NJOKI NATHANI WANE

RECLAIMING OUR SPIRITUALITY

A Pedagogical Tool for Feminism and Activism

> *The past is not only a position from which to speak, but it is also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say.… Our relationship to the past is quite a complex one; we can't pluck it up out of where it was and simply restore it to ourselves. If you ask my son who is seventeen and who was born in London, where he comes from, he cannot tell you he comes from Jamaica. Part of his identity is there, but he has to discover that identity… He has to learn to tell himself the story of his past. He has to interrogate his own history, he has to relearn that part of him that has an investment in that culture.… "You can't be something else than who you are. You've got to find out who you are in the flux of the past and the present."* (Hall 19-20)

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to unearth the centrality of spirituality in the lives of five Black women who identify themselves as anti-racist feminist activists. It is a spiritual journey to their past as their interview narratives will demonstrate. The paper is based on the findings of my Social Science and Humanities Research Council (2005-2008), which explored feminisms among women of African ancestry living in Canada. I have selected the stories of the five women from the 400 participants because of their clarity of purpose in relation to spirituality, feminism, and activism; their common reference to Africa as a place they call home and as a place that defined who they are, and their spiritual traditions. Each of the five women interviewed—Tatu, Penny, Mary, Rose, and Lilly—identifies with a place outside Canada. Tatu and Mary are seventh-generation Canadian, while Rose is from Guyana, Penny from Jamaica, and Lilly from Ghana. Rose came to Canada when she was less than ten years old, while Lilly was 19 and Penny was 13. All five did not hesitate to call themselves Africans without having to explain or to qualify their Africanness or their Blackness. All five have been involved in activism as their narratives will show. In addition, spirituality and activism were the central organizing and ordering principles for the five women.

As demonstrated in the narratives of the five participants, Black women have a history of engaging in action-oriented feminism informed by spirituality and

inner strength. This inner strength or spiritual strength allows them to assess racialized and gendered inequality and build alliances to advocate for social justice. As Njoki Wane and Erica Neegan state, "The culture of our ancestors was rooted in their spirituality.… We see … African spirituality as a springboard to our collectivism and activism around the development of Black Canadian feminist theory" (31).

In this paper, I explore the interweaving of spirituality, rootedness, and self-determination of the five women and how all three inform activism and feminism. The paper is formulated around such questions as: What is spirituality? How does spirituality inform one's feminism and activism? How did the five women negotiate their spirituality in the midst of their hectic lives? How do they sustain their spiritual practices? What has been the impact of integrating their spiritual aspect to their activism from our feminism?

All through the paper, I interweave my story with the women's stories because of the similarities and sometimes contradictions that were evident in their narratives. Many times in our lives we perpetuate dualism in our ways of thinking because we have separated the path of spiritual ways of knowing from the path of activism and feminism and personal commitment. The goal of this paper is to show how the women's spiritual journeys have informed who they are today: feminist activists and spiritual beings. These women have made their spirituality an essential tool for their activism and transformative feminism. They have unearthed what many have failed to recognize as the fragmentation and departmentalization of who we are as a people.

LOCATING SELF

I have always argued that one cannot tell the story of their life without finding a context for it. I am talking about myself, and the constant reminder that we cannot hide our spiritual practices as African peoples, and pretend it is archival material that does not fit in the twenty-first century. When we do that, we perpetuate fragmentation and dissonance in our lives. I can still remember when my fragmented and dislocated spiritual journey began. I was nine years old when I joined three of my neighbours' daughters for an interview to join a missionary boarding school for girls. This was the first time I had come into contact with European women and all of them wore white veils. At that time, I thought this was the norm and mode of dress for women who did not look like me or other women from my community. On arrival at this school, the nuns or "Sisters" (I did not know at that time why all of them shared the same name—"Sister"), asked for our names, date of birth, our parents names and their occupation. All my neighbours' daughters had European or Christian names except me—everyone knew me as Njoki. Njoki was my name and I was very proud of my name. However, when the nuns insisted that I should have a European or baptismal name, it created discomfort and unnecessary dissonance in me as I did not understand why

it was necessary to have another name. In the end, I came up with a European/Christian name. Listening to the different names that the other girls or their guardians gave, provided the impetus for me to chose a name there and then. I did not know then, that this name would haunt me as I tried to drop it or explain its origin later in life. This name created anxiety as I did not know whether I should tell my parents that I had "baptized" myself and that I was no longer Njoki. Whenever I think of this particular moment in my life, I cannot help but question myself—who am I really? This is eloquently captured by Patricia Williams who states:

> There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing … when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best…. I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself; draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole. (228)

Going back to my story, the letter of admission arrived, and of course the name on the envelope was the foreign name. I have always argued that this letter marked the end of my world of blissfulness, and a world without worries and created endless moments of anxiety as reflected in the Williams quote above. More importantly, it interrupted my spiritual teachings, the morning reflections with my parents before dawn, and the evening thanks-giving conversations that my parents had with the Creator. It marked the end of my traditional teachings and the beginning of my inculcation into foreign spiritual practices and education. The missionary school culture was different. The rituals gruesome as the nuns woke us up at 5:00 a.m. to say morning prayers and get ready for the morning service. The morning prayers were signaled by a gong, the nuns' call for prayer reciting, the sign of the cross, and the Lords' Prayer and Mother of Jesus prayer. These were followed by a chorus of young voices from the five dormitories repeating after the designated nun the memorized prayers. The prayers made little sense to me and every morning I would eagerly wait hoping that instead of the nun's voice, I would hear my mother's voice giving thanks to her Creator. But that never happened. Soon, I memorized the prayers and mastered how to make the sign of the cross. After the morning prayers, we filed one after another to a building (which I came to learn was called church—very different from my community's gathering grounds for rituals and prayers). The church was lit with millions of candles (so it appeared), with chandeliers glittering from a high ceiling marked by murals depicting sad people. At one far end, there was a lifeless person nailed to a makeshift tree that I later learned was called a cross, and that the person on it was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died for all my sins. As a nine-year-old child, I pondered what could I have done to make a person who did not look like me die for me. I was totally confused, but attracted to this man who died for me and who, for all practical purposes,

seemed to be an ancestor of some kind, just like the ancestors my parents had talked to me about. My routine while growing up in the village was different. Mother would make a call for prayer, but in my language. She would thank the Creator for giving us another day and ask blessings for the day. She would always ask for guidance and protection for the seen and the unseen. When my parents sent me to a boarding school, they had no idea what they had done to this very valuable morning connection with my Creator, whom I had learned was mightier than anything imaginable, but whose presence was essential for our everyday living. However, in this new environment, I was exposed to a spiritual practice that revolved around a foreign god, language, images, and procedures that made very little sense to a child. It was unfortunate for me that my parents did not know that my traditional teachings would not continue in the boarding school. They wholeheartedly trusted the nuns and the educational system to prepare their daughter to be who she wanted to be—even if she wanted to be a feminist activist who embraced her traditional spirituality. My parents did not know that their spirituality had no space in the boarding school and could not compete with the foreign spirituality. My African spirituality was subsequently squashed and became a distant memory; but not completely lost.

Elsewhere (Wane 2006), I indicate that spirituality is a vital life force that connects African peoples to the rhythms of what it means to be straddled between more than one world or multiple ideologies. Black feminist thought is therefore engaged in the reclaiming of voice, space, and re-writing of history through a praxis that will create a historically-located field of origins in order to critically centre or re/centre traditionally subjugated bodies of knowledge. April Few explains one of the principles of Black feminism, collectivism, as a way of balancing gender with race consciousness. "Black feminism is a framework deeply rooted in history and culture to inform a collective knowledge, a Black consciousness" (Few 467). Black feminism helped of the universe and their community. This is something I detected when I read the five women's narratives. There was an urgency to connect with their roots and their fragmented past. I believe that only by connecting with this past that we are able to understand who we are, where we come from, and where we are going (Wane 2006).

In this paper, I am swayed to write about my efforts to recover and reclaim my Indigenous African spirituality after it was interrupted in my early years. However, listening to the women's narratives caused me to conceptualize, interrogate, sympathize, and even realize that my spiritual interruption was not unique. It was part of a larger globalization of spirituality. I learned too that as a feminist who embodies and enacts spiritually-centred activism, I maintain the centrality of my immediate community, its collective consciousness and its history.

The section below provides the theoretical framework for this paper: Black Canadian feminist thought.

BLACK CANADIAN FEMINIST THOUGHT

I situate my arguments on Black feminism because of how it places value on collectivism, self-determination and notions of survival strategies and resistance. Black feminism is an activism that is grounded in Black women's common histories, such as colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and neocolonialism, and that examines these oppressions in their complexities, and takes action accordingly. Black feminism can also be defined "as the sum of its constituent's parts: Canadian, Black, Feminism, Theory, each with its own particular connotations (Amoah 104). Jewel Amoah explains, "It is difficult to identify a certain cultural aspect as being distinctively Canadian, as the element of multiculturalism is itself part of the Canadian identity" (104). Furthermore, she states that being Black is more than just a culture or colour; what is important is the understanding Few "to explicate behavioural motivations rooted in unique cultural factors while examining the 'collective voice' of Black women" (468). Black Canadian feminist theory thus focuses on social justice for women and creates a space to acknowledge their racialized experiences.

Black feminist theory broadens and deepens the historical and social analysis of Black women, exposes the multiplicity of oppressions, and deconstructs neoliberal thinking. This theory is not an end in itself, but rather a pedagogy that may be directed towards greater social justice for all people. According to Rai Reece, "Canadian Black feminist thought occupies a meaningful space in activism, since the interlocking oppression that Black women face … are the molds that provide foundation from which [Black women] stand" (271).

In the last five years, women have written about Black Canadian feminist theorizing from different perspectives (see, for example, Lawson; Tastsoglou; Deliovsky; Elabor-Idemudia; Wane 2002, 2004, 2007; Riviere; Massaquoi 2004, 2007; Crawford). These works have added to scholarship on Black feminist thought such topics as sexuality, racism, mothering, community leadership, activism, the academy (Carty 1992; Henry), work (Brand; Carty and Brand), violence (Silvera 1989), women's health (Tharao and Cornwell, 2007), history (Cooper; Cooper, Shadd and Frost; Shadd), culture (Elabor-Idemudia), immigration policies (Calliste), and the general African female diasporic experience in Canada. How does Black feminist thought speak to Black women's rootedness and self-determination?

SPIRITUALITY AND ROOTEDNESS

Every individual's life is shaped by the environment that they grow in. All five women interviewed had a strong sense of being Black and being rooted in the African spiritual practices. Although they were all proud to be Canadian, they were cognizant of the fact that they were never perceived as Canadian and they had been asked many times where they are from. With time, they found it easy to answer "Africa" and to those who insisted in asking Tatu, Mary, Rose

and Penny which country in Africa, they would get a nice answer, "I am still trying to figure it out."

Each of the women's spirituality is rooted in a particular geographical space, a place they call home or sacred, a place cherished by family members, or a place that the women remembered or talked about with fond memories. Tatu states:

> *My mother had this room that we were all scared of entering alone. It was her sanctuary, a place of escape from the chaos surrounding her. Whenever my Mum entered the room, she would light candles and remain in a meditative mode for a long time. If any one of us was in the room with her, she would invite us to sit down. This was a room full of objects—later on in life I came to learn that these were sacred objects representing different forms of spiritual worship. The most precious objects were the ones from Africa. Looking back now, I can sincerely say that this room provided a sense of serenity that I have never experienced elsewhere. There was calmness and peace. Today whenever I want to experience that peacefulness, I close my eyes and imagine myself as a ten-, twelve-year-old child sitting in the midst of my two brothers and one sister, praying or just sitting quietly. That is where I got my spiritual grounding to do the work I do as a feminist and activist.*

Penny summarized her sacred space as her community church:

> *This was our private, yet community sanctuary. I would look forward to Sundays to be away from the scrutiny of my teachers, peers … racism and name calling was for me an everyday occurrence … the Sunday service and the words of our Pastor grounded me and reassured us … one day things will be all right.… Looking back, these Sunday sermons provided me with my spiritual strength and my community activism started there—I became a Sunday school teacher.*

Reflecting on the voices of Tatu and Penny, there are similarities in their stories to mine: the sacredness of a gathering place whether it was in a home or outside the home. Growing up in rural Kenya, my sacred places were the fire that used to burn in the middle of our compound and the winding Ena River. It was around the fire that my parents talked about the need for rootedness of our family, community sacred grounds, and different cleansing rituals. It was during these evenings that I learned about the importance of cleansing, prayer, and connection with ancestors. My parents would often evoke the names of our ancestors and the heroic work they had done. The river, on the other hand, has a special place in my memory. Although going to fetch water was a daily task, I can still remember vividly the Saturday visits to the river. Saturdays were days when women from the village gathered to wash the family clothes. They, however, did not just come to wash clothes. They also came to share their stories about different aspects of their lives. What stands out most

for me during those Saturdays was their spirituality and activism. They shared stories of women who had stood-up to the chief, or women who had refused to plant coffee or tea. I also heard stories of women who had insisted on their daughters attending western-style schools. The women gave each other advice, shared different strategies, and agreed on how to organize political rallies to mobilize change for women. The women also talked about the various ceremonies that had taken place or were going to take place in the village. It is the sacred moments around the fire with my parents, or my Saturday visits to the river, that have provided me with the necessary tools for my feminism and activism. The idea of sacredness was instilled in me then and it informed my spiritual rootedness and sense of being. The women I interviewed expressed similar vies in their narratives.

> *I grew up in the South Florida although I was born in Canada and what amazes me is how our history is written everywhere, yet we cannot read it. When I visit my grandmother who is one hundred years plus, I cannot help but imagine what the ageless trees on her compound witnessed or what memories are buried in the soil we walk on and her stories always remind me of how old my spiritual rootedness is. My grandmother would tell stories of how they all went to churches on Sundays, but that did not mean they gave their souls or their spirits to a foreign God. After church they all gathered at their grandmothers' homes or their grandaunts' to have a feast—there they would pour libation, talk to their Creator and thank God for allowing them to see another Sunday.* (Mary)

Others also shared stories of spiritual connectedness with grandmothers, aunties, and mothers.

> *Being in this particular church where our family used to go and worship, I never felt at home. Yet my family insisted that we should go there every Sunday—the ceremony in church, the images reflected nothing about me—or my parents—but they still insisted. I guess it was to be part of a community. But it was in this place where I experienced most dissonance and as soon as I turned 18, I told my parents I preferred to worship in our family room—a room that reflected our spiritual diversity … we had statues of Buddha, Black Madonna and the baby, Queen Nefertiti, sacred rocks from Africa, pictures of all my ancestors—great-great-grandparents. Thinking about it now, this was the room where we said our family prayers, had our family meetings and it was a place where I experienced my past through books and photos. In the final analysis, I felt more grounded in this place than in my parents' church…. The other important thing to keep in mind is that spirituality cannot be defined by a building. Spirituality must be defined by you. My parents, especially my mother, grounded me in my African traditions—that is, the foundation of my spirituality.* (Rose)

The words of Mary reminded me of what a student in my spirituality class once said: "As a generation that sits on a chasm between many worlds and identities, our sense of home and connection is constantly contested by others, however, our spirituality is rooted from where we came from—our ancestral home" (Mucina). This was very true of the five women. Like many Indigenous peoples of the world, spirituality is part and parcel of people of African ancestry. Spiritual teaching informs African peoples of their past, present, and the future. Haile Gerima makes reference to the Sankofa philosophy in his film, stating that it is important to go back and reclaim our past so that we can move forward, so that we can understand how we came to be who we are today. In addition, there is a common belief among people of African ancestry that all occurrences are a manifestation of what is happening in the spirit world (Some). Lilly's experience was different:

> *For quite sometime, I used to believe that my ancestors were godless or spiritless. Every time I went home for my holidays I would tell my grandparents that the White God would strike them dead if they did not follow his ways and worship him. These were strong words from a twelve-year-old girl.… Most of the time; my grandmother would look at me and say, "My child, I am sure all my teaching did not go in vain. One day you will get to know we have a God"… and I did.*

The power of colonization and the extent to which indoctrination and negation of Indigenous spiritualities occurred is clearly evident in the above quotation. The use of Christian doctrine has effectively rendered Indigenous spiritual practices of strength and endurance invisible and almost worthless. This doctrine has convinced many people that their Indigenous practices were/are primitive, barbaric and even bestial, in need of Christian spiritual rescue. As Makeda Silvera notes:

> Although Christian values have dominated the world, their effect in slave colonies is particular. Our fore-parents gained access to literacy through the Bible when they were being indoctrinated by missionaries. It provided powerful and ancient stories of strength, endurance and hope, which reflected their own fight against oppression. This book has been so powerful that it continues to bind our lives with its racism and misogyny. (1991: 16)

My conclusion from the women's narratives on rootedness is that spiritual knowledge resides in all of us and we acquire it through observation and the stories passed down from our ancestral past. This knowledge is awakened through the sharing of reflective memories. The narratives of the women in this paper honour their ancestral spiritual knowledge through ritual and reflective remembering. By doing so, they keep these memories alive because

spirituality is both a collective and an individual endeavour. It is collective as long as it upholds the communal spirit and it is an individual endeavour as long as it translates to the good of the community. The women emphasized the importance of sharing their stories because by doing so, they would avoid reproducing the politics and activism of dualism and divisiveness. Through reflective memory, sharing of stories and observation, the women have maintained their spiritual feminist identities in a world that is constantly changing and popularizing new forms of spiritualities, such as for instance the New Age spiritual practice.

The five women interviewed understood that spirituality as a way of knowing that embodied their connection to what they called the Divine and what some may call the Creator. Reflecting on these women's words, I can see why spirituality may be referred to as an inner-outer journey to one's past and future, to one's everyday realities, and to one's struggles to be an active member of their community.

How then do we create meaningful feminist discourse that is informed by transformative activism that has a spiritual praxis? How do we ensure our work does not become so politicized to the extent that it loses the personal component? African Indigenous spiritual knowledge provides the discourse on which we can situate how we relate to our cultural specific philosophies, politics and communities. This "situatedness" provides the ground on which we can articulate our political and our individual self. It is through this line of thinking that we can interpret our sense of belonging, our space, embodiment and identity (Arendt).

However, the spiritual practice acquired through organized religions to some extent fragmented African people's communities and created notions of domination and classification, categories that became perfected for political gain. It was the realization of fragmentation that the women talked about as they made reference to their feminism or activism. Leela Fernandes advocates for a spiritualized feminism as a way of knowing, understanding, and reacting to issues of inequality (8). Fernandes states if we are to bring true transformation we need to advance a different form of feminist politics. She explains:

> What is needed then, for transformation, is simply a radical form of liberation of the divine—within ourselves, our communities, our world. Without this spiritual liberation, enduring social transformation is not possible and movements for social justice will continue to be trapped in cycles of hope and decline, as they have been throughout history. It is precisely this kind of liberation that is needed if the tremendous transformative power of spirituality is not to be continually colonized by such structures of inequality and the social groups that mistakenly believe they benefit from them. (116)

Fernandes' words offer a different way of thinking for feminists who may have

separated their feminism from their spiritual practices. She promotes a spiritualized feminism as a way of knowing, understanding and reacting to social injustice as a response to the lack of imagination and faith in a "work without hierarchy, exclusion, and injustice" (8). She argues that mainstream feminist movements and theories have marginalized and negated the connection between spirituality and social justice, as a result of the discourses on religious fundamentalism and the increased attention given to religious political forces (9). She clearly articulates that the need for spirituality is a reality that social activists must acknowledge if we are to break from colonization and the structures that maintain racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression.

Fernandes offers hope to activists/researchers/educators who are often troubled by dead-ends presented by critical theorists. Her definition of a spiritualized feminist way of knowing acknowledges that change and peace are possible, not simply as utopian ideals. Fernandes' work proposes several concepts that are useful in the development of a spiritually-oriented methodology. She writes about the need to be aware of what she calls "[the] dailiness of ethical practice," referring to the need to ensure that our everyday work has an ethical dimension to it, and that we are aware of our responsibilities in the process of the work that we do, and not only of the outcome (52). Another crucial idea that Fernandes proposes is the need for researchers to recognize the political nature of their role as "witnesses" (83). In this framework, knowledge is understood as inherently laden with power relationships; the scholar becomes an active witness in the research process; and the person whose experience is being shared is respected as a teacher. This concept underlines the heavy responsibility that we as academics carry towards those whose stories we wish to retell.

In the context of my own journey to reconnect with African spirituality, I stated elsewhere that spirituality is the "vital life force that animates African peoples and connects them to the rhythms of the universe, nature, ancestors and the community" (Wane 2006: 89). It is this alternative to colonial knowledge and education that is a viable, legitimate, and truthful way of knowing the world. As part of this anti-colonial discourse, I was able to reconnect to my roots and to my fragmented past in order to understand who I am, where I have come from, and where I am going (2006: 87). Riyad Shahjahan's own understanding of spirituality embodies notions of equity, social-justice, and remembrance of the Divine. This remembrance leads to an "interconnection with the Divine" which develops his inner spirit and manifests itself in an outer action that has to do with healing for himself and others (27). Shahjahan's work brings forth the importance of centring spirituality—that is, making it the key element in every thought, decision, and action—even in the academy. Regarding spirituality-based theories, Shahjahan addresses our concerns that if they are even acknowledged, they are essentialized, and not permitted to possess a central role within the epistemology. It is the notion of centring our self, our soul that allows us to sustain challenges such as these.

SPIRITUALITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

> As my children grew and started leaning out into life and finding out about existence, I battled for them to get ahead. But Rubiera wouldn't let me, thinking a woman had to dedicate herself to running the household and nothing more. So I sacrificed everything, I sacrificed myself as a woman to be just a mother, I had to break with tradition and begin to struggle alone.… I started building a life independent of your father in order to be able … to give all of you what I yearned for: an education, personal development, minding the atmosphere in which you'd grow up, keeping you away from the difficult aspects of life. You know? I couldn't be happy at the cost of my children's happiness, and raising and educating you was to help you become free men and women. (de la Reyes Castillo Bueno 142)

Activism for the five women interviewed was not a choice, but a matter of survival and self-determination. Most of their activism started at home as a collective action, a family or community affair. Just as Maria de la Reyes Castillo Bueno states above, activism must begin by not accepting the status quo, by looking at the bigger picture, and breaking away from the yoke of patriarchy. This argument is confirmed by Linda Carty who states that collectivism is a form of resistance whose site is the family. "Although the home has its own struggles of oppression, it is in that space that many Black people find the family has served as a protection against, and a central source of resistance to racist oppression" (1999: 420). This is also articulated by Heather Osterreich, quoting Cherry Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua: "…the real [activism] of women of color feminists [is] to resist compliancy and to become warriors of conscience and action who resist death in all its myriad manifestations" (cited in Osterreich16).

Within the Canadian landscape, the works of Makeda Silver, Adrienne Shadd, Sylvia Hamilton , Annette Henry, Dionne Brand, Peggy Bristow, and among others have kept the memories of activism alive. Silvera's writing for the silenced voices of domestic workers who have endured sexual exploitation and psychological abuse, encourages others to articulate their oppression and come together as a community to disrupt the inequities that domestic workers around the world continue to face. Penny talks about her mother's experience as a live-in caregiver, and the ways in which she and women like her organized to fight for their rights:

> *When my mother migrated to Canada, she left us behind with our grandmother. What was strange was, no one talked about the work she did—but I used to love the barrels of clothes and other goodies that used to arrive every now and then.… It was years later that she talked to me about her experiences of looking after other people's children and how emotionally*

> *drained she was by the experience.… My mother did not want any other person in her family or other Black women to go through similar experiences. Every Sunday, on her day off, she used to meet with other domestic workers and they would share their stories … their stories always started with fellowship—giving thanks to God and asking God to get them out of this predicament.… It was from this sharing that many of the women of my mother's generation, went back to school, fought for their rights.… Today, there are very few live-in caregivers from my country.*

The activism that Penny's mother initiated more than 40 years ago is evident in the works of other young African Canadian women who are continuing Black women's legacy of political activism and documenting it, among them Erica Neegan (Wane and Neegan), Bathseba Opini, Ann Solom (Solomon and Wane), Helen Ziral Pearman, Roberta Timothy, Gail Solomon-Henry, and Charmaine Crawford. For instance, Timothy has documented the experiences of Black women working in shelters in Toronto. The collective voice that rings through the voices of these women has brought policy changes and empowerment for many of the women that Timothy interviewed. Another example is the work of Solom, writing about the political activism of Black women administrators and how their collective sharing has enabled many of these women to strategize on how to get promotions in their place of work, and empower Black youth through mentorship.

Collectivism, one of the principles of Black Canadian Feminist Thought, brings collective forces together and the fundamentals of a community that evoke the notion of communal sharing of pain, struggles, triumphs and vision. Tracey Reynolds states that collectivism is Black women's desire to resist oppression through a collective voice, especially through the key sites of motherhood and family, education, everyday experiences, and community activism (1999: 597). According to Wanda Bernard, collectivism is acknowledging community responsibility for the passing on of knowledge, nurturing, mentoring and utilizing the many talents of Black people:

> More than an acknowledgement of their strength and the additional burdens they have carried historically, these men called for their brothers to work more collectively with black women, and to take on responsibilities for nurturing and mentoring black sons and daughters. There is also an acknowledgement of the role of mothers across generations. (334)

Heidi Safia Mirza sees collectivism as visionary and inclusionary because:

> Female collective action offers a new direction for thinking about new social movements, challenging masculine assumptions of social change through confrontation. Ultimately, to do well in a racist soci-

> ety is a radical act. Given the parameters of the world we live in, we must think about transformative struggle through inclusive acts. (18)

To Mirza, collectivism means empowering women to challenge male and societal domination of women. It is a powerful tool that forces us to question our activism and its mandate. To bring about transformation, it is necessary to work together as a group, as a community. Olabisi Aina states that collectivism is about acknowledging one another and not disregarding other sexes. Acknowledging the power of collectivism to uplift the community, Constance Backhouse points to the importance of using collectivism to create an intergeneration link:

> We need to use every force at our command, from those of us who have fallen into positions of power, to those of us who have not begun to imagine enrolling in universities. We need to create inter-generational linkages, so that those of us who are white-haired and immune-disordered can match our experience and ideas with the energy and goals of youth. We cannot afford to rest. We cannot afford to wait. (22)

Backhouse uses collectivism to call for people to go back to school and obtain an education in order to be more knowledgeable and to become involved in a group. By doing this, Backhouse believes that we can do much better in confronting injustices. Collectivism as articulated above echoes through the voices of all the women interviewed. Lilly's words summarize the women's sentiments:

> *I try to lead by example.... I share with community members strategies that will move them from A to B … sometimes when I reflect where I would be if others did not sacrifice for me.... I get cold shivers. I organize healing circles where I encourage the young people to enroll in courses … when they indicate that they have no money or their employer will not give them a day off, I coach them what to say .... I tell them, tell your employer you will work during your lunch hour or put an extra hour every other evening … or I forward to them any information I may have regarding their areas of interest. I may not carry a big placard, but this form of organizing has yielded many success stories.*

Clenora Hudson-Weems furthers Lilly words when she argues that the only way to resolve any kind of struggles, such as violence, lack of education, and barriers to equality, especially in the lives of African women, is through collective action and a collective voice. Lilly organizes healing circles because as Hudson-Weems also suggests, there is a need for us to eliminate disabling tendencies in our lives, then venture out to educate others and this can only happen through helping one another in the community. Hudson-Weems further explains that:

> The real challenge for Africana men and women is how to create more opportunities within Africana communities. Many people talk about the need for enhanced Africana economic empowerment. If our goal in life is to be achieved—that is the survival of our race as primary concern for Africana women—it will have to come from Africana men and women working together. If Africana men and women are fighting within the community, they are ultimately defeating themselves on all fronts. (160)

Hudson-Weems reiterates that without collectivism in the community, everything is negatively impacted: the social, the political, and the economic well-being of the people. Hudson-Weems adds:

> As Africana womanism—rather than feminism, black feminism, African feminism or "mere" womanism—is a conceivable alternative for the Africana woman in her collective struggle with the entire community, it enhances future possibilities for the dignity of Africana people and humanity of all. In short, the reclamation of Africana women via properly identifying our own collective struggle and acting upon it is a key step toward human harmony and survival. (160)

Patricia Hill Collins describes collectivism thus:

> Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. (11)

She adds that the legacy of struggle among U.S. Black women suggests that a collectively-shared Black women's oppositional knowledge has long existed. This collective wisdom in turn has spurred U.S. Black women to generate a more specialized knowledge, namely, Black Feminist Thought as critical social theory (13). Collins notes that Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 volume of essays, *A Voice from the South*, is the first book-length treatment of race, class, and gender in Black women's thought. As a leader in the Black women's club movement, Cooper certainly knew that breathing life into "lifting as we climb" required that Black women gain a collective voice (cited in Collins 46-47). Resistance, resiliency and self-determination of Black women is also revealed in the interviews I conducted, as articulated by Penny as she talks about her feminist and activist standpoint:

> *Most of the work I do is at a national level.… I would consider myself in*

a position of leadership at my office—and this did not just come overnight. It started in the early 1990s when I got involved in NAC [National Action Committee on the Status of Women] and Joan Grant-Cummings became the President.… That was a turning point in my life. I became political both at work and outside work.… I started to network and I found myself in positions of leadership. I did not take these positions for granted. I knew the women in my community had my back and I was and I am their spokes person.

Rose adds:

I do not know how I get it done because everyday is a constant struggle whether I am at school, at work or out there soliciting for support for myself for my community.… I am very cognizant of that fact.

Upon reflecting on the stories of activism and self-determination of the five women interviewed, I look upon these women in awe at the amount of resilience that rises through their everyday experiences. However, I am not surprised at how well they have managed to stay above their struggles because of their rootedness in their spirituality, activism, and feminism. The women's lives touch on many aspects of Blackness, feminism, oppression, struggles from the effects of colonialism, healing, and rebirth.

BLACK WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

This section below addresses the ways in which Black women have used spirituality as a form of activism to navigate through generations of hardships and struggles caused by colonization, racism, sexism, and classism. Black Feminist Thought as a conceptual framework recognizes the integral role of spirituality in the survival of Black women in Canada, and speaks to the souls of those who dare to resist the oppression they have been subjected to. This is captured by Tatu below:

My work of resistance to dominant forces came about because of an occurrence in a department store when the manager insisted that I had not paid for a pair of stockings and that I had shoplifted. With confidence I told the manager that I had paid for the item and I did like not being harassed. He insisted that I should produce the receipt.… Due to my panic, I had to empty the contents of my handbag to find it.… By that time, the manager had called the security guard who literally dragged me out of the store because I was a thief.… [crying]. It is those times that I call my ancestors to give me the strength.… Then I put my hands in my jean jacket and there it was—the receipt. Very calmly, I unfolded it and gave it to the manager.… I did not say a word. I had the manager's voice say something like, "uhmm, we are

> *very sorry, you can go," …but I could not move…. I was transfixed. When I got my voice back, I told them, I wanted to speak to my lawyer…. I said something like, "this type of harassment has gone on for too long and it is time to close this chapter"…. To cut a long story short … the store agreed to carry out sensitive training for all its employees. Do you know who did it? …Moi. Today, I go round talking to racialized people about documentation, receipts, id cards….Unfortunately, we have to carry proof of who we are and what we are at all times.*

These sentiments are echoed in the words of bell hooks:

> Developing feminist consciousness is a crucial part of the process by which one asserts radical black female subjectivity. Whether she has called herself a feminist or not, there is no radical black woman subject who has not been forced to confront and challenge sexism. If, however, that individual struggle is not connected to a larger feminist movement, then every black woman finds herself reinventing strategies to cope when we should be leaving a legacy of feminist resistance that can nourish, sustain, and guide other black women and men. (57)

Black feminism, therefore, is an integral aspect of Black women not as individuals, but as members of a community movement.

As mentioned earlier, most of the women interviewed made reference to their spirituality as a way of knowing that embodies connection to what they may call the Divine, and what some might refer to as the Cosmos, the Creator, the Spirit. Some of them considered spirituality as something that they could not describe that gave them the strength to go on, to wake up in the morning and go back to the same job where they were being underemployed despite their qualifications or their abilities. When I pressed them to explain what this spirituality was, one person in a focus group of the study stated: "Spirituality for me is what keeps me grounded and connected to my family, community, and to my Creator." This manifestation of spirituality is what Shahjahan refers to as an inward and outward manifestation that is based on the knowledge that there is no separation between the other, the self, and the Divine" (146).

One of the many implications that we draw from spiritual manifestations is a commitment to social justice and a critique of injustice, agreeing with Amina Wadud (11) when she argues that "[all] who are engaged in surrender to the Divine order would find violations of human dignity and oppression in any situations that maintain a fragmentation between the divine order and the lived experiences of the people." For Black people willing to speak are driven by determination to achieve, as hook states: "step out on nothing, hoping to land on something" (hooks 9).

It is the oppressive conditions that many Black people find themselves in, that they reach out to something in their past, something that will link them to some traditions of sustainability and strength. Many times, religion becomes that something. For many people outside the Black communities, it is difficult to understand how a community can embrace a spiritual practice that was used to oppress them and was literally forced upon them. However, as bell hooks and Cornel West note: "one of the reasons we believe in God is due to the long tradition of religious faith in Black community" (8). They go on to add: "As a people who have had to deal with the absurdity of being Black in America, for many of us it is a question of God or sanity, or God and suicide" (8). Religion is therefore used by some in a contextual manner to hold on to life, or to give meaning to a particular situation in their lives. Spirituality on the other hand, for many Black women is interwoven into all aspects of the 'self' which allows one to connect to others, nature and their environment. As noted elsewhere (Wane and Neegan) "as African/Black women, they see spirituality as a way of life" (28). Further, "it's an expression of community and relationship building that is based on sharing and cooperation" (28).Furthermore, "its practice is defined by relationships, by caring not by creed, by enjoying human fulfillment and not adhering to orthodoxy" (28).

CONCLUSION

Indeed, spirituality for many Black women is transferred from one generation to the next and has helped to sustain families and communities. As I noted elsewhere, "spirituality is a dynamic concept…Some scholars describe it as tied to religion but not an exclusively religious phenomenon; it is rather an aspect of life that is affirmed by people of all faiths and those without faith in a transcendent being" (Wane 2007: 28).

An understanding, therefore, of Black women's feminism and activism and the role of spirituality is essential so that we can make sense of how generations have struggled with liberation from sexism, racism, classism, homophobia etc., and the maintenance of cohesiveness in Black communities. This understanding, which is situated in Black women's spirituality, must encompass "the narratives of black women who have militantly engaged in radical struggles for change offer insights" (hooks 57). hooks goes on to add that the various narratives of Black women's lives have: "let us know the conditions that enable the construction of radical black female subjectivity as well as the obstacles that impede its development" (57). In this paper, the five women have demonstrated how their spirituality informs their activism and feminism and is part and parcel of who they are. Their spiritual upbringing proved to be the bedrock on which their feminism and activism sits on. Although some of the women ground their activism in organized religion, they do not lose sight of their African rootedness. Some of the questions raised during the interviews require more interrogation or further research such as: what kind of qualities does an activist and feminist

who embraces spirituality have? How can we develop spiritual practices that will inform our activism and feminism to bring positive transformation in our society? Reflecting on the narratives of the five women has also been a journey for me as well as I look back into my spiritual upbringing. There is a common thread that connects the five narratives with my lived realities and I would like to believe that many women who will read this paper will find something that speaks to them.

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