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WOMANIST MODEL:  
CROSSING CLASS BARRIERS:  
MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK WOMEN  
RELATING WITH INNER-CITY  
BLACK FEMALE YOUTH

Introduction

In her essay, "Eye to Eye," Audre Lorde offers an in-depth, candid discussion of relationships (or lack of relationships) between Black women, openly naming weaknesses that play out in Black women's relational dynamics. The goal in this essay is capsulized in the paradigm that Lorde presents in critiquing significant shortcomings in Black women's treatment of each other. Lorde purposely contained her discussion to Black women. The writer's commentary discusses the relationship of Black women and Black youth, specifically, middle-class Black women and poor, Black female youth and critiques the attitudes of Black middle-class women concerning these young Black girls.

The intent in this analysis is to dismantle stereotypes wrongfully placed on these inner-city youth females and then to illuminate the "goodness" and "strength" demonstrated in their lives daily. There is opportunity for ministry between the two groups.

Lorde's overall plea is for Black women to love one another. She calls for us to acknowledge and respect our differences, to recognize the plight of commonality in fighting the battle against hegemonic systems, and to dig deeper, past superficial associations to deep, meaningful, liberative friendships.<sup>1</sup> This is the plea

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<sup>1</sup>Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 145-175.

to middle-class Black women: stop buying into the shallow critiques of these poor, Black female youth, honestly discovering what the deeper issues are and growing in understanding, so that mutual friendships develop and liberating lives flourish.

The write explicates her personal experiences with one Black girl in order to glean understanding, revelation, and possible healing for Black girls in the inner city. Beginning with specific contextual situations, the location is within the womanist paradigm that demands critical analysis of women in their "particular" life dilemmas. The writings of Katie Cannon, Audre Lorde, Kelly Brown-Douglas, Jacquelyn Grant, Tricia Rose, Marcia Riggs, bell hooks, Marsha Foster Boyd, and Teresa L. Fry Brown, are used to critically engage current beliefs and conversations surrounding issues affecting female youth in the inner cities. The seemingly chaotic lives of these inner-city girls are ordered by identifying their systematic ways of dealing with reality. Specifically, four pertinent issues are selected:

- morality
- sexuality
- age
- rap

This paper concludes with a model that ministers to Black females in the inner city and is grounded within the framework of the womanist movement.

### Re-moralizing<sup>2</sup>

When Courtney Usher ran up to me on May 11, 1995, I had no idea she would change my life forever. A few months

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<sup>2</sup>See Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), especially chap. 6, [93]-98; also Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), especially chap. 2, [59]-73.



earlier I had quit my corporate job and entered seminary, having no idea why I decided to work with inner-city youth. Having read several articles concerning their plight, I wanted to help. I was extremely excited upon being selected (from among seven interviewees) to be the assistant director of Stewart Center, an inner-city Christian organization that ministers to persons living in Reynoldstown (a Black inner-city community in Atlanta). So there I was my first day of work, standing in front of the Center, ready to save all inner-city youth! Courtney boldly said to me, "You ain't gon' stay long; your ass gon' fly up out of here like everybody else!" I don't know if Courtney knew what she did, but basically she challenged me; and I accepted the challenge, making a covenant to remain at the Center. I cannot count the times I have wanted to "get the hell up out of there since that date"!

In *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon asserts that placing mainline Protestant ethical boundaries on Black oppressed people is absurd. She maintains that intertwined in this Eurocentric ethical standard are assumptions that all humans are moral agents who have the freedom and power to determine their actions. She contends that "[t]he real-lived texture of Black life requires moral agency that may run contrary to the ethical boundaries of mainline Protestantism."<sup>3</sup> The writer asserts this argument as a critique of that perspective in the framework of Black middle-classism. Black middle-class moral ideology maintains that material success, individualism, and formal education are markers, witnessing to the apparent correct moral standards in individual lives. Black middle-class women measure their moral standards within this ideology. A typical Black middle-class woman who receives a salary (or hourly pay wage) affording her the opportunity to acquire life's basics such as food and

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<sup>3</sup>Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 2.

shelter and occasionally enjoying life's pleasures such as fine dining or travelling, may assume that Black women (including Black female youth) who receive welfare, face constant eviction from apartments, and ask for handouts are immoral.

Many of these Black middle-class women also espouse individualism as a moral standard. Though they may believe in communal values, one rarely sees their sharing "fine" material goods with others. Rarely do Black middle-class women drive inner-city poor youth around in their Four Runners or BMWs. Most feel that they have to make it no matter what! Often this means not volunteering to help poor persons at risk or not spending enough time in the corporate office. These women would much rather live alone in five-bedroom houses than entertain the idea of taking in some "uncultured" inner-city girl, messing up their cream-colored sofas or dirtying their neatly, decorated guest rooms.

For these women, post-secondary education is a must. The absence of at least a bachelor's degree would be a sign of laziness or poor upbringing. Many Black middle-class women believe that intelligence and moral uprightness are developed in institutions of higher learning. Within these institutional environments most middle-class Black women learned to dress properly (conservatively), use proper (politically correct) language, and understand the importance of living a moral life, i.e., attaining a job, not participating in crime and "looking out for ourselves."

These middle-class moral standards are not problematic for this writer. However, middle-class Black women err when they attempt to judge inner-city, Black girls by these standards. They make the mistake of assuming that young ladies aspire to be within this middle-class life, and they demean the moral standards already established in the inner city. In understanding the moral complexities of these young Black girls, Black middle-



class women must consider the circumstances, the contradictions, and the dilemmas that constrict these girls' lives.

For three years the writer exhausted all of her physical, emotional, and spiritual energies trying to equate middle-class ethics with those of the inner city. Turning Courtney into a middle-class, Black teenager, assisting her in employment, finding her a decent place to live, insisting that she sever the friendships with other inner-city girls, and encouraging her to exceed academically in high school was overwhelming. If she worked hard in school, no longer hung with her seemingly ignorant friends, got a decent place to live, and found a job, she would no longer be inner city and, consequently, no longer immoral. At the end of the third year at the Center, the writer realized that Courtney was operating in a highly moral standard. Her real-life situation needed to be considered.

Just like many of the inner-city female youth, Courtney's mom is, and has been for six years, addicted to crack cocaine. The foundation of the moral framework from which Courtney operates is completely opposite of the foundation of many Black middle-class women, including the writer.

Material success to Courtney is being able to eat at least two meals a day. Often this is done by getting up early for "free breakfast" and then "free lunch" at school. Dinners are a luxury afforded to her and many inner-city youth at the beginning of the month, when welfare checks are received, just before their crack addicted parents pay off their drug debts. That Courtney's inability to get a job equated to lazy behavior was grossly wrong. Any Black middle-class woman who thinks the majority of Black teenage girls are jobless because of their laziness is mistaken. These young ladies are stuck in complex, daily dilemmas of survival that do not afford them the luxury of time to look for a job. Also, there are issues concerning the lack of money to buy tokens for transportation to work, the lack of proper clothing for work, and

the lack of role models to exhibit this work ethic.

Why could Courtney not forget about the people in her surroundings and concentrate on herself? On Mondays, Courtney was given money for the week and by Friday she was broke. Her explanation, when asked about the money, was that she had to buy Boonaany diapers for her baby. Courtney could not take care of herself; she even went without eating in order to help others in her neighborhood.

The moral standard of the "hood" is communalism. Everybody helps everybody—to do otherwise would be immoral. As long as one of Courtney's friends was hungry, she was hungry. Accepting this standard, the writer also recognizes that middle-class individualistic mentality is in some ways immoral. Most middle-class Black women will give assistance to persons in need but set limits, thereby, not suffering too greatly for anyone. Three or four Black poor girls pushing baby buggies, or sharing one box of chicken typifies the morality expected in the "hood." These young girls, when they seemingly abdicate opportunities for individual success for communalism, are to be respected.

### **Formal Education: A Standard for Middle-Class Black Women**

Upon entering a social gathering, the first question asked is where did you go to college. What is the Black middle-class response to someone who did not go to college? If these women were to meet some of the young ladies in the "hood," for instance, the twenty-year-old who does not graduate from high school, their reaction would be one of silence. This response would be a harsh moral statement: "You poor, unfortunate girl, what on earth are you doing with yourself?" Perhaps she is trying to survive by paying her bills on minimum wage and keep-



ing a roof over her two little girls' heads. What if she never goes to college? What if she never wants to go college? Does this somehow render her less successful, less moral than Black middle-class women who chose to struggle for a college degree? It simply says that she chose a different lifestyle not to be judged by middle-class standards.

Middle-class Black women must honestly determine if they have bought into negative stereotypes of these inner-city Black girls. We must then seriously contemplate the depth of their dilemmas and rethink the standards by which these girls are judged. Neither moral standard is higher than the other. It is necessary, however, to understand their moral standards and respect their plight. Courtney shares how "she" does things and what she perceives as morally right; the writer tells how "she" does things and what she believes to be morally right, and a "new standard" of and working out any complex life dilemmas is created. This is what all Black middle-class women must do when critiquing Black inner-city females.

### Sexuality

Black women have the highest increase of HIV/AIDS in America today. Also, within this group, those between thirteen and twenty-four are reported to have the highest number of cases.<sup>4</sup> Courtney, age eighteen, waited two weeks for the results of her HIV test. Because she had contracted chlamydia, the doctors insisted she test for AIDS. Courtney received condoms and birth control pills and was sent on her way. The concern remains, however, that some Black teenage girls tested positive on the same morning that Courtney tested negative. What is the message for Black middle-class women?

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<sup>4</sup>"Impact of AIDS by Race in the United States," *Health Watch* 5 (Summer 1998): 3.

### Womanist Theology and Black Sexuality

Kelly Brown Douglas writes, "It is clear, then—from teenage sexuality, male-female relationships, sexism and heterosexism—that the lack of sexual discourse in the Black community has contributed to life-threatening and oppressive conditions for Black men and women."<sup>5</sup> Throughout her article, Douglas continues to ask the question, "Why have we been silent?" She answers by saying that the Black community has bought into the white racist vilification of Black sexuality. She contends that we have not honestly dealt with our own sexual selves; we fear we may be seen as "Jezebels" or sexually, immoral people. Therefore, we hide behind the mask of "right living" and ignore the realities of AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and homosexuality. We must talk because our community is in a state of emergency.<sup>6</sup>

How can Black women remain silent on the pertinent issue of sexuality? The writer believes that her silence (and probably that of many middle-class Black women), comes from her understanding that sex is somehow equated with sin. In her article, Douglas is pleading for the Black community to be honest about their sexuality and re-approach God concerning God's regard for our sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

Black middle-class women need to own their sexuality and share their experiences with inner-city Black girls. We need to tell our stories of sex, rape, incest, homosexuality, abortions, diseases, and lovemaking. Perhaps then will these young girls glean understanding, utilizing this discernment in their various life dilemmas.

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<sup>5</sup>Kelly Brown Douglas, "Daring to Speak: Womanist Theology and Black Sexuality," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1997), 243.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*



## Ageism

In *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, Jacquelyn Grant discusses the tri-dimensional reality of Black women.<sup>8</sup> She states that Black women are oppressed within the systems of racism, classism, and sexism. Black women are classified as being the "least" in America. Audre Lorde in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," adds age to this tri-dimensional analysis. She asserts that too many young persons are ignoring their past and missing out on wisdom. She writes, "As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which interferes with our vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes."<sup>9</sup> Lorde definitely names a disconnect in relationships between youth and their elders. She correctly surmises the reality of repeating mistakes due to the lack of wisdom. However, the writer perceives Lorde's particular stand on ageism to be biased toward adults. She could have expanded her analysis to include ageism from the point of view of youth. In so doing, the analysis would be more balanced. It is true that youth are ignoring their elders, but it is also a fact the elders are ignoring their youth! In such an analysis she would have recognized the injustices that oppress young people, in particular female youth. It is the meshing of Grant and Lorde's thoughts on classism, racism, sexism, and ageism that name poor, Black female youth as "the least."

Age prevents these poor, Black girls from receiving proper health care. Courtney wanted badly to go to the doctor when

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<sup>8</sup>Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 209.

<sup>9</sup>Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider*, 116-117.

she realized she had large lumps in her breast. Her mother could not be found; there was no Medicaid card. No one would see her without the Medicaid card and consent from her mother. It took almost two weeks to track her mother down to give us the card and absentmindedly signing a consent form for the doctor in the future. Poor inner-city youth girls do not have access to proper health care. The majority do not live with their mothers; this is often problematic because the clinics sometimes refuse to give treatment unless mothers are with them. Age prevents Courtney from receiving basic health care.

Age also limits available employment opportunities. By the age of sixteen many of the teenagers in the inner city have had at least one baby. They need money to support their kids; yet because of their age, it is difficult to obtain jobs. These young ladies desire to work at fast-food restaurants and grocery stores. While they wait to complete their applications, the writer notices that older persons work in the positions for which these young ladies qualify. It is understandable that employers prefer older persons as employees; however, it still leaves young people jobless. Many times these girls give up on their job pursuits, and they tend to go into prostitution and dance in strip clubs.

The age factors also prevent these youth from critical input in decision-making arenas. These girls have important views and comments; but because no one respects their opinions, they are unable to participate in making positive changes in their daily environments. There was no one who would listen to Courtney when she complained about the busted sewage pipe under their house; there was no responsible adult to make the complaint valid, so they lived in that condition until their house was condemned. Because of their young ages, the youth are stuck in the middle of nothingness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Random House, 1994), 22-23.



They cry out to adults, but adults do not hear them. The adults are unable to "hear" because they filter the voices of the youth with their own lenses. Within these distorted lenses are the stereotypes of youth being irresponsible, lazy, and disrespectful.

### Rap

Criticizing rap music by upper middle-class Blacks demonstrates no true understanding of inner-city life. These persons think that gangsta rap is the example of every type of rap. Such persons as Delores Tucker (chair, National Political Congress of Black Women) and Reverend Calvin Butts (community activist) are quick to denounce gangsta rap, labeling it as one of the negative contributing factors to African-American youth crime and lack of upright moral standards.<sup>11</sup> In their critiques, they accuse rap of being another negative aspect of inner-city youth. Words like "bitch" and "whore" classify all rap as meaningless. bell hooks in her essay "Gangsta Culture: Sexism and Misogyny" accuses these persons of missing the thrust. She writes, "More than anything, gangsta rap celebrates the world of the material, the dog-eat-dog world where you do what you gotta do to make it even if it means [screwing] over folks and taking them out."<sup>12</sup> hooks recognizes the misogyny and sexism, but she also identifies that gangsta rap shows the real life dilemma of Black youth in the inner city. Rap language names critical issues playing themselves out there.

In gangsta rap, there is significant negative language about women. However, the conversations within the songs are addressed

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<sup>11</sup>See articles on the subject "gangsta rap" on various web sites. There is a continual debate among rappers and Delores Tucker, William Bennett, Calvin Butts and other scholars and politicians concerning this subject.

<sup>12</sup>bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 117.

to women in the inner city. In particular, these songs call females who use men for money "hos" and females who do not respect themselves "bitches." In this particular paradigm, the only persons who need to respond to this name calling are girls in the "hood." It is they to whom these comments are addressed, and it is only in the context of being in intimate relationships with persons who live in the "hood" that in-depth accurate analysis can occur. In fact, there is conversation between male rappers and female rappers within the inner-city setting. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose provides an enlightening, positive cultural analysis of music and its positive effects on Black culture. In her chapter, "Bad Sistahs: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," Rose discusses the complexities of gangsta rap and the conversations between gangsta rappers and female Black rappers.

She maintains that an "inner" understanding is obvious between these two groups, which creates a bond between the female and male rappers. In an interview with the female rappers MCLyte and Salt, Rose found that these female rappers are acutely aware of the uneven and sometimes racist way in which sexist offenses are stigmatized and reported. And so, in several public contexts, women rappers defended male rappers' freedom of speech and focused their answers on the question of censorship rather than on sexism in rap lyrics.<sup>13</sup> Middle-class culture cannot understand these dynamics. Perhaps to a highly educated, middle-class Black woman "bitch" might be offensive, but to a normal inner-city Black girl "bitch" is a term of endearment. The value in gangsta-rap is that young African-American males have a platform to express their innermost thoughts and

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<sup>13</sup>Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 150.



beliefs about life. Once these rappers speak their truth, other persons, are able to dialogue with them concerning a plethora of issues. Certainly, if the KKK can express their negative views concerning entire groups of people, gangsta rappers can also express their convictions.

Inner-city female youth express themselves through plain "rap." Anthony Pinn's *Why, Lord?* critically analyzes how the African-American community deals with suffering. In one particular chapter: "Blues, Rap and Nitty-Gritty Hermeneutics," Pinn describes how African Americans therapeutically utilize Blues and Rap music in dealing with life struggles.

Pinn divides rap into three distinct groups:

- status
- gangsta
- progressive

Status rap is concerned with distinguishing artists from their competitors. Gangsta rap provides a critique of society by demonstrating the destruction done to humans by market-driven goals. Progressive rap stems from an awareness of the same existential hardships and contradictions as gangsta rap, yet progressive rap seeks to address these concerns outside of aggression and more in terms of political and cultural education.<sup>14</sup> Progressive rap helps us to understand plain rap. In other words, inner-city girls use plain rap to try and deal with life's complexities. There are many inner-city female youth rappers. One of the most popular is Sylk-E Fyne. She raps about how it is to be a poor, Black girl in the "hood." One of her popular songs is called, "I Ain't

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<sup>14</sup>Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum Press, 1995), 125-131.

Down with the System.”

*I ain't down with the system, because they  
keep us twisted in the prisons...  
too many unsolved killings...  
brothers and sistahs stop the violence...  
they got us on the three strike system, yet the CIA  
runs drug dealings stealin' from the ghetto...  
we too ignorant to notice...<sup>15</sup>*

It is clear that Sylk-E Fyne is critically analyzing the reality of inner-city life. In many of their songs these young ladies are calling for help—help from persons who will “hear” their hurts and act on their behalf.

The majority of Black middle-class women must admit complicity in demeaning inner-city, Black female youth by participating in negative and judgmental conversations. If we admit our dishonesty, then we can move into opportunities of “truly” empowering this group of poor, Black teenagers.

In her book, *Awake, Arise and Act*, Marcia Riggs argues that the class issues within the Black community is halting progress toward Black liberation. She presents her moral vision of the twenty-first century as threefold:

- renunciation
- responsibility
- mediation

In this moral vision, it is the female Black elite who have the sole responsibility of renunciation (denounce all class privileges).

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<sup>15</sup>Sylk-E. Fyne, “I Ain’t Down with the System,” *Raw Sylk*, vol. 1 (New York: BMG Music Service, 1998), 1 audio CD.



She writes, "In other words, we think ourselves better than others by social, political, and/or economic standards of valuation."<sup>16</sup> Riggs calls these Black elite women to a sense of responsibility, contending that the notion of individualism tears at the fabric of our Black community. Black female elite must embrace communalism, acknowledge their moral responsibility, and help poor persons reach their liberation. This call of responsibility could not be more suited for middle-class Black women who would enter into helping poor, Black teenagers reach their liberative states.

This group of Black elite females must enter into a process of mediation. Here Riggs is asserting that these females live in tension with other Black women who are in a different economic class status. It is here that Riggs' text enables the writer to reiterate her conviction that we (middle-class Black women) move away from judging other Black females by our middle-class standards. This internal process of admitting our inherent prejudices against inner-city Black teenagers is the first step in "truly" reaching out.

A mentoring program is needed for Black middle-class women and inner-city female youth that will work in a dualistic manner. Allow inner-city girls to educate and teach middle-class women other ways of living, thinking and being, enabling this group to share their "ways" of living life with the inner-city female youth. Just as the writer's life has changed since entering into a mentoring relationship with Courtney, so would the lives of other Black middle-class women. The crux of the situation is that both groups would be learning new, liberative ways of living out life.

As we continue to reach out and become friends with inner-city female youth, we must continue to tell our stories and allow them

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<sup>16</sup>Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act*, 94.

to tell their stories. In this process, we each become what Marsha Foster Boyd terms "cojourners." In Boyd's essay, "WomanistCare," she rejects the notion of being a "wounded healer" (a concept introduced to the counseling world by Henri Nouwen<sup>17</sup> some thirty years ago), and she introduces the term "empowered cojourners." Boyd writes, "Cojourners are spiritual companions brought together on a common path for a particular time."<sup>18</sup> This is the spiritual awareness that must feed our hearts in sharing the telling and hearing of stories. We must recognize that our time with these inner-city girls will be temporary but significant. They are "empowered cojourners" bonded with us for a time so that God can teach us something about each other.

The great chasm that exists between poor, Black girls and middle-class Black women must be closed. It is through our remoralizing, understanding, accepting and most of all loving all Black females that Black women will reach liberation!

### Conclusion: Womanist Model

#### Remoralizing

- Recognizing difference
- Accepting opposite moral standards
- Reaching compromise in moral guidelines

#### Sexuality

- Deal with our own inherent fears concerning our own sexuality
- Wrestle with God in coming to "our" own understanding

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<sup>17</sup>See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>18</sup>Marsha Foster Boyd, "WomanistCare: Some Reflections on the Pastoral Care and the Transformation of African-American Women," in *Embracing the Spirit*, 200.



of God's feelings on human sexuality

- Tell the truth of our own sexuality and sexual experiences
- Refuse to hide behind religion

#### Ageism

- Understand how age limits youth from being self-determining moral agents
- Include one's self in advocacy for poor, female youth
- Listen and value the opinion of poor, female youth

#### Rap

- Reject current scholarly writings about rap
- Develop your own understanding of what is happening in rap culture
- Write your own rap song!

#### Beginning to reach out

- Renunciate
- Accept responsibility
- Relax in the tension of difference.

#### Develop or become a part of a mentoring program

- Read ways to mentor to these young inner-city Black females
- Recognize the value in relationship and communication among various types of Black females
- See yourself as an "empowered cojourner" on a spiritual mission to save yourself and other inner-city female youth.

