

The Divine Feminist: A Diversity of Perspectives That Honor Our Mothers' Gardens by Integrating Spirituality and Social Justice

Arisika Razak¹

Abstract: While spirituality has often been separated from feminism, this essay suggests that a number of prominent theorists in the diverse fields of Africana Studies (Amadiume, 1998; Badjo, 1996; Teish, 1994); Chicano Studies (Anzaldua, 2007/1987); Indigenous Studies (Harjo, 1991; Mehesuah, 2003); Islamic Studies (Wadud, 2006); Queer Studies (Grahm, 2009); and Women's Spirituality/Women and Gender Studies (Brooten, 2010; Walker, 1983) have all linked empowered roles for women and other oppressed groups to contemporary and historic liberatory spiritual frameworks and culturally specific Indigenous roles for women and other oppressed genders. The contemporary *divine feminist*, (a term coined by Professor Alka Arora) is one who walks the contested borderlands between secular feminisms, philosophy and religious studies, and ethnic/indigenous studies. They integrate diverse spiritual frameworks elaborated by people of color, liberatory theory and praxis supporting the empowerment of women and other oppressed genders with Euro-American academic perspectives, and contemporary disability and embodiment studies to develop new forms of activism, scholarship and alliance building that benefits the Earth and all sentient life.

Keywords: African Diasporic Spiritualities, African women, Alice Walker, Amina Wadud, borderlands frameworks, divine feminine; divine feminist, Gloria Anzaldua, Indigenous Studies, Luisah Teish, *nepantiera*, Oshun, Women's Studies, womanism, Women's Spirituality.

I begin by honoring “our mothers’ gardens,” a phrase taken from the essay, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* by Alice Walker (1983). In her essay, Walker honored the many poor and working class Black women who were denied the time and leisure to create what the Western world deems as ‘art’ – but whose work in designing quilts, making songs, or growing large “ambitious (flower) gardens” (p. 241) reflected their need to create beauty and art *regardless* of their circumstances. Her loving tribute to those who came before her reflects indigenous protocols of respect, which are embedded in many traditional spiritual practices of Africa and the Americas.

¹ **Arisika Razak**, MPH, has been former Director of Diversity and former Chair of the Women’s Spirituality Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Her teachings incorporate diverse spiritual traditions, women's health and healing, and multicultural feminisms, with a special emphasis on the spiritualities and cultures of women of the African Diaspora. An inner-city midwife of over twenty years, Arisika has led healing workshops and ritual celebrations for women for over three decades. In addition, she has facilitated embodied spiritual workshops for women and men at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and East Bay Meditation Center. Her writings on womanism have been included in several books and journals, and her film credits include *Alice Walker, Beauty in Truth; Fire Eyes*, the first full length feature film by an African woman on female genital cutting; and *Who Lives Who Dies* a PBS special on health care services to underserved populations.

arazak@ciis.edu



In these traditions, before any ceremony begins, the human community must acknowledge those who came before us, on whose shoulders we stand. In many holistic, embodied indigenous religions, those whom the West designates as ‘human beings’ include the dead, the living, and the yet to be born. They include those who have recently died, the older yet still remembered ancestors, and those ancestors born so long ago that they are seen as spiritual entities, who stand as intermediaries between human life and the primal powers of the universe. These primal powers include elemental forces of wind, water, earth, fire, metal and air. They include the life-giving and life guiding presences of the sun, the moon, the mountains, and the stars. They include rivers, deserts, oceans and streams as well as herbs, plants, and forests. Finally, they include the spirits that animate all our human and non-human kin and the deities who preside over the entire web of life—those who have guided the life and work of our ancestors in the past, who continue to inform the life and work of our kin today, and who will – Spirit willing – continue to inform the lives of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Following this tradition, I begin by acknowledging the many artists, activists, teachers, and scholars who have not only contributed to my thinking, but who have made the world a better place through their thinking, their courage, their generosity and their work. Some of the women I wish to acknowledge are established scholars, whose written works are published and well known. Others, less well known, are community activists, healers, and religious practitioners. Some, nameless, and unknown, are mothers, community mothers, other-mothers² and elders. They include the unknown ancestors who endured the unspeakable, in hopes that life would be better for the children. I am their descendant and I honor them with a poem by Luisah Teish³ entitled “Mother of the Night.”

I am the Mother of the Night.
 The Great Dark Depth, the Bringer of Light.
 All that was, that is, that ever shall be,
 All that could or should can only come from me.
 High above and far below. I am the ebb, I am the flow. The
 stars in the sky, the fish in the sea. Every seed, every
 stone, every critter is me.
 I am the Center, the Beginning the End. I am without and
 I am within. I am the lair, the nest and the den. I am
 the Earth, the Water and Wind.
 The Horned Cow, the many-teated Sow, the Queen bee,
 the Mothertree, the Pregnant Womb, the Grain-seed

² This term arises out of the African American notions of extended family and *fictive kin* which recognize biological motherhood as well as extended “family” relatives who take in, care for, and shelter the young of the community when their own parents are unable or unwilling to do so. While they may be called “mother” “aunt,” “uncle,” “cousin,” etc. *fictive kin* may or may not be related by blood; sometimes they are related only by ties of affection. See Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd Ed.) New York: Routledge, pp. 179-183.

³ Luisah Teish, Woman Chief, initiated elder and *Iyanifa*, is an internationally known scholar and healer. Her works include: Teish, L. (1985). *Jambalaya: The natural woman's book of personal charms and practical rituals*. New York: HarperCollins. Teish, L. (1994). *Carnival of the spirit: Seasonal celebrations and rites of passage*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.

broom, the candle's wick, the Matrix, and woman,
 you are my daughter.
 Praise and Love to the Mothers of the World.
 Praise and Love to the Sisters of the World.
 Praise and Love to the Women of the World.
 Praise and Love to my daughters.
 To the women in the fields, who plow and plant and turn
 mill wheels. To those who spin and weave at looms
 who make the mats, the cloth and brooms. To those
 who sew the royal robes, to those who pierce the
 child's earlobes. To those who rub and oil and braid.
 To all the Queens and all the Maids.
 Praise and Love to my daughters.
 To those who nurse babes on their breasts, who carry on
 without due rest. Then rise up early as the dawn to
 mend the fence and mow the lawn. To those who mix
 and stir the pot, to those who bake and clean and
 mop, to those who have and who have not.
 Praise and Love to my daughters.
 Praise and Love to those who seek, to those who know and
 those who speak. To those who smile with tender eyes,
 whose wisdom penetrates the lies. To those who sing
 and those who cry. For those who fight for right and
 die! To those who live to ripe old age, to great-grandma
 the family sage. Praise and Love to my daughters.
 To those unborn and yet to come, we bid you on with
 song and hum. From other worlds and through birth
 water. Come forth child, beloved daughter.
 Praise and Love to the Mothers of the World.
 Praise and Love to the Sisters of the World.
 Praise and Love to the Women of the World.
 Praise and Love to my daughters. (Teish, 1994, pp. 22-23)

In this poem, Luisah Teish who is an initiated elder, an *Iyanifa*⁴ and a woman-chief, offers honor and praise not only to the Goddess, and her daughters of the natural world, but to the many ordinary and extraordinary human women who are Her living embodiments.⁵ The common tasks that she names are works that sustain, heal and enrich the world, making life possible and enjoyable for millions of people locally and globally. Even today, this work is carried out by millions of women throughout the world.

⁴ *Iyanifa* is a priestly title in the Yoruba religious system that is granted to women who are considered "mothers of wisdom" or full diviners. See : Badejo, D. (1996b). *Osun Seegesi: The elegant deity of wealth, power and femininity* (pp. 90-93). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

⁵ While I have no desire to *essentialize* that work that women do as mothers, and child rearers, or to limit our capacities to work that is pre-industrial in nature (thus denying our intellectual, scientific, and scholarly abilities), the work that Teish names is still done by a majority of working class women all over the world.

I know that for some, the term, ‘Divine Feminist’⁶ is quite confusing. I want to acknowledge Dr. Alka Arora, faculty member of the CIIS Women’s Spirituality Program for first coining this term. In what is commonly called the Western worldview – and I acknowledge that there are currently a variety of ‘Western’ worldviews – the sacred and secular realms, if not opposed, are at least separate. The term, ‘divine feminist’ represents my attempts to bridge these two very distinct and conflicting world views.

However, if we explore the work of borderlands/*nepantlera* theorist, Gloria Anzaldua (2007/1987, pp. 99-120) we find a discussion of the contested areas of conflict and convergence, which frame the diverse and opposing paradigms in which many of us live. In an essay titled “La Conciencia de la Mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness” (Anzaldua, 2007/1987, pp. 100) , Anzaldua refers to the theories of Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos regarding *La Raza*, the multi-ethnic, bicultural people who emerged from the forced encounters between the Spanish conquistadores, and the Indigenous inhabitants of Latin America:

Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the politics of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more genetic streams ...this mixture of races rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable ... species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (Anzaldua, 2007/1987, P. 99)
Developing this theory further, Anzaldua continues:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (Anzaldua, 2007/1987, P. 100)

While all of us do not (and should not) claim a *mestiza* identity, I would argue that many of us straddle traditional, non-traditional, and modern world views. We are trying to walk a path of integrity that honors and integrates older more holistic practices, while remaining within the framework of the modern techno-industrial West in which we have been raised.

A *divine feminist* is one who walks the contested borderlands between secular feminisms, religious studies, and ethnic/indigenous studies. We stand at the crossroads where goddess studies, feminist studies in religion, and newer spiritual frameworks elaborated by people of color and others involved in the reclamation and renewal of women and other oppressed gender’s ancient and contemporary roles, rights and powers meet. We weave together Euro-centric perspectives on philosophy and religion with older frameworks drawn from goddess studies, ethnic/indigenous

⁶ This paper by Dr. Alka Arora, titled: *The Divine Feminist*, was part of a panel at 2016 Founders Symposium at CIIS and is included in this special issue of Integral Review (Vol. 13, No. 1, 2017).

studies and new paradigms in women, gender and disability studies, to name a few of the transdisciplinary areas that women's spirituality touches upon. We are claiming and reclaiming ancestral traditions. We are using our knowledge, and the knowledge and spirituality of our ancestors to inform our activism. We are uncovering the original women-honoring traditions buried in frameworks labeled patriarchal; we are making alliances across difference and continually interrogating and challenging our work and the work of others.

While the terrain that the divine feminist walks is contradictory and perplexing, its breadth allows us to be more fully inclusive of our human lives and our human struggles. The term, 'divine feminist', is related to, but not synonymous with, the term 'Divine Feminine'. The Divine Feminine is often used to describe female divinities. However, when we imagine female divinity, we all too often imagine a 'Divine Feminine', which is perfect: healthy, able-bodied, symmetrical and *perfectly* beautiful. All too often, we fall into a trap in which we choose the unattainable 'ideal', rather than the material, the real, and the mundane in order to represent what is spiritual and 'beautiful'.

I've been studying women's visionary art for a long time – and I finally understand what some of my students who reject the term 'Divine Feminine' have been telling me. If we talk about a 'Divine Feminine'; surely she's different from the fat, imperfect, female body that sweats besides us at the gym, or who squats, ragged, smelly and homeless on the street. The slender, full-breasted, long-haired, narrow-waisted, full-hipped 'Divine Feminine' that is celebrated in contemporary artistic depictions of female divinity all too often looks like a white, brown, or golden-skinned Barbie doll, or even worse, a Playboy pinup⁷.

Even in women's goddess circles, we rarely see or imagine the Divine Feminine as embodied by the gender queer youth or the middle aged butch; she's not the disabled woman with cerebral palsy or an elderly woman of color living with dementia in a nursing home. In the dominant culture worldview, which confines us to binary boxes – i.e. good versus evil, beautiful versus ugly, white versus non-white, young versus old, able-bodied versus disabled, cis-gender male versus cis-gender female – we only count if we are able to successfully present as embodying the qualities deemed most worthy by the dominant culture.

In addition, dominant culture values may be as embedded in the alternative movements we create, as they are in the systems we struggle against. All too often, the Goddess – who in some traditions is a primary spiritual icon of liberation – is embodied by images reflecting the values of the dominant culture, rather than images that reflect our actual cis-or-trans-gendered bodies.

Fortunately, all of us have roots in indigenous traditions that valorized the 'real' or material world as well as the spiritual realm. In many 'traditional' indigenous world views, everything is part of Creation – and everything is sacred. In a poem written by Native American (Mvskoke Nation) Joy Harjo titled "Remember," the poet states:

⁷ While some readers may view Barbie dolls and Playboy pinups as positive, I see them as representing unrealistic and/or unattainable templates of female embodiment, since the form they present is rarely seen naturally, and many women and girls experience mental, physical and emotional suffering in their attempts to attain this ideal.

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her
in a bar once in Iowa City.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night.
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth,
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of the universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war
dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once.
Remember that you are all people and that all people
are you.
Remember that you are this universe and that this
universe is you.
Remember that all is motion, is growing, is you.
Remember that language comes from this.
Remember the dance that language is, that life is.
Remember. (Harjo, 1991, p. 234)

This poem reminds us that in the indigenous world, *everything* is sacred. Intellectually, I had been aware of this for decades, but its true meaning eluded me. The good, the bad, the human, and the non-human – are all part of the Indigenous circle of life. My friend, teacher, and colleague, Angelita Borbon, states that indigenous thought is based on the three R's: respect, relationship and reciprocity. We live, she says, in an embodied universe in which there are numerous living entities, many of whom are not human. Our life is conducted in *relationship* to these entities, which include – but are not limited to – the elements of earth, air, fire, water, metal and rock; the life forms which share the earth with us – represented by plants, animals, birds, insects, microbes, and fish – and the mountains, rivers, caves, trees or oceans which embody sacred sites.

According to San Francisco elder, healer, and Indigenous spiritual teacher, Dr. Concha Saucedo-Martinez, co-founder of Instituto De La Raza in San Francisco, we owe these powers *respect*, since they are the forces that make life possible. The Four Directions are not compass directions, metaphors or psychological archetypes – they are the spiritual powers and sacred entities that enable human beings to live on this planet.

In private conversations with me when we were doing diversity trainings together in the 1980s, Borbon explained the concept of reciprocity to me. Reciprocity, according to Borbon (personal communication, n.d.), means that what we do as humans, comes back to us. It's no surprise to indigenous peoples that if we pollute the land and the waters, that this act will affect our lives – and the lives of our children and grandchildren. All things are connected and the acts we take or don't take have real repercussions in the world.

In this world of sacred sentient life, we are all sacred because that's how we were born. We're not less sacred because we're disabled or different; the drunken woman who has abandoned her child has lost her way, but she's still a sacred being. She needs help and healing – and if she persists in following a particular road, certain consequences will occur. However she's still a child of Creator and a manifestation of the Divine. And in some Indigenous traditions, which understand and accept the many roads that humans travel, there may be a special deity for the thief or the prostitute or the one who's lost their way. *All* are part of the circle of life. The idealized Divine Feminine may not live in this realm, but the divine feminist transverses it. She knows that roads can change, and that light follows darkness and that darkness follows light. Braided together like life and death, suffering and ease, the divine feminist is the common woman that Judy Grahn writes about.

She's a copper headed waitress,
tired and sharp-worded, she hides
her bad brown tooth behind a wicked
smile, and flicks her ass
out of habit, to fend off the pass
that passes for affection.
She keeps her mind the way men
keep a knife – keen to strip the game
down to her size. She has a thin spine,
swallows her eggs cold, and tells lies.
She slaps a wet rag at the truck drivers
if they should complain. She understands
the necessity for pain, turns away
the smaller tips, out of pride, and
keeps a flask under the counter. Once,
she shot a lover who misused her child.
Before she got out of jail, the courts had pounced
and given the child away. Like some isolated lake,
her flat blue eyes take care of their own stark
bottoms. Her hands are nervous, curled, ready
to scrape.
The common woman is as common
as a rattlesnake. (Grahn, 2009, pp. 10-11)

She's the resister, the survivor, the teacher, the healer. She's the abused woman leading other women out of brothels; the acid burned woman who walks with her scars publically and tells others

to resist. She's Lora Jo Foo⁸, the daughter of a Chinatown sweatshop worker – and a garment worker, herself at 11 – who grew up to become a labor organizer and attorney – and who broke the silence about her family's life in a memoir of photographs that document her healing. She's Dorothy Allison (1994), the lesbian organizer of battered women's shelters who was kicked out of the feminist movement because of her alternative sexual practices. She's Amina Wadud, African-American Qur'anic theologian who proudly asserts:

As a descent of African slave women, I have carried the awareness that my ancestors were not given any choice to determine how much of their bodies would be exposed at the auction block or in their living conditions. So, I chose intentionally to cover my body as a means of reflecting my historical identity, personal dignity and sexual integrity. (Wadud, 2006, p. 221)

She's Doris Davis, an orthodox Jewish teacher from Long Island whose husband refused to grant her a divorce – effectively preventing her from being able to re-marry within her community. With help from the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot⁹, she led rallies outside of her husband's home and posted his photo in synagogues in Brooklyn – protests which eventually led to his granting her a divorce (Brooten, 2010).

She's you and me and women we'll never see – and yes she's divine because what's more spiritual than our liberty and freedom? What's more spiritual than struggling to stay alive and make a better world for those you love – your family, your children, your community?

The issue of spirituality can also be problematic. The linkage of social oppression with dominant culture religious traditions has a long and multicultural history. That legacy is very much alive today. Many feminist scholars are acutely aware of how women, LGBTQIQASGLP¹⁰ people, and queer/third gender communities are oppressed by fundamentalist religious traditions both here and abroad. Christianity taught to enslaved Africans by their Euro-American owners justified slavery and encouraged the slaves to be content with their lot. The ill treatment of Dalit people in India was justified by certain strands of Hindu religion. And at different points in time, all three Abrahamic religions accepted the fact that female captives could become the sexual slaves of men who owned them. This means, and let me be explicit, that these women could be raped at will.

That said, religion has also been used to support resistance. The verse *Osa Meji*, is one of the Yoruba *odu* found in *Odu Ifa*, the compendium of stories, proverbs, divinations and moral and ethical guidelines, which form the body of the sacred oral 'texts' of traditional Yoruba religion. There we find that even when sexism is postulated to exist at the time of Creation, it turns out not to be sanctioned by the Supreme Being. According to *Osa Meji*, when the original (17 in some versions and 401 in others) orishas, or deities, came to the earth to make the world habitable, they

⁸ Foo, L. J. (2008). *Earth passages: Journeys through childhood*. Castro Valley, CA: Earth Passages Nature Photography.

⁹ The Organization for the Resolution of Agunot is a non-profit organization based in New York whose mission is to "eliminate the infliction of abuse within the Jewish divorce process." <http://www.getora.org/#!/about-us/cxeg> accessed 6/28/2016.

¹⁰ LGBTQIQASGLP or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, questioning, asexual, same gender loving pansexual.

excluded Oshun, the only female deity who travelled with them, from their deliberations. In his modern translation of the Yoruba text, Maulana Karenga writes:

This is the teaching of Ifa for Odu
Obarisa and Ogun,
When they were coming from heaven to earth.
Odu asked: “O Olodumare, *Lord of Heaven*,
this earth where we are going,
What will happen when we arrive there”
Olodumare said that they were going to make
the world
So that the world will be good.
He also said that everything that they were
going to do there,
He would give them the ase, power and authority,
to accomplish it,
So that it would be done well.
Odu said “O Olodumare this earth where
we are going,
Ogun has the power to wage war.
And Obarisa has the ase to do anything
He wishes to do.
What is my power?”
Olodumare said: “you will be their mother forever.
And you will also sustain the world.”
Olodumare, then gave her the power
And when he gave her power, he gave her
the *spirit* power of the bird.
It was then that he gave women the power
and authority so that anything men
wished to do,
They could not dare to do it successfully
without women.
Odu said that everything that people would
want to do,
If they do not include women,
It will not be possible.
Obarisa said that people should always respect
women greatly.
For if they always respect women greatly, the world
will be in right order
Pay homage; give respect to women.
Indeed, it is woman who brought us into being
Before we became recognized as human beings.
The wisdom of the world belongs to women.
Give respect to women then.

Indeed it was a woman who brought
us into being.

Before we became recognized as human beings. (Karenga, 1999, pp. 72-74)

Women and other oppressed genders are certainly at the heart of feminism as an activist enterprise. This verse, which is as old as the Yoruba creation story, helps us understand how long sexism has existed even in (some) non-western cultures. However the fact that sexism has existed for millennia, does not mean that it has always existed¹¹ – nor does it mean that women have always accepted it.

If we review the term, ‘womanist’, which was coined by Alice Walker¹², I believe we can better understand the term, ‘divine feminist’. While Walker had used the term *womanism* before, it is in the book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Walker, 1983), that she first fully defined the term, *womanist*.¹³ Walker developed this term to differentiate between the feminist (or liberatory) activism of Black women and the feminist activism of Euro-American women.

¹¹ A number of Women’s Spirituality scholars: Eisler, R. (1988). *The chalice and the blade*. New York: HarperCollins; Eisler, R. (1995). *Sacred pleasures: Sex, myth, and the politics of the body*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco ; Gadon, E. (1991). *The once and future goddess: A sweeping visual chronicle of the sacred female and her reemergence in the cultural mythology of our time*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers; Gimbutas, M. (1991). *The civilization of the goddess: The world of old Europe*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco; Stone, M. (1976). *When god was a woman*. New York: Harvest/HBJ, have all challenged the notion of the continuous existence of sexism/patriarchy, arguing that Neolithic/Paleolithic artifacts suggest a veneration of the feminine, resulting in egalitarian/partnership/gynocratic societies. Other indigenous scholars: Allen, P. G. (1992) *The sacred hoop: Recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions* (2nd Ed). Boston: Beacon Press; Talamantez, I. (1991). Images of the feminine in Apache religious tradition. In Cooley, P. M., William R. E., and McDaniel, J.B. (Eds.), *After patriarchy: Feminist transformations of the world religions* (pp.131-144). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, have suggested that some American Indian societies never adopted patriarchal structures and are matrilineal, matriarchal, or gynocratic.

¹² According to Layli Phillips (now Maparyan), the term, *womanism*, was independently coined by three separate writers during the 80’s: Alice Walker, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems (who was very specific about using the term *Africana womanism*). See: Phillips, L. (2006). Introduction: Womanist on its own. In *The womanist reader* (pp. xix-xx), Layli Phillips (Ed.). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

¹³ “Womanist: 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and

According to Karla Simcikova (2007), “This definition . . . was in many ways a response to the white feminist movement of the time and its agenda, which was not particularly inclusive of, or sensitive to black women’s issues” (p. 11).

Beginning with the statement that a *womanist* was a Black feminist or feminist of color (p. 11), Walker’s four part definition focused attention on Black women’s historic and contemporary ability to take leadership in liberation struggles benefiting *all* members of the African American community. However, a womanist, for Walker, was not only a social activist. Walker’s concept of womanism validated Black women’s ability to love, support and nurture women and men “sexually and non-sexually” (p. 11). She honored the diversity, beauty and ‘*roundness*’ (p. 12) of Black women’s physical forms, and proclaimed the importance of rest, healing, and self-care. She listed music, dance, Spirit, and the Folk among the elements loved by womanists.

Walker’s holistic definition of womanism is also inclusive of people of many colors and ethnicities. She defines a womanist as a “universalist,” (p. 10) rather than a separatist, and she uses the metaphors of a garden of flowers and a family of many colors.

While some Black women of diverse identities have embraced the term, ‘womanism’, others have rejected it. Some Black women prefer to be called Black feminists. Some indigenous women prefer the term *tribalists* (Mehesuah, 2003, pp. 159-171) and there are others who support or reject Walker’s definition of “womanist” either in whole or in part.¹⁴

While these controversies continue, the work of supporting, improving, or reclaiming culturally appropriate rights of women and other genders is alive and well in a multitude of Indigenous and African societies. Writing of Africa, Filomina Steady (1981) states:

The birthplace of human life must also be the birthplace of human struggles, and feminist consciousness must in some way be related to the earliest divisions of labor according to sex on the continent. But even more significant is the fact that the forms of social organization which approach sexual equality, in addition to matrilineal societies where women are central, can be found on the African continent . . . Above all, true feminism is impossible without intensive involvement in production. All over the African diaspora, but in particular on the continent, the black woman’s role in this regard is paramount. It can therefore be stated with much justification that the black woman is to a large extent the original feminist. (pp. 35-36)

If we review women’s roles in selected areas of West Africa, we see that even in the patriarchal societies of the Yoruba and the Ibo women: 1) held social and political roles of authority, 2) worked outside the home, 3) had the right to engage in money-making commercial activities and, 4) held roles of spiritual authority in their culture’s religious institutions. The term ‘mother’ which in the

roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers’ gardens: Womanist prose* (pp. xi-xii). San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

¹⁴ See: Phillips, L. (2006). Introduction: Womanist on its own. In *The womanist reader* (pp. xix-xx), Layli Phillips (Ed.). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. See, also: Hudson-Weems, C. (2006). African womanism. In *The Womanist Reader* (pp. 44-54), Layli Phillips (Ed.). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

west connotes a lack of power in the ‘outside world’ of politics, economics, and religion, is a term of authority and agency within many African societies. The Yoruba even have a term, *iyalode*, “mother of the outside” (Badejo, 1996a, p.8), which is used as a title for the women who hold authoritative roles in the political, economic and spiritual realms – e.g. the woman chief of the market place, the chief of the women’s military organization, or the senior priestess who is involved with politics of the land. According to Oyewumi, kingship was not denied to Yoruba women, and she argues that several of the “kings” in Yoruba history were actually female.¹⁵ Childbirth was neither unimportant nor secular; in a culture where the goal of existence was to be reborn again and again, it reflected spiritual harmony, social balance and **empowerment** (Badejo, 1996a, pp. 67-101).

Rejected by many modern day feminists as essentialist, the powers of birth giving and/or life making were – and in some cases still are – seen as magical, mysterious and **empowering** in many African socio-spiritual contexts (Badejo, 1996a). The figure of a woman kneeling in the traditional (active) stance of giving birth was often depicted in pre-colonial and/or “traditional” Yoruba sculptures. Stripping naked and exposing their vulvas was an act of women’s power in many areas of pre-colonial Africa – especially when done by married or elderly women – and this has been repeatedly employed by African women of the 20th century in protests against government taxation, ecological deprecations by oil companies and in support of peacemaking efforts¹⁶.

Even in patriarchal settings, Nigeria’s Ibo women could (collectively) go on sex strikes and “sit on a man” – e.g. go to war against an individual or a group who aroused their anger. Judith Van Allen, writes:

"Sitting on a man" or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the women's main weapons. To "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit. A man might be sanctioned in this way for mistreating his wife, for violating the women's market rules, or for letting his cows eat the women's crops. . . . In tackling men as a group, women used boycotts and strikes. Harris describes a case in which, after repeated requests by the women for the paths to the market to be cleared (a male responsibility), all the women refused to cook for their husbands until the request was carried out. For this

¹⁵ According to Oyewumi, the list of Yoruba rulers – termed as ‘kings’ after colonial encounters with the West – actually includes several female rulers. See: Oyewumi, O. (2005). Making history, creating gender: Some methodological and interpretive questions in the writing of Oyo oral traditions. In Oyewumi, Oyeronke. (Ed.). *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (pp. 169-205). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

¹⁶ See: Disney, A. E. and Gini R. (2008). *Pray the devil back to hell*. Fork Films LLC and RO*CO Films International (<http://www.rocofilms.com/>). Also:

<https://www.africanexponent.com/post/the-rise-of-naked-female-protests-in-africa-3031>, accessed 6/29/2016;

<http://exhibitions.globalfundforwomen.org/exhibitions/women-power-and-politics/biology/curse-of-nakedness>

accessed 6/29/2016; <http://www.okayafrica.com/culture-2/naked-protest-and-african-feminism/> accessed 6/29/2016.

boycott to be effective, all women had to cooperate so that men could not go and eat with their brothers. (Van Allen, 1972, p. 170)

I've cited these examples to make clear that women in Africa were not waiting to learn about their oppression from Euro-American feminists. It is true that sexism existed in Africa prior to contact with Islam, Christianity and European colonialism, but many cultures in Africa, while not based on a model of gender *equity*, were based on the principle of *complementarity* in gender relationships. In such cultures, the powers of men were believed to be *balanced* by the power of women, ensuring that social, spiritual and ecologic harmony prevailed.

Women often had power not as individuals but as part of a collectivity of women. Among the Nnobi of Nigeria, for example, there was a Women's Council that was responsible for the welfare of all Nnobi women: it set rules to regulate or protect women against physical abuse (Amadiume, 1998, p. 66), regulated the market, and independently acted to support the welfare of the town (Amadiume, 1998). The *Agba Ekwe*, or most highly titled woman, was considered to be a representative of the Goddess Idemili herself, and only she and the shrine priest could consult with the Goddess directly. Under Christianity and colonization, however, the authority and titles of men were readily translated into male norms of the colonial administration, while the authority and responsibilities of powerful women were seen as "pagan" and discontinued.

Most of us understand that the struggle of women for justice and empowerment is a global one. My description of the precolonial power of African women is meant to help us understand that the issue of women's rights and powers in selected patriarchal non-Western societies is more complex than many of us have considered. However while most of us would support political systems that provide justice and equality for women, many of us don't make the connection between liberation struggles and the practice of spirituality. For many of us, religion has created a divide between social justice and spirituality, for we have been raised either in an entirely secular world, or one in which the material and spiritual realms are seen as separate.

We all know the world needs to change. How we do it, with whom we do it, and with what tools, are some of the important questions we need to ask. While we often contrast contemplative spiritual traditions with socially engaged or activist ones, I believe that a closer examination of diverse, traditional, contemporary and/or indigenous spiritual traditions from around the world reveal that the questions we face today were not unknown to peoples of the past, nor to their colonized and oppressed descendants.

In some contemplative religious traditions, the material world, while beautiful, is not divine. Divinity and sacredness – belong to a realm outside of our material reality. If in some traditions we suffer in the physical world, it is because of our transgressions in a previous life. In others, our suffering is merely the reality of our life on earth. Only after our death and release to a heavenly realm, or our rebirth as a member of a different caste or gender, will our earthly suffering come to an end and be redeemed.

In still other traditions, some of which are branches of the same contemplative religions that see suffering as a normal part of life, we are called to take action to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. The Bodhisattva Vow of Mahayana Buddhist tradition has been interpreted as

meaning that we vow to return again and again to the world until all sentient beings have attained enlightenment. The engaged Buddhism of Vietnamese Buddhist monks led some to burn themselves to death to protest the Vietnam war, and it encouraged others to provide healing to wounded soldiers and civilians on both sides of the war. In many Jewish traditions one, is expected to engage in *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, which has been interpreted by some as meaning that one is obligated to take righteous *social action* to foster the creation of a peaceful and egalitarian world that honors all races, ethnicities, spiritualities, orientations, genders, and abilities.

Many of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas understand that their spirituality is intrinsically linked to liberation from oppression. The ability to practice many Indigenous religions is often linked to particular landscapes which shelter the sacred sites, plants and other items that are necessary for the proper spiritual practices of particular First Nations peoples (McLeod, 2001). The right of access to their traditional lands, along with the right to speak the languages in which their spiritual traditions are embedded, and the right to have custody of their children and to train them in their ancestral ways, were rights that were denied to many Indigenous inhabitants of the USA for centuries. The reclaiming of these rights – and they have not yet been granted to all First Nations peoples of the USA – has only come about because of political, spiritual and activist struggles.

Whether we accept the notion of a spiritual or ensouled universe or find ourselves moved by legacies of human activism for liberation, our profound human connection to the natural world remains. I'd like to close with a poem by Alice Walker that invokes the union of spirituality and social justice – and that reminds us of the natural world's ability not only to sustain our bodies but to feed our souls. It's called "Torture":

When they torture your mother / Plant a tree
 When they torture your father / Plant a tree
 When they torture your brother/ and your sister
 When they assassinate your leaders/ and lovers/ Plant a tree
 When they torture you/ too bad / to talk/ Plant a tree
 When they begin to torture / The trees / And cut down the forest
 they have made
 Start another. (Walker, 1989, p. 63)

May we remember and follow this ancient and indigenous wisdom in the days to come.

References

- Allison, D. (1994) *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
 Amadiume, I. (1998) *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.
 Anzaldúa, G. (2007/1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New mestiza* (Third Edition). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
 Badejo, D. (1996a). Osun in Yoruba cosmology. In *Osun Seegesi: The elegant deity of wealth, power and femininity*, Badejo, D. (Ed.). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

- Badejo, D. (Ed.)(1996b). *Osun Seegesi: The elegant deity of wealth, power and femininity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Brooten, B. (Ed.) (2010) *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grahn, J. (2009). Ella, in a square apron, along Highway 80. In *The Judy Grahn Reader*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Harjo, J. (1991). Remember. In Marilyn Sewell (Ed.), *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality* (p. 234). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Karenga, M. (1999) *Odu Ifa: The Ethical Teachings*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press.
- McLeod, C. (2001) *In The Light of Reverence* (Video). Sacred Land Film Project. San Francisco, Bullfrog Films. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/inthelightofreverence/video/christopher-mcleod-and-malinda-maynor-2001/>
- Mehesuah, D. A. (2003). Feminists, Tribalists or Activists. In *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Simcikova, K. (2007). *To Live Full, Here And Now: the Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Steady, F. C. (1981). *The black woman cross-culturally*: Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishers.
- Teish, L. (1994). *Carnival of the Spirit: Seasonal Celebrations and Rites of Passage*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Van Allen, J. (1972). Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 6(2).
- Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: One World.
- Walker, A. (1983). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Walker, A. (1989). *Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful: Poems by Alice Walker*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.