanism as a way to self-empower and negotiate their positions as one who was revered but still not a threat to with masculinity. It was more important for the women in these groups to remain insiders by countering racism than outsiders in

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<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Canning. *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship*. (Cornell University Press, 2006). 5

<sup>33</sup> R.W. Connell. *Gender: Short Introductions*. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2002). 3

constantly challenging the gender order in such a way that the men could perceive as a threat.<sup>34</sup>

### **Africana Womanism vs. Feminism and Womanism:**

Until the advent of the third wave, the feminist movement had not been all-inclusive in terms of race and class. Although there were *multiple* patterns of masculinity and femininity reflective of the cultures present in the Anglophone Americas, the hegemonic binaries have historically mirrored the experiences of the White middle-class.<sup>35</sup> Feminism has often been denounced by Black women writers, scholars and activists as a hindrance to social progression within the Black Diaspora. Ama Ata Aidoo—African novelist and critic—vehemently rejected feminism’s utility in the Black female community:

*Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing Western philosophy?*  
*The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women (1986).*<sup>36</sup>

Critically acclaimed author, Alice Walker, honed in on this need for Black women to carve out their own niche within the issues surrounding patriarchy with her

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<sup>34</sup> Regina Jennings. “Africana Womanism in the Black Panther Party: a Personal Story.” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 25 No. 3 2001

<sup>35</sup> R.W. Connell. *Gender: Short Introductions*. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2002). 77

<sup>36</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. (Troy, Mich.: Bedford Publishers, 2004).

conceptualization of the Black female experience using the term *womanism*, to define the position of women of color and Black feminists who shared a love with other women sexually and/or non-sexually and who preferred women's culture, emotional flexibility, and strength and who committed themselves to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.<sup>37</sup> While useful in providing agency and identity for Black women where they have been historically ignored, womanism in and of itself was not adequate enough to describe the experience of the women in these specific cultural groups. Katie G. Cannon and Carol B. Duncan took the initial meaning of womanism and further developed its meaning to define it as form of intangible identity politics developed through a unique set of experiences shared by Black women and girls, an experience heavily influenced, no doubt, by race and racism.<sup>38</sup> Because of the historical racial mistreatment of American Blacks, there has been a natural alignment between the men and women as a means of self-preservation.

Coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana womanism* was the explanation of male/female alliance within the BPP and Rastafarianism. *Africana*, identified the race of the woman being considered and established her cultural identity. Hudson-Weems cited *woman* as a more appropriate word than *female* because it speaks only to humanity

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<sup>37</sup> Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1983) xi

<sup>38</sup> Stacy Floyd-Thomas. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. (New York University, 2006). 16

thereby placing it in a higher realm than all other walks of life.<sup>39</sup> Created and designed solely for women of African descent, Africana womanism highlighted the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women but unlike Walker's womanism, relationships amongst women were not focal.<sup>40</sup>

The focus was on the struggle of Black women for equal rights as women, though not at the expense of their relationships with men or the fulfillment they derive from motherhood.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the importance of motherhood, other tenets of the Africana womanist agenda included self-naming, role flexibility, family centeredness, struggling *with* males against oppression, Black female sisterhood, ambition, recognition, and spirituality.<sup>42</sup> Using this body of evidence, I contend that Africana womanism was most applicable to Rasta women, Earths, and BPP women because prioritized the needs of the whole community over their own. Succinctly, I believe the Africana womanist would say, "Some of us are women but all of us are Black".

Black women in the Americas have juggled their statuses in which two parts of their makeup (Blackness and womanhood) have often placed them in positions of double jeopardy<sup>43</sup>. Hudson-Weems' argued that this dilemma was diffused through the

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<sup>39</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. (Troy, Mich.: Bedford Publishers, 2004).

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<sup>40</sup> Stacy Floyd-Thomas. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. (New York University, 2006).

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Carnes & Anna Karpathakis. *New York Glory: Religions in the City*. (New York University Press, 2001).

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<sup>42</sup> Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien. "Revisiting 'What's in a Name: Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought'". *Frontiers: Gender Watch* Vol. 27, Issue 1 (2006). 69

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 52

Africana womanist ascription to a primarily Black identity shared with men. This was in opposition to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's assertion that Black women perceived and experienced their lives in a way distinguishable from Black men and White women and men.<sup>44</sup>

*The Africana woman did 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.<sup>45</sup> (...in the effort to fight against racial injustice) Black women cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues<sup>46</sup>.*

So with this understanding of the Africana womanist ideal, one can see how women comprehended and defended their positions within the Black Panther Party, Rastafarian movement and in the Nation of Gods and Earths.

Amongst Afrocentric groups during the Black Power movement, there was the message that Black people on a whole ought to familiarize themselves with their heritage and pattern their values after an Afrocentric ideal. Garveyism and the Nation of Islam were the forebears for Rastafarianism and the Nation of Gods and Earths as culturally Black-centered groups.

### **Rastafarianism and Africana Womanism:**

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<sup>44</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History". *Gender & History*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 1989). 54

<sup>45</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. (Troy, Mich.: Bedford Publishers, 2004).

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 28

Garveyism laid the foundation for a transformation in the thinking of Blacks through the reinforcement of past achievements and future possibilities of Blacks. His 1920 premonitory announcements that Blacks in the Diaspora ought to “look to Africa, for the crowning of a king to know that your redemption is nigh” came to fruition with the 1930 crowning of Ras Tafari Makonnen as Emperor of Ethiopia—an African nation that had not until that point seen themselves under any long-lasting control of a European nation.<sup>47</sup> This elevated Garvey’s position amongst his followers to one where his Garveyite philosophy was completely liberating in its denial of the innateness of White supremacy and its converse, Black inferiority—a sentiment that ran rampant the world over during the time period.<sup>48</sup> Garvey identified ‘race’ as the defining characteristic of a Black nationality, thereby giving a sense of common identity and power.<sup>49</sup> Garvey was considered the prophet within the Rastafarian culture.

Rastafarianism paid special attention to African culture, drawing upon elements of Garveyism and celebrating Marcus Mosiah Garvey as the first prophet of the movement a movement that was the first to establish the image of a Black Jesus and prophets as a way to boost cultural pride.<sup>50</sup> Rasta womanism was a branch of this outlook in that it takes into account the pride and upkeep of the entire Black

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<sup>47</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 10

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid* 10.

<sup>49</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 29

<sup>50</sup> Sw. Anand Prahland. *Reggae Wisdom: Proverbs in Jamaican Music*. (University Press of Mississippi, 2001). 15

population.<sup>51</sup> Barry Chevannes noted how trite an acknowledgement it would be to mention the contributions of the Caribbean woman in the household.<sup>52</sup> The women were revered within the Jamaican Rastafari culture because of the invaluable work they did in the home and for the family and, by extension, the community insofar as their ability to bear children and take on the responsibility of educating and caring for them as well as taking care of the personal needs of their father—her mate. This freed the man to become the spokesman for his nuclear family to the greater community. These designated roles created an atmosphere that perpetuated some sense of collective spirit among members in a community. Karen Baker-Fletcher pointed out that the womanist in everyday life strove to maintain her identity as a communal asset and not an individualistic entity.<sup>53</sup>

Although not actively acknowledged, there was plain evidence of Rasta women's willingness to adhere to an Africana-womanist agenda in which they did what was expected of them as mothers and wives but did not question or threaten their male counterparts' position or authority. That was what White, middle- and upper-class feminists did according to the Africana womanist—went head-to-head with the very men in their communities with whom they should have bonded. The sense was that

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<sup>51</sup> Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis. *New York Glory: Religions in the City*. (New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 118

<sup>53</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. (New York University Press, 2006). 162

confronting their mate about any perceived oppressive practices would be disloyal and a hindrance to the movement. The man was of the highest order.

There has also been a mutual collusion between women and men to create identities for one another. Kimmel argued that men's involvement in pro-feminist discourse provided what he called the "antidote to the crisis of masculinity".<sup>54</sup> By this Kimmel meant that in order to liberate men from their gendered roles, women ought to be freed from these roles as well. Rastafarians did not necessarily work to "free" women from their role as mothers and wives nor men from the role of provider and leader but reworked it so that those roles were great organizing tools for the movement. If everyone knew his or her role, then things would run smoothly.

Jamaican Rastas in the 1980s and 90s generally were not interested in changing woman's role as mother interested in changing the hegemonic perception of motherhood as oppressive—a role that has a relatively low value in Eurocentric cultures.<sup>55</sup> Whereas the notion of the Rasta woman as valuable only as a "vessel" for the Rasta man's seed was once seen as the primary indicator of women's second-class status in the movement, women have likewise transformed their role as mothers into the responsibility for the growth and reproduction of Rastafari itself.<sup>56</sup> Rasta men looked to Rasta women as the only ones able to ensure that a progeny of Rastas would

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<sup>54</sup> Michael S. Kimmel. *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities*. (SUNY New York Press, 2005). 107

<sup>55</sup> Joseph A. Baldwin, Yvonne R. Bell, Cathy L. Bouie. "Afrocentric Cultural Consciousness and African-American Male-Female Relationships". *Journal of Black Studies*. December 1990) Vol. 21, No. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Tony Carnes & Anna Karpathakis. *New York Glory: Religions in the City*. (New York University Press, 2001). 349



maintain the culture.<sup>57</sup> As a result of this transformation from bearer of children to bearer of a culture and movement Rasta men further supported their women as integral to the culture.

This demonstrated the collective power of Rasta women. Rasta men now were afforded the opportunity to focus on the main goal of the movement which was recognizing one's position in what they saw as the Babylonian West, and working toward the ultimate goal of Repatriation. Through this acceptance of woman as the creator and primary teacher of future Rastas (children) and therefore a necessity to the movement, Rastafarians have reinterpreted woman's role into one of great authority. Africana womanism worked in the Rastafarian worldview because it subverted secondary issues like sexism in favor of the achievement of community goals- escape from the evils of society which included racism. An agreement amongst women that their individual self was not more important than that of their community was vital in order to accomplish the goals of the group.

#### **Nation of Gods and Earths and Africana Womanism:**

The Nation of Gods (men) and Earths(women) (NGE) have operated as an offshoot of the Nation of Islam (NOI) since the mid-1960s. This movement-largely based in New York City- was created out of the teachings of Clarence (Smith) 13x, a former member of the NOI. A major reason behind the splintering was Clarence 13x's

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<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.* 349

disbelief that a group of Black Muslims dedicated to the empowerment of Black people followed the teachings of what appeared to be a White founder—Wallace D. Fard.

Clarence 13x, named himself Father Allah. One of the major tenets of the NGE was that all Blacks ought to be self-reliant, especially in educating themselves. Using a unique numerological and alphabetical system as well as incorporating a set of 13x's lessons, this group has operated more as a school of thought than a religion from the 1960s to the present.<sup>58</sup>

Within the NGE movement, there existed similar male/female relationships as in Rastafarianism. Though Gods hailed mothers as the teachers of children, it was understood that a woman could not be the enlightener for a man.<sup>59</sup> Kimmel's theory of collusion between men and women was evident in this group also as the understanding that Gods were the ones responsible for teaching other Gods and Earths the lessons while the Earths' responsibilities lay in teaching "the babies". For an Earth to attempt to transcend this role would be harmful to the movement. This was not to say that agency was stripped from the Earths in their attempt to uphold the gendered standards of the NGE. Patricia Hill Collins articulated womanism as a "way for Black women to address gender-oppression without attacking Black men" and the movement's

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<sup>58</sup> Kat. "Allah B". XSMegazine. <http://link.brightcove.com/services/link/bcpid339143462/bclid18590698/bctid23635811>. Accessed August 12, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Muhammad Knight. *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop, and the Gods of New York*. (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2007). 215

acceptance of an Afrocentric womanism as a way to strengthen women<sup>60</sup> without breaking the God/Earth solidarity needed to overcome the devil's rule<sup>61</sup> proved to be tools of empowerment for Earths.<sup>62</sup>

With respect to child-rearing, the Gods bestowed the utmost appreciation to their Earths. Women in the group were referred to as Earths because "she received procreation input and brought forth life, same as the earth receiving the sun"<sup>63</sup> A sense of Africana womanism can be gleaned from such publications of the Nations of Gods and Earths as *The Five Percenter* in which a young girl in a comic strip who asked when she would be able to teach someone the lessons of the NGE but was made to realize her duty to "reflect the fields of home economics, culture, and refinement onto the young" in recognition of "why the Black woman is the Mother of Civilization".<sup>64</sup>

Through reinterpreting feminism and womanism, one can observe the creative ways in which Rasta women and Earths negotiated their status as essential to their respective movements. This negotiation is reminiscent of *Eigenart* spirit of German women in the Weimar Republic during the First World War. *Eigenart* was a political slogan that designated the particularities of women's, needs, sentiments, and

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<sup>60</sup> Patricia Collins Hill. "Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond". *Black Scholar*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 1996). 11

<sup>61</sup> Members of the Nation of Gods and Earths believe that the world's population is broken down into three groups: the five percent who are conscious and aware of the historical past as it were before it had been twisted and hidden by the ten percent in power who want to keep the remaining eighty-five percent of the population in the dark about the past and about present social disparities.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Muhammad Knight. *The Five Perceners: Islam, Hip-Hop, and the Gods of New York*. (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2007). 224

<sup>63</sup> Pen Black. *Gods, Earths and 85ers: A Comparative Look into the Goals, History and Teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths, otherwise known as the Five Perceners*. (Brooklyn, NY: Tru Life Publishing, 2007) 35.

<sup>64</sup> "Akee, Wise & Essence" *The Five Percenter*. (March 2006). 12

consciousness in the workplace.<sup>65</sup> Such a stance maintained that women were different from men but certainly not inferior to them.<sup>66</sup> When Rasta women and Earths adhered to this understanding of their roles within their respective movements, they tended to see themselves as part of an organic community in which their absence would prove detrimental to the whole.

As Clenora Hudson-Weems posited, the maintenance of the greater structure, in this case the Rastafarian and NGE cultures, was paramount to the internal issues faced by these groups. Creating inner strife by arguing that the women were oppressed in a patriarchal system would hinder the aims of the movements. These women took the responsibility of self-definition into their own hands in lauding themselves as the irreplaceable part of the movements. Additionally, the Rasta men and Gods also recognized the magnitude of women's contribution to their respective groups.

Some scholars have argued the utility of the Africana womanist model saying that Hudson-Weems' theory rested on an ahistoric, monolithic view of African cultures.<sup>67</sup> While this claim was certainly valid, the best way to understand the usefulness of an ascribed monolithic view would be through a Pan-Africanist view which connects all African descendants in the fight for equal rights and thus categorizes them under a common identity. The world over, Africana people have experienced

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<sup>65</sup> Kathleen Canning. *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship*. (Cornell University Press, 2006). 88-89

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 89

<sup>67</sup> Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien. "Revisiting 'What's in a Name: Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought'". *Frontiers: Gender Watch* Vol. 27, Issue 1 (2006). 68

varying forms of racial strife regardless of their individual social status. Using the Africana womanist perspective to analyze the experiences of women in the Black Panther Party, Nation of Gods and Earths and within the Rastafarian cultures is the best way to see their agency and identity. Garvey's strategy for achieving the economic advancement and liberation of Africans, 'at home and abroad', was the building up of a powerful and united Africa.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Allah (Clarence 13X, father of NGE culture) adopted an Afrocentric perspective and maintained that his movement focused on pride and empowerment of Black people.<sup>69</sup> Utilizing these strategies was necessary for these groups to mobilize a certain constituency dedicated to improving the depreciated status of all Africana people.

The alliance with people in the African Diaspora was crucial to the identity politics within these cultural groups. Moreover, gender was important in defining one's specific purpose. As an Africana womanist, learning from knowledgeable Black men, having children with them and later, teaching these children to continue in this vein was vital to the continuance of a powerful culture. The self-naming tenet of Africana womanism was most evident in the naming of women in the NGE as Earths and not goddesses. Because of the life giving power of the Earth itself, the women of the NGE are named likewise. Childbirth was most important to both the Nation of

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<sup>68</sup> Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). 10.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Muhammad Knight. *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop, and the Gods of New York*. (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2007). 112

Gods and Earths and Rasta women in that the power to create a new generation of followers—hence, the family-centered aspect of Africana womanism.

The women in these groups were not silent when it came to addressing men for their shortcomings in holding up their end of the bargain as fathers, providers, and protectors. Multiple articles in the Earth inspired *Divine Wisdom* newsletter urged women not to look for self-affirmation in Gods as doing so could prove to be self-destructive. Knowledge was to be gleaned from the Gods not one's sense of self-importance.<sup>70</sup> On the Rastafarian-based *Roots Women* internet website, an unnamed author questioned damaging male-domination beginning with a quote from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, former leader of the Nation of Islam- "A nation can rise no higher than its women". The race will be uplifted through the uplift of Black womanhood.<sup>71</sup> The author emphasized a shared equality between men and women in the eyes of their God and asserted the supreme power of women and their reproductive capabilities.<sup>72</sup>

The Africana womanists in these groups also voiced their concerns for their sister members in the groups using various outlets. Earth conferences and "reasoning" by Rasta women were gender-specific meetings in which conversation concerning

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<sup>70</sup> Beautiful Asiatic Earth. "Black Woman Get Your Mind Right". *Divine Wisdom*. Volume1, Issue 1 (2007).1

<sup>71</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. *Negritude Women*. (University of Minneapolis Press, 2002). 16

<sup>72</sup> "Developing Woman" (1996), <http://www.rootswomen.com/articles/developingwoman.html> (accessed November 30, 2007).

relationships to men and one another, child care, and personal empowerment were discussed:

*“Many Sistrens in the Faith are falling out of Glory and are straying from their position in the house hold. From the way thou dress, to the way thou raise and stear thou youths, up to the way de I Raspect de I’s temple as the temple of Her Divine Empress Menen, MaMa Omega, to the way thou Appreci-Love, Raspect and, Honour Thy King Man and ,love and Raspect thy Bredrens and Sistrens.”<sup>73</sup>*

The spiritual ambitions of these women lay not in improving one’s own individual status but in the reassurance that the education and personal wherewithal of one could be used to fuel the progression of the entire community. The message of expected male-female roles could also be found in the music lyrics of members of the groups and those who acknowledge the teachings of the NGE without necessarily becoming a member. Singer, Erykah Badu stood out as the most notable female artist who espoused the tenets of the Nation of Gods and Earths in her lyrics. In her “Orange Moon” song, she sang of her God (or Sun) who shined his light (knowledge) on her (the moon) creating in her a brightness (awareness or consciousness) never before experienced.<sup>74</sup> Likewise in Busta Rhymes’ “One”, Badu takes up a more Africana womanist message with lyrics that attempted to assure the male subject that her quest for independence should not be misinterpreted as rivalry but one that will help in the

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<sup>73</sup> Empress Peaches. <http://www.worldofjah.com/profiles/blog/show?id=1042051%3ABlogPost%3A28676>. Accessed March 25, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Erykah Badu. “Orange Moon” *Mama’s Gun*. (2000)

betterment of the whole. “Now don’t you let my ambition make you feel like competition/ we should both play a role in our whole living condition” .<sup>75</sup>

At the heart of membership in these groups was the desire to align oneself with an agenda that would accelerate and ameliorate the Africana experience. The reverence men paid to mothers and sisters members in the groups was the most important contributing factor to women’s presence. Being “barefoot and pregnant” was transformed from the feminist perspective of oppression to one of empowerment in the Africana womanist model. Being a “sister in the struggle” was admirable.

### **Chapter 3: Africana Womanist Expressions**

The Black Panther Party of the 1960s and 1970s and Rastafarian culture of the 1980s and 1990s, and the NGE spanning the 1960s-2000s were not oppressive patriarchies that rendered their women voiceless and powerless. Using an Africana womanist perspective, I contend that members of these social groups operated such that the women experienced a particular inclusion in positions of power that affected the entire community.

One of the strongest arguments against Clenora Hudson-Weems’ tenets of Africana womanism has been that it problematically conflates the experiences of women of African descent. While theoretically unorthodox, this formulation of a collective identity existed and was necessary for Black Panther women, Earths and

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<sup>75</sup> Busta Rhymes. “One” *When Disaster Strikes*. (1997)



Rasta women to take up in order to perpetuate their respective cultures. The tenets pertaining to one's dedication to family, community, and male-female companionship spoke loudest to the women in these groups. Through embodying the African-based attitude of *ubuntu* meaning "I am because we are", these women prioritized the needs of the whole ahead of individual desires. Working toward the benefit of these most important people, ensured the survival of the people.

Acceptable platforms of leadership for these women were built on the understanding that they strive to perpetuate the precepts of the group. Rasta "reasoning" forums were gender specific with men discussing society outside of their culture and women focusing on how they would strengthen themselves within the group through their roles as wives and mothers.

In his *The History of Men*, Michael Kimmel posited that men should not be looked at as having only acted as women's oppressors.<sup>76</sup> They have acted alongside women in reifying the terms of womanhood and manhood- a manhood stripped from Black men through various acts of brutality, terror, and familial destruction throughout the eras of slavery and post-emancipation. It appears as though these groups ignored how notions of womanhood were also expropriated from Black women—possibly because regardless of the level of social oppression, they could still bear children and "marry" men, legally or not, while men were unable to live out their manhood in protecting their

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<sup>76</sup> Michael S. Kimmel. *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities*. (SUNY New York Press, 2005).

families. It took both the men *and* the women of these groups to allow for the position of man as the leader of the family in order to remain intact and to avoid any strains of contention. The common thread between these groups was the emphasis on adherence to rather than deviance from gendered roles in order to better facilitate the goals of social egalitarianism and personal enlightenment.

It must be noted however that while the gendered roles exhibited by those in the Black Panther Party as well as within Rastafarianism and the Nation of Gods and Earths appear to reflect a European model in that the hierarchy exists such that men occupy a position above women in the household as well as in public discourse; they do not. The men in these groups are not above the women, they simply occupy a different position with a different set of responsibilities. Scholars, however, take Hudson-Weems to task for her ascription to Africana-based relationships that mirror a Eurocentric hierarchy:

Hudson-Weems condemns sexism in the Black community, but the male-female complementarities she recommends is not authentically African as she suggests, and actually affirms Western standards of gender relations.<sup>77</sup>

I argue that while adopting a pattern of gender relationships that reflect exactly that which you wish to refute is impractical, that error can be in turn used to explain the particular relationship that the women in these groups shared with their male companions. Despite its flaws, Hudson-Weems' Africana-womanism still functions as a

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<sup>77</sup> Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd. & Evelyn M. Simien. "Revisiting 'What's in a Name: Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought'". *Frontiers: Gender Watch* Vol. 27, Issue 1, 2006: 68-69

useful analysis for negotiating the areas of power and influence in which female Black Panthers and Rasta women existed.

The Africana womanist focused more on the problems she confronted based on her race more so than her gender. The Rasta woman or woman of the Black Panther Party who spoke out on behalf of the groups did it in a way that did not challenge male authority and that focused criticisms outward. While constant debates existed over in-group sexism such arguments were couched in a manner that kept the group's focus on fighting social inequality outside of the group. Failure to do so would create a rift in the community which went directly against the Africana womanist agenda. Black writer, poet, and activist, Audre Lorde, recognized the inseparability of Black men and women in their struggle against racism: Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it...Out of that shared oppression we have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community.<sup>78</sup>

Women in these groups were vocal on many levels that included being a forerunner of the BPP and producing music, poetry, and written publications that spoke to their experiences. Here, these women got their messages of dedication to family and community across. Men also utilized such mediums to both praise and condemn what they believed to be uplifting attributes that contributed to fostering a greater sense of

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<sup>78</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems. "Africana Womanism: The Flip Side of a Coin". *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. 25, Part 3 (2001): 137-145

community as well as divisive and “evil” ways of women that were counter to the beliefs and goals of the group, respectively. Video recorded interviews of Rasta women in particular that delved into discussion of male-female relationships in which many of the women understood and agreed that it was their duty to support their mates as the men saw fit. They also believed it was their responsibility to encourage fellow Rasta women to uphold their revered roles as mothers and wives and to avoid playing into the stereotypical reviled role of woman as lecherous, traitorous, and an all around trickster hell-bent on entrapping men.

### **Africana Womanism: Mother and Sister Leaders**

When considering prominent figures in the Rastafarian culture, one need not go far to see women whom are held in the highest regard. The oldest of the three branches of Rastafarianism was the Nyabinghi Order, named after Queen Nyabinghi. The other two, the Bobo and Twelve Tribes of Israel, each operated on opposite ends of rigidity as per the in-group rules and regulations.

Dr. Leonard E. Barrett, a Jamaican and graduate professor of religion in the United States, researched the Nyabinghi as part of his comprehensive study, "The Rastafarians."

"The term 'Nyabinghi' comes to us from East Africa and refers to a religio-political cult that resisted colonial domination from the last decade of the 19th century to about 1928," Barrett writes. "The term might have been the name or title of a Ruandaise (sic) royal princess who was killed by colonialist because of

her resistance. After her death, cults arose which were influenced by her spirit. The members of the cult experienced spirit possession and the medium of these cults was always a woman....

The Nyabinghi believe in a global theocracy to be headed by Emperor Haile Selassie I, whom they proclaim to be the promised Messiah and incarnation of the Supreme Deity.... The purpose of Nyabinghi is to resurrect the people from darkness into light and to set all Black people free. Anyone can be a follower of Rastafari but the Order of Nyabinghi [exclusively] is intended to liberate all African people and set them in the ways of truth and right and teach them to love and live as Jah Rastafari had wished from the beginning."<sup>79</sup>

Many new Rasta of the early twentieth century came to believe that Haile Selassie I, emperor of Ethiopia, became possessed with the spirit of Nyabinghi thus propelling him in his fight against the invading Italian army of Mussolini.<sup>80</sup> The head figure to which Rastafarianism owes its namesake- Ras Tafari- was Haile Selassie I. Considered to be the god figure, his wife, Empress Menen, was not without her accolades. She was fundamentally important to the movement as an honorable woman prepared to fight along with her husband in the quest for independence.

Following this trajectory within the Jamaican culture, another well respected woman was Amy-Jacques Garvey, wife of Marcus Garvey the prophetic figure of Rastafarianism. Matching the ideas of her husband, this race woman was most concerned with the uplift of Black people and their need to establish for themselves in

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<sup>79</sup> Hugh Hamilton. "Nyabinghi Elders Explain Principles of Their Faith". CITY SUN June 15-21,1988----  
<http://web.syr.edu/~affellem/nyah.html>

<sup>80</sup> Turner & Ferguson. *Arise Ye Mighty People! : Gender, Class, and Race in Popular Struggles*. Trenton, NJ. Africa World Press (1994). 30

Africa a nation governed by Blacks where they would not encounter the racism prevalent in the early twentieth-century United States. Jacques-Garvey easily fell into the Africana womanist model in that she instructed Black women whom she stated as “not being physically strong as men but endowed with God-given gifts that would repay them for this weakness” to be competent mothers—surely, one of the divine gifts—and affirm men in the movement for self-determination.<sup>81</sup> Taylor contends that although Jacques-Garvey encouraged Black women to be guided by an African consciousness and to make heard their voices in political and civic affairs they were not to stray from their innate gender-specified roles as mothers, wives, and nurturers in general- roles she believed to be beneficial to both women and men, hence the community.<sup>82</sup> This profound dedication to one’s family and community carried over the decades to the women of Rastafarianism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Bianca Nyavingi Brynda’s documentary, *Roots Daughters: The Women of Rastafari* stars Judy Mowatt dubbed Jamaica’s first lady of worship; a woman active in the Rasta culture until the late 1990s. Throughout the video, Mowatt’s incantation of the “great Black warrior queens” lets her audience know that they must neither forget nor look past strong woman leaders such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and the aforementioned Amy Jacques-Garvey- women who had dedicated their lives to the betterment of the Black race, but were also cognizant of the particular issues facing

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<sup>81</sup> Taylor. “Negro Women Are Great Thinkers As Well As Doers”. *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 12 No.2 (Summer). 2000. 111

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 113

Black women. In his *Virtuous Woman*, Rastafarian reggae artist, Warrior King, sang:

*Nuh (no) real man can live without a woman. Like night*

*to day so is a woman to her man. She's essential to his purpose and his missions.*<sup>83</sup>

Another medium through which Rasta women expressed their African womanism was in their poetry that held their “king-men” or lovers and husbands responsible for taking care of their household and children as they did their parts as mothers and wives in educating the children, maintaining a peaceful household, and preserving an amiable relationship with their men as the best way to ensure the survival of their community. Lady Loxx, Rasta dubb poet, exclaimed in *Queen*:

*“I am complicated, engaging, and radiant with splendor- a compliment to a man and my gender. I am woman, interwoven with a man without the other cannot stand. I am a Rasta. Not just a Rasta man’s woman but a Rasta woman, a sister of Jah (God).”*<sup>84</sup>

For those Rasta women who either did not possess a particular musical or poetic skill or the desire to make themselves heard in that way, they took to the more simplistic fashion of holding both formal and informal “reasonings” amongst their sistren. These were talk sessions wherein women would discuss amongst themselves those things most important to them. Conversation was often geared toward educating those women who were unaware of, or not keeping up with their duties as Rastas.

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<sup>83</sup> Warrior King. “Virtuous Woman” *Virtuous Woman*. (2001)

<sup>84</sup> Lady Loxx. “Queen” [http://www.8rooks.com/spoken\\_word/spoken\\_wordladylox.html](http://www.8rooks.com/spoken_word/spoken_wordladylox.html). (Accessed November 3, 2007)

Maintaining the Rastafari culture became especially important to those members who experienced the rapid economic decline in Jamaica since the 1950s despite the interference of the International Monetary Fund in 1963. The IMF was considered an evil tool of Babylon implicit in the destruction of Jamaica.<sup>85</sup> With women doing their part within the movement, Rasta men could focus on encouraging others to turn away from the Babylonian West and toward repatriation to Africa.<sup>86</sup> The Rastafari in Jamaica were not alone in their disenchantment with the West.

During the Civil Rights era, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPPSD or BPP) emphasized racial solidarity, self-help, and the eradication of racial, economic, and political oppression. The Panther Party's call for revolution was illustrated in their ten point plan.<sup>87</sup> As an organization geared toward the betterment of the entire Black community through food for the hungry and Afrocentric-based education programs, many Black men and women fed up with the economic and social disparities of the 1960s and 70s flocked to the BPP in search of personal empowerment.

Under the guise of strength and empowerment for the entire community however, some men tended to regard those women around them as inferior counterparts in exercising their "male privilege". Critical race theorist, Derrick Bell

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<sup>85</sup>Stephanie Black. *Life and Debt: Globalization and Jamaica* (2001)

<sup>86</sup>Rastas often liken the West to ancient Babylon for displaying what they believe to be a lascivious, dastardly, and evil nation hell-bent on materialistic and physical pleasures without regard to the good of the all people and the environment.

<sup>87</sup>James L. Conyers, Jr. *Engines of the Black Power Movement*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007) .48



addressed this issue of sexual diversion in which Black men take the oppression dealt to them and assert themselves over Black women as a their way of maintaining some sense of self and superiority over another in the face of an existence in which they believed that there was little they could control.<sup>88</sup> Such incidences in which women in the Party faced gender discrimination were certainly catalogued by the likes of Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, and Regina Jennings and numbers of other members but we cannot deny the fact that the BPP gave the women of the group far more opportunities to lead and to influence the organization than any of its contemporaries, in white or Black radical formations.<sup>89</sup>

Mumia Abu-Jamal, a former member of the Party staunchly defends the role of women in the organization as vital to the carrying out of its goals. Women like Afeni Shakur, Safiya A. Bukhari, and Elaine Brown found themselves at the helm of various positions within the Party—as regional leader, at the head of internal affairs, and in charge of the entire organization, respectively. According to Frankye Malika Adams, former member of the Black Panther Party:

“Women ran the BPP pretty much. I don’t know how it got to be a male’s party or thought of as being a male’s party. Because these things, when you really look at it in terms of society, these things are looked on as being women things, you know, feeding children, taking care of the sick, and uh, so. Yeah, we did that. We actually ran the BPP’s programs.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Devon W. Carbado, *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader*. (NYU Press 1999)

<sup>89</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal. *We Want Freedom*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004). 161

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 164

It is evident through looking at the personal first-hand accounts of Black Panther Party members that women's experiences ran the gamut—she could be elevated to a prominent position or remain in a more lower-level position. The Africana womanist attitude was present in the actions of these women in that they were most concerned with securing parity for Black people and in that they were willing to operate in any sector in order to ensure the goals of the Party.

One must not think, however that the women in these groups were without a voice when it came to addressing men for their shortcomings. The Africana womanists in these groups also voiced their concerns for their sister members in the groups using various outlets. Earth conferences and “reasonings” by Rasta women were gender-specific meetings in which conversation concerning relationships to men and one another, child care, and personal empowerment were discussed. Another conduit for discourse on these topics includes publications created by Earths and Rasta women. Multiple articles in the Earth inspired *Divine Wisdom* newsletter urged women not to look for self-affirmation in gods as doing so could prove to be self-destructive.

Knowledge was to be gleaned from the gods, not a sense of self-importance.<sup>91</sup> On the Rastafarian-based *Roots Women* internet website, an unnamed author questioned male-domination beginning with a quote from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, former leader of the Nation of Islam- “A nation can rise no higher than its women”. The race

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<sup>91</sup> Beautiful Asiatic Earth. “Black Woman Get Your Mind Right”. *Divine Wisdom*. Volume1, Issue 1 (2007).1

will be uplifted through the uplift of Black womanhood.<sup>92</sup> The author emphasized a shared equality between men and women in the eyes of their God and asserted the supreme power of women and their reproductive capabilities.<sup>93</sup>

At the heart of membership in these groups was the desire to align oneself with an agenda that would unify Africana people under the shield of cultural pride in the fight against racism and the ensuing inequalities. Many Euro-American women tended to think that being a parent and/or wife brought them little social respect and sense of dignity or personal gratification. These women sought “liberation” from their subservient roles in heterosexual relationships and advocate “equal rights” which the Africana womanist had already been experiencing.<sup>94</sup>

Scholars would be remiss in failing to recognize that the women in these groups held some of power at some level at all times. Their participation and membership was a key element. The reverence paid to mothers and sisters in the groups was the most important contributing factor to women’s presence. Role flexibility came from child rearing, teaching and leading. The development of Rastafarianism and the BPP owed much to the willingness of Black Panther women and Rasta women to acknowledge their roles in the groups as strengths rather than social constraints. The women joined

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<sup>92</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. *Negritude Women*. (University of Minneapolis Press, 2002). 16

<sup>93</sup> “Developing Woman” (1996), <http://www.rootswomen.com/articles/developingwoman.html> (accessed November 30, 2007).

<sup>94</sup> Joseph A. Baldwin, Yvonne R. Bell, Cathy L. Bouie. “Afrocentric Cultural Consciousness and African-American Male-Female Relationships”. *Journal of Black Studies*. December 1990) Vol. 21, No. 2

these groups primarily based on their desire to connect on a race-based level directed toward improving conditions for their entire family and community regardless of sex.

### **Conclusion:**

For the Africana womanist, racial disparities were the most debilitating problem facing her. With the belief that race was most important, the Africana womanist aligned herself with nationalist groups such as the Black Panther Party, Rastafarianism, and Nation of Gods and Earths. While espousing an Afrocentric cultural world view, the members of these groups embodied a blend of European hegemonic gender relations in which women were most important as mothers and wives, and an African-based idea where each member of the community was important and vital to the continuation of the whole. Because of the presence of Blacks in the Western hemisphere and their immersion in the dominant culture, it is understandable that such a blend would occur.

In an interview with Clenora Hudson-Weems, professor of gender Studies Daphne Williams Ntiri asked what it was about Africana womanism that makes it stand out from its precursors. Hudson-Weems replied:

*What makes Africana womanism different from any other female-based theory is that we are inseparable and one—as the other, I should say the other side of the coin from the Africana man—collectively struggling, as we’ve always done as Africans: A people collectively working. We come from a communal past. “It takes a village to raise a child,” as the old African adage goes. Well, it takes a village to do everything, because we work together.*

The women of the Nation of Gods and Earths, the Black Panther Party, and Rastafarianism would not have been able to continue to remain in their respective groups had it not been for their Africana womanist resolve. More than anything else, they wanted to work toward making their people's lives better. Arranging their identities in a way that placed race at the helm was best for bridging gaps between the men and women in the groups. They were all connected by a common heritage from the African continent and through taking on a common culture largely influenced by their ancestry and further shaped by their experiences throughout the Diaspora. Instances of sexism certainly occurred within each group however the women addressed these occurrences in a fashion that reminded the men of their commitment and promise to uphold an ideology that respected Black women as integral to the household and community thus keeping in tact the communal spirit.

Black Nationalist, Martin Delaney put it best with his declaration that:

*Our females must be qualified because they are the mothers of our children. As mothers are the first nurses and instructors of children; from them children consequently get their first impressions, which being always the most lasting should be the most correct. Raise mothers above the level of degradation, and the offspring is elevated with them.*<sup>95</sup>

This was the spirit behind male-female relationships in the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Gods and Earths and Rastafarianism.

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<sup>95</sup> Tolagbe Ogunleye. "Dr. Martin Robinson Delany, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Africana Womanist: Reflections on His Avant-Garde Politics Concerning Gender, Colorism, and Nation Building". *Journal of Black Studies* (May 1998 Vol. 28, No. 5) 634

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