

# TOWARD A LIBERATORY PEDAGOGY: A GENEALOGY OF BLACK FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

BY SARAH MILITZ-FRIELINK

*The spiritual life of blacks in the last five centuries is marked by transformation. We may not know how this transformation will occur, but we do know that it will occur as it tries to give succor to the soul.* - Mumia Abu-Jamal

In honor of the centennial celebration of Black life, history, and culture, this essay will trace a genealogy of discourse on African American feminist conceptions of spirituality in education with an emphasis on non-religious discourse. Inquiries into what it means to be a spiritual being, definitions of spirituality, and the relationship between spirituality and education will be explored in this essay. During my spiritually-centered journey as a teacher/researcher, I have gleaned the most insight from the African American feminist tradition—a tradition that has been largely overlooked in American public education. Teachers who seek to educate for social justice can and do benefit from the spiritual wisdom found in the Black feminist tradition. Katie Geneva Cannon explained this contribution best when she spoke to the wisdom and special talents Black women writers have, qualities which can uplift not only marginalized groups, but humankind in general. Cannon posits: “Black women writers know how to lift the imagination they inform, how to touch the emotions as they record, how to delineate specifics so that they are applicable to oppressed humanity everywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

African American feminist studies and transnational perspectives on spirituality have the capacity to move humanity toward the deeper questions in life. For example, questions such as—How can we evolve as human beings on a non-religious, spiritual level?—may arise when studying these perspectives. Currently, there is an immediate need to study the non-religious spiritual perspectives and the African American feminist tradition in public schools. The typical classroom in today’s era of neo-liberalism is increasingly dominated by techno-globalism, standardized testing, corporate agendas, and school reforms designed to eliminate the humanities from the curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Thus, because of these education trends, there exists a need to study African American feminist practices and definitions of spirituality taking shape in educational settings.

Questions may arise about my intention in choosing to write about African American spiritual feminist thought. Spiritual definitions and frameworks are present in all cultures, so why would a white female scholar be so interested in African American ways of knowing and being? As I stated earlier, I have uncovered the most insight about spirituality in this tradition and I also strongly believe that it should be used as a pedagogical tool to further social and racial justice in public schools.

## Author’s Social Location

My spiritual search began during my middle school years. Growing up in government housing, I paradoxically attended privileged public schools in an affluent Chicago suburb where social status was determined by what types of clothes I wore, what my dad did for a living, and what kind of car we drove. Thus, I became acutely aware of the stigma associated with living below the poverty line in America. I was bullied because I wore the wrong clothes, shamed because my dad was a custodian, and told the apartment we lived in was junky—very few children in my school wanted to play with me. In high school, I learned how to hide my class background as I struggled with the socially constructed shame attached to my place of residence. I could travel out of town and no one would know my socio-economic status. Conversely, my friends of color dealt with discrimination wherever we would go because of their race. I became indignant at this injustice, and slowly came to grips with my white privilege. Thus, I was inspired to educate for racial justice—so I majored in education in college.

During my undergraduate studies at Northern Illinois University, I enrolled in my first foundations of education class, and this is the point at which I fell in love with Freire, bell hooks, W.E.B. Dubois, Derrick Bell, Thoreau, Emerson, and Giroux. They gave me the language I had been seeking to articulate my class struggle and the struggles of historically marginalized groups. My interest in these scholars eventually led me to study social foundations of education at the master’s level, and then curriculum studies at the doctoral level. Of every one of these authors, however, I connected most with bell hooks. Her work on feminism, spirituality, and education quenched my thirst for an alternative way of educating students—framed in what I believed to be an accessible authentic feminist epistemology. Soon after I found hooks, I started studying other African American feminist thinkers, such as Audre Lorde, Cynthia B. Dillard and Patricia Hill Collins. Each of these African American feminists provided new insights into the historical conversation on spirituality, and contributed greatly to my life work.

## Origins of African American Feminist Literature on Spirituality

This inquiry into the origins of African American feminist literature can be traced to the Harlem Renaissance. One of my aims is to focus on black female writers from the past 100 years as part of the 2015 centennial celebration of Black life, history, and culture.<sup>3</sup> I have specifically selected writers from each era (from the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary times), who have framed spirituality in a non-religious/non-doctrinaire framework. I have intentionally omitted writers whose conceptions of spirituality are solely situated in Christianity or other religious dogmas because my work is intended for a secular audience (i.e. teachers and professors who are seeking to integrate spiritual qualities into the curriculum without violating the establishment clause.) The following writers make use of spiritual frameworks that I believe are capable of reaching secular audiences.

### Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was a feminist thinker who developed spiritual overtones in her books and essays. Gnostic and existential spiritual themes have proliferated in Zora Neale Hurston's writings. For example, Janie, the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* often describes divine aspects of the natural world and conceptualizes God as a mystic force. As Janie sits under a pear tree, she notices a rose bud describing it as the "tiny bloom that had opened... [and] had called her to come and gaze on a mystery."<sup>4</sup>

From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred [Janie] tremendously. How? Why? It was a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the book, Janie embarks on a spiritual journey to find her place in the world as an independent black woman, and to make peace with her gossipy neighbors and surroundings. Janie's spirituality is non-religious and self-empowering as Hurston's book reflects a communion with the divine that can be found in nature, in others, and the self.

### Margaret Walker

Margaret Walker, a poet during the era of modernity (1940-1960) was influenced by her father's sermons and classical literature. Biblical themes emerge in her poetry which reveals her spiritual roots. In 1942 she won the Yale University Younger Poet's Award for her poem *For My People*, which was hailed as a "signature piece" for black audiences.<sup>6</sup> The passionate opening of the poem unfolds with imagery of spiritual slave songs and prayers. Her description of god as "unknown and unseen" connotes mystery, agnosticism, and non-doctrinaire viewpoints.

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power.<sup>7</sup>

Walker ends her poem with a call for the spiritual renewal of the earth and her people. Her words ring with the spirit of revival, freedom, and peace.

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing of our spirits and our blood.<sup>8</sup>

### Audre Lorde

One of Audre Lorde's most seminal essays *The Uses of the Erotic*, defines spirituality as part of the erotic feminine. Lorde, a writer who began her career during the Black Arts era, was one of the first black feminist thinkers who challenged white feminist writers who dominated academia and left out the voices of women in other marginalized groups. Lorde speaks to the relationship between personal power, social change and spirituality.

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.<sup>9</sup>

Lorde draws attention to the erotic as a resource which is a part of spiritual (female) plane and reminds us that the spiritual dimension should not be suppressed as it is a source of personal power and knowledge.

## Alice Walker

In Alice Walker's *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*, she reclaims the rich spiritual roots of black grandmothers and mothers. She writes about "black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held."<sup>10</sup> Walker reveals the importance of acknowledging and creating a space for individuals to express the spiritual side of their being and use their creative talents; she defines spirituality as "the springs of creativity and a basis of art." She cautions against the detrimental effects a suppressed spirituality can have on a person—to be specific—the unacknowledged, unused, and unwanted spiritual talents of an individual. She contextualizes the way this spiritual suppression occurred given the historical oppression of black grandmothers and mothers.

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich spiritually—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane.<sup>11</sup>

While these selected writers are extremely influential on conceptions of feminist spirituality, the scope of their writing does not include the topic of spirituality in education, which is expected given the literary nature of their work.

### Origins of African American Discourse on *Spirituality in Education*

In 2008, I conducted a philosophical/qualitative study on meditation, yoga, and spiritual definitions in the K-8 classroom for my master's thesis. In my thesis, I hypothesized that one can engage in a spiritual activity such as yoga, drawing, or star gazing as a separate act independent of one's belief or non-belief in a religion. I also hypothesized that one can even be "spiritual" without belief in the immaterial world—which means that even atheists and agnostics can engage in spiritual practice without violating their non-belief. In my thesis I defined spirituality in education as the following:

Spirituality can be a non-doctrinaire component of education, which can address the emotional aspects of the child. Spirituality encompasses being in the present moment, losing oneself in tasks and projects without attachment to outcome. Students can experience spiritual aspects of education through nature walks outdoors, periods of silence indoors, and through ungraded creative projects in the classroom. My assumption is that human beings possess a spiritual dimension that can exist in harmony with the emotional, intellectual, and mental capacities. I am referring to the word spiritual to mean "the holistic development of mind, body, emotions, and sense of self."<sup>12</sup> I also refer to the term 'whole person' to demonstrate the importance of addressing the multi-dimensional nature of human beings—the intellectual, the emotional, the spiritual, the social, and the physical—in the classroom.<sup>13 14</sup>

Since I completed my thesis, I stumbled upon the work of A. Wade Boykin, who has a more complete definition of spirituality in education anchored in the Western African tradition. Although, he is not a feminist writer, his work has laid the foundation for others feminist thinkers to write about spiritual pedagogy. Boykin, who wrote extensively on African American identity and achievement, was the first black scholar to argue for the inclusion of spirituality in education. In his seminal chapter in the book *Achievement and Achievement Motives* he defines nine dimensions of African American culture that he argues should be included in educational settings. The nine dimensions being spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, orality, and social time perspective.<sup>15</sup>

A. Wade Boykin traces the lineage of these dimensions to the West African belief system. He states: "The African (particularly West African) belief system holds that the universe is essentially a vitalistic life force; human beings are harmoniously conjoined with the cosmos; there is an interconnection among all people that produces oneness, yet everyone is unique."<sup>16</sup> Boykin argues that nine interrelated, yet distinct dimensions which grew out of the belief system and orientation of traditional African society, manifest themselves in contemporary African American culture. His arguments in the early 1980s paved the way for African American feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Cynthia B. Dillard to write about spirituality in research and education.

Taking a transnational endarkened feminist approach, Cynthia Dillard speaks to the importance of "having a consciousness of the realm of the spirit in one's work and its ability to transform research and teaching."<sup>17</sup> Dillard has written extensively about having spiritual principles in the academy. She elaborated on the power of these spiritual principles with great clarity:

Spirituality in education is education with purpose; education that is liberatory work, education that is emancipation... Spirituality in education is education that connects, education that is about *building relationships between and across teachers and students, males and females, Others and Ourselves*.<sup>18</sup>

Her definition of spirituality in education is about building bridges between and across others and ourselves and dissolving the self/other binaries that often keep us in fear of embracing differences. Dillard includes important principles that signify spiritual work in education—liberatory work, work that is emancipation. The work social justice educators strive to do in their classrooms and the connections they build could be about Dillard’s conception of spirituality in education. Yet, Dillard has gone a step farther and has modeled an emancipatory classroom with purpose. To do so, she piloted a new dissertation seminar where she challenges the status quo in higher education. She writes:

The course was designed to be a space where an endarkened and transnational feminist epistemology and pedagogy would be created, engaged, and experienced. It was about enacting a radical humanism as intervention in higher education, about a central agenda being that of becoming more fully human in all our variations as African ascendant women.<sup>19</sup>

Dillard’s radical humanism draws upon her spiritual principles. She has created a safe space for students to express themselves and explore their African ascendant roots. She states: “Women of Africa ascent share experiences with some form of oppression characterized and related by our class, race, or gender, by our existence as women. And often, it is some version of our belief in spirit that has allowed us to stand in the face of hostility and degradation, however severe.”<sup>20</sup>

Unlike Dillard and Boykin, however, bell hooks situates her spiritual pedagogy in eastern thought, drawing upon the teachings of the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Trungpa Rinpoche (Vietnamese Zen masters). In response to her Black peers who ask “Why would you be interested in [spiritual teachings] in Tibet,” hooks links the freedom of Tibet with her freedom.<sup>21</sup> She states: “...and for me to understand as an African American woman, that my being is connected to the being of all those toiling and suffering Tibetan people, to know thought I may never see or know them, we are connected in our suffering.”<sup>22</sup> hooks shares that one way she embodies spiritual teachings is to “bring [her] body out there with the students: to see them, to be with them.”<sup>23</sup> Her willingness to be completely present with her students is a characteristic that all educators should embrace. The work that educators and students do in a classroom is so fixated on the future with upcoming standardized exams, assignments, and graduations, that it has become increasingly difficult to be in the present moment.

hooks’ work is very salient because she recognizes that spiritual practices nurture progressive teaching, nurture progressive politics, and enhance the struggle for liberation. She identifies the interconnectedness between all beings and goes beyond binary ways of thinking about others. As an African American woman, she connects with the suffering of the Tibetan people. It is my hope that hooks’ beliefs about spirituality in education can inform and shape some of the current teaching happening in education classrooms and contribute to furthering social justice in society.

Brenda Atlas, a retired public school administrator, shares the same passion for merging spirituality with pedagogy as hooks. She conducted a qualitative study interviewing six principals in Milwaukee to ascertain their definitions and practices of Afrocentric feminist spirituality.<sup>24</sup> Atlas reveals her personal definition of spirituality as “the essence of an individual’s soul” in her inquiry.<sup>25</sup> She further elaborates that this essence is “who the person truly is and therefore cannot totally be ignored or discarded based on one’s environment.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed spirituality is the essence of our souls and cannot be extricated from the domestic or institutional settings in which we live and work. The results of Atlas’ inquiry revealed that the administrators she studied share a mutual conviction that social justice and spirituality cannot be separated.<sup>27</sup>

### **Toward a Liberatory Spiritual Pedagogy**

Through my study of Black feminist writers under a transnational lens, I have developed a spiritual pedagogy that is rooted in a radical social justice framework. In my classroom, the undergraduate students and I challenge Eurocentric hegemony, and explore alternative pluralistic perspectives situated in critical agency.<sup>28</sup> My curriculum is rich in the humanities and draws from critical theory to facilitate anti-oppressive pedagogy.<sup>29</sup> My aim is to create an unfinished space of becoming, so my students and I can become more fully human in our process of inquiry.

My teaching style is similar to the practice of bell hooks. I make sure that I am fully present in the classroom with my students. hooks taught me that spiritual practices nurture progressive teaching, nurture progressive politics, and enhance the struggle for liberation. My goal is to help my students link their struggle for freedom to humanity’s struggle for freedom.

I also rely on meditative exercises to help my students become conscious of self/other binaries and merge their conceptual understanding of critical perspectives with actual experiences. I believe meditation creates a space for being present to self and others. When used appropriately with respect for personal beliefs, meditation practice in the classroom can provide opportunities for students to cultivate an internal awareness and openness to understanding the other. Meditation

teaches students to observe their thoughts and reflect in moments of stillness. It elicits a transpersonal process that moves students beyond the ego into a higher state of consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

To be specific, I carve out 5-10 minutes of meditation time prior to every class that I teach at the undergraduate level. The students are given the freedom to choose not to participate without any judgment. For the most part, the majority of students choose to engage in the meditation exercises. During these sessions, I lead them in guided relaxation, visualization, and an exercise of self-forgiveness. I include an exercise of self-forgiveness because I find that certain students can be especially hard on themselves about the most trivial things. Students often ruminate over a minor formatting error on their paper. They are surprised when I ask them to let it go, and acknowledge they did the best that they could. Some expect me to lower their grade over such things as a trivial spacing error—then I tell them that they are being too hard on themselves. They need to learn to accept imperfections and flaws as part of the human experience.

As I continue to work in a Western academy “which claims theory as thoroughly Western...and has constructed all the rules by which the indigenous world has been theorized, indigenous voices have been overwhelmingly silenced,”<sup>31</sup> I aspire to disrupt traditional Western research paradigms, which have overwhelmingly silenced or diminished the voices of African American scholars of color. When I have studied the body of literature on spirituality in education, I have noticed an overwhelming absence of African American female writers whose work illuminates, enriches, and expands the field of contemplative studies; thus it should be studied and cited more frequently.<sup>32</sup> Most scholars who study spirituality in education draw upon eastern new age practices or watered down western versions of those practices. Unfortunately, at this time, the primary literature used to justify the inclusion of spiritual practices, discourses, and definitions of spirituality in education, have been written by white men.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, I have hope that the centennial celebration of Black life, history, and culture will bring more African American feminist writers to the forefront of public consciousness. Their contribution to public education and humanity as a whole is absolutely vital to the spiritual transformation of the human race. This genealogy of African American feminist studies on spirituality in education is far from complete. My hope is that more scholars and journalists will join my quest to recover the rich African American feminist spiritual tradition. I believe this rich spiritual tradition will be the foundation of future transformation in public education.



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#### (Endnotes)

- 1 Katie Geneva Cannon, “Moral Wisdom in the Black Women’s Literary Tradition,” in *Weaving the Visions*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 291
- 2 William H. Watkins, *The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2011).
- 3 See the Association for the study of African American Life and History (ASALH), the founders of the Black History Month and the publishers of the Black History Bulletin (formally known as the Negro History Bulletin, which was started by Carter G. Woodson and Mary Bethune Mcleod in 1937. <http://www.asalh.org/>.
- 4 Zora Neale Hurston, “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 1067.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Margaret Walker, “For My People” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 1618.
- 7 Ibid., 1619.
- 8 Ibid., 1620.
- 9 Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007). This essay was originally published in 1978.
- 10 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 2430.
- 11 Ibid., 2430.
- 12 The David Lynch Foundation, *Frequently Asked Questions*, <http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org>.
- 13 My definition of spirituality in education has been influenced by the following scholars: bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (London, Routledge, 1994). George Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 19. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1929), 9. Jeff Lewis, “Spiritual Education as the Cultivation of Qualities of the Heart and Mind,” *Oxford Review of Education* 26 (2000). Eckhart Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now* (Novato: New World Library, 1999), 58. Dorothy Sisk and Paul Torrance, *Spiritual Intelligence: Developing Higher Consciousness* (Buffalo: Creative Education Foundation Press, 2001), 176.

- 14** Sarah Militz-Frielink, *Spirituality and Education: An Inquiry into Definitions and Practices Taking Shape in Charter Schools* (NIU Graduate Thesis Option B, defended April 2009).
- 15** A. Wade Boykin, "The Academic Performance of Afro-American Children," in *Achievement and Achievement Motives Psychological and Sociological Approaches* ed. Janet T. Spence (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983).
- 16** Abraham, 1962; Akbar, 1978; Dixon, 1976; Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1976, 1980; Nyang 1980 as cited in A. Wade Boykin, "The Academic Performance of Afro-American Children," in *Achievement and Achievement Motives Psychological and Sociological Approaches* ed. Janet T. Spence (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 341.
- 17** Cynthia B. Dillard, *Learning to (Re)member: the Things We've Learned to Forget* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).
- 18** Cynthia B. Dillard, Daa'iyah Abdur-Rashid, Cynthia A. Tyson, "My Soul is a Witness: Affirming Pedagogies of the Spirit," *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15 (2000): 447.
- 19** Ibid., 60.
- 20** Ibid., 60
- 21** bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159.
- 22** Ibid., 159.
- 23** Ibid., 157.
- 24** Brenda LuGene Hooper Atlas. The role of spirituality in the work of African-American women principals in urban schools. Ph.D. diss., The University of Wisconsin - Madison, In *Dissertations & Theses: A&I* [database on-line]; available from <http://www.proquest.com> (publication number AAT 3049447; accessed March 25, 2012).
- 25** Ibid., 10.
- 26** Ibid., 10.
- 27** Ibid., i.
- 28** See Eddie S. Glaude *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For a more thorough discussion of the trope of agency.
- 29** Anti-oppressive education is based in critical perspectives that disrupt Western binary thinking and work toward liberation for all members of marginalized groups. Anti-oppressive education seeks to educate for diversity and social justice, and challenges existing oppressive institutionalized practices.
- 30** I use the term higher consciousness to illustrate the results of a regular meditation practice, which I believe helps students transcend self-ishness, let go of ego-based thoughts, and engage in the present moment.
- 31** Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Zedd Books, 2012), 30.
- 32** Contemplative education is an emerging field in the academy which acknowledges spiritual definitions and practices as an integral part of educating the whole person. However, there is much missing from it—especially transnational feminist perspectives. I really feel like transnational feminist authors contributed to the field like Cynthia Dillard, yet go unrecognized in the body of contemplative literature. Hopefully this part of my dissertation will fill in the gaps between the transnational feminist writing (like Dillard's) and the contemplative studies as I examine professors' spiritual conceptions, definitions, and practices in the higher education classroom.
- 33** See George Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 19. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1929), 9. Jeff Lewis, "Spiritual Education as the Cultivation of Qualities of the Heart and Mind," *Oxford Review of Education* 26 (2000). Eckhart Tolle, *Practicing the Power of Now* (Novato: New World Library, 1999), 58. Dorothy Sisk and Paul Torrance, *Spiritual Intelligence: Developing Higher Consciousness* (Buffalo: Creative Education Foundation Press, 2001), 176. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* 10<sup>th</sup> edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007). The above writers continually showed up in my literature review for my thesis on spirituality in charter schools. While I am not discounting their work (and I found it very valuable) I am suggesting that we need more women and men of color entered into this dialogue. The work of Cynthia Dillard and bell hooks has been very refreshing, and one aim of my work is to highlight more Black feminist thinkers on spirituality in education and literary scholars whose writings enrich our understanding of the spiritual domain.