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***Rethinking Indigenous Africana Sources
of Womanist-Feminist Activisms in the 21st Century***

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This keynote address for the 2012 Womanist Consultation with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Ghana offers an African diasporan perspective on an understudied approach to theorizing Africana women's activisms. In Africana cultures, the mother symbol has hermeneutical and epistemological relevance to the ethical project of community building and social transformation. The address explores the mother concept and its noble significations as an originary symbol that traverses many of the Indigenous African, Christian and Islamic religious heritages claiming the allegiance of Africana communities. Specifically, it offers a figurative exploration of the mother symbol that draws from the scholarship of African and African diaspora feminist/womanist scholars. Considered together, the works of thinkers such as Ifi Amadiume, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes resurrect from a transatlantic legacy of Africana women's kinship connections and responsibilities, buried virtues of relational life that all humans can strive to embody and enact. Mothering is interrogated, then, as a term whose semantic purview expands well beyond the literal to register the metaphorical and even the socio-ontological.

During the mid-1990s, I found myself developing a comprehensive bibliography on global womanist and feminist liberation theologies in preparation for one of my doctoral field exams. When I attempted to locate relevant texts and articles by Caribbean scholars, I was aghast to discover that there were no Caribbean womanist or feminist theological scholars to speak of, female or male. Even today, the theological literature generated by Caribbean female theological scholars remains sparse for several reasons. First, many of the theologically trained women are not professional scholars in the theological fields. For the most part, they are pastors, ministers and lay Christian women who devote the majority of their time to enriching the praxis and piety of their respective communities. Given the sources of which I am aware, I have not been able to identify a collective Caribbean feminist theology that seeks to reflect on the experiences and epistemic resources of women from such a diverse region.

With the 2011 publication of Sister Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth's edited volume, however, we have a model of exegetical and theological reflection that strikes the needed balance between critical scholarly analysis and congregational instruction.¹ The structure and tone of *Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story* position Caribbean Christian congregations at the center of each contributing essay, thereby resonating with the vocational legacy of female clergy and lay leaders across the region who embrace the ethics and principles of contextual liberation theologies. As the volume's abstract makes clear, "*Righting Her-Story*...is a Bible study book on women, which provides refreshing ways to read the Bible, enabling women and men to rediscover its richness and its ability to help them reflect

¹ Patricia Sheerattan-Basnauth, ed., *Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story* (Geneva: World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2011).

theologically on their faith and experience. It is envisioned as an instrument that will contribute to building the critical consciousness of women and men and in fostering women's leadership."²

Mirroring a number of projects launched by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle), and by individual scholars affiliated with African feminist theology, the significance of *Righting Her-Story* as a landmark intervention in the theological formation of Caribbean Christian communities cannot be overstated. African and African diaspora churches are, if nothing else, societies of women whose cultural worlds rarely intersect with even the most committed academic societies that have trained feminist and womanist theological scholars. Yet the attentive commitment to transforming congregational cultures into supportive environments for the health and well being of women and girls is, in my view, the signature achievement of womanist-feminist Africana theological scholarship. And although womanist theological scholars in the United States have not had the same degree of impact at the congregational and wider communal levels as their African and Caribbean sister scholars, in the last ten to fifteen years, we have observed the heavy concentration of female graduate students selecting practical theological and ethical fields over systematic theological training. This shift in expertise speaks volumes about their obligations to women in the pews and in our wider communities through scholarly, social and spiritual activism.³

² Abstract viewed at <http://www.wcrc.ch/node/573>, accessed June 27, 2012.

³ The recently launched three-year initiative (November 2012), "Squaring the Womanist Circle," perhaps signals a new chapter in womanist theological scholarly activism. Under the direction of Drs. Katie Cannon, Angela Simms, and Erica Kierulf, the initiative will explore with diverse womanist scholar-activists' and social service professionals' justice-seeking strategies that can address the complex concrete concerns of girls and women in the a multireligious world. The initiative began with a workshop, "Prophetically Moving Toward Womanist Possibilities," and will be sustained through its resultant Institute of Womanist Studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Virginia.

The resolve to produce what I am choosing to call *applied* theologies suitable for such women and their wider ecclesial and social communities anchors Africana feminist-womanist scholarship in the terrains where concrete experience and critical reflection overlap. As a result, the pedagogical, practical and prosocial theological platforms constructed by Circle and Purple⁴ theologians set the stage for a collective rethinking of indigenous Africana sources for womanist-feminist activism in the twenty-first century. The sort of rethinking that I have in mind is, indeed, already underway in the scholarship of thinkers like Musa Dube and Isabel Phiri.⁵ In advancing postcolonial contextual analysis beyond conventional limits they invite us to address more comprehensively and inclusively the full scope of anthropological poverty in the lives of Africana women and girls wherever we find ourselves in the world.⁶ They also require us to rethink the negotiations at play in women's and men's assertions and contestations of agency, power and authority at all levels of social interaction.⁷ Significant discursive and conceptual shifts introduced by these scholars rest upon at least three prominent and intersecting strategies:

⁴ "Purple" is invoked here metonymically to convey all that the concept womanist has encoded for African American theologians who designate their scholarship and theological locations as such.

⁵ See, for example, Isabel Phiri's essay, "A Gender-based Analysis of the Testimonies of Female Traditional Healers in KwaZulu-Natal," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 113-130; Musa Dube, "Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention," in *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 131-156.

⁶ Engelbert Mveng, "Third World Theology—What Theology? What Third World? Evaluation by an African Delegate," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 220; "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 154-165.

⁷ Feminist scholars studying women, gender, and power across diverse religious communities are increasingly sensitive to theorizing agency more flexibly than in the past. See, for example, R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

(1) abandoning the dualistic framing of human experience; (2) de-centering Western essentialist epistemological paradigms; and (3) identifying resources within indigenous African religious cultures that protect the dignity and holistic wellness of women and girls.

Taking these strategies into account, I wish to offer a reflection upon seminal insights of Africana thinkers whose scholarship holds tremendous promise as methodological templates, case studies and heuristic exercises, for feminist-womanist theological and religious studies research. I want to proceed by placing secular and theological studies scholars in conversation around the central place that *mothering* holds across Africana communities. Mothering is interrogated here as a term whose semantic purview expands well beyond the literal to register the metaphorical and even the ontological. Mothering, or what Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí calls “motherly” and Ifi Amadiume calls “matricentricity” is an advisable tradition to interrogate because it introduces at once the vexing effort required to apprehend the purchase and perils associated with the loaded concept of “motherhood.” African feminists, from Buchi Emecheta to Mercy Oduyoye to Nyambura Njoroge have brought under scrutiny the suppressive social stigmas attached to women who are not biological mothers in Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Kenyan societies.⁸ Without losing sight of the collective African feminist critique of biological motherhood as ideal womanhood, I ponder whether critical and inclusive reflections upon the symbol of motherhood might provide opportunities to engage in the ethical and aesthetic scrutiny

⁸ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space,” in Letty M Russell, Margaret A Farley, and Serene Jones, *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, eds. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105-122; Nyambura J. Njoroge, “Let’s celebrate the Power of Naming,” in *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 59-74.

of a central womanist-feminist trajectory in Africana thought and some of the foundational ideals upon which it rests.

The increasing move among scholars to distance Africana feminist-womanist theory and theology from dualistic frameworks reinforces the fact that human societies seem incapable of producing panacea solutions for its ailments. Thus, my interest in mothering seeks no companionship in romantic appeals to a harmonious essence at the core of African cultural life. Rather, mothering or the absence of mothering is a fact of human existence and relational life. It is true that some women and all men are not biological mothers; however, we all have biological mothers. And many in the human family have experienced the prosocial effects of mothering, if even provided by someone other than our biological mothers. The mother symbol has hermeneutical and epistemological relevance to the project of eradicating anthropological poverty in the global Africana community without sacrificing the health and fulfillment of girls and women. In other words, the mother symbol registers entire fields of meaning that address disequilibrium and dysfunction in private and public life.⁹ I also work with the mother concept and its noble significations because it is a cognate originary symbol that traverses diverse religious and spiritual heritages claiming the allegiance of Africana women. Specifically, it introduces a semantic environment for thematizing an orientational¹⁰ element in African religious cultures that counters dehumanizing and debilitating lifeways.

⁹ Ifi Amadiume's collection of essays *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London, New York: Zed Books, 1997) are suggestive in this direction.

¹⁰ Charles Long's phenomenological approach to defining religion as "orientation" is most influential here. See his collection of essays, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

In the past, Africana liberation/contextual theologians were prone to frame their discussions through dualistic paradigms such as “gospel and culture” or “religion and culture.” In such discourses, the symbols of Euro-Western Christianity register sacred experience, that is, “the gospel” and “religion” while indigenous African religiosity tends to be collapsed under the contrasting and profane category of “culture.” This conceptual schema has the discursive impact of extricating the gospel and Euro-Western Christianity from their flawed cultural contexts and construing their significations as divine revelation, indeed, shrouding them with an “aura of facticity”¹¹ untainted by the imperfections of human culture. These polarizing classifications likewise lend much credence to the assumption that African cultures lack spiritual virtue and are, therefore, innately corrupt. In some of the most compelling internal theological criticisms of sexism and patriarchy in African cultures, for example, one can observe a dichotomy between African culture—often interrogated as the source of women’s and girls’ social oppression—and Christianity—often accessed as the source of solutions and the will to overcome women’s and girl’s dehumanizing cultural dilemmas.

African feminist theoretical treatments of mothering and other female-inclusive concepts make the case for locating solutions to African female dilemmas first and foremost in indigenous African spirituality and cultural values. If there is one thing that we have learned after twenty-three years of the Circle’s existence it is that African women (as most people) are socialized to take their cultures seriously; they do not easily abandon what they perceive to be cultural sources of instruction and authority. And, in fact, where the Bible offers parallel examples of cultural norms and practices, Christian women can develop a more entrenched commitment to customs

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: BasicBooks, 1973).

that compromise their quality of life.¹² It is appropriate and expected for African feminist Christian theologians to adduce Christian and biblical principles to support their campaigns against harmful customs. But, is this approach sufficient to ensure the substantive transformation desired for the health and vitality of African girls and women? I suspect that the effective application of African feminist cultural hermeneutics¹³ would be strengthened significantly if its proponents begin to incorporate an additional hermeneutical strategy of locating the principal justifications for abandoning harmful customs in the very indigenous culture(s) under discussion *before* accessing complementary biblical or Christian imperatives. The discursive and psycho-social power in such a strategy for supplanting harmful ideologies with affirming cultural values is relevant not just for African contexts but also for the African diaspora, which, in many respects, perpetually seeks to reattach its severed navel string to its ancestral source.

As observed in Musa Dube's reliance on Akan symbolic thought to deduce a principle of community,¹⁴ African feminist thinkers will enrich the theoretical and theological resources for women of the African diaspora who envision their liberation to involve accessing transcontextual indigenous African spiritual grammars and cultural resources that sustain the worth of women and girls. This is especially true for women of the Caribbean and Latin America who adhere to African heritage religious traditions like Yoruba-based Orisa, Ifa, Santería, Lucumí, and Candomblé; Evhe/Dahomean-based Vodou; Kongo-based Palo and Kumina; and Akan-based Winti and Akan-Akom traditions.

¹² Musimbi Rachel Angogo Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Musa Dube, "Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together," 133; 151-53.

As a conversation starter, my figurative exploration of the mother symbol draws from African and African diaspora scholars who resurrect from a transatlantic legacy of Africana women's kinship connections and responsibilities, buried virtues of relational life. These virtues begin, according to Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume, with the matricentric or mothering unit of production in African households and encompass a vision of community in opposition to social and religious customs that promote female dehumanization, suffering, subordination, dependence, negative difference, and confinement. To explore more concretely what matricentric ethics might entail in local contexts, I also offer some reflection on relevant motifs in the experiences and activism of Africana women in the public domain.

I find Ifi Amadiume's matricentric theory distinct and compelling because of her decided constructive commitment to uncovering what Jeffrey Stout would call "enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct"¹⁵ in indigenous Igbo Nnobi culture that guide social health, justice, wellness and thriving. Though she employs a questionable dualistic framework to delineate matriarchy and patriarchy in Nnobi Igbo society, I am more interested in her contributions to what can be called a constructive social ethics informed by the matricentric unit in Nnobi society and its counterparts in other African societies. According to Amadiume:

...the *mkpuka* structure, a...mother-focused social category...occupied a distinct space in the form of a self-contained compound of mother and children. It had an economic base, since it produced for itself. It was a production and consumption unit of those who ate from one pot or plate. This unit also had an ideological base as it was bound in the spirit of common motherhood in the ideology and ritual of *umunne*—children of one mother—with its strong moral and spiritual force, binding members in love, care, compassion, peace and respect, forbidding incest and bloodshed within the group. In the *umunne* ritual, the focus of worship and

¹⁵ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

spirituality was a successive line of mothers to whom an *okwu*, an altar or shrine, was built inside a woman's kitchen or bedroom.¹⁶

Amadiume's framing of gender ideologies, matricentricity and the social and sacred positionings of mothers in Nnobi and other African societies is echoed in the groundbreaking research of another Nigerian scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí. Oyěwùmí's central scholarly project focuses upon old Oyo-Yoruba society. She begins with a thorough linguistic analysis of gender-neutral Yoruba concepts, and a sociological analysis of Oyo-Yoruba institutions that were assumed to indicate gender exclusivity, particularity, or gender-based distributions of power in studies conducted by Western trained scholars. In the end, she discovers that the very concept of gender as a principle of social organization was absent in pre-colonial Oyo society and titles her resultant publication, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.

Oyěwùmí argues, in fact, that there was no such concept of "woman" or "man" in pre-colonial Oyo. Instead the concepts of *obinrin* and *okunrin* should be properly translated as anatomical female or anafemale and anatomical male or anamale, respectively. Even terms such as *omobinrin* and *omokunrin* that have been sloppily translated as "girl" and "boy" should be re-translated appropriately as "child, anatomical female" in the case of *omobinrin* and "child, anatomical male" in the case of *omokunrin*. Both terms, she contends, "show that what is privileged socially is the youth of the child and not its anatomy."¹⁷ Oyěwùmí further explains:

The word *obinrin* does not derive etymologically from *okunrin* as "wo-man" does from "man." *Rin* the common suffix of *okunrin* and *obinrin*, suggests a common

¹⁶ Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa*, 147-48.

¹⁷ Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 40-41.

humanity... There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured... It has been well documented that in the West, women/females are the Other, being defined in the antithesis to men/males, who represent the norm... In the Yoruba conception, *okunrin* is not posited as the norm, the essence of humanity, against which *obinrin* is the Other. Nor is *okunrin* a category of privilege. *Obinrin* is not ranked in relation to *okunrin*; it does not have negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness, and above all, it does not in and of itself constitute any social ranking.¹⁸

Oyèwùmí's research on Oyo-Yoruba social organization, in terms of marriage, labor, governance and religion, leads her to conclude that "the primary social and political unit in Oyo-Yoruba towns was the *agbo ile*—a compound housing the group of people who claimed a common descent from a founding ancestor." In these lineages and in the wider networks of human interactions:

Social hierarchy was determined by social relations.... [H]ow persons were situated in relationships shifted depending on those involved and the particular situation. The principle that determined social organization was seniority, which was based on chronological age. Yoruba kinship terms did not denote gender, and other non familial social categories were not gender-specific either. What these Yoruba categories tell us is that the body is not always in view and on view for categorization. The classic example is the female who played the roles of *oba* (ruler), *omo* (offspring), *oko*, *aya*, *iya* (mother), and *alawo* (diviner-priest) all in one body. None of these kinship and nonkinship social categories [is] gender-specific. One cannot place persons in the Yoruba categories just by looking at them. What they are heard to say may be the most important cue. Seniority as the

¹⁸ Ibid., 33. This critical dimension of Oyèwùmí's argument is especially worthy of extensive comparative study involving other indigenous African societies and substantive reflection in many Africana ecclesial contexts where the dominion of man over woman is claimed and celebrated as the biblically revealed divine order of creation. The hierarchical and asymmetrical relationship between males and females in the Christian family is further enshrined in the social roles attributed to husbands and wives based upon anatomically-derived understandings of essential masculinity and essential femininity. However, Oyèwùmí offers a totally different portrait of husbands, wives and marriage in pre-colonial Oyo Yoruba society. "Marriage was essentially a relationship between lineages." When anamales and anafemales married, though it was customary among the common citizenry that the anafemale would move to her spouse's lineage compound, she did not lose her seniority or insider rights within her own patrilineage or matrilineage. Additionally, anamales and anafemales maintained vital connections, responsibilities and rights within their birth lineages, even after marriage. See Ibid., 55-56.

foundation of Yoruba social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body.¹⁹

Let me clarify that I am not attempting to uphold an idyllic picture of pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba anafemales as untouched by any form of social oppression. In fact, I do not believe that this is Oyèwùmí's intention in contesting the relevance of gender as a definitive socially meaningful category in pre-colonial Oyo society. What I want to emphasize from Oyèwùmí's research is how, in deploying language-sensitive transdisciplinary methods, she, like Amadiume, is able to produce new knowledge about the dynamic, divergent and overlapping social locations occupied by sisters, daughters, female spouses and mothers in pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba society.

In place of approaching Oyo-Yoruba society as a static space of human retrogression, Oyèwùmí undertakes linguistic analysis to develop a sociology of knowledge that explains indigenous Oyo approaches to social organization. In so doing, she discovers that social organization revolved not principally around gender but around seniority, which encompassed age, the time of entrance into a family lineage and the manner of entrance into a family lineage. When anafemales were oppressed or disadvantaged in pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba culture they were not oppressed essentially as a gendered group across time and circumstance; they would have experienced both privilege and lack of privilege, power and disempowerment based upon shifting social positioning in particular circumstances over their lifespan. After decades of Western feminarchy it might be impossible for some to consider seriously the claim that Oyo society, prior to the colonial period, did not necessarily present operational structures of gender polarity and inequity as commonly assumed by Western trained feminists. However, this is

¹⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

exactly the kind of postcolonial step Africana womanist-feminist scholars must be willing to take if we hope to envision new possibilities for relational life across our global communities.²⁰

Oyèwùmí's work places a check upon the wanton authority of Western feminist and Christian assumptions about gender as a universal and divinely ordained category of prominent social meaning for all people and all cultures across time. In demonstrating a fundamental difference between Western and Oyo-Yoruba societies on the question of gender and social power she shows how a specific Western "biologic"²¹ that confines human beings to particular stations and ranks in a social hierarchy based upon their anatomical and phenotypic features had no precise analogue in pre-colonial Oyo-Yorubaland. Thus, she situates the logic of "body-

²⁰ My comments here are simultaneously directed toward a wider scholarly community of resistance to Oyèwùmí's project. Indeed, her research has generated some contention in African and gender studies circles. Based upon what I have read, the Yoruba feminist philosopher, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, has launched the most substantive scholarly argument against some of her foundational claims. Although, an engagement of Bakare-Yusuf's position is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that some of her points about the limitations of Oyèwùmí's static etymological interpretive strategies might hold up under further scrutiny of Oyèwùmí's project. I also find Bakare-Yusuf's argument about seniority and power a crucial one that warrants attention in contemporary African women's and gender studies. She maintains that power operates across multiple valences, and thus, seniority, as a foundational Yoruba or African social category, is not above criticism when it comes to studies of women's experience and social power. With this in mind, it is important to point out that Oyèwùmí does not present a romanticized discussion of Oyo-Yoruba seniority traditions, nor does she suggest that they are above reproach, as implied by Bakare-Yusuf. However, I would agree with Bakare-Yusuf that Oyèwùmí's treatment of power could benefit from more extensive intersectional analysis. For example, her under-theorization of seniority, as a structure of power, leaves unaddressed at least one key concern: the manner in which the privileging of seniority in regulating social relations shapes marriage and household arrangements such that anafemales (and *not* anamales) often find themselves occupying outsider/ newcomer status—that is, a low stratum in seniority—vis-à-vis their integration into the spousal familial structure and household. I still think Oyèwùmí would argue, in defense of her larger philosophical and socio-linguistic point, that this social arrangement, while depriving anafemales of privilege, does not do so as a result of gender bias but on the basis of another logic altogether concerning understandings of age, experience, lineage and belonging. See Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "Yorubas Don't Do Gender": A Critical Review of Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*," in *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*, ed. Signe Arnfred et al., (Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), 2004), 61-81.

²¹ Ibid., ix.

reasoning,' the assumption that biology determines social position,'²² within the local confines of Western culture and social experience.

In her edited volume, *African Women & Feminism*, Oyěwùmí goes on to offer an analysis of the mother symbol through her concept of “motherly,” which complements Amadiume’s discussion of the matricentric unit as an ethical space of care, love and support for life in relation. Calling motherly an “African communitarian ideology and ideal,” Oyěwùmí, explores the virtue of “motherly” through the Yoruba concept of *omoya*, which means “my mother’s child or children” when translated into English. According to Oyěwùmí:

The category of *omoya* transcends gender; sometimes it is used to refer to an individual, but what it encapsulates is the collectivity. It functions to locate the individual within a socially recognized grouping and underscores the significance of mother-child ties in delineating and anchoring a child’s place in the family. These relationships are primary and privileged, and it is understood that they should be protected above others. *Omoya* is the primary category in the sense that it is the first and fundamental source of identification for the child in the household.... Symbolically, *omoya* emblemizes unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity and loyalty.²³

Extending her discourse to encompass the traditions of African diasporic women in the Americas and the Caribbean, Oyěwùmí also explores motherly as a wider African ideal. First she acknowledges that mothering does not necessarily imply a biological relationship to those being mothered, as patterns of co-mothering have been engaged and celebrated across Africa and the diaspora. She specifically notes Patricia Hill Collins’ documentation of “othermothers” in U.S. African American communities and *macomère* traditions in Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Haiti which “[encapsulate] a particular kind of relationship amongst women that is founded on trust

²² Ibid., 17.

²³ Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 12.

and an expectation of mutual support—material and otherwise—particularly with regard to the raising of children.”²⁴ As a woman with no biological children of my own, I felt the power of my motherhood when I read the card that my Haitian godson’s mother presented to me on the occasion of his christening. “Dianne,” she wrote:

This is one of those times that I am so grateful to have access to a language other than English. ‘Thank you’ is insufficient to express how we feel, but so is ‘godmother.’ The word ‘macomère’ is used throughout the French Caribbean to mean ‘my child’s godmother,’ ‘close female confidante,’ or ‘the woman who, by virtue of the depth of her friendship, has rights and privileges over my child and is a surrogate mother.’ This name/title seems even more appropriate for you because it so clearly expresses the intimate relations which women share; it is firmly gendered; and it honors the importance of friendship in relation to marriage and family life. So, Macomère, thank you!

Matricentric, motherhood, othermother, and macomère traditions can be observed across African diaspora institutions—from kinship to spiritual structures—and form the basis for how many activists have engaged public spaces and contributed to socio-political transformation. For example, we have today a greater appreciation for the power and prestige of sanctified church mothers in U.S. African American Pentecostal traditions due to the research of scholars like Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Anthea Butler, Cheryl Sanders, and Diedre Crumbley.²⁵ Collectively,

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007); Deidre Helen Crumbley, *Saved and Sanctified: the Rise of a Storefront Church in Great Migration Philadelphia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Cheryl 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). Cheryl Sanders does not engage the subject of motherhood/matricentricity as directly as the Gilkes, Butler and Crumbley. However, she does describe a practice of “peculiar egalitarianism” in the Sanctified Church as women (mothers) and men are respectively assigned “gatekeeping roles” over “ecstatic expression” and static structure.” See her *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63. Also see Clarence Hardy’s monumental essay, “Fauset’s (Missing) Pentecostals: Church Mothers, Remaking Respectability and Religious Modernism,” in *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, eds. Edward E Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 15-30.

they frame their treatment of these sacred pillars of motherhood with African feminist-womanist theories that acknowledge a range of upwardly mobile options their activism has opened up for women and girls, and link the veneration of church mothers and their arenas of authority to African continental heritages. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes states it this way:

These varieties of shared power or of access to authority reflect the range of positions church mothers occupy. The similarities in organization of church mothers to West African social organization range from clearly articulated and established dual-sex political systems to fragments of familyhood, which modify the otherwise rigid lines of authority within episcopal style church hierarchies. These African overtones in social organization exist alongside of and in spite of a dominant cultural tradition of European sex-role organization and church politics.²⁶

Rosetta Ross's ethical study of Black women's activism during the U.S. civil rights movement also calls our attention to how the African American Nation of Islam (NOI) owes its survival to the motherhood strategies of its first Muslim female member, Mrs. Clara Muhammad. As the wife of the NOI's founder, Elijah Muhammad, Clara was the 'Mother of the Nation,' not just nominally, but especially in deed. She led the NOI; developed the institution's educational and economic infrastructure; and cultivated an ethos of holistic nurturance for her fledgling community in its infancy period. Her authority and institutional vision were indispensable during an era marked by incessant U.S. government surveillance and imprisonment of its founder and other male members who refused to register for the military draft due to religious and political convictions. Ross actually expands Gilkes' matricentric theory to explore the activism of Muslim mothers like Clara Muhammad, noting how Muhammad's letters and testimony from the 1960s "[depict] her sense of responsibility to try to meet" her family's material needs "in a manner

²⁶ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 72-73.

similar to practices Cheryl Townsend Gilkes describes in Christian ‘church and community mothers.’²⁷

Parallel matricentric traditions and spiritual mothers figure prominently across a variety of Caribbean religious cultures as well. In traditions akin to some African indigenous churches, Spiritual Baptist and Revival Zion Mothers embody motherhood as dreamers and healers who channel divine power in the holistic health services and spiritual mentorship provided to those under their charge. Furthermore, the African heritage religious traditions such as Kumina in Jamaica, Vodou in Haiti, Candomblé in Brazil, and Orisa in Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States also sustain matricentric spiritual networks that place women in leadership roles as knowledge bearers and knowledge producers for communal edification. Societies of Iyalorisa (or Mothers of the Orisa) across Candomblé in Brazil, Orisa in Trinidad, and Lucumí or Yoruba in Cuba provide motherly care for their spiritual children. The late Iya Melvina Rodney of Trinidad, for example, claimed responsibility for hundreds of spiritual godchildren, whom she initiated into the Orisa religion and who regularly sought her counsel and ritual expertise up until the time of her passing in 2008 at the age of ninety-three.

It is important to understand that in these African-inspired Caribbean religious cultures, the title of mother invokes the figurative significations of motherhood to indicate a position of high rank and responsibility as an initiated or ordained priest and/or unusually gifted custodians of divine revelation. With the bulk of its civil rights movement for religious freedom behind it, since the last decades of the twentieth century, Trinidad’s society of Iyalorisa has been able to

²⁷ Rosetta Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 159. Also see her reference to Gilkes’ matricentric theory vis-à-vis community workers on 162.

institutionalize its matricentric activist traditions in multiple arenas, including the natural world and the public square. Some of the Orisa tradition's most influential and empowering projects were launched by Iyalorisa, including the accredited Osun Abiadama School in the capital city, Port of Spain, which enrolls a diverse student body from varied religious and cultural backgrounds. The Abiadama School was founded with the mission of providing an excellent and progressive academic setting for primary and junior high school education. The school is not restricted to members of the Orisa tradition; however, parents are informed of the curricular emphasis upon African heritage and specifically Orisa theological and philosophical principles.²⁸ The school is one arm of the wider Abiadama Center for Lifelong Learning where adult and expanded community programs are held. The vision for such a center first came into view years earlier when its founder, Iyalorisa Sangowunmi joined her first Yoruba shrine in central

²⁸ For example, students are taught the following "essential tenets of the Orisa Nago belief system:"

Olodumare created and controls the universe and all that is contained therein;

The Yoruba believe that there are forces of nature (or parts of God) who deal with the affairs of people on earth, and the governing of the universe in general;

the Yoruba believe that the spirit of humans lives on after death and can reincarnate back into the world of humanity;

The Yoruba believe that ancestral spirits must be remembered and honored, and consulted by the living;

The Yoruba believe in divination;

The Yoruba believe in the use of offerings and blood sacrifices to elevate their prayers to the Orisa and their ancestors;

The Yoruba believe in magic (The transformation of prayers and offerings to action);

The Yoruba believe in magical and medicinal use of herbs;

The Yoruba believe that humanity communes with God through the vehicle of trance-possession;

The Yoruba believe that ritual song and dance are mandatory in the worship of God.

Sangowunmi cites these tenets from Gary Edwards and John Mason, *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World* (Brooklyn: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985).

Trinidad. She soon experienced disillusionment due to the culture of impoverishment that engulfed many of its members and visitors. Iya Sangowunmi became determined to change the image of the Orisa shrine from a place people believed they could “creep into in the night if they wanted something done but... would pass it straight in the day.” Her first project was to sponsor evening math, English, and reading comprehension classes for young people in the community between the ages of eleven and nineteen, given that many of the children in the community “couldn’t read and write.” When she observed that most students could not handle the work, she introduced drama and performance into the curriculum to foster self-expression, innovation, and self-discovery. Sangowunmi concluded that it was incumbent upon the shrine to address this need and to provide a service to the community at large beyond the confines of the Orisa yard.²⁹

The second major endeavor Sangowunmi undertook was the establishment of Oya Day, which came about after Oya (a female Orisa associated with wind, the cemetery, and transformation) manifested during a ritual ceremony and asked Sangowunmi directly what she was “going to do for her [Oya].” When Sangowunmi confessed that she was confused by the question because she had just presented Oya with offerings, Oya instructed her to go and think about her question, and not in terms of the customary practice of ebo (offering), but in some other sense. Sangowunmi eventually instituted a day of ritual and cultural celebration in honor of Oya.³⁰

The last major project Sangowunmi developed was a seminar series where speakers were invited to give informational lectures on subjects related to African cultures, politics, histories

²⁹ Iyalode Sangowunmi, aka Patricia McLeod, personal interview with author, May 2, 2001, Woodbrook, Trinidad and Tobago.

³⁰ Ibid.

and religions as well as local history of African presence in Trinidad and the wider African diaspora. She also sponsored sessions on life management skills covering themes such as, securing economic stability, and cultivating industries that provide satisfaction and self-sufficiency. Her reasoning for developing this latter agenda was to suggest an alternative model for engaging the Orisa. Sangowunmi witnessed far too many persons who approached the Orisa only out of sheer desperation with the hope that they would perform some miracles that would transform their lives. Sangowunmi, however, lives by the principle that “God only does for you what God can do through you.” Moreover, based upon what she saw, she concluded that “many times [God] couldn’t do anything through them because they would just be waiting.” Through these and a host of other initiatives now sponsored by her own shrine, Ile Eko Sango/Osun Mil’Osa (IESOM), Sangowunmi has practiced a corrective and applied theology that identifies divine intervention within human efforts to achieve success in all areas of life and to overcome hardship and oppression.³¹

In the domain of public health and wellness, other Iyalorisa are contributing to wide-scale efforts to curtail the spread of HIV and AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago. In a poignant documentary aimed at transforming the nation’s cultural approach to HIV and AIDS, Iyalorisa Aina Olukayode appeals to the female deity Osun as a model for developing a responsible sexual ethic. “[S]ex and sexuality and sensuousness in the Orisa paradigm is a blessing,” she remarks:

It’s a positive thing. It is the way that we procreate; it makes it pleasurable. It is to be respected, it’s sacred; it’s God-given, and it’s to be honored. Osun, the deity that is the embodiment of sensuousness and sensuality—Osun is also discipline...Osun has her own rules, her own regulations. Osun is the embodiment of...equality for women. Osun is not just about her body, it’s not just about your

³¹ Ibid.

body; it's about thinking and using your head well. Osun was able to not just use her sensuality, but use her brain to work out how things could be in balance for women as well. Just as how now we have as a society, especially the Afrocentric society, the African community, the community of people of African descent, we have to figure out how to work against this onslaught of HIV..., and the way to do that is to show our young people through the example of Osun that your body is sacred, your body is a beautiful vessel. Sex is a sacred, joyous, beautiful thing when it's done according to the rules and regulations for good living.³²

As the title of the film suggests: Iya Aina is “coming home” and “fighting AIDS with culture” by locating solutions to this daunting health crisis within her Yoruba-Orisa religious culture. Iya Aina's approach to arresting the spread of HIV and AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago provides a Caribbean response to Musa Dube's “explor[ation] of how [African Indigenous Religions] AIR/s can respond to the HIV & AIDS challenge and become part of the healing process.”³³

There are countless African continental analogues to the Caribbean and U.S. African American matricentric traditions in our twenty-first-century world. The documentary film *Africa Rising*³⁴ is one example of a powerful complement to *Coming Home...Fighting AIDS with Culture* in that it follows what I would call the feminist-womanist activisms of local women and men who deploy culturally sensitive educational and economic programs in their efforts to eradicate female genital cutting practices across communities in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal.

³² Aina Olukayode (Orisa Priestess) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaXu2E_roW4, accessed July 5, 2012.

³³ Musa Dube, “*Adinkra!* Four Hearts Joined Together,” 133.

³⁴ Paula Heredia et al., *Africa Rising: The Grassroots Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation* (New York: Women Make Movies, 2009). Though I do not support activists external to cultural contexts where female genital cutting (FGC) is practiced using the language of “mutilation” as a blanket term to classify the range of procedures associated with FGC, *Africa Rising* is an outstanding documentary that depicts African women and men at the forefront of the struggle to educate, empower and transform African communities and families affected by FGC.

The internationally acclaimed advocacy of Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee also resonates with Africana matricentric and motherhood traditions. This 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner asserted her motherhood as the leader and symbol of Liberian women united across diverse ethnic and religious boundaries, and she testifies now that it all began literally with a dream she had about organized resistance, which she intended to hand over to an honorable Christian woman whose presence was unmistakable in the local church. Once it became clear that her co-activists had appointed her to lead the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Network, she realized that she had to muster the resources and vision from somewhere to rise to the occasion. At the root of Gbowee's success in helping to bring Liberia's civil war to a close were indigenous matricentric strategies powerful enough to effect concrete change in the society at large. The 2003 position paper, which she delivered before the then president, Charles Taylor, epitomizes those principles of motherhood that the Liberian Women's Peace Network embodied at every stage of protest and persuasion:

“We ask the honorable Pro Tem of the senate, being a woman, and being in line with our cause, to kindly present this statement to His Excellency, Dr. Charles Taylor. With this message: that the women of Liberia, including the IDPs, we are tired of war, we are tired of running, we are tired of begging for bulgur, wheat we are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand to secure the future of our children because we believe, as custodians of society, our children will ask us “Mama what was your role during the crisis?” Kindly convey this to the president of Liberia, Thank you.”³⁵

When the Peace Network traveled to Ghana (2003) to ensure a productive outcome to agreed-upon peace talks between Charles Taylor and Liberian rebel leaders, Gbowee, who had

³⁵ Ken Diego et al., *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* [videorecording] / producers, Gail Ablow [et al.]; directed by Ken Diego; written by Bill Moyers, Michael Winship; a production of Public Affairs Television, Inc.; a presentation of Thirteen/WNET New York. (Hamilton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2009). Transcript cited from <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06192009/transcript1.html>, accessed July 5, 2012.

read about the activist strategies deployed by other African women throughout history, resorted to the tactic of stripping naked to avoid arrest and incarceration and to impose her organization's will upon the men seated around the negotiation table. Gbowee's strategy worked when confronted by Ghanaian arresting officers in part because she relied on the transcontextual African understanding that, in the words of her comrade Etweda Cooper, "It's a curse in Africa to see the naked body of your mother, especially if she does it deliberately."³⁶ Reflecting upon these key turning points in the movement and her wider activism Gbowee told Lynn Sherr during a 2009 interview: "We believe as mothers we are the ones who will change everything."³⁷ Although it is clear that Gbowee mobilized Christian and Muslim women toward direct action against the civil unrest that shredded Liberia's fabric of social stability, I would argue that their silent cultural partner in such a momentous struggle was a spiritual grammar and ethic rooted in a local Liberian as well as a shared Pan-African matricentric heritage and transcultural value system.

The power of mothers and the value that females are accorded as a result of their biological motherly potential should not quarantine our hopes for the matricentric potential in all humans. Whether childless women, fathers, childless men or children, I am suggesting that all members of the human family can become *socio-ontological* mothers! Motherhood, as a socio-ontological category, is a mode of being that takes instruction from concrete and material experiences of motherhood (actual mothers), but socio-ontologically is extended to other women,

³⁶ Etweda "Sugars" Cooper, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06192009/transcript1.html>, accessed July 5, 2012. Cooper is Secretary General of the Liberian Women's Initiative, which was founded in 1994.

³⁷ Ibid.

men and children³⁸ in diverse circumstances involving religion and the arts, social organization and governance as well as education and initiation. Motherhood is a title, rank and status in its own right; but it introduces a repertoire of ideals, values and expectations that all human beings can and should be educated to internalize.

Amadiume and Oyěwù mí remind us that while “female reproduction is a human universal, the meanings attached to motherhood are diverse across cultures” and philosophical traditions. Although there is overwhelming evidence that “Western accounts of motherhood reduce it to a gender category,” African approaches to motherhood emerge from complex semiotic and philosophical world-senses that privilege relational life and the power of creative force in the universe. In the Yoruba context, Oyěwù mí specifies the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of creative power, identifying mothers as artisans who participate in the creation of human beings with the deity Obatala. She embraces the research of Yoruba art historian Babatunde Lawal who acknowledges that “some...translate *iya*, the Yoruba word for mother, as someone from whom another life is fashioned or the body from which we are created.”³⁹ Oyěwù mí goes further in etymologically identifying the root verb *ya*, which means “to draw, to carve, or to fashion,”⁴⁰ and she analyzes Yoruba artistic figures of the mother that reinforce a tradition of placing mothers at the center of not just procreation but also pre-earthly creation in

³⁸ Children can be taught motherhood ethics from an early age. In the language of Alice Walker, they can be encouraged to act and be “womanish” in the matricentric sense of the term. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1983), xi-xii.

³⁹ Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwù mí, “Beyond Gendercentric Models: Restoring Motherhood to Yoruba Discourses of Art and Aesthetics,” in *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities*, ed. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwù mí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 232.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

Yoruba cosmology and creation theology.⁴¹ The *socio-ontological mother*, then, is a quality of being that does overlap biological motherhood in some cases but in no way is reducible to biological motherhood. In continuity with James Cone's Christian formulation of ontological blackness,⁴² socio-ontological motherhood invites all humanity to *be* in accordance with the principles of motherhood.

Notwithstanding the criticisms that a feminist scholar like Bibi Bakare-Yusuf raises about Amadiume and Oyěwùmí's scholarship,⁴³ I find merit in the insights these and other thinkers contribute to a wider Africana feminist-womanist conversation. Beyond their deconstructive work, Oyěwùmí, Amadiume and Dube have provided constructive theoretical and ideological⁴⁴ interpretations of African cultures. How might their scholarship support our efforts to advance the theoretical and practical arms of African women's and gender studies research? First, the material explored here indicates that we have in indigenous African cultures the epistemological premise and philosophical foundation to generate ideal virtues of motherhood/matricentricity. These ideals can be placed in dialogue with complementary ideals from Christian, Muslim, Rastafari, Neo-Kemetism, Hebraic, and other religious cultures, where Africana women are

⁴¹ Ibid., 234.

⁴² See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977 (1970)), 7-9. Also see endnote #5 on page 204 where Cone remarks: "The reader should take note of two characteristics of the definition of blackness. First, blackness is a *physiological* trait. It refers to a particular black-skinned people in America, a victim of white racist brutality. The scars of its members bear witness to the inhumanity committed against them.... [No American theology can even tend in the direction of Christian theology without coming to terms with the black-skinned people of America. Secondly, blackness is an *ontological* symbol for all those who participate in liberation from oppression. This is the universal note in black theology. It believes that all human beings were created for freedom...." Also see James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997 (1975)), 222.

⁴³ See note #20. Also see Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence," agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_feature_article_1.pdf, accessed June 20, 2012.

⁴⁴ My use of "ideological" is intentional suggesting both innocuous aspects of ideational expression and the partiality associated with biased and narrow-minded aspects of ideational expression and rhetoric.

stakeholders, with the ethical aim of challenging sexist structures and customs in our present communities, and clearing the way for the birthing of new matricentric stories and life paths.

My concern here is not whether Africana mothers, families, communities, and societies have been able to bring their practices and daily habits into perfect alignment with ideal matricentric traditions. I consider the principles and ideals associated with motherhood differently than those associated with other well-known traditions that are accorded extensive scholarly treatment despite their imperfect application in practical socio-political contexts across Western societies. In this sense, matricentric traditions are like democratic traditions; they reflect cherished virtues that establish ideal standards for human social behavior and institutional governance. Most important, such ideals and virtues remain vulnerable to human breaches and disregard and are constantly eroded throughout human interactions. It is no secret that citizens of Western societies like the United States and the United Kingdom, who idealize democratic traditions within their national mythologies, violate those very traditions as much as they claim to uphold them. Yet those charged with honoring, enforcing and theorizing democracy in the West often exhibit tremendous patience with human frailties as well as hope in the human potential to approximate the democratic ideal.

I rely heavily on African feminist thinkers such as Amadiume, Oyěwùmí, and Dube because I perceive in their scholarship an invitation to join a patient and hopeful project of discerning resources for social redemption in Africa and the African diaspora. Amadiume's matricentric ethical theory actually makes a sound case for the Nnobi Ibo *mkpuka* structure and its counterparts in other regions of Africa as an indigenously grounded philosophical platform for reconstructing African families, societies and political states. When Dube calls communities

to “interrogate the causes of gender inequality and how we can best empower both men and women,” she rightly notes that “these questions should lead to revisiting our cultural constructions of man and woman and their possible re-interpretation to ensure that we remain a community shaped by ‘I am because we are,’”⁴⁵ and by what she describes through indigenous concepts as “*Botho/Ubuntu*, the act of earning respect by first giving it.”⁴⁶ Dube’s suggested inquiries dovetail effortlessly with Oyěwùmí’s theoretical examination of Oyo-Yoruba conceptions of the human anafemale and anamale throughout the life cycle. As a result, readers are encouraged to replace body-based reasoning, as a principal approach to social organization, with more neutral and wholesome criteria, that shape our common life around dignifying lineage, kinship and group relations in our local and extended global communities.

The inability to identify, or the fear of delineating, indigenous Africana ideals, ethical norms, epistemologies and social contracts that must guide our future—in the face of imposing Western political and philosophical traditions—is for me a sign of the spiritual malaise characterizing the Africana world’s collective soul-life since the era of transatlantic slavery and colonialism. At the very least, Amadiume, Oyěwùmí and Dube present useful frameworks for, first, identifying a pattern of Africana matricentric practices in Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and other regions of the worldwide African diaspora and, second, theorizing womanist-feminist agendas of peace building, social change and sustainability among the Mothers—the matricentric custodians—of an understudied repertoire within Africana spiritual and activist traditions. This research focus moves explorations of African religions beyond

⁴⁵ Musa Dube, “*Adinkra!* Four Hearts Joined Together,” 151.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

studies of standard Christian, Islamic, and indigenous institutional structures and theological categories to encompass analysis of originary symbols and axiological orientations that are embedded within cosmic and creative realities. African thought systems exhibit profound apprehension of these phenomena. They deserve sustained theorization in African and African diaspora religious studies toward the end of developing new conceptual frontiers and nurturing other fields, including women's, gender and sexuality studies, philosophy and political theory.

A related second point we ought to consider concerns more deliberate efforts to educate and partner with feminist-womanist men in our scholarly and social activisms. In the diaspora context of the 1960s to the 1990s, many Black male nationalists and Afrocentrists led the way in promoting the adoption of "African" cultural values and practices across their communities. Yet, the so-called African traditions to which they most appealed had an uncanny resemblance to the sexist and patriarchal Western Victorian ideals that identified a female essence with domestic duties, subordinate roles and the private domain. Although Africana women conducting research on Africana cultures will never produce totally bias-free scholarship, when it comes to gender and social organization, I do think it is significant that female scholars like Oyěwùmí, Amadiume, and Dube are leading the way in forwarding some of the most critical postcolonial perspectives that consider the negative impact of patriarchy not only upon females but upon males as well. Our leadership must now extend to designing the liberation of Africana boys and men from masculinities and other ideologies that strangle their potential for prosocial co-habitation with women, girls, and the rest of creation. In the U.S. context there has been some controversy over the membership of the womanist community. While I understand the reservations that many Black women have toward outsiders who rush to claim a womanist

identity, I want to make the case for acknowledging and encouraging the scholarship, activism, and behaviors of our male counterparts as womanist when they actually align with womanist principles and agendas.

Finally, these feminist thinkers establish a method of theorizing women's experiences in African societies through indigenous African vocabularies. Musa Dube's insistence that African communities must name HIV and AIDS in their indigenous languages in order to confront such illness conditions as enemies of their common life advances this important discursive and theoretical step in African feminist methodology.⁴⁷ Placing Amadiume and Oyěwùmí's research in conversation with other feminist-womanist accounts of continental and diaspora activist women uncovers how African women have brought names and significations to their balanced humanitarian and creation-centered traditions out of their experiences and values. The ensuing conversation also invites *Circle* and *Purple* scholars to employ indigenous African literacies in theorizing the power of such traditions to guide communal living and provide standards for sustainable co-habitation with others, including other forms of life.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 135.