ARACHNE'S VOICE: RACE, GENDER AND THE GODDESS

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Abstract

This article considers the issue of racial difference in the Goddess movement, using the mythological figure of Arachne, a skilful weaver whom the goddess Athena transformed into a spider, to explore the unequal relational dynamics between white Goddess feminists and women of colour.

Bringing Goddess spirituality and thealogical metaphors of webs and weaving into dialogue with postcolonial and black feminist perspectives on the politics of voice, marginality and representation, the article points to some of the ways in which colonial narratives weave through Goddess feminism, including practices of silencing and the romanticisation of racial difference. Ultimately, I argue that feminist spirituality must recognize and address structural inequality between white women and women of colour, or in other words, listen to Arachne's voice.

Keywords

Goddess movement, thealogy, racism, black feminism, women of colour, feminist spirituality

Introduction

The concept of a feminist spirituality centred around women as a collective group has been closely entwined with the western Goddess movement since its emergence in the 1970s and 80s, although, importantly, feminist spirituality and the Goddess are not synonymous, or even mutually necessary to one another from a standpoint outside of western theology (Rajan 1998).[1] Within a post-Christian framework, Goddess thealogians have reconceived women's embodied experiences as the gateway to retrieving an organic, egalitarian society beyond the constraints of sexism, racism and other forms of injustice, intending to counter the marginalization of women within patriarchal society and culture (Budapest, 2007; Christ, 1979, 2012; Christ and Plaskow, 1979,

[1] Tensions exist between feminist and non-feminist narratives of Goddess feminism, and not everyone drawn to Goddess spirituality is a feminist (Raphael, 1999: 21; Reid-Bowen, 2011).

1989; Daly, 1978; Goldenberg, 1979; Spretnak, 1982; Starhawk, 1999).[2] Nevertheless, structural differences of race, class, gender and ability among women remain an under-analysed problem within the Goddess movement. Particularly where race is concerned, the problem of difference within Goddess feminism is entangled with a western postcolonial horizon which universalises white feminist perspectives. In this article, I argue for the importance of addressing racial difference, which (at the very least) calls into question any unqualified belief in the potential of Goddess feminism to transcend racial inequality.

Race has long been a contentious undercurrent in the movement: as British feminist theologian Melissa Raphael noted, 'the perceived lack of an ethnic mix in Goddess feminism is something of a vexed issue' (1999: 25–6). Similarly in her study of North American Goddess feminists, Cynthia Eller observed that 'the overwhelming whiteness of the movement…is not a fact about which white spiritual feminists are very happy' particularly because it contrasts 'with their dream of a feminist spirituality that brings together women of every race and nationality' (1993: 18–19). Several scholars have problematised the whiteness of women's spirituality, Goddess spirituality and/or the contemporary Pagan movement more broadly (Crowley, 2011; Gallagher, 2000; Klassen, 2004).

Arachnean Metaphors

The ideal of a post-patriarchal, egalitarian society is often associated with the symbol of the 'web of life', which feminist thealogians celebrate as a representation of organic harmony, relationality, plurality and interconnection (Christ, 1997: 135, 2012: 252; Reid-Bowen, 2007: 104). The motif of spinning, weaving, webs and spiders permeates the rituals, ceremonies and most widely-read texts associated with Goddess spirituality. Most notably, Mary Daly

[2] Melissa Raphael uses the term 'post-Christian' to describe how Goddess feminism overturns patriarchal symbols in the Jewish and Christian cultural imaginary (2014).

draws on arachnean imagery to suggest the creative possibilities of a pre- or post-patriarchal gynocentric culture (1978). In Britain, spiritual feminists at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, inspired by Daly's writing, wove webs as a form of peace activism (Welch, 2007: 235). Weaving is referenced in the title of the women's spirituality magazine *Arachne* (1983)—referencing the female figure of classical myth, whom I will discuss below—and in the everyday language of the Goddess community in present-day Glastonbury.[3] Thealogy adopts the spider's web to re-imagine and advocate for an holistically balanced relationship between different life-forms and ways of being, suggesting the hope of repairing an alienated consciousness, what Catherine Keller calls the 'separative self' produced by a technocratic patriarchal society that refuses relational understanding and the life-cycles of organic nature (1986: 38).

It seems to me that the 'vexed' question of racial difference and the fact of the predominant whiteness of the Goddess movement strike a dissonant note when juxtaposed with the spiritual idealism invoked by the 'web of life'—one that I think ought to invite ongoing self-reflection by white Goddess feminists. Questioning the politics of race within women's communities immediately invites in notions of conflict, disconnection and difference, pointing to experiences which are not shared between individuals across differing social and political locations in the relational web. These differences need to be voiced and heard to if there is to be hope of achieving genuine inclusivity and social transformation. Ruptures of relationality and understanding are deeply implicated in the contemporary social fabric, in which Goddess feminism—in spite of its internal emphasis on retrieving an idealized, prehistoric gynocentric culture—is irrevocably entangled. As a woman of colour with an investment in the hopeful visions of equality woven by feminist spirituality and as a scholar of critical race and gender theory, I am

[3] For example, brochures for the annual Glastonbury Goddess Conference refer to the organizers as 'weavers' and 'spinners', and the act of web-weaving forms an important part of the community's rituals and mythmaking practices (see also Jones 1994, 2006).

interested in pointing out the limitations of idealizing the spider's web as a singular representation of fluid, organic interconnection.

Spider webs are useful conceptual tools to think with when considering relationships of social power and inequality. Webs are fragile but sticky structures, easily broken and re-woven, difficult either to escape or to perceive clearly. They have distinctive patterns and shapes. They may represent both the creation of new social structures but also the reproduction of sexist, racist and imperialist narratives, leading to the ongoing entrapment of people marginalized by race, class, gender and disability. To my mind, they are metaphors of emancipatory hope and the entanglements of oppressive, sedimented histories at the same time—as I think is the case with the Goddess movement. Spiders themselves are ambivalent symbols: both creators and predators, they spin translucent, delicate structures, and they consume other life-forms for sustenance. Their eight-legged, segmented bodies evoke affects of awe and anxiety. Spiders may inspire thoughts of creative change, but they also provoke fear—much like talking about race in the contemporary political climate.[4]

(Un)weaving White Goddess Feminism

That spider webs are structures with multiple interconnecting nodes makes them apt metaphors for the social fabric in all its sticky complexity. As black and brown feminist scholars have argued, focusing on the common identity of women as a collective group does not address the specific embodiment of women of colour and their/our experiences of racism not only at the hands of men, but of white women (Carby, 1997; Lorde, 1984b; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty,

[4] Here I refer to the recent online and media controversies regarding the decolonizing movement in UK universities (see for example Emejulu 2017) and the activism of writers of colour who are drawing attention to racism, for example *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). The uncomfortable reactions evinced by some members of the audience in response to the lecture I delivered at the University of Winchester in May 2018 (on which this article is based) further illustrates my theme.

1984). Thinking about gender entails thinking beyond sexual difference alone—that is, the (structural, not essential) difference between women and men that produces sexism and patriarchal social patterns. In the framework I am using, gender as a lens for feminist analysis is incomplete and ought to be critiqued if it does not acknowledge multiple axes of oppression, including race and the effects of colonial histories (Ahmed, 1998; Butler, 1992; Narayan and Harding, 2000; Scott, 1986). To do otherwise reproduces colonial violence, and continually centres the contexts and voices of white, able-bodied, cis-gendered western women.[5]

Where my reinterpretation of the spider's web differs from the thealogical metaphor of the 'web of life' is, first of all, in the acknowledgement that embodied relationality always involves social relationships of power in some form, beyond the capacity of individuals to transcend by themselves.[6] Secondly, thinking about spider webs as a metaphor for socio-political structures involves denaturalizing and deromanticizing the ideal of an organic, pre-given social harmony, whether conceived as (pre)historical or present-day.[7] Thirdly, it counters the assumption that Goddess feminists' desire to move beyond patriarchy is sufficient to overcome the multiple patterns of inequality knotted into the contemporary social fabric—especially postcolonial, racialized differences between white women and women of colour. As bell hooks argues, sexism is not analogous to racism (1982: 136). White women cannot attribute structural racism to white male colonizers alone or to a global patriarchy without consequently marginalizing the collective voices of women of colour.

[5] The terms 'women' and 'women of colour' include transwomen. Although I do not discuss transphobia in the Goddess movement in this article, gender should be read as a fluid and inclusive social category for analysis. My theorization of Arachne's voice certainly includes the marginalization of non-binary people of colour and racialized transwomen.

[6] This contrasts with the concept of atomistic, personal 'power over' versus 'power from within' that I've often encountered among Goddess feminists (Starhawk, 1997: 1–14).

[7] In fact, I view conceptions of prehistory, including Goddess feminist narratives of prehistoric matriarchies, as products of the socio-political desires of the present.

In using the term 'women of colour', I am describing and locating myself within a term of political solidarity which emerged in the late 1970s US (and which later gained traction in the UK) to name and oppose experiences of racism and marginalization shared by all non-white women across our differing social positions and interests. To identify as a woman of colour is not merely descriptive: the term invokes the history of women's personal and political resistance to colonial legacies and the history of racialization (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981; Mama, 1984; Swaby, 2014).[8]

Naming whiteness in this context is likewise a political act rather than a neutral description. Rather than voicing marginality, however, whiteness indicates the site of historically unmarked power, the previously invisible norm which structures the threads of racism woven through the contemporary social web (Frankenberg, 1993; Ware, 1992).[9] Whiteness is not an 'ontological given', which is to say that it is not an essential racial or cultural identity (Ahmed, 2004: 150). Claims to a 'white selfhood' outside of an antiracist framework are incompatible with the dismantling of racist structures (Back, 2009: 445). The whiteness of the Goddess movement, therefore, cannot, or should not, be read merely as describing the *absence* of women of colour. Rather, it points to a deeper problem: how colonial narratives of race and gender continue to weave through the imaginative web of Goddess feminism, resulting in white Goddess feminists' continual marginalization and appropriation of women of colour as contemporary speaking beings.

It is necessary to point out here that critiques of Goddess feminism's whiteness (and in fact there are few in-depth critiques which draw on critical race and postcolonial theory) do not, as Carol Christ has suggested, erase 'the participation of non-white and non-privileged women' in the Goddess and feminist spirituality movements, nor do they 'assume…that non-white and

[8] The term 'racialization' emphasizes 'the dynamic and processual nature of identities' constructed through race (Murji and Solomos, 2005: 8).
[9] I say 'previously' because as Les Back has pointed out, the terrain of racist discourse has adapted to the point where whiteness is increasingly and troublingly represented as a discrete identity under threat (2009: 446).

non-privileged women are unaffected by powerful cultural symbols that encourage women to depend on and subordinate themselves to men' (2012: 247). This argument ignores the politics of women of colour, black feminism and the antiracist trajectory of critiques of whiteness, as explained above. It reproduces the elision of the structural difference between white women and women of colour, who do not share the same social status, mobility and power, and who are not heard and recognised on the same terms as white women— or even *by* white women (Carby, 1997; hooks, 1982; Lorde, 1984c).

From an antiracist feminist position, pointing out the whiteness of the Goddess movement ought to lead to a consideration of the collective, political self-definition and activism of black and brown women, in their/our multiple voices and on their/our own terms. It is a means to re-imagine the racial oppression of women, and to enable their/our voices to be heard. There are, of course, a minority of less visible black and brown women who (like myself) have participated or may currently participate in white Goddess communities—but why should the unfolding of our positionalities, stories and voices be used as evidence by white Goddess feminists that their movement has not inherited the racialized patterns of the wider social fabric? At best, this line of thought leads to tokenism and an investment in what Gloria Wekker describes as 'white innocence' (2016: 17), contributing to the continual marginalization of the voices of women of colour.

Arachne's Voice

The mythological figure of Arachne, whose Greek name signifies 'spider', offers potential insight for navigating the multiple, tangled threads that structure marginality. Interweaving themes of creativity, resistance and power, her story is an apt parable for the politics of voice and representation. I see Arachne as continually posing the following question: who is weaving what story, and why? Any and all attempts to develop an answer require attention to the positionality and context of the weaver in relation to marginalized others.

Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1986: 206–211) is a famed weaver who refuses to attribute her illustrious skill to Pallas Athena, and challenges the goddess to a contest at the loom. Athena accepts, depicting the majesty of the Olympian pantheon and the punishments incurred by those who dared to challenge their authority. The defiant Arachne, by contrast, weaves a tapestry revealing the gods in a less than favourable light, portraying their rape of mortal women. She wins the contest when Athena can find no fault with the superior quality of her weaving. In a rage, Athena tears up the tapestry and torments Arachne, striking the young woman with her shuttle. Arachne then tries to escape the goddess's wrath by hanging herself, and Athena finally decides to take pity and spare her life—but in doing so, she transforms Arachne into a spider.

Feminist readings of this myth emphasize Arachne's role as a figure who protests patriarchal authority, willfully defying the regime upheld by Athena, the goddess who identifies with the law of her father (Kruger 2013: 67, Miller 1986, Keller 1986). To reassert the legitimacy of the Olympian gods and punish the revelation of their misdeeds, the goddess changes Arachne from a speaking being into a marginalized creature who is 'virtually all body' and must hang from a thread, continuously weaving her webs outside of human language and representation (Miller 1986: 273–4). A symbol of women artists and storytellers, Arachne's skill in weaving a counternarrative to Athena's theocratic text renders the myth 'a figuration of woman's relation of production to the dominant culture, and…a possible parable (or critical modelling) of a feminist poetics' (Miller, 1986: 272).

In feminist writing and activism, including Goddess feminist narratives, the motif of spinning and weaving symbolically asserts women's creativity and political agency. The story of Arachne has served as a way of naming, celebrating and reversing women's marginality—albeit without attending to (particularly racial) difference. As mentioned above, in weaving counternarratives to patriarchal history and theology, Goddess feminism

tends to elide the differential positions and contexts of white women and women of colour.

Feminist Arachnopolitics

I offer a more nuanced reading of Arachne's story and its usefulness for thinking about the dynamics of marginality, especially the relations of power woven through contemporary patterns of postcolonial, racialized difference. In this reading, the antagonistic and unequal relationship between Athena and Arachne mirrors the silencing and appropriation of the voices of women of colour. Athena's transformation of Arachne and her banishment from the realm of human speech is key to opening up this parable to a plurality of interpretive positions: Arachne must weave her dissenting webs in perpetuity, but without the capacity to 'speak' or make others understand her representations on her own terms.

Black and postcolonial feminist scholars have shown how the politics of voice and the capacity to speak are more accurately understood in terms of the willingness of those with greater social power to listen to the voices of the marginalized—and importantly, to do so in a way that does not appropriatively re-present marginalized speech for their own ends. For example, Gayatri Spivak's work on subalternity (2010) is concerned with the unequal relationship between the postcolonial global North and South, and with the way that unequal narrative frameworks emerging from imperialist and postcolonial nationalist contexts disempower women in the most underprivileged classes in the global South. Entangled between the narratives of western imperialist feminism and bourgeois nationalist patriarchy, Spivak argues that subaltern women have no space to 'speak' in the metaphorical sense or come to voice on their own terms. More precisely, the dominant culture cannot and will not listen (2010: 61).

In a similar vein, Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticises white western feminists who construct a homogenous representation of 'a composite, singular "Third World Woman"', a figure encoded with a 'homogenous notion' of difference, 'that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries' (1984: 334–5). The representation of 'Third World Woman' does not recognise the heterogeneity—that is, the differential, local, material contexts—of women in the global South or of black and brown women in diasporas in the global North. This colonial figure ignores the multiple voices of women in the contexts of their own lives, speaking over and speaking *for* the racially marginalized. The result is that white western women have tended to represent themselves as the torch-bearers of progress, authorized to speak for the oppression of both their non-western and western darker 'sisters'. As I will discuss below, imperialist feminist narratives weave through Mary Daly's work (see also Barton, 2012; West, 2012).

In a third example, Kristie Dotson points out that 'to communicate *we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us*' (2011: 238; emphasis in original). Drawing on work of black feminist philosopher Patricia Hill Collins (2000), she describes how inherited racial stereotypes woven through the social fabric result in a public devaluing of the knowledge, testimony and credibility of women of colour. The result of this is the enactment of routine practices of silencing—first, through 'testimonial quieting', which Dotson defines as 'when an audience fails to recognise a speaker as a knower' (2011: 242). Secondly, 'testimonial smothering' is a form of 'coerced silencing' which occurs when a (racialized) speaker modifies or 'smothers' her words because, after weighing the risks, she knows an audience is likely to respond with ignorance or be unable to recognise the credibility and value of her speech (2011: 244).

The politics of voice and representation suggest that the consequence of the contest at the loom is not so much that Arachne can no longer weave her story or speak after her apparent transformation into a frighteningly non-

human creature, but rather that Athena refuses to hear her, effectively (mis)using her divine position to banish the possibility of reciprocal dialogue. Although white Goddess feminists have adopted the figure of Arachne and the motif of the web to represent and resist the dynamics of patriarchal oppression, they have tended to engage in an (and here I introduce a neologism) *arachnopolitical* dynamic in relation to black feminists and women of colour. The spider's multi-layered ambivalence weaves through this relational dynamic. The goddess Athena preys upon her less powerful mortal counterpart, using her divine authority to silence and appropriate Arachne's voice by re-presenting the brave and skilled weaver as a non-speaking, lowly spider. In the non-fictional context of racial difference, the story brings to mind the trope of the angry black woman or woman of colour whose defiant and uncompromising speech about inequality becomes unintelligible to white feminists, as described by the black lesbian feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde (1984c; see also Ahmed, 2010).

Lorde and Daly Revisited

To illustrate the arachnopolitical dynamic between Arachne and Athena, I turn to the example of the dispute between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly and the subsequent public controversy, deeply entangled as it is with the unequal relational patterns of voice, power and representation between black and white women. In 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly' (1984a), Lorde critiques *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) for its homogenous representation of black women, in Lorde's words, 'only as victims and preyers-upon each other' in the chapter on African genital mutilation, which Daly opens using one of Lorde's poems (1984a: 67). Stating first of all that she finds much of value in *Gyn/Ecology*—and she specifically refers to its 'words on the nature and function of the Goddess', acknowledging her relationship with spirituality—Lorde then states her disappointment at the text's Eurocentric focus, its disregard of racial difference and misrepresentation of black women:

> Then, to realize that the only quotations from Black women's words were the ones you used to introduce your chapter on African genital mutilation made me question why you needed to use them at all. For my part, I felt that you had in fact mis-used my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of Color….So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women?
>
> (1984a: 68)

Here, Lorde is expressing her frustration that Daly has used her words without really listening to or understanding their meaning and the antiracist context in which she was writing. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly touches on antiracist criticism in a footnote but rejects it, stating that 'accusations of "racism" may come from ignorance, but they serve only the interest of males, not of women' (1978: 154). Daly names racism in double inverted commas, or scare quotes—an act which invalidates the term and undermines the black feminist context of Lorde's critique.

Daly cannot imagine why black women would criticise white feminists who speak for and homogenize them as the victims of cultural oppression, as has since been elaborated at length by postcolonial feminists. Instead she claims that '[t]his kind of accusation and intimidation constitutes an astounding and damaging reversal, for it is clearly in the interest of Black women that feminists of all races should speak out' (1978: 154). It is important to draw attention here to Daly's remark that black feminist criticism constitutes a form of 'intimidation' in demanding accountability from white feminists, and how her use of the phrase 'all races' essentialises and relativises racial difference. She sidesteps the problem of structural racism and the unequal power relationship between white women and women of colour within the contemporary postcolonial web.

In the allegory of Arachne's voice, I read Lorde and the black feminist context of her words in the position of Arachne, challenging stereotypes that reproduce racial inequality. Daly and the narratives of white imperialist feminism, which universalise marginality and erase racial difference, mirror the position of Athena and her response to Arachne. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly envisions a thealogical 'ludic cerebration', a radical feminist re-weaving of new

words and worlds (1978: 386). However in the same text, she reproduces a racialized framework that foregrounds the creative, liberatory potential of white women through erasing and objectifying black women, in effect—to draw an arachnopolitical phrase from Lorde's letter as cited above—'preying upon' them.

Debates over whether and how Daly responded to Lorde's letter are suggestive of the ways race continues to be under-acknowledged and misrepresented in white feminist discourse (De Veaux, 2004; Messina, 2011; West, 2012: 115). Laura Levitt, for instance, grants more praise to Daly's silence than she does to Lorde's outspoken speech, interpreting Daly's lack of follow-up after her initial, cursory reply to Lorde's letter as a 'powerful statement' that 'enabled' Lorde's letter to be heard and appreciated by the public (2012: 109–112). She valorises Daly's work, implying that Daly sacrificed her reputation by allowing the public to think she had not responded in order to allow Lorde to make a political statement. This point of view trivialises Lorde's position by ignoring the history of racial power and oppression which has structured the differential conditions of silence and speech for white and black women, and it undermines the powerful significance of Lorde's words for black feminists.

In terms of reading the (arachno)politics of voice and representation, this is an example of what Kristie Dotson defines as 'testimonial quieting' (2011: 242), undermining Lorde's status as an outspoken black lesbian feminist activist and her credibility as a knower and truth-teller. My own view here is that Lorde likely considered Daly's response insubstantial, in that it evades her specific critiques of *Gyn/Ecology*'s eurocentrism and erasure of black women. Politically speaking, it is a non-response. Lorde's (1984) letter indicates ongoing problems with white Goddess feminist narratives which continue to require receptive engagement.

Romanticising Racial Difference

The homogenising narratives of white imperial feminism which silence the voices of women of colour are entangled with a pattern of appropriating and fetishizing racialized otherness, as existing feminist scholarship on Goddess and women's spirituality has begun to explore (Crowley, 2011; Eller, 2000; Munst, 1995). In *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, Eller states that for spiritual feminists, '[a]dopting African religions and black goddesses is another way of reversing traditional symbol structures, siding with the oppressed and making them the real heroines of spiritual feminist culture' (1993: 73). However, I profoundly disagree with the implied leap from racial and cultural appropriation to 'siding with the oppressed', which I think entirely sidesteps the way racial inequality operates through the (arachno)politics of voice and representation. White Goddess feminists tend to romanticise blackness and darkness as the signs of suppressed power, mystery and alterity, for example through black goddesses (Barham, 2003) and the 'dark mother' (Sjöö, 1992: 146–50). This is not equivalent to recognising women of colour as contemporary, living, speaking beings with racialized, structurally different standpoints and histories in relation to white women.

In her analysis of New Age culture, Karlyn Crowley argues that white women's spirituality (including white Goddess feminism) opens up 'agency and empowerment for women even as it rests on suspect racial logics' (2011: 21) which, in the end, preclude it from becoming truly liberating (2011: 169). Like Eller, she notes white women's desire to see their spiritual practices and communities as more inclusive and diverse than they actually are, but further illuminates the problematic relationship between the visionary fantasy and social reality:

> [W]hite women participate in New Age culture in part to negotiate the long, complex, and some would say failed political alliances with women of colour. Just when women of color challenged feminism and women's and gender studies for its racist foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, many white women turned toward New Age spiritual practices that "allowed" them to live out fantasy unions with women of color that were disrupted in the public, feminist-political sphere.
>
> (2011: 8)

Returning again to arachnean metaphors, this fantasy of post-racial relationality moves beyond a desire for empathic identification to the appropriation and consumption of the voices and cultural contexts of racialized, fetishized others (Crowley, 2011: 9; hooks 1992: 21), rather than the recognition of socio-political difference necessary for antiracist feminist solidarity.

Goddess feminists who identify themselves with indigeneity and non-western indigenous cultures participate in this arachnopolitical cycle. In *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, for example, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor discuss the violent effects of colonialism, but in doing so they associate what they describe as 'matrifocal cultures', one of which they name as the 'pre-Aryan Toda people of India', with 'ancient Paleolithic and Neolithic peoples' in prehistoric, preliterate European cultures (1987: 25–6). Ironically, they cite the twentieth-century anticolonial and antiracist black philosopher Frantz Fanon to describe the impact of colonial violence, before linking the category of women as a whole to the category of the colonized, erasing entirely the perspectives of black feminists and women of colour.

Describing how colonizing empires drain the 'memory' and 'continuity of identity of a people', they go on to assert:

> No one should recognize this process better than women; for the female sex has functioned as a colony of organized patriarchal power for several thousand years now. Our brains have been emptied out of all memory of our own cultural history, and the colonizing power systematically denies such a history even existed. The colonizing power mocks our attempts to rediscover and celebrate our ancient matriarchies as realities.
>
> (1987: 27)

In their desire to affirm the existence of prehistoric matriarchies, Sjöö and Mor erase contemporary racial inequality by describing the 'female sex' as a universal 'colony of organized patriarchal power', enabling them to identify themselves with indigenous and colonized women, without addressing their own racially privileged positions as white western women. They thereby erase not only the specific forms of oppression experienced by western women of colour, whose lives and histories have been shaped by contemporary histories

of racialization and colonization, but the contexts of all indigenous people and colonized people in the global South in general.

Clearly the appropriative identification of white women with indigeneity is incompatible with the antiracist and postcolonial feminist positions outlined above, which advocate for the recognition of the voices of women of colour (Arachnean voices) who are resisting racialized representations and practices of silencing. Furthermore, for white women to re-imagine themselves as an indigenous colony risks further enabling the problematic recuperation of 'white selfhood' (Back 2009: 445) which ought to be understood as damaging to the progress of racial equality and the egalitarian societies desired by Goddess feminists.

Conclusion

Although white Goddess feminists idealize the egalitarian relationality of Goddess-centred, gynocentric societies which thealogians symbolize using the motif of webs and weaving, racial inequality is knotted into the fabric of the contemporary Goddess movement. In presenting a critical reading of the movement's whiteness, I am advocating for naming and decentring the threads of white feminism that undermine a more inclusive and egalitarian concept of feminist spirituality, spun from the visionary voices of black feminists and women of colour.

The fact that the Goddess movement has remained a predominantly white movement and that thealogy has so far not significantly recognised or addressed racial inequality should not be understood as accidental: I find it significant that white Goddess feminists developed their creative vision during the 1970s and 80s, at the same time that the political movement of black feminists and women of colour became increasingly vocal about the legacy of western colonialism, racism and racial difference. Antiracist critiques of white feminism, which are not by any means novel, have so far been excluded from the white women's spirituality and Goddess movements. Whereas genuine political solidarity across racial difference does not visibly feature in Goddess

spirituality practices and thealogical writing, patterns of racial romanticisation and white Goddess feminists' universalisation of marginality seem to persist. I have consequently introduced the term *arachnopolitics* as a critical tool to untangle and contest the relational dynamic in which white Goddess feminists appropriate, erase and silence the voices of women of colour. My reinterpretation of the figure of Arachne and the arachnean motif is a means for black and brown women to reclaim space and to contest postcolonial racial inequality and to spin new creative texts of their/our own.

To me, feminist spirituality (whether or not the concept of the Goddess remains at the centre of its visionary web) articulates a way of living and thinking that is both political and imaginative, part of a changing socio-political fabric with an unfolding horizon of possibility. I no longer view feminist spirituality as synonymous with the Goddess movement, precisely because the latter is, in my experience and analyses, too deeply entangled with white feminist narratives, continually disregarding the words and activism of antiracist black and brown feminists. What feminist spirituality is or can be most definitely deserves further critical exploration and interpretation beyond my focus in this article on the silencing practices of white feminism. However, I maintain that this exploration must be critical: as Sara Ahmed states, '[a] feminist project is to find ways in which women can exist in relation to women; how women can be in relation to each other. It is a project because we are not there yet' (2017: 14).

Before feminists can weave new visions, we need to address the reproduction of patterns of inequality, including contemporary racism and its tangled, insidious threads. To do otherwise risks (un)knowingly reweaving historical harms. Faced with repeated discrimination and exclusion, women of colour are continuing to call out inequality and weave new relational visions within the web of contemporary society: Goddess feminists, listen to Arachne's voice.

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