

Africanity, Womanism, and Constructive Resilience: Some Reflections

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O thou who hast an illumined heart!

Thou art even as the pupil of the eye, the very wellspring of the light, for God's love hath cast its rays upon thine inmost being and thou hast turned thy face toward the Kingdom of thy Lord.

Intense is the hatred, in America, between black and white, but my hope is that the power of the Kingdom will bind these two in friendship, and serve them as a healing balm.

Let them look not upon a man's color but upon his heart. If the heart be filled with light, that man is nigh unto the threshold of his Lord; but if not, that man is careless of his Lord, be he white or be he black.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Letter to Louis G. Gregory (*Selections* 76:1–3)

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the Black people of the world can be compared to the pupil of the eye, through which “the light of the spirit shineth forth.” We are “dark

in countenance,” yet “bright in character,” potentially the “fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 78:1). According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “the blackness of the pupil of the eye is due to its absorbing the rays of the sun” (*Some Answered Questions* 49:5). Shoghi Effendi, quoting 'Abdu'l-Bahá, recalls that, “Bahá'u'lláh once compared the colored [Black] people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white,” and “[i]n this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it and, through it, the light of the spirit shineth forth” (*Advent* 37).

The use of this metaphor by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as by its Guardian, is noteworthy in its singularity. In fact, in 1996, the Universal House of Justice affirmed this in its Ridván letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa by writing, “Bahá'u'lláh favored the black peoples by making a specific reference to them when, as the Master testified, He compared them to the ‘black pupil of the eye’ through which ‘the light of the spirit shineth forth’” (21 Apr. 1996). This same letter stated that “[t]he spiritual endowments of Africa derive naturally from the creative forces universally released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh” when the African continent was graced in turn by Bahá'u'lláh (Whose ship docked in Egypt during His exile), 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Who visited Egypt before heading to the West), and Shoghi Effendi (who twice traversed the continent north to south and back, mostly by car).

Throughout my life as a Bahá'í, particularly as the child of a Black-White interracial Bahá'í marriage, and as a scholar of race and identity, I have wondered about and reflected deeply upon what gives Blackness its special station in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. I have also thought about what new insights we gain when the Faith is viewed through lenses of Blackness and Africinity, and when Blackness and Africinity are viewed through the lenses of the Faith. Deeply aware of the ways in which race is too often conflated with physiognomic Blackness—a conflation which, paradoxically, tends to make Africinity—that is, the cultural and cosmological wealth of African and African-descended people—invisible, I have dedicated at least part of my academic career to illuminating Africinity and inviting others to view the world through its lens. In the Bahá'í world, which prizes racial amity, racial unity, and racial justice so highly, indeed, elevating all three to the level of mandates, my working hypothesis has long been that a deep engagement with Africinity catalyzes the attainment of these aspirations. Yet, as the National Spiritual Assembly wrote in a letter dated 19 June 2020, “deeply entrenched notions of anti-blackness . . . pervade our society,” and “[w]e must build the capacity to truly hear and acknowledge the voices of those who have directly suffered from the effects of racism.” In the case of Black people, being able to “truly hear and acknowledge” requires being able to step outside the dominant Western mind frame about race and

into the cultural wealth of Africinity and the African worldview.

THE CULTURAL WEALTH OF AFRICINITY

Often, the assumption is that the cultural wealth of Black people is simply the fruit of their long suffering under the racist regime of modernity—a sort of constructive resilience that Black people in America often refer to with the folk expression “making a way out of no way.” And, yet, another view is that this cultural wealth is the product of an African cultural and cosmological coherence that was cemented “before contact,” that is, before the colonizers and slavers showed up. A third view—and the one that I embrace—is that both of these mighty rivers of cultural wealth have merged in contemporary times into an ocean of light, power, and perceptivity in the “pupil of the eye” for the benefit of all humanity along its journey towards conscious recognition of its unity.

Rúhiyyih Khanum, Hand of the Cause and wife of Shoghi Effendi, made an interesting remark in 1961 when she wrote for *Bahá'í News*, “When Bahá'u'lláh likens the Negro race to the faculty of sight in the human body—the act of perception with all it implies—it is a pretty terrific statement. He never said this of anyone else.” She continued, “I thought the American Negro’s humility, his kindness, friendliness, courtesy and hospitality were something to do with his oppression and the background of

slavery. But after spending weeks, day after day in the villages of Africa, seeing literally thousands of Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, I have awakened to the fact that the American Negro has these beautiful qualities not because he was enslaved but because he has the characteristics of his race" (Thomas 183). This quote is important because it illustrates a seeing of Africanity on its own terms, beyond the bounds of Western anti-Blackness—that is, seeing humility, kindness, friendliness, courtesy, and hospitableness as endemic cultural attributes and aspects of the African ethos, rather than as products of racial oppression.

The racial hierarchy—Whites on top, Blacks at the bottom—used to justify slavery, colonialism, and capitalism, has historically been and continues to be a central structural pillar of the current world system. That simple, dichotomous hierarchy has been an engine of centuries of racial violence at once physical, psychological, social, economic, environmental, and epistemological. Thus, it is the seed form, the blueprint, the central organizing principle of today's systemic racial injustice—the very thing we are trying to undo when we are trying to undo racism. It is one of the fundamental schisms in the world order—and one which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation upends.

Literary scholar Derik Smith, in an essay exploring the "pupil of the eye" metaphor, particularly as it illuminates the relationship between Black people and modernity, notes that "the 'pupil of the eye' metaphor is a deeply

consequential, distinguishing feature of the transformative social and spiritual system laid out in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation" (7) because this metaphor "effectively positions Blackness at the epicenter of a 'bold and universal' world-transformative project" (9). Smith goes on to conjecture reasons for this centrality in Bahá'u'lláh's "wondrous System" by noting "the material reality that Black people were among the principal builders of global modernity" (9) and the fact that Bahá'u'lláh's favoring of Black people through the use of this metaphor effectively ruptured the dominant racial (racist) ideology of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, distinguishing "the world-transformative project of His Revelation from social reformist movements of the era" (10). Thus, we witness in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation a signal towards something that people of African descent in the modern era have longed for: liberation.

Surviving the long epoch of anti-Blackness—at least four hundred years in the Americas (Hannah-Jones et al.) and even longer elsewhere around the world—has required survival genius on the part of African and African-descended people. It has required suffering and sacrifice, sorrow and sublimation. It has required the ability to not become dehumanized in the face of dehumanizing conditions, to not become hateful in the face of hate. It has evoked creative genius in the form of music and song, art and dance, literature and drama, fashion and sports; it has generated scholarly

innovation, scientific invention, and spiritual expression. Arguably, the engine of this survival genius has been Africanity itself, which, far from being erased or eradicated by slavery, colonization, and their sequelae, has gestated quietly and protectively inside the bodies, souls, and communities of Black people, continually being transmitted, generation after generation. Another, more contemporary way of speaking about this survival genius might be in terms of constructive resilience.

CONSTRUCTIVE RESILIENCE

In a letter dated 28 February 2018 to an individual believer, the Universal House of Justice compared the constructive resilience of the African American Bahá'ís, particularly those who had been engaged in race unity endeavors, to that of the persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran. A close reading of that letter reveals that those exhibiting constructive resilience also demonstrate the attributes of being forward-looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serving the larger society. Furthermore, they exhibit solidarity and collaboration in the face of oppression, transcending “mere survival” to transform conditions of ignorance and prejudice all around them and win the respect and collaboration of people in the wider community. Among those demonstrating constructive resilience, expressions of apprehension and anxiety are minimal, and their hearts are not easily perturbed by calamity; they are able to avoid despair, surrender, resentment,

and hate. Drawing from immense spiritual reserves, they are able to maintain focus on a more visionary horizon. These attributes bear great similarity to the type of African-American survival genius described earlier.

Other letters from the House, most directed to the Bahá'ís in Iran, further enrich our understanding of constructive resilience. In a letter dated 9 September 2007 to the Bahá'í students deprived of education in Iran, for example, the House describes several attributes associated with constructive resilience, noting (of those who were the targets of discrimination) that “[t]hey responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all.” Moreover, these Bahá'ís “attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development” and “[t]o build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves.” In a letter dated 23 June 2009 to the Bahá'ís of Iran, the House states that those experiencing oppression are neither to “succumb in resignation” nor to “take on the characteristics of the oppressor.” In a letter dated 27 August 2013 to the Bahá'ís in the Cradle of the Faith (Iran), the House lauds the Iranian Bahá'í community for their “calm and constructive resilience” and remaining “patient and composed under difficulties.” African American history—even beyond the history of African American Bahá'ís—is replete with examples of individuals

and communities manifesting these attributes and embodying constructive resilience, and the same can be said of African peoples worldwide.

CONSTRUCTIVE RESILIENCE
AS OVERCOMING
COSMOLOGICAL NEGATION

One manifestation of constructive resilience that is well known to African-descended Black people worldwide is enduring and surviving cosmological negation while simultaneously clinging fast to the oneness of humanity. Cosmological negation, also known as epistemicide, occurs when indigenous (including African) cultural belief systems, cosmologies, and worldviews are overwritten by the belief systems, cosmologies, and worldviews of colonizers.¹ This psychically violent process

1 In this paper, the term “indigenous” both affirms and departs from generally established working definitions of indigeneity, such as those implied within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The question of whether people of African descent, especially members of the global African diaspora and, most pointedly, African Americans today are to be considered “indigenous” has been deliberated (DESA, 2009). This paper invites readers to consider the ways in which African descended peoples worldwide retain indigeneity, despite having been forcibly removed generations ago by enslavers from the lands they originally occupied and despite the vehement attempts, past and present, to erase African consciousness and culture through processes of mental and economic

takes place through many vehicles: schooling, the imposition of a foreign language over local languages and criminalization of native tongues, religious proselytization, mass media and advertising, the denigration of local ways of life (for example, foodways, marriage and family norms, childrearing practices, etc.), and the importation of alien value systems (such as gender inequality, colorism, individual land ownership, capitalism). The result of cosmological negation has been to subvert indigenous worldviews and life-ways all around the world, disorienting well-functioning societies and individuals, and depriving the larger humanity of valuable accumulated knowledge and wisdom from these diverse peoples. Thus, cosmological negation is a profound vector of oppression. Despite these efforts at cosmological negation, however, indigenous knowledge systems, including African knowledge systems, have, like deeply buried seeds, survived.

In *Prayers and Meditations*—a sorrowful yet hopeful accounting of tribulations and overcoming, filled with plaintive cries to God as well as worshipful litanies of God’s superlative names—Bahá’u’lláh wrote these words:

These are Thy servants whom the ascendancy of the oppressor hath failed to deter from fixing their eyes on the Tabernacle of Thy majesty, and whom the hosts of tyranny have been powerless to

colonization and acts of physical violence.

affright and divert their gaze from the Dayspring of Thy signs and the Dawning-Place of Thy testimonies. (176:4)

The first time I read this passage, it leapt out from the page for me, piercing my heart with Bahá'u'lláh's profound love, expressed as empathy for those, like members of my own group, who have suffered relentless oppression, including cosmological negation, yet who have maintained an ardent, unquestioning love of God. In this passage, I felt very seen, and I felt that all populations suffering under the yoke of oppression were deeply and compassionately seen by Bahá'u'lláh. The passage was deep encouragement for all of us.

More recently, I encountered Nayyirah Waheed's powerful poem in her book *salt*:

if we
wanted
to.
people of color
could
burn the world down.
for what
we
have experienced.
but
we don't.

— *how stunningly beautiful that our sacred respect for the earth. for life. is deeper than our rage.* (197)

This poem spoke to me as a Black Bahá'í who has fought to reconcile competing impulses about how best to participate in the movement for racial justice. The pain and rage associated with the unrelenting epidemic of police killings of unarmed Black people and the indefensible disproportionality of Black and Brown deaths to Covid-19 sparked fire in my heart and soul, but the love of God and Bahá'u'lláh, the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the infinitely loving service of Bahíyyih Khánum, the resolute equanimity and planning genius of Shoghi Effendi, and the inspiring guidance from the Universal House of Justice cooled the flames and channeled the heat into the enduring warmth of love, service, and obedience to the Covenant, reorienting my focus towards the unity of humankind—a unity that fully embraces Black people, acknowledges Black equality and dignity, eradicates anti-Blackness, and integrates Africanity into world culture. It is a universal consciousness of unity that has arrived only after humanity has looked through the “black pupil” and “seen the reflection of that which is before it,” allowing “the light of the spirit [to shine] forth.” In other words, it is a conscious unity that has decisively abandoned the practice of cosmological negation.

In the illustrations above, both the Prophet and the poet acknowledge that oppression is a fiercely disruptive force, capable of destabilizing people, of evoking paralyzing fear or incendiary rage, and, yet, both acknowledge that there is a higher power greater

than this force—a power (or Power) capable of evincing a liberatory transcendence. It is towards this power/Power that many African individuals and cultures orient themselves and their discourse, taking refuge in the indomitable pervasiveness of Spirit.

While constructive resilience has not been the only response of African Americans to oppression, without it, the African American community would never have survived the decimating, racially valenced (that is White on top, Black at the bottom) conditions of modernity—and the same might be said of other African and African-descended peoples around the world. The quest for nobility in the face of denigration and the pursuit of dignity in the face of assaults on Black humanity have defined the Black social movement across the centuries, reflecting the spiritually resolute demeanor and hopeful disposition associated with constructive resilience. This spirituality is inherent in the African worldview, described by upholders of the “cultural unity of Africa” thesis, as a consistent and coherent ethos binding Africa’s diverse and far-flung people. This ethos is encapsulated in the African worldview and cosmology (Mbiti).

AFRICAN WORLDVIEW AND COSMOLOGY

In the African worldview, as in many other indigenous worldviews, reality is understood this way: humans, nature, and the spirit world are three interrelated domains. The spirit world (or

dimension) is by far the most vast and influential, and it interpenetrates the other domains. In African cosmology, everything is spiritual, infused with spirit, or of spiritual significance; spirit is inescapable. Spirit is also dynamic and replete with “aliveness”; it is a vitalizing force, but also a force with destructive potential. The spirit world is filled with beings, from the unitary God Who is “All That Is” and takes many forms, to divinities both grand and minor who are spiritually superior to humans, to Ancestors and the spirits of deceased persons, who are relatively equal to humans, but invisible in a material sense. In some accounts, the spiritual realm contains both beneficent and maleficent beings who constantly compete for the “heads” of human beings (in other words, the ability to control human thoughts and actions for their own ends), yet, even in these accounts, the beneficent beings outnumber the maleficent ones significantly. While a full accounting of the nature of relationships between humans and beings in the spiritual realm within African cosmology is beyond the scope of this essay, a major takeaway is that, for many people of African descent, the invisible spiritual realm is real, present, and always interacting with human life, in both its social and material aspects. Thus, engaging with spirit is an “everyday” thing, not a thing apart from everyday life.

Additionally, the spiritual realm pervades the realm of nature, inspiring animals and plants and other natural phenomena (from mineral formations,

to the weather, to the celestial bodies), to the point where virtually any natural being or phenomenon can be considered a messenger of spirit or spiritual actor, both in its own right and with respect to humans. This has several implications. First, nature is considered sacred, often with its own consciousness, but, at the very least, worthy of reverence and awe. Second, humans must respect and not abuse nature, as natural “beings” are not objects to be exploited for human ends. Humans and nature must work together, and each can put the other in check. Third, nature is a source of life, whether in terms of food or medicine or shelter or simply inherent life-force. Fourth, nature is a source of signs, that is, communication or information from the spiritual world for humans to discern—information that can guide or constrain human action, providing valuable information about whether human life is in alignment with the divine order. Thus, human communities benefit when people become skilled sign-readers, as well as when people become knowledgeable about the physical and spiritual attributes of plants, animals, and natural phenomena of all kinds. With this knowledge, humans so specialized can become healers, diviners, intermediaries, and teachers, to the benefit of whole communities.

The organizing principle for human beings and human communities within African cosmology is kinship. Everyone is related. Everyone is family. Family is vast. In fact, kinship is the organizing principle of life, from

family to community to humanity to the cosmos. Humans, in turn, form a community with all other beings, from animals, plants, and minerals, to forces of nature, the cosmos, and the spirit world. Kinship is the governing principle of one grand divine ecology. Within this kinship system, there are rules of right relation, based on factors such as age or seniority, gender, lateral versus vertical relationship, and the like. People tend to know (or seek to know) their degree of kinship with every other person they encounter, and this degree of kinship determines right relations. These rules of relation are designed to maintain both connectedness and social order against the backdrop of competing individual needs, agendas, and aspirations, and to ensure both justice and cohesiveness within the larger collective. Importantly, these rules of right relation can encompass elements of nature as well as spiritual entities, keeping all three domains—human society, the natural world, and the spirit world—aligned and in harmony. Such harmony is, of course, dynamic and not static.

In African cosmology, community is often thought of as an ever-expanding circle of inclusion. At the heart of it is the dyad, whether husband and wife or mother and child. Encircling (or growing out of) this dyad is family, followed by clan, tribe, and then nation, and culminating in all humanity or the cosmos. Thus, Bahá'í principles such as “unity” and “the oneness of humankind” are highly consonant with the African worldview and easy to embrace. This is one reason that womanism struck such

a chord with me when I first encountered it as a young Bahá'í college student studying at the historically Black Spelman College in 1984.

WOMANISM: A GENDERED EXPRESSION OF AFRICANITY

Womanism, a social change perspective rooted in the African worldview and further elaborated through Black women's culturally and historically based perspectives and practices, provides another angle on constructive resilience as well as another layer of possibility with regard to how Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation advances justice and unity for all humanity by centering the "pupil of the eye." As I wrote in 2006 in the introduction to *The Womanist Reader*,

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips xx)

Unpacking this, womanism is an understanding about how to solve problems—social problems, environmental problems, indeed, not just Black people's problems, but all humanity's problems—that comes from Black

culture and is rooted in African cosmology and worldview. This approach is inflected by the cultural and historical experiences of Black women, who have built up a body of knowledge and a praxis around problem-solving that has its center of gravity in "everyday life" rather than "institutions," per se. Its protagonists are "everyday women" rather than "powerful people" or "elites," per se—although womanism very much considers "everyday Black women" to be powerful people, agents of change, and, in fact, geniuses. What's more, Black women, Africana women, do not cling to womanism as strictly "their own thing"; rather, womanism is viewed as a life-saving, life-giving gift to all humanity from Black women, and anyone of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender can be a womanist or enact womanist social change praxis. Its values, including the value placed on ever-widening circles of inclusivity, ultimately welcome all human beings into its ken.

Inherent within womanism is a set of social change methodologies, as well as a social movement logic. At the center of this logic is an emphasis on changing hearts and minds, the energetic foundation of all material and social life, and healing the world. Womanists understand the brokenness of the world because of their cultural-historical experiences of slavery and colonization, which attempted to disorient, debase, and annihilate African cultures and cosmologies at the same time as they succeeded at economically exploiting and exacting an immense

toll of violence on Black bodies. This violence included gender-specific acts such as the wanton rape of enslaved women, the separation of enslaved mothers and children, and medical experimentation on enslaved women and women in colonized countries. Smith's point, mentioned earlier in this essay, about Black people—Black bodies and labor—being at the core of modernity and all its travails is resonant with womanist understandings about the devastation that slavery, colonialism, and all their horrific sequelae have wrought on Black individuals, communities, and cultures. Many African Americans refer to this experience, especially the Middle Passage in which so many Africans died as captives on their way to America, as the *Ma'afa*, which means “terrible occurrence” or “great disaster” in Swahili.

Despite these past horrors and their current-day sequelae, from police brutality and the killings by police of unarmed Black civilians to the outsize numbers of Black deaths from Covid-19, womanists maintain that unrelenting efforts at epistemicide and other forms of Black annihilation have failed to rob African-descended peoples of their Africanity, that is, their cultural wealth, or their innate nobility. Womanists also maintain that “race,” as a construct synonymous with deficit, lack, evil, and sin, is incapable of containing the cultural wealth that is Africanity. Womanists, because of this cultural wealth, maintain optimism and strength in the face of tremendous trauma and unrelenting physical, psychic, cultural, economic, environmental, and spiritual

assault. The world is out of whack, and womanists continue to believe that it can be righted.

CONCLUSION

We cannot realize the oneness of humanity while simultaneously negating the manifold cultures and cosmologies of the earth's diverse and ancient peoples, particularly those “populations of special significance”—defined by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States as American Indians, African Americans, and various immigrant groups—who have endured the ravages of slavery, colonialism, genocide, and negation (31 Jan. 2018). By opening up new ways of seeing Black people, Black culture, and the African worldview—ways that defy and dissolve anti-Blackness—we advance the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh and accelerate the just and loving world order it heralds. The gravest problems that we are trying to solve now are byproducts of the exploitation of Black people, of the racist organizing principle at the blueprint level of modernity—a principle that codified “race” as a way to negate the humanity and brilliance of Black, African people. Bahá'u'lláh redeemed Black people's humanity and brilliance against the backdrop of that hegemonic racist system when He designated Black people as “the pupil of the eye” through which “the light of the spirit shineth forth.” By reflecting deeply on Blackness as Africanity and its cultural wealth, we are opening the portal wider for this light.

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