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Talking Feminist, Talking back : Sarojini Nadar's African Feminist Transdisciplinary Study of Religion

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15 | Talking Feminist, Talking back: Sarojini Nadar’s African Feminist Transdisciplinary Study of Religion

Megan Robertson

Abstract

In this chapter I trace the ways in which Sarojini Nadar has negotiated, shaped and challenged the study of faith and feminism – what she refers to as “the f- words” – in contemporary South Africa. I draw on Nadar’s academic writings, notable oral presentations, interviews, as well as my own personal interactions with her as my doctoral supervisor, mentor, manager, and sister-friend. I frame Nadar’s contribution to the study of gender and religion in relation to her analysis of violence in Biblical text, in church and public life, and in higher education. Through her scholarship and embodied work, I argue that Nadar has created a toolkit for talking back to patriarchal and heteronormative power in these various spheres. Not only does Nadar provide young black African scholars of religion with crucial underpinnings from which to continue to talk back, but she also demonstrates *how* this can be done in socially just and transformative ways.

Keywords: African feminism, interventionist, transformation, talking back, transdisciplinary

Introduction

Sarojini Nadar introduced me to the feminist idea of ‘talking back.’ I was fortunate enough to attend Nadar’s inaugural lecture at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in August 2016 titled, ‘Sacred Sex, Sacred Text: Queering religious sexual scripts in transforming African societies.’ She had just taken up her current position as a research chair, now named the Desmond Tutu Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice, while I had recently taken her up on an offer (made in jest a few years earlier)

to pursue my PhD with her as my supervisor. I sat in her inaugural lecture in awe and anger. Never before had my previous training in white-washed, masculinised sociological theory spoken deeply to me and my experiences in the way that Nadar's lecture then did. After attending the lecture, I went home and cried.

I have been over this experience in my head many times before, and often wondered what the tears meant. At the time my now husband interpreted it through his own theological training, as a calling. In other words, he suggested that it may be that researching and lecturing on religion and gender was what I was called by God to do. I still have my doubts about this interpretation, but what I do now know is that, at least in part, the tears came because listening to Nadar and reading her work felt like someone was giving me – a young Coloured¹ woman from Cape Town – permission to talk back for the first time. Nadar's body of work continues to serve as a source of permission for me to talk back to the racism and heteropatriarchy that has often led me to silence, doubt and make 'decent'² my own voice and experiences. Moreover, in her work she helpfully provides the analytic tools, theories and concepts that have taught me *how* to talk back in meaningful, critical and even hopeful ways.

I use this as my introduction not because I want to take up a role as a praise singer. Indeed, Nadar herself would hate if this was simply a hagiography. I begin with this personal reflection because one of the key tools Nadar has given me is the ability to position myself in my writing. I cannot remove my admiration for Nadar and her work and I do not believe I need to pretend here that my assessment of her work is objective because, as all good feminist work reminds us, there is no such thing. However, that does not negate the criticality with which I approach her contribution to the study of religion. I also believe that my admiration reveals the depth and significance of the type of research and teaching that Nadar theorises and embodies precisely because it speaks to the lived realities of women in South Africa and serves as a catalyst for positive

¹ "Coloured' was a racial category constructed in apartheid to classify people who were racially mixed or ambiguous. It remains in use as a marker of identity. It has also become a politicised, contentious and fluid category which people negotiate in various, complex ways" (Jodamus, Robertson and Nadar, 2022, 14).

² I refer here to Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2000) work in which she critiques the ways in which Christian concepts of decency operate to restrict and oppress.

change. This chapter is therefore simultaneously a reflection of what Nadar has meant to me, as well as of the contribution she has made to the study of religion and culture. I utilise a range of data for this chapter as I draw on her academic and media publications, notable oral presentations, interviews, as well as my own personal interactions with her as my doctoral supervisor, mentor, manager, and sister-friend.

In the proposed chapter outline for this book, Nadar's work was characterised as womanist theology, a position which she herself aligned with in her earlier work. Inspired by the work of African-American scholars such as Renita Weems, Katie Cannon, Traci West, Vanessa Lovelace and Mitzi Smith, Nadar first wrote from a South African Indian womanist perspective.³ While this enabled her to incorporate race, culture and class into her gendered analyses of religion, and to consider her positionality in producing theory – for most of her career she has instead identified as an African feminist scholar of religion, and more particularly Christianity. Nadar builds on the work of scholars who appropriated this theoretical genre to various degrees such as Madipoane Masenya who presents a Bosadi (womanhood) approach⁴, Musa Dube who names her work as post-colonial feminist⁵, and Musimbi Kanyoro who introduced African feminist cultural hermeneutics⁶. Inspired by their work, Nadar joins them in talking back to theologians who have (and continue to) avoid or dismiss feminism as a Western import imposed upon indigenous people in Africa.⁷ While she acknowledges that some versions of Western or white feminism exclude discourses of race and class, she also maintains that of-

³ Sarojini Nadar, "Living in two worlds: Spirituality and the changing role of the South African Indian Woman in the Full Gospel Church," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 14, no. 2 (2001) 76.

⁴ Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) approach," *Old Testament Essays* 10, no.3 (1997) 439-448.

⁵ Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000).

⁶ Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Indiana: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

⁷ Sarojini Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda: A case study of the Jacob Zuma rape trial," *Missionalia* 37, no. 1 (2009d) 88.

ten these rejections, “hide other biases, such as an unwillingness to recognise that gender equality can and must be part of African cultures too.”⁸ In this chapter I trace how Nadar has negotiated, shaped and challenged the study of faith and feminism – what she refers to as “the f-words” – in contemporary South Africa and Africa more broadly.

Nadar’s scholarship interrogates the relationship between religion and gender-based violence. In one of her early articles published in 2002 she asks, “How is it that we find suffering bodies of used and abused women right from Biblical times into our very own century in the midst of people that claim to be religious, in the midst of people who engage in religious discourse?”⁹ While she has expanded and contextualised this question in different ways, over the last two decades she has provided a variety of nuanced answers to this question. Furthermore, her oeuvre constructs an African feminist conceptual, epistemological and methodological toolkit for others to draw on in order to engage this question in critical and meaningful ways. In this chapter I provide an overview of her toolkit in relation to three key areas namely, 1) violence in the (Biblical) text, 2) violence in the church and public life and 3) violence in the academy.¹⁰ I reflect on how she reveals the ways in which discourses, ethics and beliefs foster violence in these three areas but also how she marks out ways in which these aspects of religion can be transformed for a more just, free and equitable world.

Violence in the text

Despite South Africa adopting a progressive constitution in 1994, granting all women full rights and protections as citizens, violence against women has continued unabated. A significant factor in this trend, as Nadar shows through her work, has to do with the role that religion and culture play in framing beliefs and actions. With the majority of South

⁸ Sarojini Nadar, “‘Stories are data with soul’ – lessons from black feminist epistemology,” *Agenda* 28, no. 1 (2014) 20.

⁹ Sarojini Nadar, “Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation,” *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002) 114.

¹⁰ This is in part inspired by her own characterisation of her work when introducing herself to a group of American scholars in 2022 who visited the research centre where we worked together.

African's claiming to adhere to some form of Christianity, the Bible becomes an important "site of struggle"¹¹ for shaping beliefs and ethics about gender. As Nadar asserts, "the violence is not just physical or sexual but also textual."¹² She posits,

The Bible is...used to...justify men's headship over families, condemn same-sex relationships, judge HIV/AIDS as a punishment from God, and even prescribe women's dress codes etc. And so, injustice and an essential denying of people's humanity continue within the walls of the church itself, spurred on by that iniquitous term "Biblical values."¹³

Through her work, Nadar makes a notable contribution towards contextualising, critiquing and de-constructing the text by talking back to the perceived sacredness and infallibility of the Bible.¹⁴ By talking back to this phenomenon, Nadar adopts an interventionist approach in her work on Biblical hermeneutics in order to not only open up "a window to the past", but also to critique the ways in which the text provides "a mirror for the present, so that contemporary challenges can be critically engaged with."¹⁵ I identify three interventionist strategies which can be traced in her work, 1) reclaiming Biblical (women's) narratives, 2) (re)reading these narratives in community, and 3) contextualising those narratives in relation to the lives of contemporary women and contemporary struggles. I discuss the first two strategies here whilst the third strategy is discussed in relation to her work on violence in the church and public life.

Some of Nadar's earliest work is centrally concerned with reclaiming the narratives of Biblical women by using and further developing the tools of African feminist Biblical hermeneutics. For example, her doctoral research and subsequent publications focus on reading the characters of Esther and Vashti. Nadar uses a womanist approach to reclaim the character of Vashti, whose narrative of disobedience to the king is often read as an example of how women, and wives ought not to act towards their

¹¹ Nadar references Gerald West's use of this concept. See Gerald West, "Redaction Criticism as a Resource," *Old Testament Essays* 30, no. 2 (2017) 525-545.

¹² Sarojini Nadar. "Queering sacred sexual scripts for transforming African societies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Susanne Scholz, 88. New York: Oxford Univ. Pr, 2020.

¹³ Sarojini Nadar. "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 93.

¹⁴ Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 83.

¹⁵ (<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/prof-dr-sarojini-nadar-i-believe-knowledge-is-power-and-critical-for-justice-work>)

husbands. Through re-reading Vashti through womanist liberation lenses, Nadar demonstrates that the character can instead be read as subversive in the ways she disrupts the Persian patriarchy.¹⁶ She re-reads Esther too, a character most often characterised in opposition to Vashti and praised as an example of a loyal and obedient woman. Nadar however, contextualises Esther's narrative and, rather than viewing her either as an example of an obedient wife or a woman in power who abused her position and instigated atrocious violence, she understands Esther as a woman implicated in the systems of power of her time, trying to survive.¹⁷ By reclaiming these narratives, Nadar talks back to the erasure and the male-centred gaze through which their stories are interpreted.¹⁸

In more recent work, Nadar turns her attention to (re)reading Judges 19 and to reclaiming the story of the concubine, Batshever.¹⁹ Generally interpreted in relation to male homosexuality or homosexual rape, Nadar reveals that normative (and even queer) readings that seek to 'save' the text from condemnation of homosexuality, continue to violate Batshever. Through an analytic of sexual 'scripting', Nadar demonstrates how the male gaze, invisibilises, fetishizes and objectifies Batshever's body.²⁰ She maintains Cheryl Exum's argument that Batshever "is not just raped by the pen but also by the pulpit."²¹ Using an African feminist re-reading, Nadar re-members Batshever's dismembered body. She writes an alternative script in the form of an imaginary interview where Batshever is given the opportunity to talk back as a theologian in her own right to the "vile", "violent" and "inviolable" scripts which have shaped her narrative.²² Through Batshever's voice Nadar calls for "transgressive feminist sexuality scripts"²³ thus offering a reading of the text that supports social

¹⁶ Sarojini Nadar. "Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation." *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002) 118-122.

¹⁷ Nadar, "Gender, power, sexuality," 128.

¹⁸ Nadar, "Gender, power, sexuality."

¹⁹ While this concubine is unnamed in the Biblical text, Nadar borrows from J. Cheryl Exum's work to name her Batshever (Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 88.)

²⁰ Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 86.

²¹ Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 89.

²² Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 95.

²³ Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 92.

change. That is not to say that Nadar argues that all oppressive texts can be reclaimed, and in fact she argues that there is power in recognising texts such as 1 Tim. 2:8-15, as oppressive rather than trying to rescue it.²⁴ Nadar's second interventionist strategy lies within her feminist methods of reading in community. Nadar has been critical of the use of Contextual Bible Study (CBS) by white scholars who frame it as a means to gain community wisdom about the Bible and its interpretations.²⁵ Her work reveals the theoretical assumptions underlying this approach to CBS and in particular, the paternalistic ways in which 'community' and 'indigenous knowledge' have been framed. She argues that, 'speaking with' and 'reading with' "camouflages the respective power categories"²⁶ associated with the community and the scholar and fails to consider the need to transform harmful interpretations that these communities may hold. Nadar reframes CBS through 5 C's (namely, Community, Context, Criticality, Conscientisation and Change²⁷) which lends itself to an interventionist paradigm. This characterisation of CBS is evident in her description of it as, "an interactive study of particular texts in the Bible, which brings the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into dialogue, for the purpose of transformation."²⁸ The lasting influence of her characterisation of CBS is evidenced by Ujamaa's, albeit uncredited, use of Nadar's C's to inspire a similar 6 C's of CBS for their resource manual.²⁹

While she often talks back to power, in relation to CBS Nadar also adopts Spivak's idea of 'speaking to' in order to conscientise communities and generate social change. She interprets Spivak's concept by arguing,

²⁴ Nadar, Sarojini, "Paradigm shifts in mission: From an ethic of domination to an ethic of justice and love. The case of 1 Tim 2: 8-15," *Missionalia* 33, no. 2 (2005a) 303-314.

²⁵ Sarojini Nadar, "'Hermeneutics of Transformation?' A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement Between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities," *Scriptura* 93 (2006) 339-351.

²⁶ Nadar, "'Hermeneutics of Transformation?'," 345.

²⁷ See Sarojini Nadar, "Beyond the 'ordinary reader' and the 'invisible intellectual': Shifting contextual Bible study from liberation discourse to liberation pedagogy," *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 2 (2009) 390-391.

²⁸ Nadar, "Beyond the 'ordinary reader'," 387.

²⁹ Ujamaa Centre, "Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual," (2015) 7-8.

That even though we as scholars may gain valuable insights from community wisdom, what is intrinsic to our work is the assumption that we can transform our society. This is not always possible if we stop at the point of ‘reading with’ the community.³⁰

For Nadar, an “organic intellectual” is best positioned to take on the task of speaking to communities – in other words, someone from the community, trained in Biblical studies and committed to “liberation in the community”.³¹ This is because, she understands that a crucial part of reclaiming Biblical narratives for the purpose of transformation is recognising the positionality through which people, including the researcher, reads the texts. This passion for social change is driven by her own embodied experiences as she describes them,

first as being the youngest of seven children and growing up in apartheid South Africa, experiencing sexual violence as a child, then experiences of post-apartheid South Africa including the ambiguities of the fact that the new president of our country is someone who said in his rape trial that the complainant was asking for sex because she was wearing a skirt; thirdly, experiences of being a fourth generation South African of Indian descent, sometimes feeling like an outsider to South Africa and yet being refused a visa to go to India in 2002!³²

While recognising positionality is no doubt important, I think the idea that only organic intellectuals can facilitate change within their communities should also be nuanced. First, because in recognising that positionality is not fixed (but intersectional and dynamic), it should not be assumed that ‘coming from’ a particular community enables better understanding or more organic interactions. Second, while CBS was developed around reading with largely marginalised (poor, black) communities, it has since been used in a variety of contexts. Therefore, a community may constitute a group of white ministers, queer people, or academics. Other intersections such as race, class, gender serve as various sources of identification and disagreement within these groups (as they do in marginalised communities) and therefore sourcing an ‘organic intellectual’ should not be seen as a straightforward task. Third, CBS has been shown

³⁰ Nadar, “Hermeneutics of Transformation?,” 345-346.

³¹ Nadar, “Hermeneutics of Transformation?,” 344.

³² Nadar, “Beyond the ‘ordinary reader’,” 385-386.

to inspire a variety of creative ways of reading together. As I have demonstrated previously³³, CBS-like methods have been used in contexts (for example with Ugandan LGBTQI+ refugees³⁴) where they do not need to be conscientised about their own oppression – “in fact...[they are] uniquely aware of the cultural power of the Bible and how it has infiltrated various discourses against them. They have been... trained by their experiences and the discourses around them to reinterpret and reimagine the Bible in ways that even Biblical scholars may not be able to.”³⁵ ‘Speaking to’ should therefore, in some cases, be treated with a similar caution to what Nadar affords ‘Reading with’.

Nadar’s African feminist call for CBS and Biblical scholarship more generally to be interventionist rather than framed as an objective intellectual task is significant in large part because she is averse to transformative readings lying dormant in the realm of text alone. Throughout Nadar’s work there is an important thread connecting Biblical text, discursive practice and praxis (in other words, the ways in which it affects women’s lives, bodies and voices). This becomes even more evident in her work focusing on the church and religion in public life.

Violence in the church and public life

Nadar understands violence in the text in relation to contemporary lived experience – in particular those of women, black and queer people.³⁶ She argues that the concerns raised about Biblical text also brings attention to the ways in which text frames discourses, ethics, beliefs and practices inside and outside the Christian church. Nadar has been critical of various church denominations and traditions³⁷, broader bodies such as the

³³ Megan Robertson, “Contesting and curating the Queer African archive with Sacred Queer Stories,” *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 21 (2), 2022.

³⁴ Adriaan van Klinken, Johanna Stiebert, Sebyala Brian and Frederick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives & the Bible* (Rochester: James Currey, 2021) 126-127.

³⁵ Robertson, “Contesting and curating”.

³⁶ Sarojini Nadar, “The Bible Says! Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134 (2009a.) 131-146.

³⁷ This includes work she has supervised as well as her community engagements and traditions include Pentecostalism, Anglicanism and Methodism.

Council for World Mission³⁸, and preachers and religious figures³⁹ and the role they play in relation to violence against women, black and queer people. A feature of her work is the way in which she draws on narrative. At times this involves the courageous telling of her own experiences of rape⁴⁰, misogyny⁴¹, racism⁴², grief and exclusion⁴³, at other times she draws on case studies in the media, such as the rape trials of pastor Timothy Omotoso⁴⁴ and Jacob Zuma.⁴⁵ Nadar reveals how religious text, discourse, and actors are implicated in these narratives, and in particular the harmful dichotomies that are shaped by them. One of the most persistent beliefs which the church relies on, as she reveals through these narratives, is an essentialised gender binary which subscribes to a “gospel of male headship and supremacy and female submission.”⁴⁶

³⁸ For example, Sarojini Nadar, “The Bible in and for mission: A case study of The Council for World Mission,” *Missionalia* 37, no. 2 (2009c) 210-228.

³⁹ For example, Sarojini Nadar, “Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan’s Mighty Men’s Conference as a case study of masculinism,” *Scriptura* 102 (2009b) 551-561; Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, “Liberated through submission? The Worthy Women’s Conference as a case study of Formenism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (2010) 141-151; Nadar, “Queering sacred sexual scripts,” 81-95; Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “No holy cows in hate cases,” *Mail and Guardian*, January 11, 2019. <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-01-10-00-no-holy-cows-in-hate-cases/>.

⁴⁰ See Nadar, ““Toward a feminist missiological agenda,” 98.

⁴¹ I do not cite a particular paper here as her entire oeuvre speaks to these experiences.

⁴² See Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of theological burglaries and epistemic violence: Black theology, decoloniality and higher education,” *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022) 541-560.

⁴³ See Sarojini Nadar, “God, grief and Good Friday: A response to Eusebius McKaiser,” *Times Live*, April 16, 2022. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times-daily/opinion-and-analysis/2022-04-16-god-grief-and-good-friday-a-response-to-eusebius-mckaiser/>.

⁴⁴ Sarojini Nadar, “Moral responsibility for Omotoso lies with the churches,” *News24*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/moral-responsibility-for-omotoso-lies-with-the-churches-20181026>.

⁴⁵ Nadar, “Toward a feminist missiological agenda.”

⁴⁶ Nadar, “Moral responsibility for Omotoso.”

Nadar's concepts of 'palatable patriarchy'⁴⁷ and 'formenism'⁴⁸ are notable examples of how she provides conceptual and critical descriptions of discourses implicit in movements such as the Mighty Men and Worthy Women's conferences to produce palatable patriarchal discourses which valorise domineering, coercive and violent masculinity. These messages also construct a God framed by ideas of might, masculinity and militarism.⁴⁹ Another binary that Nadar critiques in her work is the theological divide created by religious discourse between the divine and the physical world which has framed the church's ambivalence around issues of gender-based violence, including HIV and its indiscriminate effects on black women in particular.⁵⁰ A poignant example of her frustration with this can be found in Nadar's open letter to the church on its silence around the highly publicised trial of pastor Timothy Omotoso, who raped Cheryl Zondi. She asks, "Where were you when Cheryl Zondi was being cross examined about why she didn't scream? Where were you when Cheryl Zondi gave testimony that Omotoso told her that they had a "covenant" relationship? Have you nothing to say?"⁵¹

Nadar locates African feminist theologies as central to the deconstruction of these binaries and in the development of counter strategies that talk back to discursive religious and cultural justifications of violence.⁵² This involves developing alternative discourses and ethics for positive masculinity and positive sexuality. For example, in her work with Johnathan

⁴⁷ See Nadar, Sarojini, "Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference as a case study of masculinism," *Scriptura* 102 (2009b) 551-561.

⁴⁸ See Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, "'Liberated through submission?' The Worthy Women's Conference as a case study of Formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (2010) 141-151.

⁴⁹ Sarojini Nadar. "God, grief and Good Friday: A response to Eusebius McKaiser." Times Live, April 16, 2022. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times-daily/opinion-and-analysis/2022-04-16-god-grief-and-good-friday-a-response-to-eusebius-mckaiser/>.

⁵⁰ Nadar, "The Bible in and for mission," 224; Nadar, "Living in two worlds," 79.

⁵¹ Nadar, "Moral responsibility for Omotoso."

⁵² Sarojini Nadar, "Searching the dungeons beneath our religious discourses: The case of violence against women and the 'unholy trinity'," *Agenda* 1, no. 66 (2005) 16-22, 21; Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 86.

Jodamus, they offer an indecent sexual ethics framed as a means of transforming Pentecostal discourses of repressive sexuality.⁵³ Nadar demonstrates that by drawing on black, feminist and queer theologies that “destabilise and decolonise normative narratives of faith through lived experiences of suffering”, helpful and transformative tools within religion can be constructed. Indeed, it is the imperfect black, feminist and queer God that “brought [her] back to faith.”⁵⁴

Violence in the academy

Nadar has incisively revealed what violence looks like in the South African higher education and how it is fuelled. I can best explain her contribution to researching and teaching through the metaphor of cooking. As an avid cook herself, I believe Nadar would delight in my use of this extended cooking metaphor to conceptualise her work (on condition of course that it be used cleverly and critically). I also think it is an apt metaphor which encompasses the remarkable, and often courageous, hospitality and care that I have witnessed her demonstrate as she prepares, cooks, and serves her unapologetically black feminist study of religion in the academy.

First, I discuss how Nadar has gone about preparing the ingredients. By this I mean the ways in which she prepares a space for the study of faith and feminism, especially for black women scholars. She does this by fighting for the importance of the study of feminism and faith in public universities⁵⁵, and by demonstrating the importance of “getting to the bottom of people’s belief systems”⁵⁶ and of challenging fundamentalist confessional approaches through African feminist lenses. However, a large part of her prep work, is not publicly accessible. While a feast of African feminist approaches to religion is being served by Nadar, we only, I think, see glimpses of the mental, physical and emotional energy that has gone into producing the meal. I have had the profound privilege to

⁵³ Sarojini Nadar and Johnathan Jodamus, “‘Sanctifying sex’: Exploring ‘Indecent’ sexual imagery in Pentecostal liturgical practices,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (2019) 16.

⁵⁴ Nadar, “God, grief and Good Friday.”

⁵⁵ Sarojini Nadar, “I dream of freedom to use the F-word,” *Sunday Tribune*, August 17, 2014a.

⁵⁶ Nadar, “I dream of freedom.”

see her politics in action in her position as research chair and Centre director at UWC. Nadar writes “When Black women find their voices in academia, only for them to be silenced or killed by a white and patriarchal academy, the responses open to them are either talk-back or kick-back.”⁵⁷ Through tears, anger, disappointments, and even health challenges, I have witnessed Nadar talk and kick back as she; fights against grant criteria that disproportionately exclude black women, provides line by line critique of research proposals, mentors young scholars (including myself) on ways to ‘make it’ in academia, and courageously calls out male colleagues on their racism and misogyny. This is the prep work that underlies her written work because for Nadar, the political is truly personal.

Next, I want to reflect on her cooking which is done with great care and attention to detail – it is most certainly not about simply adding and stirring black women into the pot.⁵⁸ In responding to systematic racism in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Nadar references a particular question which Judith Plaskow asks about how the journal continues to feel like a “white container” even when “powerful Black women and other women of color have both sat on the editorial board and been coeditors.”⁵⁹ Nadar responds,

I would venture that it is because the container is exactly that—it is white, and it is designed to “contain” rather than expand and take on new shapes and textures. The container is designed to invite others to be contained within its confines, to be “included” rather than to transform. The formula of “add women of color and stir” has not been helpful because the shape, style, and structure of the container remains white.⁶⁰

Instead of adding black women and stirring, Nadar advocates for recognising the epistemological value and insights in black women’s scholarship informed by their embodied experiences and emotions – and allowing these to shape the various “containers” of the academy, religious institutions and society more broadly.⁶¹ For Nadar, this is a matter of epistemic

⁵⁷ Sarojini Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger: Living with cracked containers in feminist scholarship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 38, no. 1 (2022a) 60.

⁵⁸ Nadar, “Stories are data,” 19.

⁵⁹ Cited in Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger,” 61.

⁶⁰ Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger,” 61.

⁶¹ Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger.”; Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, “Rest, Recognition and Resistance: Drawing on the Womanist

justice and we see this in her work with Tinyiko Maluleke as they critique the violence and appropriation of the white patriarchal academy.⁶²

Finally, I want to discuss how the meal is served. I refer here to how Nadar teaches students and emerging scholars in the study of gender and religion. Teaching, for Nadar, is not simply a diversion from the ‘real’ work of research, instead, it is a critical part of her interventionist approach to the study of religion. In other words, for Nadar social justice in higher education is not only about formal access to spaces of academia but epistemological access in terms of how black women shape knowledge but also what and how they are taught. While she has, at different times, framed her pedagogy as African feminist, decolonial, queer, trans or a mixture of them, the interventionist thread in her work again frames her teaching. This is aptly captured in the title of her article, “Changing the world: The task of feminist Biblical scholars”.⁶³ The task of changing the world is, at least in part, undertaken through a transgressive, transdisciplinary and transformative approach to teaching.⁶⁴ Through these principles, Nadar advocates for deconstructing the normative boundaries that distance and exclude black people, women, queer people and other marginalised groups. In its place, she promotes teaching as an embodied and dialogical process “that allows students, in Martha Nussbaum’s words, to become (or to grow as) “citizens of the world” who are actively concerned with democracy, human rights, and global justice.”⁶⁵

Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021b) 7-18.

- ⁶² Tinyiko Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar. “Alien fraudsters in the white academy: Agency in gendered colour.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120 (2004) 5-17; Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of theological burglaries”.
- ⁶³ Sarojini Nadar, “Changing the world: The task of feminist Biblical scholars,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (2009e) 137-143.
- ⁶⁴ Johnathan Jodamus, Megan Robertson, and Sarojini Nadar, “Transdisciplinary, transgressive and transformation: Pedagogical reflections on sexual ethics, religion and gender,” *Critical African Studies* (2022).
- ⁶⁵ Sarojini Nadar and Adriaan van Klinken, “Introduction: “Queering the curriculum”: Pedagogical explorations of gender and sexuality in religion and theological studies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018) 103.

Talking Feminism, Talking Back

In the introduction to this chapter, I write about how Nadar and her body of work, not only gives me permission to talk back to power, but also provides me with methods, concepts and analytics on *how* to talk back in responsive and socially just ways. Nadar's toolkit for talking back can be summarised into three speech acts. The first is, '*dialogue between*'. Nadar's has advocated for the benefits of transdisciplinarity long before it became trendy. Her scholarship regularly crosses the disciplinary boundaries of theology, Biblical studies, sociology of religion, gender and queer studies, ecclesiology, and ethics. She opens dialogues between disciplines, religious traditions⁶⁶, theory and praxis, text and experience, and by doing this, demonstrates the tools within African feminism that can produce more socially engaged and responsive work that is not confined by boundaries.

The second act of talking back is through '*telling stories*'. Nadar's own personal narratives and embodied experiences, feature prominently in her work, the telling of which she infuses with critical framings of gender and religion.⁶⁷ Nadar's conceptualisation of narrative and STORY⁶⁸ acts as methodology, epistemology, a pedagogical tool, and a motivation for research. As she reminds us, "Stories are not just told for the sake of telling a story, but for their power to invite us all to call deep on our courage to transform."⁶⁹

The leads me to the final act of talking back which involves '*speaking to*.' As discussed throughout this chapter, Nadar is concerned with producing more responsive theologies, methodologies and pedagogies. She might best be described as an academic-activist with a commitment to transformational praxis. While the goal of social change has become popularised in scholarship in recent years due to the clout that decolonial research and teaching has gained in the South African academy, Nadar has advocated for this approach throughout her career. It is precisely this commitment towards transformation that impacted me so deeply in her

⁶⁶ Fatima Seedat and Sarojini Nadar, "Between boundaries, towards decolonial possibilities in a feminist classroom: Holding a space between the Qur'an and the Bible," *Religion & Theology* 27 (2020) 229-249.

⁶⁷ Nadar, "Stories are data."

⁶⁸ Nadar, "Stories are data."

⁶⁹ Nadar, "Stories are data," 26.

inaugural lecture in 2016, it is what has encouraged me to continue to research and teach in interventionist ways guided by the principles and methods I have reviewed throughout this chapter, and it is this that continues to encourage me to continue to talk back as a young black South African scholar of religion.

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