A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers

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In recent years, a compelling discussion in education has centered on caring. In this paper, I contribute to this dialogue by suggesting that there is a particular form of caring exhibited in the pedagogy of exemplary black women teachers. It is the purpose of this paper to illuminate central aspects of their pedagogy as facets of womanism, an epistemological perspective based on the collective experiences of black women. As educators who exhibit "womanist caring," such teachers demonstrate the following three characteristics: an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk. In describing each characteristic, I provide both contemporary and historical evidence to demonstrate that womanism is part of a long-standing tradition among African-American women teachers. I conclude the paper by suggesting that we can better inform pre- and in-service educators about the types of teachers that our students need from an understanding of how and why exemplary teachers exhibit their womanist caring.

Over the last 15 years, educational researchers and theorists have decried the lack of caring in our schools (Grumet, 1988; Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999). As researchers have sought to address this problem, they have called for teachers to transform themselves into adults who can relate to and thus more effectively teach all children in our schools (e.g., Bartolome, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999). Amidst these calls for teacher transformation have been examples of the types of teachers who are effective. Striking about such portrayals is that a number of these exemplars are black women, which I believe is more than coincidence. I believe that researchers have come across a womanist tradition of caring that extends throughout the history of African-American women.

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WOMANISM

Womanism is a standpoint epistemology (Collins, 1991). It is derived from Alice Walker's (1983) term *womanist* and is used generally to represent the cultural, historical, and political positionality of African-American women, a group that has experienced slavery, segregation, sexism, and classism for most of its history in the United States. Used interchangeably with *black feminism*, it is a theoretical perspective that sees the experiences of black women as normative, not as a derivation or variation of black male or white female behavior (Collins, 1991). Womanists recognize that because so many black women have experienced the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism, they often have a particular vantage point on what constitutes evidence (Collins, 1991), valid action (Welch, 1990), and morality (Cannon, 1995). Three central points support womanism. First, womanists understand that oppression is an interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of penalty and privilege. Second, they believe that individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation. Last, they embody a humanism, which seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves (Collins, 1990). Given that womanism seeks to elucidate the experiences, thoughts, and behaviors of black women, in order to understand the caring demonstrated by African-American women teachers, it is critical that we contextualize their thoughts and actions within their particular cultural and historical legacies. In doing so, three characteristics are noteworthy: the embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk.

EMBRACE OF THE MATERNAL

In both lay and academic analyses of exemplary teachers committed to social justice, the maternal image is particularly visible in the pedagogy of African-American women teachers. A public example of such teaching is that of Marva Collins, the founder of the renowned Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. Over the last 25 years, Collins has drawn out "extraordinary" capabilities from her students, who are "at risk" for school and social failure because they are poor African-American children living in the neighboring housing projects. While her successes are clearly significant and have garnered the attention of many Americans wanting to see improvements in our public schools, notable about her work is the maternal sensibility she brings to her pedagogy. As the jacket of her book, *"Ordinary" Children, Extraordinary Teachers* (1992), reads:

> Marva Collins embodies all that is meant by that hallowed word . . . teacher. She gives of herself tirelessly so that those whose minds are supple may grasp knowledge and power through her love. Indeed love, like that of a mother for her children, is the

essence of the Marva Collins Way . . . love of learning, love of teaching, and love of sharing.

Such a connection with a maternal form of caring is also evident in Collins's own descriptions of her work. Reflecting on her frustration with the public school she left to begin her own academy, Collins explicitly connects her teaching visions to her sensibilities as a mother:

> The search for a school for my own three children opened my eyes: the public schools had no monopoly on poor education. . . . What was once the poor man's burden had become everyone's.
>
> With this came another realization, that I couldn't escape the problem, as a teacher or as a mother. These parts of my life were inextricably interwoven; at Delano I was fighting for the kind of education I wanted for my own children. As a parent I tended to be protective, and I always felt that same driving concern as a teacher. I could never walk out of Delano at 3:15 and leave the school and the students entirely behind me. Were my students going home or would they wander the streets? Were their clothes warm enough? Would their stomachs be full tonight and would they have sheets on their beds? (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 73)

Collins views her inability not to mother her students as a matter of fact, and as an emotional strength rather than as a weakness. If anything, her parenting experiences as a mother seem to have informed her teaching so that she has brought the same standards of care and accountability to her students as she would to her own children. "If the school was going to be good enough for other children, it had to be good enough for my own," she reasoned (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 80). As a public school teacher, caring like a mother focused her decision to take maternal steps, that is, to create a structure in which she could educate and shelter her students/children from adversity. Indeed, in the Ten Teaching Commandments that she has developed for her own faculty, the first reads, "Thou shalt love they students as you would love your own children" (Collins, 1992, p. 178).

Such a maternal caring for students is also a central theme of a *People* magazine article entitled "Momma Knows Best." Affectionately called "Momma Hawk" by her middle-school students, Corla Hawkins is another Chicago teacher. Like Collins, Hawk began her own school, Recovering the Gifted Child Academy, after seeing too many poor children systematically failed by the public schools. For Hawkins, her teaching very clearly emanates from a vocation to extend herself to those children who needed her most:

> I felt I could take the dysfunctional family structure these children were used to and replace it with a new family structure that stresses success, personal achievement and self-esteem. . . . God gave me a dream—to take care of children of rejection. I

literally saw myself going around the world hugging and loving children nobody else wanted. (Valente, 1996, pp. 45, 47)

Describing Momma Hawk, a board member of the school says, "Corla is so successful because she is so human. . . . She's not on a pedestal. She feels things deeply. She hurts" (Valente, 1996, p. 46). At the same time, however, such emotional connection with her students does not preclude Hawkins from "run[ning] my school based on a corporate model" (p. 46), complete with a time clock and strict discipline.

As educator Lisa Delpit (1995) and others have described, schools too often replay the racial and economic biases of the larger society. Distinctions, both overt and subtle, abound between majority member students ("our children") and children from minority groups ("other people's children"). Drawing attention to this split, Delpit identifies educational reform as centrally concerning our identities and relationships as educators:

> The teachers, the psychologists, the school administrators . . . look at "other people's children" and see damaged and dangerous caricatures of the vulnerable and impressionable beings before them. . . . What are we really doing to better educate poor children and children of color? . . . What should we be doing? The answers, I believe, lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another. (Delpit, 1995, pp. xiii, xiv, xv)

If school failure is a result of a "relational breakdown" (Ward, 1995) between teachers and students, where both groups see little in common or shared in purpose, then the academic success of poor, immigrant, and minority children lies very much in the quality of the relationships that their teachers establish with them.

Exemplary African-American women teachers use the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their interactions with students. As Kathe Jervis (1996) concludes in her article about an innovative public school:

> For such a promise of personalized schools to be fulfilled, faculties have to adopt Carrie's [an African-American teacher's] attitude about children. She often says, "When I am in a quandary about how to handle a child, I think, 'What would I do if that child were my child?' and 'How would I want that child handled were my son or daughter in that situation?'" Parents have an urgency about their own children. We need to feel the same urgency when we teach other people's children. (p. 570)

However, to have such an urgency about children is to recognize that teachers may be failing precisely those students considered to be failures. As Momma Hawk notes, when a student is disruptive, "the teacher's first reaction is to get him out of the class instead of saying maybe this child doesn't have anybody"

(Valente, 1996, p. 44). Too often, in her opinion, teachers lacking a parental urgency take the easy, nonfamililal/nonmaternal way out of difficult situations.

As insightful and active as the maternal connection to students appears among womanist teachers, not all women adopt it in their pedagogy. Kathleen Casey's (1990, 1993) phenomenological study of teaching and women-identified values perhaps best illuminates the differences in caring among women. Investigating the role of such values in the work of socially progressive Jewish, Catholic, and African-American teachers, Casey (1990) found that many of these women had a desire to "deconstruct the maternal." Both the secular Jewish women and the Catholic nuns interviewed saw schools as sites of the patriarchal domination closely resembling traditional middle-class families. In these families, maintains Casey, there is a pattern of "maternal nurture and paternal authority" (p. 307). Significantly, neither group of teachers had experienced this stereotypical family pattern in their own upbringing. However, both the Jewish and Catholic teachers felt that the only concept of mother that they could manifest in the classroom was that prescribed by the school culture: "mother" as an agent of the patriarchal domination of women and children. As a result, they sought to assert an identity in the classroom that challenged such a conception of teacher as mother.

In a very real manner, these educators were trapped in a mainstream, patriarchal notion of teaching. Significantly, they did not call on the ennobling models of women as mothers from their personal lives and use these to resist the patriarchal expectations of women. Rather, as they decried hierarchical gender distinctions, the Jewish teachers resented the gender stereotyping within schools and thought of teaching "in terms of intellectual challenge and political efficacy" (p. 305), not in terms of making school family-like. Similarly, in their criticism of school patriarchy, the Catholic nuns portrayed themselves as the sisterly allies of students. In other words, for both groups of these women educators, commitments to social justice hinged on their reworking of their professional relationships, as women, to both children/students and men/administrators. Casey's (1990) interviews with older white teachers who taught before and after raising their own children led her to conclude that "since the maternal relationship can leave a woman in our society so materially and psychologically vulnerable, it is no wonder that so many look for another metaphor to describe their connections with children" (p. 313).

The black women teachers in Casey's study, however, did not evidence a domesticated view of womanhood or mothering in their reflections on their educational philosophies and practice. Within their cultural construction of womanhood, they profoundly embraced a maternal image. Based in their lives and experiences outside the classroom, the maternal served as a relational compass for their teaching. Like the Jewish teachers and Catholic nuns, these educators did not accept the definition of "mother" found in the schools and in

society. However, unlike their colleagues, the African-American women did not rely on the school's appropriation of the maternal to circumscribe their own desire to relate to students in a familiar, maternal way. In fact, these teachers saw their maternal qualities and the mother-child relationship as *central* to their resistance to domination, both patriarchal and racial. As Casey (1990) clarifies the black teachers' maternal orientation to students:

> The relationship between mother and child is not exclusive and private, but is part of the wider family which is one's "people." . . . Because of the social context out of which this understanding has been constructed, the maternal is not seen as an individual burden, but as reciprocity among members of the group. Whatever nurture these teachers provide, it comes back to them; as one teacher says about her students, "they love your very soul." (p. 316)

Rather than envision mothering primarily in terms of women's individual relationships with men and children (as Casey reports the Jewish and Catholic teachers doing), the African-American teachers regarded mothering broadly as a communal responsibility. Casey (1990) explains, "The definition of nurture which is presented in the narratives of these Black women teachers is inclusive in several senses: it is not limited to women, it is expressive of relationship within community and it is not separate from the exercise of authority. An exceedingly powerful version of nurture emerges from this particular social context" (p. 317).

Racism and the collective struggle against injustice comprise the particular social context of which Casey speaks. The black women teachers were raised in households in which their identity as African-Americans, as people treated as second-class citizens in a democracy, was discussed. Furthermore, in conceptualizing their own agency, these black women did not believe that their view of maternal responsibility implicated them in a patriarchal family structure. Drawing on the cultural norms of West Africa and the oppressive realities that people of African descent have faced in this country, these women viewed the maternal as a profound commitment to the well-being and survival of black children and black people. The maternal lens they brought to their practice powerfully connected their personal relationships with students to an active engagement with social reality.

Several recent studies have suggested a similar cultural connection between the pedagogy of culturally relevant black teachers and a concept of the maternal in their practice (Case, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1993). For example, Michele Foster (1993) maintains that the use of kin terms among black women teachers as "mothers, aunts, and grandmothers" toward their students is a long-standing practice within black communities. In this tradition, teachers often see themselves as "othermothers" or women who, through feelings of shared respon-

sibility, commit themselves to the social and emotional development of all children in a community (Collins, 1991). "Othermothering" has also been described as a "universalized ethic of care" or a "collective social conscience" (Case, 1997, pp. 26, 36) in which the caring that othermothers engage in is not simply interpersonal but profoundly political in intent and practice. Explains Patricia Hill Collins (1991):

> By seeing the larger community as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents "rights" in child rearing, African-Americans challenge prevailing property relations. It is in this sense that traditional bloodmother/othermother relationships in women-centered networks are "revolutionary." (p. 123)

This concept of othermothering is germane to education because teaching in the African-American community, as in other ethnic groups, has been dominated by women since the turn of the 20th century. However, the profound relational capacities of womanist teachers are vitally connected to another dimension—their identity as political beings who make constant parallels between schooling and society, school practices and social reality. Thus, as the traditions of caring in which black women have been involved have had an explicit focus on helping other women and their children survive the degradations of physical, economic, and political enslavement (Collins, 1991), so has womanism provided an interpersonal base for social action in education.

POLITICAL CLARITY

Political clarity is the recognition by teachers that there are relationships between schools and society that differentially structure the successes and failures of groups of children (Bartolome, 1994). Womanist teachers see racism and other systemic injustices as simultaneously social *and* educational problems. Consequently, they demonstrate a keen awareness of their power and responsibility as adults to contest the societal stereotypes imposed on children.

The presence of political clarity among womanist teachers is a recurring theme in historical and autobiographical analyses of black segregated schools that were valued by their communities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). In taking on the role of surrogate parents toward their students (Cecelski, 1994; Siddle-Walker, 1996), the teachers believed that they were both ethically and "ethnically responsible for preparing these youth for future leadership and for making contributions to this unique mission, namely the liberation and enhancement of the quality of life for Black people" (Adair, 1984; cited in Siddle-Walker, 1996, p. 206). Educators were exhorted to use their sense of collective responsibility to help the masses of their fellow African-Americans understand and act on their rights as citizens in a democracy (Higginbotham, 1992; Perkins, 1983).

As a result, their concern was for the "whole child," not simply their stu-

dents' academic well-being. As Mamie Garvin Fields (1983) recalls from her lifetime of teaching in the segregated state of South Carolina:

> I taught the schoolchildren the same way I taught my sons, but not everybody approved. . . .
>
> My point always was that the "good manners" of some black people didn't help their black child to "come up in the world." Those manners kept us "in our place." They conditioned us in the Old South ways. So the next thing you know, that black child is grown up and calling white people "sir" and "ma'am." . . . For example, many teachers would say, "Don't bother the white people to get necessities for your school." Afraid, you see. My attitude was, "He's a man and speaks English. I will ask him." So the other teachers would send me to see Mr. Welch in his office. I became the spokesman. (p. 221)

Most black teachers during segregation had few illusions about their freedom and knew that, even as adults, they were considered inferior to all whites. Thus, for Mamie Fields to refuse to model subservience for all her children—those of her family as well as of her classroom—was to "teach against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1993) in a profoundly political manner. As she also says, "White people had so many ways to degrade the Negro. I always tried to oppose that" (Fields, 1983, p. 214). Thus, her caring and pedagogy were very much contextualized by and responsive to the needs of her students for someone who would value them and expect greatness of them, even if the larger society (and some of their other black teachers) did not. In the words of one former student of a segregated school, "Our teachers could see our potential even when we couldn't, and they were able to draw out our potential. They helped us imagine possibilities of life beyond what we knew" (Foster, 1997, p. 99).

In a similar way, Marva Collins emphasizes the promise of her students, finding something admirable about each child every day (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 61). This habit is tied to her fundamental belief that

> a good teacher can always make a poor student good and a good student superior. The word *teacher* has its roots in the Latin word meaning *to lead* or *to draw out*. Good teachers draw out the best in every student; they are willing to polish and shine until the true luster of each student comes through. (p. 6; emphasis in original)

In "shining" her students, Collins also confronts them with social reality. In other words, she does not uncritically glorify children. Nor does she simply strive to make students feel good about themselves. The purpose of her teaching is much more political: to help them question reality along with her and to discuss its implications for them.

Because Collins's students are poor children from housing projects located in an urban ghetto, the social assumption (and perhaps desire) is that they will

fail, both in school and in life. Rather than ignoring or minimizing the presence of derogatory stereotypes, Collins makes the political ramifications of their failures to learn clear to them:

> If you throw away your life, you're just letting society have its way. . . . You know, boys and girls, there are some people who look at places like this, neighborhoods like Garfield Park, and they say, "Oh, children from there are not very smart. They aren't going to grow up to be anyone or do anything special." If you decide to waste your lives, you are letting all those people be right. No one can tell you what you will be. Only you have the power to decide for yourselves. (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 85)

While Collins speaks of her children needing to make choices that have lifelong implications, she also recognizes that they need guidance and sponsors, in their families as well as in their school:

> In this messed up world, the only children who are going to make something of themselves are those who come from strong parents or those who have had a strong teacher. One or the other. Or both. (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 54)

As a result, Collins repeats to her students, "I am not going to give up on you. I am not going to let you give up on yourself" (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982, p. 87).

Very significantly, Collins lays bare the political realities that her students, all elementary-aged, are experiencing. Such honesty about the stakes of getting an education, particularly when one is marginalized and oppressed by society, is not common practice in our schools, even at the secondary level (Fine, 1991). Teachers apparently fear that being truthful with minority children will demoralize them even further and seal their fate. Yet, from the perspective of these African-American teacher-mothers, to withhold knowledge *is* to disempower those children.

Politically clear womanist educators understand the necessity of seeing through stereotypes as false representations of children's realities and possibilities. As one communications teacher remarks:

> I teach you the way I perceive you to be. . . . [One of the problems I had with Teach for America] is that, you know, "White savior" type thing. Susie Bonnie Joe . . . is going into 125th, you know, and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, and teaching people who *look* nothing like her, people who are of a *totally* different economic class, and she's "taming the savages." But she sees them as savages. She's perpetuating [bitter chuckle] the very self-hatred and degradation that, I think, is characteristic of so many people who have been othered by our society. . . . So you've got to start with a base level of understanding these kids as *human beings*. We're all subject to the stereotypes of our society, and we can't assume that because we're well-intended

> [chuckle], we don't carry with us all of that. You know, that sheltering, "Don't teach them that history." Or, "Don't tell them that." Or, "I feel so sorry for you. I *expect* you to be poor. I know you only have one parent. Your mother probably doesn't know how to be a mother" [all said in a gentle, yet condescending voice]. Hey, you've got to help them see within their own situation the strength and the richness. (Beauboeuf, 1997, pp. 122–123)

Thus, womanist teachers readily demonstrate their political clarity: With their students, both in deed and in word, they share their understanding of society, an understanding that does not shy away from the reality of domination nor from the existence of resistance struggles against oppression. In essence, loving students means discussing such insights with them, not withholding knowledge from them. Audrey Thompson (1998) describes the cultural significance of such openness: "Caring in the Black family has had to be, in part, *about* the surrounding society, because it has had to provide children with the understanding and the strategies they need to survive racism. . . . [Thus] love and caring [in the womanist tradition] do not step back from the world in order to return to innocence, but step out into the world in order to change it" (p. 532; emphasis in original). Being a womanist educator entails more than simply having a professed love for children: A womanist educator loves children, especially those considered "other" in society, out of a clear-sighted understanding of how and why society marginalizes some children while embracing others.

While political clarity and a maternal sensibility are central to the everyday practice of womanist teachers, their overall investment in the teaching profession emerges from an ethical perspective of risk taking. It is this ethic of risk that provides such educators with the moral fortitude and vision to persevere in their fundamentally political and maternal form of caring.

AN ETHIC OF RISK

A womanist engagement with oppressive realities occurs in spite of an educator's recognition that social injustice is deep-seated and not easily dismantled. Sharon Welch (1990), a white feminist theologian, has remarked on the "ethic of risk" she observed in the literature of noted black women authors, all of whom describe intergenerational struggles against injustice:

> Within an ethic of risk, actions begin with the recognition that far too much has been lost and there are no clear means of restitution. The fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success. . . . It is an ethos in sharp contrast to the ethos of cynicism that often accompanies a recognition of the depth and persistence of evil. (p. 68)

Thus, when Momma Hawk (Valente, 1996) speaks of her dream of "tak[ing] care of children of rejection" or of her belief that "every child is a gift from God and our job as teachers is to find the gift in each" (p. 44), she frames her teaching as a mission and sees herself as a child of God and as having the spiritual resources to undertake that mission. A similar belief in students and in oneself emanates from a high school English teacher's conviction that students "can be *great* achievers. It's so *much* in them, you know, but it takes a *skillful* teacher, it takes a skillful *woman* to draw it out" (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 83). Or in the words of a junior high school communications educator, teaching becomes a process of "manifest[ing] the divinity within you":

> And that means for me. . . . I want to develop a *kindness* and a *love* and a *patience* . . . [a] level of *understanding*, of *humility*, of *groundedness*, of *goodness*. . . . I think that there's something really *spiritual* about being an educator, because I think the only reason to learn is to teach. (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 126)

Because their ethic of risk is rooted in their sense of an existential interdependence, womanist educators recognize and accept "not that life is unfair, but that the creation of fairness is the task of generations, that work for justice is not incidental to one's life but is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive" (Welch, 1990, p. 70).

While individuals have an ethic of risk, their commitments to working for social justice rest on a concept of self that is part of rather than apart from other people. From their embrace of an ethic of risk, womanist educators understand morality not in abstract principles but in personal, and specifically maternal, terms (Colby and Damon, 1992; Koonz, 1987). In other words, their capacity to act morally is based in "the ability to perceive people in their own terms and to respond to need" (Gilligan, 1986, p. 292). It is an intimacy with and not an aloofness from other people that motivates womanist educators to see personal fulfillment in working toward the common good.

From this sense of interdependence, womanist educators establish classroom routines that model such mutual responsibility. Such routines are well described by educational researcher George Noblit (1993) in his ethnography of the classroom dynamics of one African-American teacher, Pam. Noblit maintains that Pam created rituals with her second-grade students so that as they performed daily tasks—such as cleaning the board, sharpening pencils, and reading the calendar—they were "serv[ing] the collective good" (p. 29). Moreover, academically weak children were not left to themselves, and no one was ever singled out for praise at the cost of others. In her interactions with students who were unable to answer questions, Pam still held them responsible for acquiring academic skills; however, she allowed them to do so in a supportive environment filled with "a lot of coaching to get it right and a lot of room to figure it

out for yourself" (p. 29). Even when asking a question and choosing one student to answer, Pam would try to include the whole class: She would "let the hands wave for a while—long enough to allow the maximum number of hands to raise . . . smile and make eye contact with all she could" (p. 33). And regardless of whether the answer given was correct, "she would connect for a brief moment with her eyes, words, humor, and attention" (p. 33). Instructive about Pam's teaching is how she acknowledged, but did not resign herself to, the "difficult" students and parents: "She could laugh at a lot of the tribulations of classroom life because neither the events nor her enjoyment of her students threatened her authority. In many ways, they constituted her moral authority" (Noblit, 1993, p. 27, 28).

In emic discussions of African-American culture, such an assertion of the individual existing within a web of community and history is very common (Collins, 1991; Hord and Lee, 1995). Not only is the tie between the individual and the community a guiding cultural belief, but the conditions of slavery and continued oppression have heightened this interdependence as not simply a preferred existential state but a critical component of survival: "Black service providers and community activists alike have long recognized that their own destiny was inextricably linked to the destiny of other Blacks, and that in forging ties of mutual support, collective survival and racial progress would be achieved" (Ward, 1995, pp. 176–177). Significant about this concept of interdependence is its charge that "you *must* have some practical *purpose* and *benefit* to others and to self. You *must*" (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 83). As a junior-high-school history teacher explains, the interdependence of womanist caring requires that teachers see both teaching and change as interpersonal processes:

> I mean, it's not that you have all the answers. . . . I think you have to have the right attitude, the right outlook that, "I'm about change; I'm not perfect." . . . And I think we've got to sort of remove it from being sort of a personal attack to like trying to help us understand who we are so that we can help our students understand better who they are. (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 95)

Because they include self-change in the project of social change, womanist educators are guided by a humility in their teaching:

> To suggest "I'm going to change you," is to suggest, "I know everything, and I have the right answer." . . . *People aren't victories.* It's about, "So, what have you got to tell me? So let's talk for awhile, let's keep the conversation going, and maybe we'll both be changed by the end of this." . . . [Change] is increments. It's little steps. And I value the process. . . . It's the process through which we go that's often the time during which you learn the most. (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 127; emphasis added)

Thus, informed by an ethic of risk, womanist caring encourages educators to see their action as a humble, yet essential, contribution to an extensive, collaborative, and enduring project of social change.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

If black women exemplars are truly models of the types of teachers that our students need, then recognizing a womanist orientation to teaching compels us to reconsider several assumptions we may make about women, caring, and education. First, it suggests that caring need not be regarded simply as an interpersonal, dyadic, and apolitical interaction; to see caring in such terms is to disregard its potential for communal engagement and political activism. Furthermore, to see children as innocent and incapable of wondering about the problems of our society is in fact to condemn them to the same despair we have about our social ills. Once we begin to see caring and mothering in larger, sociohistorical realms, we can recognize how in sharing knowledge we can also share power. As Alice Walker (1983) notes, womanists pride themselves on "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one" because they like being "responsible. In charge. Serious" (p. xi). Thus, for those women (and men) uncomfortable with the political nature of teaching, we might ask, "Whose limitations are they embracing as their own? And to what end?" Noblit's (1993) admission of his own uneasiness with the authority and caring of Pam's womanist pedagogy is instructive here:

> I understood caring as relational and reciprocal. . . . I, who saw power linked to oppression in everything, did not want caring to be about power, and thereby about oppression. . . . I wanted the "ethic of caring" to be pristine, to be somehow beyond issues of power that I considered to be essentially hegemonic and masculine. (p. 26)

By associating power with masculininty and oppression and caring with femininity and liberation, Noblit acknowledges that he erroneously left no room to explain the pedagogy of Pam, a woman whose pedagogy combined both power and caring. However, as a result of being instructed in her methods as a participant-observer in her class, he realized that power in and of itself is not hurtful and that power is not the same as the exploitation or oppression of another person. As a result, he concludes that the real task of teaching is to find ways of holding truth to power, of using power to promote rather than thwart human development. A key way of manifesting this "good" power, notes Noblit, is heeding Pam's "emphasis on collectivity . . . as a corrective for the seemingly rampant individualism of Americans in general" (p. 37).

Lacking such interdependence and an ethic of risk, one can easily succumb to despair given the many problems of urban education. However, to subscribe to a form of mothering in which the nature and purpose of one's caring are not

interrogated, out of the belief that good intentions necessarily result in good actions, is also deeply problematic. Alice McIntyre (1997) describes the politically unclear caring of several white female students in a preservice teaching program:

> The observations that are made by the participants reveal several stereotypes about students of color (e.g., unkempt, violent, unprepared). Confounding that is the fact that the participants' perceptions of themselves as caring and benevolent teachers make it difficult for them to even recognize those stereotypes. . . . Rather than expressing anger and rage at children coming to school with no coats and "not having" what "they have," the participants' discourse lacked a sense of urgency about the need to restructure educational institutions. The participants conceptualize the problem as being internal to their students. The solution then is to "save" them. (pp. 667, 668)

In resorting to such a paternalistic pedagogy or what Sara Ruddick (1992) terms "maternal miltarism" (p. 147), women fail to see or care about "others," those beyond their immediate families and communities. As teachers, they also run the risk of succumbing to self-righteous despair about the enormity of the social problems of poverty, racism, and general injustice, by seeing these problems as insurmountable because they are rooted in the ways of "other people."

Womanism, however, in positing our fundamental interdependence, regardless of the social divisions of class, race, and gender, offers heartening, yet sobering, information about the nature of social activism. It suggests that caring may not result in immediate, self-congratulatory successes. In fact, because the struggle is long and social in nature, one cannot egocentrically base one's commitment on seeing instantaneous change: One must have the faith, as Noblit (1993) writes of Pam, that "You'll love me more after you leave me." As a womanist educator, one must reconcile oneself to the paradox that "peace is the struggle"—that is, "life is [lived] on the edge, and that's when the best self emerges" (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 150). Thus, womanist teachers see themselves as dynamic agents for social justice precisely because they define themselves as having a sense of connection with and responsibility to the human struggle for freedom and justice. In other words, the hopefulness of the ethic of risk keeps people from falling into the numbness and self-absorption of despair. From a womanist standpoint, we understand that oppression, as a misuse of power, occurs when there is a disconnection between people—when people refuse or fail to care for each other. As a result, womanist teaching offers ways to repair such relational breakdowns by emphasizing the following: the agency that each of us has to treat others as our own; the obligation we have to understand as fully as we can the world around us; and the responsibility we have to make sure that our actions contribute to the larger human goal of freedom for all.

I have intended the foregoing examples of black womanist teachers to help teachers reflect on their own pedagogy. Not all black teachers are womanists,

and not all womanists are African-American women. Because womanism is a politicized appropriation of some of the cultural values of black women, people choose whether or not to become womanists. It is my hope that teachers will use the womanist tradition to inform their own pedagogy and professional identities and will begin to see themselves as part of a long-standing *American* tradition in which women and men have seen teaching as their contribution to the making of a socially just society. We exist at a time when our access to multicultural histories is a powerful tool at our disposal for "rewriting autobiography" (Cochran-Smith, 1995) to create empowering images of our possibilities, culled from various cultural and political legacies.

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