

HEALING, HONORING, TRANSFORMING: THE POWER OF SPIRITUAL
ACTIVISM IN MARILOU AWIAKTA'S WORK

A THESIS

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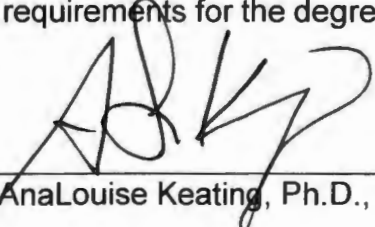
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To the Dean of the Graduate School:


I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Colleen Moore entitled "Healing, Honoring, Transforming: The Power of Spiritual Activism in Marilou Awiakta's Work." I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Women's Studies.



AnaLouise Keating, Ph.D., Major Professor


We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:





Department Chair

Accepted:



Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

To my parents Dave and Lois, my sister Wendy, and my niece Presley, with whose love and support anything can be accomplished.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

COLLEEN MOORE

HEALING, HONORING, TRANSFORMING: THE POWER OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM IN MARILOU AWIAKTA'S WORK

MAY 2012

Marilou Awiakta, author of *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*, is a Cherokee/Appalachian author whose work reveals the web that connects all life and demonstrates how important it is to protect and honor every living thing. I believe that poet/author Marilou Awiakta's work exposes the interconnections between all living things—her work is part of the heartbeat that initiates spiritual activism. I define spiritual activism as creating concrete positive transformation that benefits all life. When one is a spiritual activist, one respects and works to sustain all living things, becoming an agent of change for people, nature, and animals—protecting the interconnections between all forms of life. In this thesis I will discuss what spiritual activism is, the ways in which Awiakta's work demonstrates and calls for spiritual activism, the potential transformation that can occur with spiritual activism, and how Women's Studies can benefit from increased awareness of and attention to Awiakta's work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
I. INTERCONNECTIONS: BECOMING A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST	1
II. TRANSFORMATIONS: WORKING AS A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST	16
III. COMMUNITY:LEARNING FROM A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST.....	22
WORKS CITED	33
WORKS CONSULTED.....	37

CHAPTER I

INTERCONNECTIONS: BECOMING A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST

We have never really understood that we are one small part of a very large family that includes the plant world, the animal world and our other living relations. How can we possibly keep our world from spinning out of balance if we don't have a fundamental understanding of our relationship to everything around us?

Wilma P. Mankiller

Wilma P. Mankiller makes an important point—that everyone and everything is interconnected. We share multiple connections that weave between and among us, back and forth, over and under, through. When these interconnections are honored, powerful transformation can occur. When the interconnections are not honored, we lose our way and our focus on what is best for all living things; equilibrium is lost and unjust power systems, which no longer honor the interconnections between all living things, take hold. Oppressive, hierarchical structures dominate life and living. Feminists and other social justice workers have been working for over a century to change oppressive power structures that benefit the few while harming the many. There have been great successes, but ground that was once won has been lost.¹ There is still great change that needs to occur. I believe that in order to create real and lasting positive change, one must employ spiritual activism. Spiritual activism can take

¹ Consider, for instance, the erosion of Roe vs. Wade and the attacks on affirmative action.

many forms, but at its center is the desire for transformation, led by the belief that all life is important and sacred.

In this thesis I will discuss what spiritual activism is, the ways in which Marilou Awiakta's work demonstrates and calls for spiritual activism, the potential transformation that can occur with spiritual activism, and how Women's Studies can benefit from increased awareness of and attention to Awiakta's work. In chapter one I will present background information on Awiakta, her life and work, and define spiritual activism with attention to the work of scholars in the field. In chapter two I will discuss the ways in which Awiakta's work exemplifies spiritual activism while expanding the definition. In chapter three I will explore the potential outcomes of increased scholarship on Awiakta, and the specific ways Women's Studies as a discipline could benefit from Awiakta's work.

I first became aware of spiritual activism through the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Eventually Leela Fernandes, AnaLouise Keating, and Thich Nhat Hahn added to and expanded my understanding of spiritual activism. Anzaldúa discusses spiritual activism in "now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts," where she describes the seven stages of *conocimiento*, her theory of transformative knowledge; stage seven is spiritual activism. Anzaldúa describes the transformative power that spiritual activism can have on individuals and the world when she states that "you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self

and between others, and find common ground by forming holistic alliances” (545). Instead of focusing on differences, spiritual activism spotlights commonalities, making it easier for diverse people to identify with each other and work towards understanding each other’s viewpoint because of what Keating, in “Forging El Mundo Zurdo: Changing Ourselves, Changing the World,” calls the “radical interrelatedness” (522) we all share. Leela Fernandes, in *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, asserts that positive change will not take place until we honor all living things and the bonds we share: “I suggest that movements for social or political transformation have faltered not because of the impossibility of realizing their visions of social justice, but because such transformations cannot be complete unless they are explicitly and inextricably linked to a deeper form of spiritual transformation on a mass basis” (11). Sharing what she learned from Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings in “On Building a Community of Love,” bell hooks discusses the outcome of what spiritual practice—a form of spiritual activism—can accomplish: “In this world all efforts to end domination, to bring peace and justice, were spiritual practice” (239). Also writing about Nhat Hahn’s teaching, Jennifer Schwamm, editor of *A Lifetime of Peace: Essential Writings by and about Thich Nhat Hanh*, wrote “If we wound others, we wound ourselves. If we deny others freedom, we lose our freedom. If we work to bring them peace and joy, we will have peace and joy” (xiv). These statements illustrate how

connected we all are to each other: what affects one affects us all. By being spiritually active we can ensure that we are taking measures that all will have freedom, peace, and joy.

I define spiritual activism as creating concrete positive transformation that benefits all life. When one is a spiritual activist, one respects and works to sustain all living things, becoming an agent of change for people, nature, and animals, protecting the interconnections between all forms of life. While Anzaldúa, Fernandes, Keating, and Nhat Hanh have all contributed to my understanding of spiritual activism, it was Marilou Awiakta's work that caused me to take hold of the idea and truly see the potential and power of spiritual activism, as I began to transform my own ways of knowing, thinking, and interacting with myself and the world around me. I believe that poet/author Marilou Awiakta's work exposes the interconnections between all living things—her work is part of the heartbeat that initiates spiritual activism. Awiakta's work reveals the web that connects all life and demonstrates how important it is to protect and honor every living thing. In *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* Awiakta states, "we are all part of the web. What affects one strand affects us all" (61).

Reading and honestly engaging with Awiakta's work can help one to start down a spiritually active path that can result in powerful transformation, affecting all members/parts of the web. The moment I first read Awiakta's words, transformation began and my path changed. What had once been invisible

became visible. I felt the call to acknowledge the interconnections around me, and to work to ensure the strength of the web. Marilou Awiakta's work illustrates how the power of spiritual activism is/can be transformational using her message of healing, balance, interconnectedness, and community. Indeed, I would define Awiakta's work as a form of spiritual activism.

As an author, Awiakta shares her life and life experiences—her Cherokee and Appalachian heritage, her relationship with science and nature, and her identity as a woman and poet/author—to illustrate the interconnections that are all around us. Her background is just as important as her work because one informs and influences the other. Growing up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in the Appalachian Mountains, Awiakta spent her formative years immersed in the dichotomy of science and nature. Raised in the shadow of the Manhattan Project (the U.S. War Department's program for the development and production of the atomic bomb), Awiakta's childhood was spent among advanced scientific research and application. Growing up around a state-of-the-art nuclear reactor and nuclear research center, Awiakta was among leading, cutting-edge scientific work, yet her surroundings were not drab, clinical, or sterile. While science and technology were all around her, so were nature and family. Awiakta's family was deeply rooted in the Great Smoky Mountains where seven generations of her family had lived. Awiakta's playground was in nature: the trees, hollows, and creeks of the mountain. Her family, as well as her environment, nurtured

Awiakta's awareness of the interconnections that exist between people, animals, and nature. In her poem, "An Indian Walks In Me," Awiakta shares her knowledge of these interconnections, describing how before she knew anything about scientific connections, she knew we were all linked because she could sense, hear, feel the interconnections:

Long before I learned the
universal turn of atoms, I heard
the spirit's song that binds us
all as one (*Abiding Appalachia* 15).

Awiakta was able to see two of the main parts of her life—science and nature—coexist easily. As Grace Toney Edwards explains in "Marilou Awiakta: Poet for the People," Awiakta "thrived in that hub of scientific experimentation and advancement. Her interests leaned toward the artistic and literary, but she recognized the great import of the scientific and appreciated the community culture that acknowledged the essential co-existence of science and art" (22).

During World War II Oak Ridge was a community with a singular purpose, to split the atom. There was no real class delineation as everyone in the community worked together; it was an egalitarian society. Awiakta had learned from her parents and grandparents about interconnections, mutual respect, and keeping life in balance, and for the most part she was witnessing this way of life in the Oak Ridge community. As she explains in *Selu: Seeking the Corn-*

Mother's Wisdom, "As a child, I was very happy with the Cherokee-Celtic heritage my parents taught me—namely, that all life is a web and that the deepest reality is the spirit that lies beyond the world we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. I had my feet (bare feet) on my homeground, where my ancestors had lived for generations. I felt very centered" (189). Soon after World War II ended, life in Oak Ridge changed. The community no longer had the singular purpose of aiding the war effort. Science was still a main focus of the city, but the community aspect was gone. Society broke into separate groups—native residents of the mountains and scientists or newcomers. Life and daily interactions went from cooperative and supportive to blaming and suspicious. Each side was fearful of and looked down on the other. Awiakta was torn. While she could be considered a native of the area, she also grew up with and among the scientists. She had a place in both worlds and could see the good in each. She needed to "find an equilibrium between heart and mind, mountain and atom, art and science—and a language to express the balance" (*Selu* 150).

Unfortunately, Awiakta did not find the equilibrium she yearned for during her school years. Instead of experiencing the freedom to discover new ways to honor all aspects of herself, she found that she had to shut many parts of herself away. Awiakta's Western collegiate education did not allow for new ways of thinking. The Western ideal had no room for a new or different language for self-expression; instead, Awiakta had fit herself into the compartmentalized world of

Western thought. To survive and flourish in school, Awiakta had to shut out and deny her Appalachian/Cherokee roots. Instead of honoring her whole self, she was forced to live a fragmented life: “To make it through, I had to adapt from the web to the boxes” (*Selu* 189). Awiakta’s heritage had no place in her formal education, and it seemed that the other areas of her life were trying to keep those roots buried as well. She was caught in an epistemological struggle between Western and Native American ways of knowing: “Everywhere I turned I found a ‘squared world,’ a society so compartmentalized that life, including my own, had no room to move around, to breathe” (*Selu* 189).

It was not until Awiakta was in her thirties, living and working in France, that she began to reconnect with those long-buried parts of herself. She had to work to heal and weave those parts of herself back together. As she worked on the integration, she realized how closed off the dominant culture’s epistemology was: “Where the Western dynamic is detachment, the Native American dynamic is connection” (*Selu* 164). Awiakta understood that in order to survive, let alone thrive, she would have to slough off the stifling detachment of the dominant culture so that she could be at peace with herself. This process was not easy. As she explains, “Millimeter by millimeter, I unlearned inappropriate modes of thought and relearned the ones my parents had taught me” (*Selu* 134). Giving attention and voice to her Cherokee/Appalachian roots and ways of

knowing/being made her happier, more productive. Explaining how she felt in her poem “An Indian Walks In Me,” Awiakta declared:

No more
will I follow any rule
that splits my soul (*Selu* 190).

After realizing the dominant culture’s destructive power of the closed off, compartmentalized, blinders-on epistemology, Awiakta was no longer caught in an epistemological struggle between Western and Native American thinking. Why would people live fragmented lives in rigid boxes when they could experience a whole and complete existence? Leaving the boxes behind and allowing herself the freedom to exist within her Native ways of knowing, Awiakta was able to “[mark] the beginning of [her] healing” (*Selu* 190).

Awiakta’s work builds on this personal epistemological discovery. She seeks to open the socially-proscribed boxes, take the walls down, and let people see the potential in the web of life, just as she did for herself. As she explains in *Selu*,

With [“An Indian Walks Within Me”] as the center of my life-web, I began to retrieve other broken strands from their boxes, to remember what I’d been taught as a child, and to seek other knowledge that my Western education had essentially omitted: the history of indigenous peoples, especially the Cherokee, as well as

the history of women and their contributions to every field of study. Unraveling the diverse strands, I gradually perceived a pattern of unity among them, a way to take the positive aspects of my Cherokee/Appalachian heritage and of the high-tech world and weave them into a new harmony. (190-91)

By letting go of the closed-off, boxed-in mentality of Western culture, Awiakta was again able to experience and enact different ways of thinking and doing. She was able to take up her quest to achieve the equilibrium she had been striving to recover/reinvent since her later years in Oak Ridge.

Moving beyond the dominant culture's epistemology—compartmentalized, separate, action before thought—allowed Awiakta to reconnect with her heritage and see the interconnections that are all around. Awiakta believes that all things (people, animals, nature, and so on) are connected by a web of life: "We are all part of the web. What affects one strand affects us all" (*Selu* 61). This perception of interconnectedness has important ethical implications. Everything we do, every decision, every action, has far-reaching effects because we are all connected, so all of our decisions, all of our actions will reverberate and affect all parts of the web. Because of these far-reaching effects, we need to be aware of our actions' consequences. Instead of thinking only about personal self-interest, we should try to act in ways that will benefit all other living things. Doing so, we enact spiritual activism.

I believe that spiritual activism (which can take many forms) first starts with the self, and then moves outward. Once one has balance in their life they start to try to reach out and be a part of positive transformation in the world. Reading Awiakta's work can be spiritual activism, because she does not ask readers to just passively read her words and then put the book away. Awiakta wants the reader to be an active participant in the book, even to the point of co-creating. As she explains in *Selu*,

although this book contains my seed-thoughts about survival and the Corn-Mother, as you gather them up, please add your own. Contemplate the value of your heritage, remember the stories that are meaningful to you, underline, write responses in the margin, tuck between the pages clippings and notes of other survival wisdoms you've found. Make this *our* book. (38, author's emphasis)

Truly engaging with the material in *Selu*, the reader finds herself beginning to transform. It is almost as if Awiakta wrote *Selu* as a workbook: first she asks you to participate and then you find you do not want to stop. You want to continue strengthening yourself and all aspects of the web of life.

To help the reader react and interact with *Selu* in new and distinct ways from the average, standard book, Awiakta employs a writing style that deviates from the usual method of Western culture. She does not offer a linear story;

instead, Awiakta writes in the “doublewoven” style. Comparing her writing style to doubleweaving a basket, Awiakta explains why she employs this method of writing: “A round, doublewoven basket in the Oklahoma Cherokee style is this book’s natural form, arising from the thoughts themselves. As I worked with the poems, essays and stories, I saw they shared a common base” (34). Like a basket that has been doublewoven, *Selu* has distinct parts, but they are still “interconnected, and they reconverge in the basic law of respect and balance” (35). Because most of us have been trained to think and read according to a linear pattern, in which there is one way of doing things, reading a non-linear story or book can be jolting. Instead of just letting the reader be uncomfortable, Awiakta explains, she has adopted this back-and-forth, doublewoven style of writing in order to help the reader understand and navigate the stories.

Awiakta offers explanation as a way to ground the reader/participant and give them bearings: “The basket image conveys the principle of composition quickly. Reading will be easy if you keep the weaving mode in mind: Over ... under ... over ... under. A round basket never runs ‘straight-on’” (*Selu* 34). This doublewoven basket style serves multiple purposes. It allows Awiakta to share her non-linear writing, which is an extension of her heritage and the non-traditional ways of knowing it provides. It also serves as an example of the interconnectedness all life shares—life does not exist in straight, never touching, parallel lines, but instead is an endless web, where everyone and everything is

connected. We go about our lives within this web—moving under, over, and back again. We may not be aware of all the ways we are interconnected, but understanding Awiakta's doublewoven writing style can begin us on a journey that starts to open our eyes to the interconnections of the web. In "The Double Weave of Self and Other: Ethnographic Acts and Autobiographical Occasions in Marilou Awiakta's *Selu*," James H. Watkins illustrates how Awiakta uses the basketweaving style in *Selu* both as a writing device and an example of our interconnectedness, stating that "Awiakta's choice of the basket as the model for the form of her text is especially appropriate and evocative, given her interest in transmitting tribal history and legends and gendering the religious and ecological dimensions of the Cherokee people's relationship with their natural environment" (8).

Whether you read Awiakta's poetry or prose, you can feel the energy in her work. Bound so long by the Western epistemological box ideology, Awiakta knows the power words can have, so she imbues all of her work, both poetry and prose, with spirit. As we connect with her words, we connect with ourselves and with other parts of the web; we begin the journey to becoming spiritually active, when we can effect positive, far-reaching transformations.

While all of Awiakta's work is important, I believe that *Selu* is her most significant piece. In *Selu*, Awiakta incorporates all of her writing styles in one book and presents new pieces along with previously published pieces. Utilizing

both her writing style and her actual writing to help illuminate connections, Awiakta uses new and old, poems and prose, as well as history and legend to help convey her meaning and intent. As Kimberly M. Blaeser explains in "Like 'Reeds through the Ribs of a Basket': Native Women Weaving Stories," "the significant action in the telling is connection. Awiakta connects technology and tribal story, she connects tribal story and her own life, she connects physical realities with her spiritual well-being" (560). Through her weaving style, Awiakta invites us to recognize and explore our interconnections with all existence.

Awiakta writes because she is deeply compelled to do so; it is not something that she is just good at or that comes easily to her. Awiakta writes to live. It is the way she express herself and her hope for a better future for all parts of the web of life. As S. Bailey Shurbutt explains in "Where Mountain Meets Atom, Within the Healing Circle: The Writing of Marilou Awiakta," "Awiakta believes that her task as a writer is to create harmony and healing, by pointing out the connections that we all have with the world around us and with each other" (197). As a spiritual activist and responsible member of the web, Awiakta gives her writing as an offering to the world, her way of helping to show people the interconnections that sustain and encompass life. In "The Power and Presence of Native Oral Storytelling Traditions in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta, Kimberly Blaeser, and Marilyn Dumont," Susana Berry Brill de Ramirez makes a similar point, explaining that "Awiakta turns directly to us, reminding us and re-

emphasizing in her reiteration that there are voices that we all must listen to: 'These speak'" (101). de Ramirez also writes that Awiakta "further emphasize[s] the passages to her listener-readers and offer[s] the space necessary for us to respond to Awiakta's story and her invitation to join her in listening to the voices" (101).

It is this invitation to join her that makes Awiakta stand out. She is not just giving advice or asking the reader to participate when there is time; rather, Awiakta is inviting the reader to begin the work now to begin to honor the interconnections we share, to help foster community, and bring about healing. Awiakta is asking for action now, for positive transformations to take place that will move throughout the web, sparking others to listen to the voices so that we can protect and respect all life, all interconnected members of the web.

CHAPTER II

TRANSFORMATIONS: WORKING AS A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST

As stated in Chapter One, I define spiritual activism as creating concrete positive changes in the world. Spiritual activism can take many forms, but at its center is the desire for transformation, led by the belief that all life is valuable and sacred. If one is a spiritual activist then she respects and works to sustain all living things; becomes an agent of change for people, nature, and animals; and is aware and protective of the interconnections between all living things. By seeing and understanding these interconnections, a radical transformation can occur and substantial change can take place that will benefit all living things, instead of only benefiting a select few. I posit that the concepts of spiritual activism are the sacredness of all life, interconnections, transformation, healing, balance, harmony, respect, hope, and purposeful thinking/actions. All life is valuable and connected through the web of life. We must transform and change our ways of being and acting so that we can protect and honor the interconnections and all life. We can accomplish positive transformation by living and engaging in the world with purposeful thinking and actions, hope, balance, respect, and letting ourselves and the web heal so we can honor all life. Awiakta's work is spiritual activism because it fulfills each of these tenets.

For Awiakta and other spiritual activists, all life is sacred and important. Every human being, every animal, and every plant is an interconnected member of the web and needs all others to ensure survival. What impacts one member of this complex web, impacts us all. As Anzaldúa indicates in “now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts,” spiritual activism includes a recognition of “the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, [and] the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings” (558). In *Selu*, Awiakta explains our interdependence: “Everything in the universe is part of the web. ... we are all related. One Family. What happens to one will happen to all” (196). By honoring the interconnections we share, we are helping to uphold and protect the web, enacting spiritual activism. Anzaldúa makes a similar point in “now let us shift,” noting that spiritual activists’ recognition of our interconnectedness with all existence “motivates [them] to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing” (558).

Transformation is an important part of spiritual activism. Spiritual activists are not self-centered; instead, they thrust their focus into the web, working to sustain the connections and helping to repair or transform broken/frayed connections. It may not, and probably will not, be easy work, but it is important and worthwhile nonetheless. In *Selu*, Awiakta shares advice she received from her parents at a point in her life when the change she was working for did not

seem to be happening at all, “Do what you can... It’s like the land. Mother Earth may go down for a while, but she always comes back. Even when things look worst, down underneath, she’s on her way. When you’ve done all you can, stand and wait. Have faith” (63). No interconnection is ever truly lost. Every strand can be repaired, be transformed; as Awiakta explains in *Selu*, “Even a break in the cardinal balance may be restored to wholeness and harmony. Broken strands in the web of life may be repaired, as a basket out of kilter may be returned to balance if one unweaves it back to the original error, corrects it and reweaves from there” (26). As Awiakta points out, we do not have to resolve ourselves and simply accept the fact that some connections are lost. We can work to transform and heal; the broken parts of the web can be transformed.

Another key component of spiritual activism is healing. Many parts of the web of life are hurt and in need of repair. Even now in the twenty-first century, there are numerous wars being waged with countless people being wounded and killed, animals are senselessly and needlessly tortured and killed for sport and in inhumane food production, and we are in ecological crisis, facing global warming and an end to much of the plant life we now know.² Something must be done so that we do not lose these valuable parts of the web. We must work to heal the aftermath of these atrocities and prevent additional atrocities from occurring.

² For information on armed conflicts and the toll on human life please see “Crisis Zones” in Joni Seager’s *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*. For information on the inhumane treatment of animals in the food industry please see Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*. For information on environmental/ecological issues and animal rights please see www.earthjustice.org and www.greenpeace.org.

Illustrating spiritual activism, Awiakta shares the power in healing. Significantly, Awiakta does not focus on blame but instead says that we should strive to correct mistakes, reworking them in a positive way. When we correct past mistakes we heal old and current wounds, thus transforming the web and enacting spiritual activism. Daniel Heath Justice makes a similar point. As he notes, Awiakta's work can be healing and transformative: "Awiakta's poetry seeks healing and reconciliation among all peoples, not revenge for past wrongs. The past *must* be acknowledged, and responsibility *must* be accepted, but forgiveness often comes, even in the old laws of respect, when right actions work to right past transgressions and injustices" (80, author's emphasis). Whether one looks to her poetry or prose, all of Awiakta's work seeks healing.

Balance and respect are aspects of spiritual activism that co-exist together, as it is respect for all living things that compels us to honor life and seek balance so that we can work to sustain the relationships and connections between all things. Balance can be difficult to achieve and sustain. As Awiakta notes, we must return what we use, share what we have, and take only what we need: "*Balance is the key*" (*Selu* 21, author's emphasis). If the web of life was balanced, there would be no injustice as there would be equal give and take between all life forms. Unfortunately, as individuals, groups, and societies we live out of balance and we do not respect all life. Most of Western culture does not value balance; instead, it praises excess and teaches that more is better; as

a result of our collective excess we are bloated and sick. To restore balance to the web of life we must begin to respect and honor the interconnections of the web—the connections we all share. In “Beloved Woman Returns: The Doubleweaving of Homeland and Identity in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta,” Daniel Heath Justice writes, “the twin philosophies of balance and respect bring a healing understanding to one’s relationships with the surrounding world” (76). If we lived in a way that valued and worked to restore balance, we would support the poor, the sick, and the needy. In return, we would receive that support, that respect when we needed it. Awiakta explains: “Respectful care brings abundance. Lack of care brings nothing. If you take, you must give back—return the gift” (*Selu* 19). What we put out into the world will be returned to us; if we do nothing, we will receive nothing. Awiakta’s work exemplifies spiritual activism as she heralds the need for balance and respect. “Everything in nature must do its part to keep life going. Even the corn plant must put down roots, unfold leaves and photosynthesize its food” (*Selu* 251). If we give any plant good soil, water, and adequate sunshine, then the plant will reciprocate our care and grow, maintaining balance within the web of life.

Another tenet of spiritual activism that Awiakta’s work demonstrates is hope. It is hope that keeps people going when they see the destruction of the web and the disrespect for life. Without hope there would be no point to spiritual activism, because no one would believe that anything could change, that healing

could take place, that balance could be restored, and interconnections strengthened. Awiakta shares that even in the worst situations, there is still hope: “in the patterns of pain and blood, there is also hope. What has been survived before can be survived again. And in every era of turmoil, now as then, there have been people who work to ensure a just and companionable peace” (*Selu* 303). It is because of and with hope that people continue to purposefully work to honor and support our connections through the web of life.

Acting and thinking purposefully are key components of spiritual activism. To think and act with purpose one does not just think with her head, but instead thinks and acts equally with her body, mind, and soul. As members of the web we must thoughtfully and carefully consider our decisions and actions, reflecting on how our decisions and actions will reverberate throughout the web. We must be respectful of all living things and set out to honor all life so we can maintain harmony throughout our interconnections. Awiakta’s work exemplifies purposeful thinking/actions. In *Selu* Awiakta relates, “paying attention, listening with unity of mind/heart/soul, is crucial in understanding differences—among cultures, individuals or others of our relatives in the creation, animals, birds, rocks, plants, and so on. We have to listen to what the other entity is saying” (250). We must listen to all parts of the web of life, think with purpose, and then act with purpose, and in doing so we honor our connections.

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY: LEARNING FROM A SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST

As a global community we face enormous problems, ranging from systemic oppression and devaluation of life to poverty, healthcare, war, starvation, and environmental/ecological concerns. These issues cannot be ignored. Awiakta's work offers ideas and solutions to these problems. With increased scholarship on her work, the potential for positive change, on a large scale, is endless. Because it is concerned with systems of oppression and how they interact with each other to keep marginalized people on the outside and those on top in power, Women's Studies would also benefit from increased study of her work. Awiakta's work details how we may be able to work through and move beyond these issues, which would benefit all people.

The current methods of doing things, the business and happenings of our day-to-day lives, both on a global and national scale, is not working. Racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and so on all still exist. Abuse of women, children, the elderly, and animals seems to be at an all-time high. Greed and poverty are rampant as the world's rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Sickness and disease are continuing to spread, and quality healthcare is increasingly available only to the elite. War and terrorism plague the world as the power hungry exploit the masses into fighting. People all over the world struggle

to have enough water and food to survive on a daily basis. Ecological issues plague the world as we over use natural resources and treat the earth poorly. With all of these massive problems facing every country in the world, not much, if any, attention is given to these issues by those in power. As Thomas Rain Crowe asserts, "The Western concept of the right of those in power to control, to consume, is still a driving force in America. An unbalanced society produces an unbalanced law because reverence for the Web of Life is not fundamental to it" (48). When problems are addressed by those in power, the solutions are usually only done halfway, with no follow-up or continued vigilance. It seems that those in power only pay attention to these issues when they have to, when there is some sort of media attention or public outcry, but once the attention dies away, so does the work on fixing the problems. It appears as if people do not care. Animals, nature, and even other people are used and consumed with no backwards glance.³

Awiakta refers to this ruthless, power hungry, scorched earth mentality as the "disdain attitude or virus" (*Selu* 187). In *Selu* Awiakta explains, "This disdain concept, this insidious and deadly virus, still runs in the bloodstream of Western thought. Although during the last hundred years activist movements for

³ I believe that these problems should be common knowledge, but the majority of people seem unaware of them. For most people I do not believe that this unawareness is a result of their own individual disdainful attitude, but rather a need to shelter themselves from the harsh realities of our world. To support my assertions about the problems our world faces please see Seager's *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*, the United Nations website, www.un.org, www.greenpeace.org, and www.earthjustice.org.

conservation, women and minorities have mitigated its power, the virus, true to its nature, has changed form, regrouped and continued its attacks” (187). By recognizing the disdain virus when we see it, and working together throughout the web of life to take away its power and influence, we can once again lessen and eventually take away its power and instead create positive change. I believe that increased scholarship on Awiakta could result in increased awareness and action. If her work was more widely known and studied, it could perhaps wake people up, jolt them out of their comfortable existence, and make them aware of the suffering in our country and the world as they begin to see the interconnections we all share within the web.

Utilizing Awiakta’s web of life concept to illustrate the interconnectedness of all living things, Sherry Robinson, in “Marilou Awiakta on Environment, Culture, and Community: A Native Perspective,” breaks down Awiakta’s writing into two categories: (1) the treatment of the world by humanity and (2) the treatment of Native Americans and women by the Western world. By studying Awiakta’s work in this way Robinson concludes that the earth, Native Americans, and women have all been greatly mistreated. It seems that long ago humanity (towards the earth) and the Western world (towards Native Americans and women) adopted an attitude of domination, that they could (and did/do, over and over again) use and consume the earth, Native Americans, and women without any thought, kindness, or reparation. Applying her concept of the web of life, Awiakta

illustrates how damaging these thoughts and actions are; she emphasizes that these disrespectful thoughts and acts reverberate throughout the web, continuing their destruction. Looking for ways to correct and repair the damage, Awiakta relates, “the crux of the problem is that we need a new model inclusive of other cultural values, in life as well as in literature” (*Selu* 164). Recognizing the validity of Awiakta’s words and message, Robinson applies Awiakta’s vision on a broad scale: “if humans are to learn this lesson—to no more follow any rule that splits our souls—we must develop reverence for the world around us. We must learn to conserve, to protect our environment and our people from being used up” (128). Through increased scholarship on and awareness of Awiakta, we can follow her suggestions and stop “our people from being used up,” by enacting transformation through healing and community.

Disturbingly, people are still being used up by the systemic oppression that operates within our society. Awiakta attributes this damage to the “disdain virus,” an arrogant attitude which stems from “irreverence” towards our interrelated world; this irreverence has its claws in our culture, attacking women, “Mother Earth, indigenous peoples, minorities and others viewed as expendable” homosexuals, people with dis/abilities, and so on (*Selu* 188). These interlocking systems of oppression—sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.—threaten the web of life and the interconnections all life shares. Increased scholarship on Awiakta could help to lessen the impact of these systems and

eventually bring about their downfall. While some forms of oppression, such as racism, are no longer as naturalized and overt, they still continue on a covert level, almost making it worse, because those not directly affected often do not believe that discrimination exists.

By living in a world that operates within these systems of oppression, we automatically discount those that are slightly different from the socially constructed “norm.” In “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde defines this norm as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (116). Those not fitting the norm are pushed to the side and are labeled ‘Other,’ along with whatever descriptor/label fits them: woman, poor, person of color, gay, disabled. ‘Others’ are not allowed to fully participate in society; consequently, society does not grow or flourish because it is not respecting all people. Increased scholarship on Awiakta could hopefully open our eyes to see that systems of oppression not only exist, but thrive in our culture and in the world. Before we can eradicate these systems and the structures that created and still support them, we have to be aware of and see the problems.

Awiakta’s work presents these problems in a way that tells the truth without being confrontational. Her non-linear, doublewoven style gives people who are afraid or who have been unable to accept the ugliness of the truth space and time to comprehend and acknowledge it. Awiakta’s work exposes the

ugliness, while also showing us different ways we can begin to correct the imbalances, giving the reader the chance to find their “bearings,” which makes it easier for them to be able to truly see and accept what she is saying. Awiakta’s spiritual activism illustrates how we can all work to accept and love each other equally, how we can not only survive, but thrive by not labeling anyone as ‘Other.’

Another possible outcome of increased scholarship on Awiakta is increased attention to and prevention of abuse—child abuse, domestic abuse, elderly abuse, animal abuse, and abuse of the earth. While most people generally condemn these kinds of abuse, as a society we do not do much to be proactive in stopping them on a large scale. There are shelters for abused women, hotlines to call for abused children, and advocates for the protection of animals, but the underlying issue does not seem to be addressed—disdain, devaluation of life. Discussing these kinds of problems, Awiakta writes, “when the people in power call Earth ‘it,’ they consider all connected with her to be its, too—objects to be dominated, controlled, consumed, forgotten. Vanished. They are—we are—expendable” (*Selu* 185-86). With increased scholarship on Awiakta we can learn more about disdain for life in the stories she shares about women, children, the elderly, animals, and the earth and discover her answers for helping to rid the world of this problem.

As poverty levels rise, the poor continue to get poorer, yet greed wins out as the rich get richer. In many countries—including the United States—people spend the majority of their day trying to secure enough water and food for their families to get by. Healthcare is increasingly becoming something only the elite have access to even though sickness and disease plague the world. Across the globe people suffer and die because they cannot afford medication, yet pharmaceutical companies, with their huge profits year after year, do little to help.⁴ These are all examples of the disdain virus in action; the few thinking they know what is best for the many. As Thomas Rain Crowe asserts, “Attitude extends to every strand of life. If people are regarded with disrespect, they also won’t be given jobs, won’t be cared for medically, and on and on . . . they are expendable” (51). The disdain attitude seems to be left over or is a continuation of imperialist, patriarchal ideas and actions. I believe that examining the U.S. government’s treatment of Native Americans illustrates the destructiveness of the disdain virus. By giving Awiakta’s work more attention we can learn from the past to change the present and protect the future.

As a discipline, Women’s Studies would also benefit from increased scholarship on Awiakta and her work. According to the editors of *Women’s Voices Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, “Women’s studies

⁴ While these statements can appear to be generalizations, I suggest that they represent reality for the majority of people. For information on my assertions please refer to the sources in the preceding notes.

explores our gendered existence: how we perform femininity and masculinity and how this interacts with other aspects of our identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality” (Shaw and Lee 1). Women’s Studies also aims “to integrate a perspective for looking at things that would challenge previously unquestioned knowledge. This perspective questions how such knowledge reflects women’s lives and concerns, how it maintains patterns of male privilege and power, and how the consequences of such knowledge affect women and other marginalized groups” (Shaw and Lee 3). Awiakta discusses women and “women’s issues” at length, focusing on the importance of women’s equality and the consequences of women’s inequality in a way that intersects with race and class. Discussing how we must change our current ways Shurbutt writes, “the linear narrative structure and the hierarchical genres and styles associated with patriarchal models that result from the binary masculine mind no longer suffice in this dangerous world in which we live” (202). The lessons we have learned (or not learned) about how women should be treated equally and given equal access easily apply to other marginalized groups, such as homosexuals, people with dis/abilities, etc.

Awiakta emphasizes the importance of treating women equally, so that the balance of the web will stay intact. As she asserts in *Selu*, “To preserve the balance, the genders must cooperate and get along, for themselves, for the sake of the community and the environment” (23). In “Marilou Awiakta: Reweaving the

Future,” Thomas Rain Crowe interviews Awiakta, who discusses the need for women to be an equal part of transformation in order to ensure enduring change. “To avoid disaster, we have to create a consensual climate, a center, where responsible men and women from every sphere—science, religion, industry, community—can unite to work out solutions. Women should be—and are not—well represented on the councils working for solutions” (45).

Advocating reconciliation and espousing the belief that positive change can take place is yet another reason that Awiakta should be focused on in Women’s Studies. Awiakta’s voice is important because she speaks from experience; she has fought for what she believes in (the web of life), and even when she lost environmental battles like Tellico Dam, she did not give up and did not lose hope (*Selu* 44-64). As participants in Women’s Studies, we know how exhausting it can be to fight a system that is resistant to change, even for the betterment of the larger society and the future. Awiakta’s lessons are important to know, study, and remember, as we continue to struggle against patriarchy and bring an end to systems of oppression. *Selu* is important to Women’s Studies, both for the content and the style. Awiakta wrote *Selu* in the same way that baskets are woven, interconnected and going backwards and forward. Women’s Studies also does this—it acknowledges the past while moving forward and creating change so that what happened in the past does not, will not, happen again.

The subjects that Awiakta covers could be a listing of classes offered through Women's Studies: ecofeminism, epistemology, spiritual activism, women in leadership, women in history, theory, activism. Her voice is an important one to add to the Women's Studies canon as she discusses each of these topics in relation to every other topic. Although her concept of the web of life, where everything and everyone is connected, goes hand-in-hand with the intersectionality that Women's Studies espouses, Awiakta and her work are not widely known.

Why is it that Awiakta is not studied on a large scale? I believe there are several reasons, but mainly it is because she may be too 'out there' for the academy. She talks about the corn mother, Selu, and how all things are connected in a web of life—topics rarely discussed or promoted within the academy. Awiakta writes in an accessible, non-academic, non-linear style which does not fit into what most academics deem acceptable and appropriate. With her discussions of changing the status quo so that concrete, lasting, positive change will take hold, I believe Awiakta frightens the academy—those in power do not want to change and lose their power, even if it would be beneficial. For many of the same reasons Women's Studies has had, and currently has, a shaky/unstable place within the academy. Instead of being afraid of losing their place in the academy and only studying more straightforward, high theorizing, academic voices, Women's Studies needs to continue to be bold and forge

ahead by turning its attention to Awiakta. Women's Studies scholars and feminists need to once again be more open to non-traditional ways of thinking and doing, which can lead to increased awareness and action. Systems of oppression and inequalities could be changed, manipulated, and eradicated because of the work of spiritual activism. We can alter the world, but we need to work together. Using Awiakta's work as a guide, we can become spiritual activists and create change.

We are all part of the web. What affects one strand affects us all.
Marilou Awiakta

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