

# Inspired by Holy Women

*In their work with the Holy Women Icons Project—including a new GTU January course in Hawai'i—alumnae Angela Yarber (PhD, '10) and Elizabeth Lee (PhD, '11) are drawing on the wisdom and experiences of historic women to meet contemporary challenges.*

*By Angela Yarber*

It's January 2010, and I'm only months away from defending my dissertation at the GTU. Amid the sweet smell of incense, I gaze across a lush forest from the high point of a Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai, Thailand, when my dissertation advisor, Dr. Ronald Nakasone, approaches. "I'm glad you came on this trip," he tells me. "In the West, when you graduate, they say, 'goodbye,' but in the East, you're stuck with me for life."

I had come to GTU in 2006 as a professional dancer and pastor, intending to pursue a PhD in Art and Religion under the guidance of Doug Adams, professor of Christianity and the Arts at Pacific School of Religion and the GTU. He died far too young the following year. Like many in my field, I was bereft. I was also without an advisor.

Who should step up to guide this queer, dancing, Baptist clergywoman? (Yes, we exist!) A world-renown Buddhist scholar, Jōdō Shinshū priest, and calligrapher. Whether it was researching the iconography of Shiva Nataraja, the kabuki onnagata, Israeli folk dance, whirling dervishes, or giving traditional iconography a folk-feminist twist, Dr. Nakasone was there. "Stuck with me for life."

Another lifelong connection was formed in Berkeley when I met my wife, Dr. Elizabeth Lee, who was also pursuing her doctorate at the GTU. Elizabeth's PhD in Ethics and Social Theory offers grounding to my creative life as an artist and author. Together, we left the Bay Area after graduating and headed south for work. For several years, I resumed work as a pastor and taught part-time; she served as an ethics professor. But over time, my job in the church became toxic. The file folder of hate mail grew thicker and the sexist and heterosexist microaggressions raged within my own congregation. Spiritually spent, I went on a retreat for artists and activists, and began to heal. In the process, I discerned the

time had come for me to follow Lilith's footsteps, climbing the "garden's walls" to find liberation and work outside the confines of church and academy.

Elizabeth and I determined to leave it all, seeking to imagine and create something different. We quit our jobs, sold our home, packed our toddler into a camper, and spent most of the next two years volunteering and traveling full-time, while discerning how to best turn my painting, writing, retreats, teaching, and sustainability work into a nonprofit. Finally, we settled in Hawai'i and established the Holy Women Icons Project ([holywomenicons.com](http://holywomenicons.com)).

The Holy Women Icons Project seeks to empower marginalized women by telling the stories of revolutionary holy women through art, writing, and special events. What began with an art show morphed into articles and books, and then became retreats and an academic course. Now, the Holy Women Icons Project offers over 100 folk-feminist iconographic paintings of revolutionary women from history and mythology, intersectional feminist writing in articles and books, retreats, and, in January a brand new academic course on the Big Island offered in partnership with the GTU and its Center for the Arts & Religion.

In this meandering travelation-turned-entrepreneur narrative, the lives, legends, and legacies of the revolutionary holy women I paint and write about were—and continue to be—my guides. To find the courage to leave a job that was assaulting my soul, I drew upon the myth of Lilith leaving the Garden of Eden and Audre Lorde's sister outsider admonition that "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." It was the passionate nomad, Freya Stark's sentiment that, "It's beckoning that counts, not the clicking latch behind you" that called me out of ordinary life to wonder and wander as a form of vocational discernment. Pauli Murray's intrepid re-



Dr. Angela Yarber with her painting "Goddess of Abundance"

silence as she faced overt discrimination because of her race, gender, sexuality, and gender identity buoyed my work as an artist, author, and executive director of a fledgling nonprofit seeking to make substantive changes for marginalized women and our access to empowerment, inspiration, and beauty.

More than quotable phrases or clichés, however, is the way these revolutionary women form a subversive sisterhood of saints that surrounds and upholds all feminist change-makers. Because of them, not only can we work outside the confining box constructed by forces of white supremacy, sexism, and heterosexism, but we can begin to dismantle it.

**T**his winter, the Holy Women Icon Project is delighted to be kicking off the new decade by offering a new accredited academic course through the GTU as well as an empowering New Year's Retreat for women. The retreat, *Holy Woman*

*Within: New Year's Retreat for Spiritual Creatives*, meets in Volcano, Hawai'i, from December 31, 2019 through January 4, 2020, to usher in a new year with radical self-care for collective liberation.

Then, later in January, our work finds academic grounding in an Intersession course we're offering that's open to students from the GTU and its member schools, as well as alumni and community members. From January 12-18, 2020, we're gathering at our off-grid eco-retreat on the Big Island for *Holy Women Icons: Embodied Ecofeminism and the Arts* (RA4190). We're delighted to be offering this accredited course in partnership with the GTU and its Center for the Arts & Religion, and hope to offer additional sessions in partnership with other schools later next year.

Our upcoming GTU course on the Big Island in January brings together the seemingly disparate areas of the arts, spir-



ity, sustainability, and feminism. Taking cues from indigenous ways of knowing, grounded in the aloha ‘āina movement, the lines between these areas blur; in Hawaiian culture, the arts, spirituality, sustainability, and gender theories are mutually informative and inseparable. This land-based intensive course offers students the opportunity to engage theory with practice on the Big Island.

Intersectional ecofeminist philosophy undergirds conversations about ethics, sustainability, and revolutionary holy women from history and mythology. Knowing, being, and doing merge with engaged pedagogy that values the mind, body, and heart as students read and discuss critical theory, participate in guided icon painting, honor the ‘āina (land) by participating in planting, harvesting, and off-grid-sustainable living, create sustainable artistic practices for their home contexts, and examine the ethical virtues exuded by revolutionary women from history and myth. Each day includes a deep dive into the life, legend, and legacy of a different historical, mythological, and archetypal woman as students examine how the ethical virtue she promotes directly impacts both theory and praxis at specific places on the island.

This land-based intensive class is grounded in the engaged theory of bell hooks, and structured in Parker Palmer’s *knowing, being, and doing* framework. The classroom’s “radical space of possibility” expands to encompass the orchard, garden, art studio, dinner table, an active volcano, tide pools, and those much-beloved seminar spaces of dialogue. Hawai’i provides not simply the location of the course, but the course’s methodology. As in most indigenous ways of knowing, humanity, spirituality, and art are inseparable from the land, so we learn on and as a part of the ‘āina of Big Island.

As haole (white people) living as academics, artists, and clergy outside the academy or church in Hawai’i, Elizabeth and I find ourselves shining an excavating light away from ourselves and onto the revolutionary historical and mythological women—often queer and/or women of color—who have radically shaped our world, yet whose stories are unheard, erased, maligned. Endeavoring to be accomplices in anti-racism work and inaugurators of interfaith dialogue, I think of these lessons that began at the GTU for me. As these historic mentors teach us “How to Be Better Haoles” at Pu’uhuluhulu on Mauna Kea, we are reminded of our place on



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this island. The history and present reality is one of colonization and military occupation. Because of this, it is our responsibility, as ethicist and artist, to serve as interlocutors who introduce others into conversations about loving and respecting (aloha) the ‘āina (land) with our (he)arts and lives. If we are to call this island our home, we must also share the stories of this island with others.

Since the GTU has offered us so much, we are delighted to invite the extended

GTU community into this conversation with us. Expand the classroom’s radical possibility alongside us, and join in our January course.

It’s August 2019 and Elizabeth and I have returned to the Bay Area with our two kids for a month-long exhibit of my icons at a museum in San Francisco. I’m beginning a public lecture to mark the closing of the exhibition, when I glance at the gallery door and see my dissertation advisor, Dr. Ronald Nakasone, walk in with his spouse, Irene. We’ve seen each other only twice since my graduation nearly a decade ago, but he continues to donate to my nonprofit, send me updates, and mail gifts to my two young children. I hear the cadence of his childhood Pidgin echoed back at me each day on Big Island. “Stuck with me for life.”

I think often of Sensei Nakasone and my time at the GTU, that magical place with a view that never ceases to drop my jaw, that venerable place where religion meets the world. I am grateful for all that the GTU has helped us create and imagine. Stuck with me for life. ♦

*Angela Yarber (PhD, ’10) is an author, artist, and executive director of the Holy Women Icons Project, which she founded with her wife and fellow GTU alum Elizabeth Lee (PhD, ’11). Find out more about the Holy Women Icons Project at [holyywomenicons.com](http://holyywomenicons.com).*

*Join the Holy Women Icons Project and the GTU’s Center for the Arts & Religion for a GTU 3-credit intersession course “Holy Women Icons: Embodied EcoFeminism and the Arts” (RA4190), from January 12-18, 2020, on the Big Island. The course is open to GTU students, alumni, and friends; limited scholarship aid is available for GTU students. Visit [gtu.edu/careclasses](http://gtu.edu/careclasses) for more information. Registration opens November 4.*