

# Spiritual Sibling Discourses<sup>1</sup>

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## SHORT BIO

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## Second Respondent

Dear Professors, colleagues, and friends, it is both an intellectual and heart honour to be invited to respond to the delightfully rich keynote delivered by a uniquely enigmatic and generous intellectual scholar of religion, Prof Sa'diyya Shaikh. Permit me to begin with a note of gratitude to Prof Nadar and the entire team at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice. My gratitude is not due to the normative formality of academic protocol, but the kind of gratitude that emerges from within one's heart, the same location from which Prof Shaikh invites us to orientate our ethical engagements, i.e., ones that are situated in reciprocity, mutuality, love, and justice, none of which can become a reality without a beating feeling heart. As scholars of religion with an attentive pulse on matters of race, class, gender, sexuality, LGBTIQ, differently abled bodies, socio-economic status, and multiple marginalities, we are alertly attuned to the daily news of racist, sexist, homophobic, and queerphobic atrocities, committed in particular

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared as a response to Prof Sa'diyya Shaikh's keynote address at the annual lecture *Economies of Violence: Religion, Resistance and Rest*, hosted by Prof Sarojini Nadar, Desmond Tutu Chair for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape in August 2021.

upon the bodies of women and marginalised members of our communities. We are all aware that every aspect of our existence is but a moment.

Attentiveness to our way of being in each moment is a modality that Prof Shaikh invites us to engage with. As I respond to Prof Shaikh's intricate keynote, I am conscious of the legacy and the work of our ancestor giant Reverend Dr Katie Cannon<sup>2</sup> in whose honour this year's Economies of Violence gathering has launched the special journal edition.<sup>3</sup> Following in the footsteps of Reverend Dr Traci West's keynote<sup>4</sup> from last year, and the late Dr Cannon's phenomenal legacy, Prof Shaikh provides us with method. Last year, Dr West insisted on method, and this year we have method from Prof Shaikh – a methodology that I will refer to later on – methods of attentive listening and loving, of engaging with the meaning-making richness that comes from our lived experience. As such, our lived experience serves as a template for interpretative possibilities.<sup>5</sup> This beautifully resonates with the attentive care of Dr Cannon's pastoral pedagogical legacy.

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996); Katie G. Cannon, "Womanist perspectival discourse and Cannon formation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no.1-2 (1993): 29-37; Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (eds.), *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Katie G. Cannon, "Moral wisdom in the Black women's literary tradition," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1984): 171-92; Katie G. Cannon, "Pedagogical praxis in African American theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 319-30; Katie G. Cannon, "Eliminating ignorance," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no.1 (2016): 114-20

<sup>3</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest: Drawing from the Womanist Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> On 31 August 2020, Doctor Traci West offered her keynote speech under the theme of *Economies of Violence*. This was the fourth annual public lecture hosted by the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice in commemoration of the 1956 Women's March and 2012 Marikana Massacre: Traci West, "Economies of Violence 2020," 30 September 2020, <https://desmondtutucentre-rsj.uwc.ac.za/2020/09/30/-economies-of-violence/>

<sup>5</sup> See Professor Shaikh's seminal work on lived experience as an interpretive tool: [Sa'diyya Shaikh, "A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community,"](#) in *Violence Against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, edited by Dan Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 66-89.

Prof Shaikh combines the potential of ethical horizons within the Islamic tradition without being apologetic, without being simplistically glorious about religion having all the answers, if only we would look deeper, or make the effort to see clearly.<sup>6</sup> She also does not turn away from the hard reality and concrete challenges experienced by humanity, or the wretched treatment meted out to animals, as well as the current state of our burning, parched, famished, flooded, waterlogged, chemically seeped, suffocating planet, a planet that is quite symbolically, like many of us, grasping for its own breath.

Right from the outset, Prof Shaikh categorically states her quest and invites us to reflect on how each of us might contribute to enabling collective transformations that create nourishing modes of being across the spectrum of life. In order to sustain life, she attentively invites us to bring the very best of us to the table, as well as the very best from each of our distinctive sibling traditions of belief. One might feel that this is quite a tall order that our dear Prof Shaikh is asking us to deliver, and this may well be the case for many of us. Where do we begin, or more precisely, how do we even begin to think about what segment or part of us is the best of us, worthy of being called and carried to the table of humanity, and what does that table of humanity look like for those of us who are marginalised members of our broader communities?

Living in constant states of resistance to forms of oppression and silencing is exhausting, and survival from one precarious moment to the next carries its own burdensome weight. For many of us, the question really is, have any of us truly tasted reciprocity, tasted mutuality, tasted love, tasted justice? Have any of us tasted rest, tasted respite, tasted healing, tasted support? Without having tasted or being sufficiently nourished by such life enhancing forces, how does one even envisage flourishing?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Professor Shaikh's *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy* provides a rich example of how insights rooted in tradition can prove to be a treasure trove from which a historic interpretation of key mystical texts can be reimagined, rethought, and applied to contemporary challenges in ways that are more gender inclusive and attentive to contemporary practices and sensibilities. See Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> In relation to flourishing, Grace Jantzen, feminist philosopher of religion, emphasises not ignoring, denigrating, or forgetting, but instead placing an importance on one's embodied

How do we even extricate what is the best of us when we are so busy surviving, working, traversing different economies of violence perpetuated upon us as women in micro and macro ways that cause exhaustion to the very core of our beings. As women and members of marginalised communities, we do not just burn one candle at both ends, we are often burning multiple candles at both ends wherever ruptures occur along the spines of our respective candles. Our work is back breaking work, and yet we are still expected to deliver on work that places bread on the table from our already precarious forms of *ad hoc* sessional piecemeal employments, and we deliver not only with our tears, sweat, and blood, but we deliver in time and on time, within suffocating systems which are barely receptive to our pulse.

Late yesterday evening, following two weeks of solid work on Muslim feminist activist initiatives in South Africa, that both Dr Seedat and I have been immersed in, we needed to make a call about which content to include in our respective responses here today in honouring Prof Shaikh's wonderful keynote. When we find ourselves in these situations, we have to ask ourselves, what gives way and what has to give way? What is lost and what is sacrificed when we are faced with having to make these multiple calls in multiple forms, navigating the crucial timely needs of our diversely marginalised communities, with the demands and expectations placed upon us by an often toxically masculinised academy and a globally problematic political landscape?

Whilst traversing through the midst of the messiness of these landscapes, we still need to honour the work and teachings of our academic and spiritual siblings, educators, mentors, pedagogical giants, and sages across our religious traditions. Each of us must constantly, continuously, consistently, and conscientiously commit to holding ourselves to account. Holding ourselves to account is important. Many of us carry and walk with wounds of vulnerability. These same wounds are portals to deeper understanding of

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needs. See Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); also Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence: Death and the Displacement of Beauty* (London: Routledge, 2004).

systemic patterns both within us and of relational ones that we encounter on a daily breath by breath basis.

As scholars and engaged grassroots academics, many of us have had to become jugglers extraordinaire. One wonders where we find time for rest because as the late Dr Alease Brown said, "This stuff stays on the mind and refuses to let go."<sup>8</sup> The exhaustion of our respective labour impacts our mental, psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

As refreshing a paradigm as it can be to see rest and respite as forms of resistance, advocated by the self-ordained "Nap Bishop" Tricia Hersey,<sup>9</sup> how realistic is or has rest and respite been in our lives? And yet, despite our various sufferings and silencing, we continue in our concerted efforts not to reinforce exploitative modes of human engagement. Indeed, we pause, acknowledging that human dignity for all is at our core, and we pause even longer when we witness other women and marginalised members of our community being used as decoys, in patronising patriarchal metanarratives that seek to dim the spirit of one's individual and collective agency. Intimacy between spiritual modalities of being and the daily messiness of political realms of the academy and the world that surround us is not easy, and yet we must continue to ground ourselves with as much ethical attentiveness as we can reasonably muster, whilst we create paths and carve out our uniquely different ways of replacing various paradigms of dominion and domination. This is indeed a formidable task, as Prof Shaikh indicates.

Alongside the naming of specific systemic challenges, the brilliant contributions in the special addition journal<sup>10</sup> mentioned by Prof Nadar

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<sup>8</sup> Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest," 8.

<sup>9</sup> Nadar and Robertson, "Recognition, Resistance and Rest," 15. See also the Tricia Hersey webpage for more information on "rest is resistance" and "rest as reparations" frameworks (Tricia Hersey webpage, "About," <http://www.triciahersey.com/about.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Beth Elness-Hanson, "'If You Bless the Women...': An Intercultural Analysis of Blessings in the Book of Ruth," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 109-26; Natalie Y. Jones, "Cannon the Bear," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 127-33; Tinyiko Maluleke, "Once Upon a Time: Invoking Lore and Narrative in Memory of Katie Geneva Cannon," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 42-55; Madipoane Masenya, "Katie Geneva Cannon's Canon on Womanist Ethics: Reflections from African-South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 93-108; C.L. Nash, "'I Kicked Myself Back to Life:' Womanist Reflections on Awakening During Religio-

earlier on in this seminar, clearly and categorically calls attention to Dr Cannon's brand of womanism, a brand that is aimed to celebrate a more holistic picture of black life, theology, and agency. Many of the contributors to the special issue speak of Dr Cannon's lifework as attentive "embodied" knowledge from a contextual framework, while Dr Fundiswa Kobo's paper reminds us of Dr Cannon's emphasis on women's bodies as epistemological sources.<sup>11</sup>

The academic rigour of Prof Shaikh's work and beautiful keynote is in delightful harmony with Dr Cannon's work. These are precious spiritual sibling discourses in which we see moments, indeed a momentum of flourishing akin to looking out of a window in early spring and seeing flowers of different hues blossoming and swaying alongside one another in the magnificence of light – a light not only towards which they themselves extend, but a light which also embraces, recognises, and receives them. Nature provides us with so many rich examples of walking with, walking with one another across our spiritual traditions, and lifting one another in light, with light.

In conclusion I want to state that the Muslim woman's *khutbah* book<sup>12</sup> and the inclusive collective collaborative community that Prof Shaikh references, honour spirituality in ways that women have themselves actively embodied, interpreted, and determined. They are worth celebrating to the core, and shouting out loud about, for these initiatives are powerful testaments to a flourishing of reciprocity, mutuality, love, and justice emerging from supportive communities of women's solidarity, with marginalised

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Academic Sleep," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 34-41; Evelyn L. Parker, "Courage to Teach for Courage," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 56-73; Miranda Pillay, "The *Virtue of Unctuousness?* Toward the Moral Agency of Women in Patriarchal Normative Contexts," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 74-92.

<sup>11</sup> Fundiswa A. Kobo, "A Womanist Excavation of Black Spirituality Trapped in the Dungeons: In Memory of Katie Geneva Cannon," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021): 19-33

<sup>12</sup> Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat (eds.), *The Women's Khutbah Book: Celebrating Muslim Women's Religious Authority at the Minbar* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

communities included, determined to create a narrative that honours human dignity for all, across scriptures and experience.

I thank you for the privilege of opportunity granted to me for being a respondent to this delightful keynote, to the work of such an enigmatic scholar, Prof Shaikh. Truly honoured.

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