



**Her Blue Body*:
A Pagan Reading of Alice Walker Womanism**

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the earth-based woman-centered paganism found in Alice Walker's womanist writings. It argues that Walker's visionary landscape is influenced by indigenous spirituality and woman-centered Goddess beliefs which place humans in a sacred web of life that includes plants, animals, elemental forces, the earth, the cosmos, and the living and the dead. In this landscape, humans are not stewards of creation, but members of the whole. A review of several of her visionary novels—including *The Temple of My Familiar*, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* and *The Color Purple*—suggest that Walker links women's erotic freedom, social and cultural liberation, and sexual and spiritual redemption. She rejects dualistic notions which oppose spirituality and sexuality, and through characters who embody transgressive sexuality, she suggests that a fully enjoyed and empowered female sexuality is a gateway to the perception of the divine as well as a path to healing, self-love and authenticity. A self-declared pagan, her holistic framework integrates the personal, sexual, spiritual, and cosmic with the needs of the earth and all sentient life.

Keywords: Alice Walker, Contemporary Paganism, Nature, Sexuality, Spirituality, Womanism

I'd like to begin with some words by Alice Walker from her essay: 'The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms)'¹ Walker shares some of her views about liberatory spirituality:

* Title taken from the poem "We Have a Beautiful Mother", in *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete* (New York: Harvest, 1993), pp. 459-60.

1. The full title is as follows: Alice Walker, 'The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms): Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self', in

It is fatal to love a God who does not love you. A God specifically created to comfort, lead, advise, strengthen and enlarge the tribal borders of someone else. We have been beggars at the table of a religion that sanctioned our destruction. Our own religions denied, forgotten; our own ancestral connections to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-centered female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led...Indeed it was because the teachings of Jesus were already familiar to many of our ancestors especially in the New World—they already practiced the love and sharing that he preached—that the Christian Church was able to make as many genuine converts to the Christian religion that it did. All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice. Never will Nature require that you cut off some part of your body to please It; never will Mother Earth find anything wrong with your natural way. She made it and She made it however it is so that you will be more comfortable as part of Her Creation, rather than less. Everyone deserves a God who adores our freedom: Nature would never advise us to do anything but be ourselves. Mother Earth will do all that She can to support our choices...For they are of Her and inherent in our creation is Her trust.²

These words are from an essay which Walker describes as an 'exploration of (her) own spiritual quest'³—a quest, I believe, that did not lead to Christianity. In spite of the fact that her womanist definition has provided a powerful framework for inserting the voices, culture/s and experiences of black women into the Academy and the Church,⁴ Walker's spiritual vision stands outside mainstream Christian religious beliefs. It indicts the Euro-American Church for its racism and colonizing role, and it critiques the African American Christian Church for its sexism, and lack of reverence for the female face of divinity. Walker proclaims her acceptance of Nature/Mother Earth as Creator and God/ess; she revisions the role and image of Christ, and asks that we not only worship our Divinity, but that the Divinity worship us.

Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism (New York: Random House Press, 1997), pp. 3-26.

2. Walker, 'The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven', pp. 25-26.

3. Walker, 'The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven', p. 26.

4. See Carol Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women...Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); Layli Phillips (ed.), *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006); Delores Williams, 'Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices', in Layli Phillips (ed.), *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 117-25.

While these ideas may be heretical to some, I would like to propose that opening to the fullness of Walker's vision allows us to examine the non-Christian beliefs that are both native to this continent and rooted in the spiritualities of the enslaved Africans who came here.⁵ Earth-based, female reverencing, animist and polytheistic worship is a subterranean ocean that runs beneath the mighty rivers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,⁶ and in poetry and prose Walker evokes these deep almost forgotten waters. This paper explores some of the foundational beliefs and implications of Walker's self-proclaimed 'pagan' spiritual beliefs, and the presence of these beliefs in her womanist writings. I believe that Walker's perspective presents a framework for the discussion of current environmental issues in a way that holds as sacred the needs of humans *and* nature—while simultaneously rejecting hierarchical mainstream religious notions of human stewardship over nature. Her woman-reverencing beliefs focus on the importance of: the sacredness of the female body; freedom of sexuality and sexual choice; the right of women to preach, teach and lead; and the autonomy of women in all realms of their lives. While some of these beliefs are held in radical Christian churches today—and may well have been held by Christians in earlier times—I believe her definition's focus on the body offers an ethical woman-centered foundation for the development of a critical, progressive discourse on black women's bodies, sexualities and self-love and self-esteem. While I will only touch on some of these issues today, I hope that others will continue to explore Walker's paganism and its social and ethical implications and underpinnings.

Background

In her 2006 anthology, *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips notes that the term 'womanism' is over 25 years old. She indicates that this term was first used in Walker's short story 'Coming Apart', initially pub-

5. I do not mean to disavow the other ancestral or spiritual lineages of African Americans, for I am aware that some enslaved Africans were of the Muslim faith.

6. For example, see Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth Power and Femininity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Riane Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body—New Paths to Power and Love* (San Francisco CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989); Nawal El Saadawi, 'The Thirteenth Rib of Adam' (trans. and ed., Dr Sherif Hetata); *The Hidden Face of Eve* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981), pp. 91-101, Nawal El Saadawi, 'The Role of Women in Arab History', in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (trans. and ed., Dr Sherif Hetata), pp. 125, 132; Barbara A. Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2000). Diane Wolkstein, and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

lished in 1979.⁷ There Walker notes, 'a "womanist" is a feminist, only more common'.⁸ In a footnote to this essay, Walker wrote: 'Womanist' encompasses 'feminist' as it is defined in Webster's, but also means

instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women's culture. It comes (to me) from the word 'womanish' a word our mothers used to describe and attempt to inhibit, strong outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: 'You acting womanish!' An advantage of using 'womanist', is that because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word 'Black'... since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with white, since the word 'feminist' is seen as coming out of white women's culture.⁹

Walker's lengthier and better known four part definition debuted later in the front piece of *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983.¹⁰ In this definition, Walker praised black women's historic and contemporary ability to take leadership in black liberation struggles benefiting *all* members of the African American community. She validated our ability to love, support and nurture women and men 'sexually and non-sexually'; and honored the diversity, beauty and 'roundness' of black women's physical form/s; and proclaimed the importance of rest, healing, and self-care. Walker noted that the activism and agency of African-American women occasionally put us in conflict with our elders – but she chose to focus on the sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized black mother-daughter relationships. In listing what we love as black feminists, Walker praised music, dance, spirit, and the folk. She included the often-neglected self in her list, and explicitly named the moon which has been culturally and biologically linked with women and the natural world in a variety of cultures and spiritual traditions.¹¹

While womanism has been applied to the arts, and the social sciences, many religious studies scholars have explored 'womanism' from

7. Layli Phillips (ed.), *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), p. xix.

8. Layli Phillips, 'Alice Walker's Womanism', in Phillips (ed.), *The Womanist Reader*, pp. 3-11 (7).

9. Phillips, 'Alice Walker's Womanism', p. 11, n. 2.

10. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker* (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. xi.

11. Barbara Mann, *Iroquoian Woman: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); Queen Afua, *Sacred Women: A Guide to Healing the Feminine Body* (New York: One World, 2000), p. 65; Ann Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess* (New York: Viking Arkana, 1991), pp. 145-48; Christiane Northrup, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 2002), pp. 105-106.

the perspective of Christianity. Christian womanists like Cheryl Gilkes, Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, Kelly Brown Douglass, Diana Hayes and Emily Townsend — to name a few — have used its tenets to reframe and revision the experience of African American *Christian* women. Some Christian womanists acknowledge Walker's definition simply as inspiration or foundation, but have developed their own definitions of 'womanism' to incorporate their Christian faith. Diana Hayes, who describes herself as a 'Catholic celibate female womanist theologian and lawyer', states that, '...for me, a womanist is a female African Christian theologian'.¹² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes notes:

While not primarily religious, Walker's definition manages to draw upon the central indigenous theme of African-American Spirituality, church formation, and construction of the pillars of religious experience: the importance of the Spirit as the operative manifestation of God in everyday life...Walker's use of the term "the Spirit" for us automatically means the "Holy Ghost" — an actualization of Jesus' assertion to "the woman at the well" in John 4.24 that "God is a Spirit".¹³

However, Walker's definition as originally stated is neither Christian, monotheistic nor even *panentheistic*, as Karen Baker-Fletcher indicates.¹⁴ Walker's writing about faith — and more specifically her faith — can designate spiritualities that are *pantheist* — meaning that 'God' is identified with Nature — or polytheistic — meaning that they may involve multiple divinities. The Spirit that Walker suggests that black women love includes diverse traditions, for, 'while (p)redominantly Christian, womanists are also religiously diverse, including pagans, Muslims, Buddhists, and practitioners of Yoruba'.¹⁵ It is important that womanist scholars recognize these diversities if they are to address the needs and experiences of diverse African women.¹⁶ Monica Coleman writes:

12. Diana L. Hayes, 'Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: The Making of a Catholic Womanist Theologian', in Stacy M. Floyd Thomas (ed.), *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 54-97 (56).

13. Cheryl T. Gilkes, 'Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989), pp. 83-112, in Layli Phillips (ed.), *The Womanist Reader* (2006), pp. 126-34.

14. Karen Baker-Fletcher, 'A Womanist Journey', in Floyd-Thomas (ed.), *Deeper Shades of Purple*, pp. 158-75. Baker-Fletcher defines herself as a Christian womanist. She describes herself as a panentheist who acknowledges that God is in Nature, but rejects what she views as Walker's pantheism which sees God as everything.

15. Karen Baker-Fletcher, 'A Womanist Journey', p. 162.

16. I am using African to designate women of Africa and the African Diaspora.

(W)omanist religious scholarship has not done well in reflecting the religious pluralism of Black women's faith associations... Baker-Fletcher notes that womanists have often followed the pattern of "black Christian women" who tend to "conflate God (Creator), Jesus, and Holy Spirit during the ordinary, everyday eloquent prayers in homes, churches, and gatherings"¹⁷ Without clarifying the theological difference between God and Jesus, womanists are incapable of speaking to the many black women who do not identify as Christian (or Christians with low Christologies). Intentionally or not, womanists have created a Christian hegemonic discourse within the field... This Christocentric discourse leaves womanist religious scholarship without a language for many black women's religious experience. How... might a womanist interpret the strength Tina Turner finds in Buddhism and the role her faith played in helping her leave a violent relationship? ... (H)ow would a womanist describe Alice's "born again pagan spirituality"?¹⁸ Few womanist scholars have dared to describe black women's spirituality when a black woman is one who "loves Nature" or "loves the universe".¹⁹

Indigenous Spiritual Traditions

In the discussion to follow, I explore some of Walker's writings which demonstrate her commitment to a spirituality that locates the Sacred in Nature, the self and the Universe. I do so using principles drawn from earth-based, indigenous spiritual traditions. In choosing these terms, I freely admit to using words that define me—at least at one level—as an outsider to the traditions I am discussing. While the Academy often describes religions characterized by polytheism, animism, syncretism, or shamanism, as indigenous or earth based spiritualities, these terms are not terms created or used by the peoples who practiced these religions for centuries.

Furthermore, it is not my intention either to essentialize indigenous cultures or to appropriate their traditions. There is a great global diversity of cultures that believe (1) we live in an *embodied spiritual universe*

17. Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 31.

18. Alice Walker, 'The River: Honoring the Difficult', in *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult; A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art and the Making of the Film 'The Color Purple' Ten Years Later* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 25.

19. Monica Coleman, 'Must I be Womanist?', pp. 85-96 of 'Womanist Roundtable', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.1 (April 2006), pp. 85-134 (88-90). Coleman comments, 'Only two womanists have ventured close: Karen Baker-Fletcher in *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), and Barbara A. Holmes, in *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), Coleman, 'Must I be Womanist?', p. 90 n. 19.

where *everything* is alive and pervaded with the energy of *Spirit*; (2) the living powers/spiritual energies of the universe are able to directly act on and influence the lives of humans (3) humans, through intention, action, ceremony and prayer, affect and influence the powers of the universe (4) the beings closest to the Western concept of 'human beings' would include the dead, the living, and the yet unborn²⁰ (5) it is necessary to regularly and formally honor the dead since they have the ability to influence the lives of their descendants, (6) after our lives on earth are done there is reincarnation/rebirth onto the material plane.

Peoples and cultures that hold these beliefs are found on almost every continent. Some of them are part of larger spiritual traditions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism), some of them belong to syncretic branches of otherwise monotheistic traditions (e.g. Santeria, and Candomble) and some of them belong to spiritual traditions practised by contemporary members of indigenous tribal groups. In *Race and the Cosmos*, Barbara Holmes describes some of the conclusions developed by the Native Research and Scholarship Committee of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium²¹ to describe indigenous spirituality and the research methods that need to support it. These findings echo the beliefs I've listed and provide a foundation for a great diversity of spiritual traditions, beliefs and practices:

1. *The human family is connected to the Spirit.* The concept of 'Spirit' can be understood as the energy of the universe... This energy is deemed to be a manifestation of human/divine potential and creative interaction...all living entities emit energy. Energy is synonymous with motion and interaction with other volatile and moving life forms.
2. *Reality is relational.* We are all connected through the veil of multiple realities. Neither death nor life can separate us from this intrinsic aspect of the life space. Accordingly, ancestors can advise, and animals and plants can co-labor in the creation process... Everything is linked through an 'indivisible whole...and this indivisible whole which we refer to as the universe is affected by the relationship of humanity'.
3. *Human beings are 'partners with the source of life'.* The committee affirmed a belief in the 'intelligence' of the universe and our con-

20. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture* (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1961), pp. 107-108.

21. Papers presented at the AIHEAC President's Retreat, sponsored by the Tribal College Journal *et al.*, Orcas Island, Washington, July 21-22, 1996, referenced in Barbara Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), p. 90.

nections through consciousness with a cosmic energy/Spirit... The earth as a co creator 'brings forth', so do we. In terms of indigenous methodology, creative partnering provides the underlying foundation of any scientific inquiry.²²

Eclectic Spiritual Practices

American (i.e. USA) interest in indigenous and Eastern religions has been on the rise for the last forty years, and many inhabitants of the USA practice some blend of spiritual traditions. While many African Americans who were part of the Black Nationalist or African American cultural struggles of the 1960s chose to affiliate with African Diasporan religions (Islam, Yoruba, Voodoo, etc.), others chose more eclectic practices. Akasha Gloria Hull, who interviewed Walker, along with several other contemporary African American women in *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*, suggests that:

(a) new spirituality...is taking shape among many progressive African-American women at this turning of the twenty-first century. Arising around 1980...this spiritual expression builds on firm cultural foundations and traditional Christian religions, but also freely incorporates elements popularly called 'New Age' – Tarot, chakra work, psychic enhancements, numerology, Eastern philosophies of cosmic connectedness and others.²³

I believe that Walker's earth-based paganism is consistent with principles of indigenous spirituality. While Walker currently incorporates Buddhist spiritual practices into her life, she also acknowledges her Native American ancestors. Like Czech Professor Karla Simcikova, in her recent text *To Live Fully, Here and Now: The Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker*²⁴ I believe Walker's womanist writings are influenced by Native American traditions, and woman-centered Goddess beliefs. These principles place us in a sacred landscape that holds plants, animals, humans, the natural landscape of the elements, the earth and the cosmos, and the visible and invisible entities that dwell within all these dimensions together in a sacred web in which humans are not the stewards of creation, but simply members of the whole. Several of her novels²⁵ express the notion that death is part of a sacred round in which

22. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, pp. 77-78.

23. Akasha Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), pp. 1-2.

24. See Karla Simcikova, *To Live Fully, Here and Now: The Healing Vision in the Works of Alice Walker* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007).

25. See *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (New York: Ballantine, 1998); *The Temple of My Familiar* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989); *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983).

one is reborn—along with those that one has bonded with before—into lifetimes of unions in which we seek—and find—compassion, wisdom, healing and growth.²⁶

The Body and Sexuality

Walker's focus on the body—and her description of an autonomous, fluid, woman-centered healing and spiritualized sexuality which is based solely on the ethical dictates of the heart and not in social rules of monogamy, compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, or traditional human boundaries may appear to be linked solely to the author's utopian vision. However, one finds in it an echo of a time when women were the sovereign owners of their bodies and their sexuality was fluid. While many contemporary Euro-American Wiccans²⁷ hold that these beliefs are a common part of an idealized past among Goddess worshipping peoples of Europe—Celtic people, for example, were said to have numerous kinds of marriages, and Celtic women are alleged to have had sexual freedom even when married—these traditions are not entirely foreign to African women. Gloria Wekker's work among contemporary working class bisexual women of the Afro Surinamese Diaspora²⁸ and Nkunzi Nkabinde and Ruth Morgan writings about same sex sangomas in South Africa²⁹ remind us that fluid sexuality is not unknown among African Diasporan women today.

Walker's Self-Proclaimed Paganism

Walker defines pagans as '(people whose primary spiritual relationship is with Nature and the earth; people who have traditionally been oppressed or destroyed by patriarchal religions)'.³⁰ Walker defines herself as a 'born-again pagan'—writing that 'I imagine I am like my pagan African and Native American ancestors who were sustained by their conscious inseparability from Nature prior to being forced by missionaries to focus all their attention on a God "up there" in "heaven"'.³¹

26. Simcikova, *To Live Fully Here and Now*.

27. Members of earth-based pagan spiritual traditions.

28. Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

29. Nkunzi Nkabinde and Ruth Morgan, ' "this has happened since ancient times... it's something that you are born with": ancestral wives among same sex sangomas in South Africa', *Agenda* 67 volume 2, 3 (2006), pp. 9-19.

30. Alice Walker, *The Same River Twice* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 42.

31. Walker, *The Same River Twice*, p. 25.

A more concrete example of this spirituality is found in *The Color Purple*, where Walker's character Shug writes of her religious awakening:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.³²

Walker also writes of an embodied universe whose denizens are interchangeable, energetic manifestations of life's boundless abundance. Forms are simply – or not so simply – exchanged and recycled. In the poem 'We Have A Beautiful Mother',³³ found in her Spelman College commencement speech, 'What Can I Give My Daughters Who Are Brave?' located in the collection *Anything We Love Can be Saved: A Writer's Activism*.³⁴ Walker writes:

We have a beautiful
mother
Her hills
are buffaloes
Her buffaloes
hills.

We have a beautiful mother
Her oceans
are wombs
Her wombs
oceans.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her teeth
the white stones
at the edge
of the water
the summer grasses
her plentiful
hair.

We have a beautiful
mother
her green lap immense
Her brown embrace

32. Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 8.

33. Walker, 'What Can I Give My Daughters Who Are Brave?', in Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, pp. 106-107. Also in Walker, *Her Blue Body*, pp. 459-60.

34. Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, pp. 89-107.

eternal
Her blue body
everything
we know.³⁵

Walker's Paganism and Indigenous Worldviews

In these writings, Walker reflects some of the basic elements of indigenous thinking. As humans, we are embedded in a living cosmos, all parts of which are alive and interconnected. Our quest for justice must include the liberation not only of other humans, but of other species — and we are called to take actions that support not only our human lives, but the harmony and interdependence of the whole of creation. As Walker writes: 'All people and living things are the body and soul of God... (W)e serve God not by making the earth and its people suffer, but by making the earth and its people whole'.³⁶

In this immanent and embodied cosmology, Self, Spirit, Nature and the world intertwine. The 'either/or' of dualistic Western thinking, which ranks 'male' against 'female', human against animal and Spirit against nature, is replaced by a cosmology in which humans are part of an animate, sentient landscape. We are not stewards of creation, but fellow 'earthlings'.³⁷ Such a viewpoint reaches back to indigenous peoples of Africa of whom Marimba Ani writes: 'The African world view... [has] certain themes in common. The universe ... is organic and is a true 'cosmos'. Human beings are part of the cosmos and ... relate intimately with other cosmic beings'.³⁸

Baker Fletcher adds:

When Alice Walker coined the term *womanist*... (s)he invoked the cosmos by saying that the colored race was like a flower garden. She insisted that the womanist loves the moon, roundness, food, the Spirit, and herself — regardless. To be a womanist, as Walker and many other womanist theologians have come to understand, is to be concerned with the well-being of all creation.³⁹

Such a perspective presents a framework for the discussion of current environmental issues in a way that holds as sacred the needs of humans *and* nature. Our scientific discourse is only now beginning to confirm what indigenous leader Chief Seattle said so eloquently:

35. Walker, *Anything We Love Can be Saved*, pp. 106-107.

36. Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 194.

37. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 53.

38. Marimba Ani, *Yurugo: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), p. 29.

39. Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit*, p. 53.

What (are the people) without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, the people would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to the people...The earth does not belong to (the people); (the people) belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.⁴⁰

This is a truth that we are just beginning to understand today: the survival and wellbeing of humanity may well depend on the dynamic harmony and homeostasis between the earth's living waters, animals, air and earth; if this web disintegrates, all life is threatened. In *Living by the Word*, Walker writes more fully about her concern for the plants and animals with whom we share the planet. She rejects the notion that the thoughtless slaughter, caging, and forced mating of animals for the benefit of humans is a morally just act; and reminds us that such behavior was forced onto African Americans during slavery. In a letter to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, she writes that confining pregnant mares 'in order to use their urine to make Premarin is an outrage against Nature and beauty'⁴¹ and poignantly recounts the story of the horse, Blue, who after periods of indescribable loneliness, received the company of a mare, only to have this companion withdrawn after she became pregnant.⁴² Walker's writing consistently indicates that the animal world and its creatures have lives that parallel—in the importance of feeling, suffering, families and wisdom—the human one. Simcikova writes:

For Walker all beings are equal since, as she explains in the interview with Simpkinson, "equality is in the existence of beings. You cannot think it's right to imprison kill and eat animals because they allegedly exist at a lower order. Nothing exists at a lower order unless you force it to".⁴³

In the world in which Walker is concerned with the wellbeing of animals *and* humans, the spirits of the dead are also part of the landscape. Writing about her life after moving to the country, she says:

A year or so after being there I reconnected with the world of animals and spirits—in trees, old abandoned orchards, undisturbed riverbanks—I had known and loved as a child. I became aware that there is a very

40. Seed John, Joanna Macy *et al.*, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Santa Cruz, CA: New Society Publishers, 1988), p. 71.

41. Alice Walker, 'Letter to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals', in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 168. Premarin was at that time used for hormone replacement therapy for post-menopausal women.

42. Alice Walker, 'Am I Blue', in Alice Walker, *Living by the Word* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 3-8.

43. Simcikova, *To Live Fully, Here and Now*, p. 100.

thin membrane, human-adult-made, that separates us from this seemingly vanished world, where plants and animals still speak a language we humans understand, and I began to write about the exhilarating experience of regaining my childhood empathy. I discovered that not only is there an adult made membrane separating us from animals, rocks, rivers and trees, ocean and sky, there is one separating us from our remote ancestors, who are actually so near that they are us.⁴⁴

Walker's world of the dead is not a Christian heaven or hell. It shares aspects of North American Native belief with ideas of reincarnation that are more reflective of eclectic Buddhist or Hindu beliefs especially in their Western translations. The late Vine Deloria, noted Native American scholar, writes:

When we examine American Indian tribal religions, we find a notable absence of the fear of death...life after death was a continuation of the life already experienced. It was not contemplated that the soul would have to account for misdeeds and lapses from a previously established ethical norm. All of that concern was expressed when the individual was alive... entrance into the next life was almost a mechanical process to which everyone was subject, a natural cosmic process to which all things were bound...the souls of people often remained in various places where they had died or suffered traumatic events. People visiting the Sand Creek location where the Cheyennes were massacred...have told me that they can hear the cries of the women and children who are still living near this dreaded place. Indians receiving bones from museums for reburial tell about the spirits of the departed speaking to them...The Indian ability to deal with death was a result of the much larger context in which Indians understood life. Human beings were an integral part of the natural world and in death they contributed their bodies to become the dust that nourished the plants and animals that had fed people during their lifetime. Because people saw the tribal community and the family as a continuing unity regardless of circumstance, death became simply another transitional event in a much longer scheme of life.⁴⁵

Chief Seattle states it this way:

'To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors, and seemingly without regret...Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander way beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being. Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people...The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. Even the little children who lived here

44. Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 129.

45. Vine Deloria, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1992), pp. 170-71.

and rejoiced here... will love these somber solitudes and at eventide... greet shadowy returning spirits... When the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth... these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe... At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land... Dead did I say? There is no death only a change of worlds'.⁴⁶

While American Indian thought did not embrace re-incarnation in the Buddhist or Hindu sense, it did postulate a cyclic relationship between life, death and human existence:

we see the fundamental conception of life as a continuing unity involving land and people. One might be tempted to suggest that as land is held by the community, the psychic unity of all the worlds is made real. We are not faced with formless and homeless spirits in this idea but with an ordered and purposeful creation in which death merely marks a passage from one form of experience to another. Rather than fearing death, tribal religions see it as an affirmation of life's reality.⁴⁷

While Walker acknowledges and at times celebrates the Christianity of her parents, the afterlife she invokes for herself is one that involves our return to this earth and to the bodies of our descendants. In the poem dedicated to 'bringing in the spirits of my parents'⁴⁸ Walker writes:

Looking down into my father's
dead face
for the last time
my mother said without
tears, without smiles
without regrets
but with *civility*
'Good night, Willie Lee, I'll see you
in the morning.'
and it was then I knew that the healing
of all our wounds
is forgiveness
that permits a promise
of our return
at the end.⁴⁹

This poem clearly describes the hope and faith that many black Christians have for a heavenly resurrection as promised by Christ. However, in writing of her own hopes and beliefs, Walker offers a dif-

46. Vine, *God is Red*, pp. 173-74.

47. Vine, *God is Red*, p. 174.

48. Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 104.

49. Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, p. 104.

ferent vision of the ancestors. She suggests that the dead and the living form a sacred round that extends from the past through the present into the future. She writes a poem for two of her ancestors, one a mixed blood Cherokee woman and one a Euro-American man:

for two who
slipped away,
almost
entirely:
my 'part' Cherokee
great grandmother
Tallulah
(Grandmama Lula)
on my mother's side
about whom
only one
agreed upon
thing
is known:
her hair was so long
she could sit on it;

and my white (Anglo-Irish?)
great-great-grandfather
on my father's side
nameless
(Walker, perhaps?)
whose only remembered act
is that he raped
a child:
my great great grandmother,
who bore his son,
my great-grandfather,
when she was eleven.

Rest in peace
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding

Rest in peace.
In me
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest in peace, in me.
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest.
In me
The meaning of your lives

is still
 unfolding.
 Rest.
 In peace in me
 The meaning of our lives
 is still
 unfolding.
 Rest.⁵⁰

Walker's concept of reincarnation and the working out of ancestral wounds will sound familiar to students of Buddhism and Hinduism, and less familiar to many who are Christian or Muslim. However, her beliefs are an eclectic mix of traditional beliefs and Walker's own ideas.

These ideas are even more elaborately presented in *The Temple of My Familiar* and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Lissie, who has seen numerous births and rebirths has even once been a lion. Hal, who is her beloved, watches her in childbirth and 'could see in her eyes the hundreds of times she had suffered in giving birth'⁵¹ In her analysis of a story that spans 500,000 years, in which beings are born and reborn again and again, Simcikova suggests that Walker is profoundly concerned with questions of relationship. She writes:

Walker believes that we are never alone in our spiritual journey. Our lives intersect with the lives of others, all of us constantly shaping one another, in both direct and indirect ways...Sometimes they heal our wounds or make us understand our mistakes.⁵²

In many non-Christian traditions, our lives do not end with death but continue over many lifetimes with ample opportunities to cause harm, heal, make amends, change and grow. In such systems, problems that occur in one lifetime may be addressed in another. According to Simcikova:

the long-lasting relationship between Hal and Lissie, based on genuine love, respect, trust honesty, and acceptance of each other in all their differences, cemented by their life struggle against racism and poverty...is a spiritual union that extends far beyond the present... Walker believes in an unending circle of people, in which all of us are connected through the sharing of our stories that helps us become and understand more fully who we are.⁵³

50. *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful: Poems by Alice Walker* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, 1984), pp. viii-ix.

51. Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

52. Simcikova, *To Live Fully Here and Now*, p. 58.

53. Simcikova, *To Live Fully Here and Now*, p. 60.

Woman Centred Perspectives

Walker's stress on the importance of sharing stories brings us to a realm in which women's issues and women's ways of knowing intersect with those of indigenous peoples. Story telling is a foundational art in many indigenous traditions; and teaching stories are essential to the oral tradition of many Native American nations⁵⁴. In Walker's work, emphasis on the somatic places black women's bodies inside the great arc of a sacralized cosmos. She asks that we listen to and heal our bodies and spirits as women, even when it means challenging societal, familial and patriarchal norms as her protagonists do in *The Color Purple*, *Temple of My Familiar* and *By The Light of My Father's Smile*. Doing this in the face of the continuing and unrelenting attacks of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia does indeed call for 'outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior'.⁵⁵

While Walker's rejection of homophobia and heteronormativity have been points of discussion since her definition was first published,⁵⁶ her emphasis on sexuality, self-love, and healing raises important issues for black women. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes states, 'Self-hatred may be one of the deepest sources of conflict and turmoil within the African American community. This may be especially true concerning women and their bodies'.⁵⁷ Gilkes describes a 'cultural humiliation'⁵⁸ and self-hatred that comes from within as well as from outside of our communities, and suggests that it is critical that black women begin to love themselves, noting that:

The failure to love self makes it impossible to love others, and our hateful acts toward others are often a measure of our feelings about self. Some of the greatest threats to human development among the poor...the black and the non-black, are rooted in the lack of self esteem... If we are to explore the work of Alice Walker for ethical content or for direction in constructing ethics and in thinking theologically, I think that the most fruitful course is her artful advocacy of unconditional love that starts with our acceptance of ourselves as divinely and humanly lovable.⁵⁹

54. See Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996).

55. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. xi.

56. Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women*, p.181.

57. Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women*, p. 181.

58. Gilkes, 'Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective', p. 152.

59. Gilkes, 'Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective', p. 152.

Writing in a world in which femininity is defined as small, fair, delicate and dependant, Walker's womanist definition indicates love for black women's 'roundness',⁶⁰ which can be read as acceptance and love of our large, round and big-boned bodies. She has championed our natural hair and skin color⁶¹ which are not loved in this culture, writing:

Stop bleaching
 your skin
 and talking
 about
 so much black
 is not beautiful.
 The color black
 is not bad
 at all.
 There are black nights
 that rock
 us
 in dreams.
 Or, if you must,
 bleach only
 because it pleases you
 to be brown,
 to be able to see
 for as long
 as you can bear it
 the whole world's
 lighter face
 reflected
 in your own
 ...
 As for me
 I have learned
 To worship
 The sun
 again.
 To affirm
 the adventures of hair.

 For we are all
splendid
 descendants
 of Wilderness,
 Eden:

60. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. xi.

61. See Alice Walker, 'Dreads' in Walker, *Anything We Love Can be Saved*, pp. 83-85; 'Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain', in Alice Walker, *Living by the Word* (New York: Harvest Books, 1989), pp. 69-74; 'Without Commercials', in Walker, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, pp. 55-58.

needing only
to see
each other
without
commercials
to believe.
Copied skillfully
as Adam.

Original

As Eve⁶²

Since Walker clearly has no problem using imagery drawn from or based in the Christianity of her parents, it is not surprising that Christian womanist scholars like Gilkes find Walker's writings a call to *Christian* women of the African Diaspora.⁶³ However, Walker's emphasis on the body can be seen as arising from non-Christian sources. She states:

"Who made you"? Was always
The question
The answer was always
"God"
Well there we stood
Three feet high
Heads bowed
Leaning into
Bosoms.

Now
I no longer recall
The Catechism
Or brood on the Genesis
Of life
No.

I ponder the exchange
Itself
And salvage mostly
The leaning.⁶⁴

Transgressive Sexuality

It is in her discussions of sexuality that many find Walker to be least aligned with normative Christian standards. In her womanist defini-

62. Alice Walker, 'Without Commercials', pp. 55-58.

63. Gilkes, 'Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology'.

64. Alice Walker, 'Sunday School Circa 1950', in *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1973), p. 11.

tion, Walker's statement that a womanist was 'a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non sexually'⁶⁵ was difficult for many African American women who were still bound by societal standards or heteronormativity, and compulsory homophobia to accept.⁶⁶ What was rarely commented on was the fact that this statement is coupled with the statement that a womanist '(s)ometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually'. Taken together, these statements suggest a belief in human bisexuality as a basic norm – and Simcikova cites an interview with Justine and Michael Toms, in which Walker indicates she believes that:

people are naturally bisexual, as they are naturally bi-spiritual... You have a male and female spirit and you have a male and a female sexuality...because you have a male and female parent... This [Western] duality [of strict gender roles] that we are really burdened by...this need to be sure that every woman is locked into femininity and every man is locked into masculinity⁶⁷

Sensuality and praise of the body abounds in Walker's writing. In *The Temple of My Familiar*,⁶⁸ Walker writes of the desire that arises between Zede, Carlotta's mother and Arveyeda, the man who is her daughter's lover:

How long had it been building between them, she wondered. Since the first day, since meeting. She smelled the scent in his hair as he bent toward her hand. The spiciness of it, the odor of her village flowers. She'd taken back her hand and hidden it flaming. After all he was Carlotta's. Carlotta had found him... Her hand trembled as she touched his hair...kinky, firm, softly rough. Exactly the feel of raw silk. The only hair like this—pelo negro—in the world. Running her fingers through it tugging. Trying for the light resigned touch; trying to be la madre. Trying to be friends. Her womb contracted so sharply she nearly cried out.⁶⁹

Walker does not celebrate the social and sexual orderliness of Christian unions but has persisted in writing of socially tabooed transgressive sexual relationships. While the issue of incest and same-sex relationships in *The Color Purple* generated much discussion, illicit, inter-racial, intra-generational, bi-sexual and pan-sexual relationships of characters in her later more speculative fiction – *The Temple of My Familiar*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and *By the Light of My Father's*

65. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp. xi-xii.

66. Coleman, 'Must I Be Womanist?'; Irene Monroe, 'Response—Must I Be Womanist', in 'Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist?', in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.1 (April 2007), pp. 107-13.

67. Simcikova, *To Live Fully Here and Now*, pp. 43-44.

68. Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*.

69. Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, pp. 21-22.

Smile – are less discussed. Walker's writing in these novels suggests linkages between women's erotic freedom, social and cultural liberation, and sexual and spiritual redemption—all issues which Walker has explicitly coded in relationships that lie outside of society's approval.

Most of these socially transgressive relationships take place within worlds created by the author where the spiritual and the sexual are profoundly linked. The worlds may or may not be similar to our own, but in them, women are profoundly marked by race, gender, sexual identity, and the trauma that can accompany a violation of the woman's will or body. Walker's work suggests that the ability of women to love freely in spite of social rules and expectations serves as a profound signifier of individual women's ability to survive, thrive or self-actualize. Her use of transgressive sexuality stands as a metaphor for personal liberation—not only liberation of the self, within the family, but liberation that encourages woman to stand as a whole person within the world.

A fully enjoyed and satisfying sexuality is not only part of one's birthright but the gateway to the perception of the divine, a perception that is grounded in immanent *and* transcendent experience. Walker writes of Zede's union with Arveyeda—a union that is intergenerational, adulterous and with the partner of Zede's daughter:

Now it was as if she had a new body...Under his lips she felt the flowering of her shriveled womb and under his tongue her folded sex came alive. The hairs on her body stood like trees. In truth the light that she felt inside her in womb and heart now seemed to cover all of her; she felt herself dissolve into the light.⁷⁰

I do not believe that it is accidental that in so many of the deep love relationships of Walker's characters there is an element of transgressive sexuality. What may be most remarkable in *The Color Purple* is not the love between Celie and Shug, but the fact that a triangle emerges that is centered on an abusive man, his long-suffering wife-slave, and the artist-mistress that both of them love, and who loves and cares for both of them. What may be most unusual in *The Temple of My Familiar* is not the love affair between Arveyeda and Zede, but the deep love between Hal and Lissie that leads him to give up sex with her after he witnesses her pain in childbirth. And in spite of the fact that the very sensual Lissie is psychically and sexually partnered with Rafe, it is to Hal that her soul will return in rebirth.

70. Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, p. 23.

Conclusions

I believe that Walker's moral and ethical vision is grounded in real *and* idealized views. Her emphasis on women who are raped, silenced and broken, as well as on those who are empowered, transgressive and adulterous asks that we reframe our ethical conversations so that we holistically and historically consider the long trajectory of women's lives in patriarchal societies. Walker's work celebrates the temple and the 'jook joint'⁷¹ and the women whose lives pass between these two spaces — which sometimes merge. It demands that we reject dualistic notions of good girls and bad girls, virgins and whores, wives and mistresses, and defend the real lives of women who are seeking to find fulfilling sexuality, meaningful love, and to make a way out of no way for themselves and their children — by any means necessary. In Walker's real and alternative worlds, transgressive sexual relationships which are freely chosen by women are often linked to issues of human love and desire, women's sexual freedom, and the spiritual nature of the world and the body. Even when their enactment is marked by suffering, remorse and the search for forgiveness, these relationships are linked to women's healing, self-love, and authenticity.

As a midwife who worked with inner city women of color for over twenty years, I am deeply aware of the damage done to our bodies and psyches by racist and sexist imaginings that tell us, implicitly or explicitly, that our bodies are somehow flawed. As a health care provider who has worked with working-class, immigrant, and middle-class women, *who have chosen or who have been forced to be sexually active*, I also resonate with the damage done to women by the impossibility of conducting our lives between the straight lines and contracted spaces of religious imaginings that do not honor the fluidity of women's desires, the vulnerability of women's bodies and the complexity of our lives. In these complex times when the emotional, and physical health of black women is so precarious, I believe that Walker offers a framework that recognizes and honors the complexity of sexual desire, heart love, moral and ethical agency, and female autonomy. I find her vision even more necessary today than when her womanist definition was first published, for I believe it offers a holistic framework that integrates our personal, sexual, spiritual and cosmic selves while simultaneously foregrounding the needs of the earth and all sentient life upon her.

71. *Jook*, an African word meaning 'place of sin', i.e. fun and good times, eventually became 'juke' in America, with the introduction of the jukebox'. Walker, *The Same River Twice*, p. 55.

Like Saunders, I believe that it is imperative that we develop 'an implicit ethics of moral autonomy, liberation, sexuality and love'⁷² if we are to survive and thrive as whole and holy women. I believe that such an ethic is found in Walker's presentation and discussion of the body and sexuality, on the one hand, and in her articulation of a cosmology that holds the entire natural world in sentient grace and awareness, on the other. As black women, we are simultaneously members of a collective and individual creations of Spirit. Walker's work offers us a non-dualistic paradigm that places somatic emphasis on women's love rights, and personal and sexual autonomy while simultaneously demanding that we commit to and work for the betterment of the entire natural world: namely the plants, animals, rocks and other elements that we share this planet with.

In closing, I would like to consider a poem from the anthology *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*. In it, Walker describes herself as a woman who offers the reader the twin flowers of justice and hope.⁷³ While these themes are certainly strong motifs in all her work, I believe that the pagan bouquet she presents in her later novels is even more variegated. Her vision honors love, beauty, struggle and pain and celebrates our ability to transform the difficult. Walker has not simply ventured off the beaten track into an alternative world to pick flowers – she has suggested that we all live – here and now – in a natural world that honors our gifts, dares us to be authentic, and laughs, joys and sings aloud with us. In such a world, which has never broken its covenant to heal and sustain its children, women of all races – can finally seek the peace of their birthright in the Garden of Earth.

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72. Sanders, 'Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective', p. 129.

73. Walker, *Horses make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, p. 2.

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