

We are our own medicine: (Re)membering leadership at the knee of my Grandmothers

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Abstract

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We are our own medicine: (Re)membering leadership at the knee of my Grandmothers explores the question, “What are the herstories of my family’s past, present and futures, and how might I (re)member myself through reclaiming those stories?” Situated within the context of the persistent violence of antiblackness within the American k-12 system, I offer this dissertation in praxis as grounded in Black feminist storytelling. Themed under recovered affirmations, are storied memories from and about the Black women in my family, layered where relevant with insights into my present. These counterstories are made hypervisible as acts of resistance and an argument toward a more loving leadership. This project reflects who I am today—journeying to reclaim a definition of leadership fortified by inherited wisdom(s). To close this work, I offer imagined futures for Black women leading in stifling spaces—a love letter and a prayer—for my sisters who also refuse for any of their selves to be made invisible.

Keywords: Black feminisms; endarkened feminist epistemology; Black storytelling; educational leadership

Dedication

For my little Sarie, who dared to wonder and to question, who heard the rage in her belly as the call of injustice, and who believed even still, that love is all there is. I was lost, but I'm back with you now.

For my grandmother, Rosa Mae Baker (nee: Jones); my great grandmothers, Ada Bell Baker (nee: Wilson) and Amanda Lee Jones (nee: Roberts); my great great grandmothers, Mariah Roberts (nee: Washington) and Pearlie Jones (nee: Hodges); and my great great great grandmother Esther. And for all of the grandmothers whose names I have not yet recovered. For my cousins, sisters and nieces, and their daughters and their daughter's daughters. I dedicate this moment to us, may we forever hear each other on the wind. Ashé.

Gratitude

Thank you, my cousins, aunties, and uncles who sat with me these past months—for sharing your rememberings with me and entrusting me to carry them forward.

Thank you, my gallery wall who carried me through these past years, gave me grace as I declined calls, invites, and accountability for my moods. Thank you for checking in on me, making sure I ate, holding me when I cried inexplicably, pushing me when I was ready to call it quits and insisting that I rest.

Thank you, my teachers who pushed my thinking, breathed love and life into the hardest weeks, pages and emotions. Thank you for the songs, texts, laughs, tarot pulls, prayers, affirmations and good ole' come-to-jesus phone calls.

To each of you, thank you for seeing all of me, even when I tried so very hard to hide the not cute bits: Ash, audrey, B, Bailey Bean, Aunt Beez, Billye, my Bob, Uncle Bub, my Burbs, Chels, Christine, CW, Dani, Dennis D., Dub, Ellen, E.R., Gil, Flavors, Heath, Issac, J.D., Keke, Kisa, Ken, Knaus, Aunt Lo, Aunt Louise, Mama, Aunt May Lue, Panda, Papi, Raikes, Shamrock, Shaneé, Sprink, Steve, Tae and Yang.

I love you.

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Pre-lude

Before I get into this business of dissertating, I realize there are a few terms and definitions I need to establish—and to do so mid-stream feels inadequate. My truth is, these are the assumptions upon which I’m entering this process, and thus they merit acknowledgement at the beginning. Firstly, you will ask yourself *who is ‘we’ and ‘us’* perhaps even with a little attitude: *girl, who you talkin’ to?! To be clear, this project is mostly unapologetic, and certainly being written unapologetically to and for, Black women leading in spaces defined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) as from the outsider-within position. I count myself among the Black women leading in white spaces, astutely aware of the ways in which leadership within my context is framed (implicitly) within whiteness¹. I also count myself among those Black women leading in white spaces, who have zero interest in leading through whiteness. We are seeking / nurturing / curating our leadership—or trying to—as authentically ours. We lead informed by the lived experiences of being both Black and woman—whatever that looks, sounds, feels, smells like to us. So, to you, and for us, I offer this project as an homage and as a journey² toward a (re)membered³ leadership.*

Second, you may wonder, when I’m talking about Black people and blackness, *why are the upper and lower cases all over the place—where is the editorial board?! The issue of capitalization is caveat number two and I’m working through the process. When talking about Black people and culture— I will*

¹ “... not all settlers are “white”... whiteness as a structural – cultural positioning of relations of power and privilege it is not about who is whiteness, but rather how whiteness is perpetuated and maintained through networks and relations of power and privilege within cross societies and – in this case – within educational contexts” (Smith & Yang, 2019, p. 31). *C’mon, you think we haven’t gotten to these positions without some proximity to whiteness? The game requires hypervigilance. And yes, I know it’s exhausting.*

² “Journeying is a process of coming to know. It is essentially learning through the chaos of moving from the familiar through to the unfamiliar while maintaining and observing a reflective frame of mind” (Smith et al, 2019, p. 29).

³ I will use parens with intention, in the tradition of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Cynthia Dillard (2000), who use similar techniques to relay the belief in the “epistemic nature” of language to construct realities (p. 662)—it both helps us to understand our world but also creates new meaning. When you see (re) throughout this project, I invite you to consider the multiple applications of the idea. What does it mean to re-member *and* to remember. What does it mean to have been dismembered— to have been separated from yourself, to recover that piece, to be made whole in this way? *This is the journey ahead.*

capitalize Black. This is a purposeful recognition of the lives and lived experiences within a shared cultural identity that when rooted in the U.S. context is informed by a shared legacy as ascendants⁴ of survivors *and also* of brilliance, strength, spirit and collectivism that began on the continent of Africa *loooooong* before imperial violence. Michael Dumas (2016) writes about antiblackness and articulates a distinction that resonates for me: capitalization here is about honoring a “specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships” (p. 12-13). This is also why I have capitalized Black feminist thought—a group of Black women thinking/engaging, with a shared history, culture and kinship—as apart from black feminisms—the result of that engagement, open to all to engage further. Whereas white/ness is a social construct lacking those features, you’ll notice that I have decided not to capitalize those terms.

Admittedly, I am working through the complexity of making this distinction. There are a number of examples in scholarship and within media⁵ of folx doing the same—teasing out and making messy how we leverage the written word to relay social nuance but also to acknowledge that our language isn’t just shaped *by* but also shapes *how* we understand our world. In the end, and towards my own conceptualization of Black/ness and white/ness as I journey through this project, I expect this little prelude may find itself expanded. My hope is to relay a distinction (and check my own assumptions) between *Black people*, bodies and communities and *blackness* as a worldview, idea and way of being. I’m giving myself permission to discover in relationship with others, and invite you to join me.

⁴ I first heard this usage, when researching paradigms, from Cynthia Dillard’s (2006) *When music changes, so should the dance*. She elaborates in subsequent writings, “Kohain Hahlevi, who coined the term African “ascendant” to imply a progressive movement that calls us to consider a different discourse for the ways we talk about people of African origin” (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011, p. 65). Consider how our language shifts our perspective –what does it mean to ascend, or to descend? Hahlevi recognized the upward (also a fixed perspective) movement of the diaspora, I hear a more spiritual challenge. *The beauty of language is that the question alone is powerful*.

⁵ Historian and educator Nell Irvin Painter’s 2020 opinion piece in *The Washington Post* on the issue certainly adds to the mess in my mind. [Why White Should Be Capitalized Too - Washington Post Opinion, Neil Irvin Painter \(2020\)](#)

Chapter I. What's Love Got To Do With It?⁶

Lovelight *Georgia Douglass Johnson*

Strange atoms we unto ourselves

Soaring a strange demesne⁷

With life and death the darkened doors

And love the light between.

(Johnson, 1963, p.23; *emphasis added*)

I remember first meeting my great grandmother just as she was approaching her 100th year. Big Mama's chair sat in front of a gallery wall cladded with her legacy. Hundreds of mix-matched frames, some surrounded wallet-sized school pictures, others had full page black and white reprints of elders long passed—each hung ever so slightly askew. I was in awe of her. *Imagine, to live to see 100 years!* Seated on a lazy boy in a simple cotton dress, coke bottle glasses magnified the love in her eyes. I remember most vividly those big eyes and her bigger smile—she almost looked like a caricature—surrounded by pictures of us, generations of faces, gleaming in her direction. The love remains mutual.

There's some dispute in the family (and in the written records) as to whether Big Mama was born in 1896 or 1898, but in any case, she was certainly born in Bastrop County Texas and raised in one of a number of small farm towns formed along the banks of a creek. She would spend her adult life along the bank of another, not fourteen miles to the west of her birthplace, and twenty miles outside of the 'big city': Austin. Mrs. Amanda Lee Jones (nee: Roberts) was a sweet woman, a faithful woman, whose resolve endured sharecropping, decades of Reconstruction era violence, the depths of the Great Depression felt

⁶ Imagine the iconic Tina Turner, *What's love got to do with it* (1984) on a 45. These lyrics fill in the spaces between my tension around leadership and leading: "What's love got to do with it... I've been taking on a new direction// But I have to say// I've been thinking about my own protection // it scares me to feel this way". But *is* love a second-hand emotion, or might love be what we lead with: love of self, love of students, love of learning ... and through love might I lead in a way that is more authentically me? Drop the needle and let her spin. [What's Love Got To Do With It - Tina Turner \(1984\)](#)

⁷ This word choice has always stuck with me. *Demesne*: the French concept of the land adjacent to the lord's manor, commonly synonymous with domain, but Sister Georgia said what she said. Is it a commentary on borrowed space/time metaphorically, an acknowledgment of the literal land we *think* we can 'own' or something else entirely? In any case, it is certainly strange and I'm certain life is nothing, if not the love in between the beginning and the end.

so acutely in rural farm towns across America, Jim Crow segregation laws and a movement for civil rights that would only amplify over her lifetime. Big Mama (and Papa) opened the first Black-owned store in Cedar Creek, and in the end, as a supercentenarian, and only months before her passing, Big Mama would cast her ballot to vote for the first Black President of the United States of America⁸. She would miss witnessing the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama II, by just 33 days; going home after 112/114 years and 2 days.

What can Big Mama teach me/you/us about educational leadership? *Everything*. Like Big Mama, Black leaders serve in contexts rich with overt and covert violences, which reward and reinforce antiblackness⁹ everyday. [Interlude: *if you know, you know*. In truth, at the root of quite a few challenges I often face within my professional day-to-day are two realities of my present: (1) I can't control my face and (2) I struggle to summon the patience to engage those who require introductory explanations of racism. *And* as a point of privilege in authoring this dissertation, I choose to write to those who do not need such definitions clarified nor defended.] I know about antiblackness in schools, because I *am* one of those leaders—Black women who lead in service of young people, but who are keenly aware of the ways in which our systems are *not* designed to serve young people, and particularly not young Black people, as whole¹⁰ and complex humans. Particularly in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S., most Black leaders serve in relative isolation; as *the one* in the building, or as *one of a few* in the district. This isolation is furthered

⁸ In October 2008, my Big Mama cast her vote via mail-in ballot for Barack Hussein Obama II, who would become the 44th President of the United States.

https://www.npr.org/sections/newsandviews/2008/10/109yearold_daughter_of_slave_v.html

⁹ I expand upon the institutionalization of antiblackness in my review of the literature. I invite any reader who finds themselves in opposition of this assertion to review the work of Michael Dumas (2016) as a next read.

¹⁰ May we each journey to live, love, learn and lead as “whole human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). *Ashé*.

when you look specifically at Black women who lead¹¹. The result is a tension *for some*¹² between their leadership and the leadership that is expected, acknowledged and rewarded in their leadership spaces. However, this is not the result merely of physical isolation but also of spiritual isolation: limiting the ability to lead connected to self and to purpose.

In the context of schools, this type of *spirit murder*¹³ occurs when Black people are subject to spaces and systems that deny their humanity and dignity (Williams, 1991; Love, 2013, 2016, 2019). Said another way, it is a violently oppressive experience to lead as a Black woman, in spaces where the ways of leading as informed by the lived experiences of Black women¹⁴, are (not so) subtly rejected. Protecting our spirit is not a matter of learning to lead differently—not a matter of capability—because the violence is against our humanity. If leading differently means denying the very essence of one’s own being and submitting to others’ denial as well, there is no protecting spirit in that equation (*no thank you ma’am*). Cynthia Dillard (2008), a Black feminist, scholar and educational leader, argues that for Black women leading especially, work is a “pursuit of purpose”—driven by the interconnectedness of the intellectual and the spiritual within our work (p. 674). If both ideas are conceptually true: that Black women leading are both led by the intellectual and spiritual *and* our context (by design) denies and dismisses our spirit and our humanity, what are the protective measures? The persistent notion I grapple with, is how can we fortify ourselves to lead in the ways that only *we* can. In support of self-definition¹⁵ this research project is

¹¹ While literal isolation is not the central point, folx like data: Black women represent ~6% of U.S. workers, 8% of all elementary principals, 4% of all secondary principals (Jang & Alexander, 2022) and 1.5% of all superintendents (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2022). I could not locate comparable data reflecting Black women’s proportion of central office leadership, but trust, we *are* out here.

¹² It’s a fair enough argument (that I’m not interested in making/having) that *not all* Black leaders experience this tension. This research is for and by those that do.

¹³ Patricia Williams, legal scholar, is credited with the term ‘spirit murder’ describing the excessive violence against Black bodies as evident of the desire to kill something deeper: the spirit. Bettina Love, educator and abolitionist, applies the term within school contexts to describe the way in which schooling as a structure, system and practice is designed to deny the humanity of Black children.

¹⁴ I make this distinction in recognition that not all those who are phenotypically and/or perceived as “Black” and “woman” aim to lead in ways informed by the deep legacy of Black womanhood as I seek to understand it.

¹⁵ “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 45).

rooted in ideas of legacy, community and leadership as a *Blackgirl*: how am I connected to the ancestral legacy of Black leadership to lead *my* way? To begin that rediscovery I ask: **what are the herstories of my family's past, present and futures, and how might I (re)member myself through reclaiming those stories?** Texturing¹⁶ Big Mama's gallery wall with the stories of her daughters, granddaughters and greatgranddaughters, I hope that you too, my sister, might find a path toward (re)membering for yourself. *Come along this journey with me.*¹⁷

We began with ***What's love got to do with it? (Chapter I)*** an introduction to the stories to follow, as a journey to rediscover and recover¹⁸, and to (re)member¹⁹ within a legacy of Black womanhood and leadership. ***To live in love // is to bear the burden (Chapter II)*** is presented as reflexive journal entries about themes across my life. Through these reflections I situate who I am in this work, what (and who) brought me to this moment and the dissonance I continue to sit with as I move through a eurocentric and colonial model of learning as authentically as I can, today. ***It sounds like a whisper (Chapter III)*** grounds this project within a theoretical framework guided by my intellectual aunties: black feminisms as understood by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Robin Boylorn among them. This chapter situates my lens and tools for understanding leadership as defined by Black womanhood. Across three themes, ***At the kitchen table (Chapter IV)*** weaves contributions to this conversation through a review of scholarship about institutional antiblackness, herstories of Black

¹⁶ "Time and emotions give different textures to these stories, and sometimes we make sense of them by sharing and receiving them" (Sankofa Waters, 2023, p. 707).

¹⁷ I am learning the depths of a truth that to write—to tell stories—is a collaborative, collective process. In honor of that truth, thank you Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters for introducing me to Lucille Clifton's poetry. "Won't you celebrate with me// what i have shaped into // a kind of life? i had no model // ... something had tried to kill me // and has failed." (Clifton, 1993).

¹⁸ Laenui (2000) proposes a process of decolonization that includes rediscovery and recovery as Phase 1.

¹⁹ Cynthia Dillard (2008a) uses "re-" as an acknowledgement that these things are not indefinitely lost, but await reclamation, calling us to (re)member "what we have forgotten as a way toward healing not just ourselves but those with whom we teach and research... [B]ringing to mind a particular event, feeling, or action from one's past experiences and the process of actually putting those memories back together in the present ('re-membering')" (p. 90-91).

leadership, and theories and ethics of love as resistance. In *Bigger than time erased* (Chapter V) I invite you into the process of preparing, sitting with and then processing the listening²⁰ done with my family. I introduce you to the characters, my beloveds, and the literal journey—road miles and air miles—that I’ve been on. This project culminates in two parts. First, *Our Gallery - Past & Present* (Chapter VI), curates (re)membered counterstories that shape my Black womanhood, and offer a definition of leadership, culled through intergenerational dialogue (table talks) and reflexive journals, dotted with insights on family artifacts. In the final chapter, *Futures* (Chapter VII) I offer what might be next for me, or for you, as we hold onto a loving leadership. *Here, you are welcome*. May we each (re)create our gallery walls, may we smile upon them, may they smile upon us, and may love continue as the light between. Ashé.

Chapter II. To Live In Love // Is To Bear The Burden²¹

Me’shell Ndegéocello’s (2024) album *No More Water: the Gospel of James Baldwin* dropped in year two of this doctoral program. I listened live at a local jazz club, my innermost thoughts curated to the fullest vibe, a candlelit room flickering to the rhythm of Me’shell’s bass. The experience was transcendent. The lyrics of “Love” speak to the journey from isolation to moving in relation: “When it’s dark, it’s hard // Will you seek to solve yourself? // Me, I take the darkest corner // Whistling to myself // To live in love // is to be uncertain // To live in love // is to bear the burden”. I wondered, does not leading in love also require us to share our burdens? Does the acknowledgement of our burdens allow us to do as Robin Boylorn (2016) suggests, to unlock each others’ secrets through telling?

My father once said, *Sara, you are the happiest angry person I know*.

I still remember²². I was eight, and he was (and is, still) right.

²⁰ “[S]torylistening is an act of creative reciprocal meaning making resulting in strengthened relationships and responsibility for both the teller and the listener” (Marin et al, 2020, p. 2203).

²¹ Dim lighting and noise-cancelling headphones recommended: I present [“Love” from Me’shell Ndegéocello, No More Water: the Gospel of James Baldwin](#) (2024).

²² Sometimes experiences are just sticky, and this one stuck. “Words impose themselves, take root in our memory against our will” (hooks, 1994, p. 167).

My positionality in this work, in my life, has been tethered to dissonance—the internal conflict of two opposing notions—even as a child the world didn’t often make sense to me. I just didn’t have the language for that then, and so, it wasn’t my grief that was visible, but my anger²³. I hope through this project, I can also tell the stories of my joy. Stories of duality—an expression of both/and—an understanding that I am both Black and white and uniquely biracial. Stories that are intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989)—an expression of interconnectedness, an understanding that I am *both* Black *and* woman, aggrieved by the violences of both white supremacy and patriarchy. This project is not a commentary on rhetoric but a (re)membering of lived experience towards healing. *For myself, for my family, and if possible, for you too*²⁴.

Wrestling // 1988 - 2006

I was born as the eldest daughter of an interracial couple (Black father and white mother) just two decades removed from *Loving v. Virginia*²⁵. I grew up in a predominately white community (and state), steeped in the (dis)comforts of an American brand of Christian patriarchy fed by middle-class ideas of wealth. We were not, however, middle-class wealthy regardless of your definition. Picture Fred Meyer (*Kroger to my southern sisters*) as my understanding of boujie groceries; the joy of cooking fueled by what Grocery Outlet had in stock and inspired by the latest episode of America’s Test Kitchen that mom and I watched on PBS Sunday after church. Those bits I love to remember. In contrast, my young Blackgirlhood also looked like being the lone *not* white family in the congregation, with images of a white-faced Jesus on the wall and the pastor expecting either a tithe of dollars or of time. And so, mom and I watched most sermons on a 10” television, while bouncing babies in the childcare room. I’ll admit I love to revisit these

²³“Everything can be used, except what is wasteful, you will need to remember this when you are accused of destruction. ... Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (Lorde, 1997, p. 280-2).

²⁴ “There is a special tie binding people together who struggle collectively for liberation” (hooks, 1984, p. 69).

²⁵ *Loving v. Virginia* was a 1967 Supreme Court decision that ruled anti-miscegenation (interracial marriage) laws unconstitutional. These laws are an example of the institutionalization of antiblackness, and were rooted in a white supremacist ideal to maintain the racial purity of ‘whiteness’ (Dorr, 1999).

times too; white church didn't quite hit (*if you know, you know*). New school clothes meant a trip to Shopko, because they had lay-away and it's not lost on me that new school clothes were themselves a symbol of status and privilege. School looked like being the only Black *person*²⁶ until my little sister started kindergarten the same year that would be last as an elementary student; and wishing I could play with *my* Barbies, with her, in the stairwell instead of being in afterschool choir. She played, waiting for me, so that we could walk home together, stopping to pick up our brother from the neighborhood lady that served as his daycare while we were in school. My Blackgirlhood, from a capitalist perspective, looked like having everything I needed, wanting for more, and being too young to see the backbreaking effort required from two full-time working parents. Being a 'good Christian family' was expensive²⁷.

The racialized experience of growing up as a Blackgirl in the white suburbs was a similar story of living in Otherness and difference, striving to "fit" where I didn't (and couldn't possibly); at least outside of home. On the outside, the faces, voices and messages were almost exclusively white—the news anchors, the school staff, the other students, the workers at the grocery store—the imagery of whiteness overwhelmed the sense of connectedness I felt at home. Home was a safe haven, nestled within a network of Black and interracial families which my parents kept close. The dissonance was being a Blackgirl surrounded by white girls and white messages—about who was labeled as pretty, as smart, as good, as worthy of empathy—while knowing I didn't want to be white either. *I want/ed to be me; and to be loved for it.*

I remember going to marches with my mother, who worked for the state teacher's union, chanting the chants alongside white teachers beaming at my presence—but I also remember being scolded in the classroom for talking too much, for *being* too much. I was confused by the mixed reception to my voice. I remember being told in the first grade (by another student), that my white mother couldn't

²⁶ Decades later, I realize I wasn't just the only Black student, there weren't any Black staff either.

²⁷ "Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor" (Baldwin, 1961, p. 68).

possibly be so²⁸. And I remember how proud I felt in the ‘ah ha moment’ and clapback that I served using a chocolate and vanilla swirled ice cream analogy²⁹. I was frustrated that the white kids my age didn’t have to understand anything but *their own* experience. I remember the lessons of Black American history that I didn’t receive in the classroom, but on the living room floor at the feet of my father; who himself was underserved by the school system. I felt angry that the only stories about blackness at school were stories of slavery—and even those stories weren’t the same as the stories from home—I felt lied to³⁰. The wall of lies that racism and sexism have created in my intergenerational memory is as thick as it is tall and I was left looking for the path toward action—toward healing.

Resistance // 2006 - 2023

Moving into young adulthood my ~~anger~~ unacknowledged grief³¹ revealed itself repeatedly, and I came to recognize the deep need I felt (and saw) for healing. I found myself studying and then serving as a practitioner in a healing profession. As a therapist I could help folx to understand their context and the everpresent -isms that impacted their lives everyday but I knew they couldn’t change those social structures for themselves. I wanted the *structures* to change, not to help people cope with their harm. A few years working for a local school district allowed me to blend family therapy within an educational setting, which, for a time, bridged that desire for structural change. I could help build systems within schools that resulted in material change for students and families—and the effort felt meaningful. A move to the central office, a state and school district later, distanced me from students but also brought

²⁸ “The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself” (Harris, 1982, p. 4).

²⁹ In reflecting some thirty years later, the dissonance deepens as I consider how my six-year-old self was wrestling with feeling and being seen as Black, and trying to hold space for the legitimacy of my white mother (also a wonderful, empathetic and deeply loving human being) which now, seems to beautifully capture how/why I understood being biracial as duality; as both, *and neither*.

³⁰ Robin Boylorn (2016) names this angst poignantly: “It is hard to feel at home when you have to hide who you are” (p. 50).

³¹ In this season of my life, bell hooks (2000) stays calling me out, “Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending” (p. 127).

opportunities for systems change. *But at what cost?* I remember thinking that moving to the central office was like peeking behind the curtain in Oz. The great and powerful “district” wizard was but a number of regular ‘ole (though predominately white) people, doing their best, but also *just* doing their jobs. The perceived dysfunction³² was perfectly functional—the system was designed for the exact outcomes I was seeing. Student outcomes weren’t great, overall teacher retention was high, but the teachers we *were* losing were disproportionately *not* white. *Girl, the math ain’t mathin’.*

Restlessness // 2023 - 2025

Autumn has arrived. The leaves are turning, the sky is grey and the air has been kissed by rain, even though I can’t feel the drops just yet. I’m seated on a fluffy couch, a crackling fire plays on the TV, and a wall of windows peeks out to a still lake surrounded by little cabins and piney woods. What a juxtaposition to this process! Four years ago I started thinking about doctoral programs. I was feeling the churn, that little stirring in your belly that says: *girl, you’re getting restless*. Five years into an administrative position, I had survived (*by the loosest definition*) a global pandemic as a first year administrator in the central office, and the echo chamber of ideas and voices was getting louder. I hoped that a doctoral program might be grounding, inspiring and that I might find a reconnection to the fortitude that was waning. I applied to this particular program, in part because the voices coming out of it were different from those swirling around me, and I have to admit there was validation in that. Validation in the possibility that a program could center ideas around decolonizing schools—could hold hope for the promise of schools as liberatory spaces³³. Nearly three years to the day since hearing I had been accepted,

³² Leigh Patel (2015) describes system (dys)function in relationship to settler colonialism—educational leaders believe themselves to make decisions in the best interests of students, and yet perpetuate (and often embody) practices counter to that belief. However, under a critical race theory analysis, this dysfunction is by design; while *leaders* may ascribe to a set of beliefs, the structures we work within were not designed in alignment with those beliefs. *The math don’t math*. Or does it?

³³ “... learning at its most powerful could indeed liberate” (hooks, 1994, p. 4).

I find myself swirling again, but in a different way. I want to write about how *we*³⁴ thrive, about how we sustain ourselves amidst the chaos and despite its apparent permanence. It's funny, I've been so focused on systems change, I've come full circle to the necessity of learning to cope with the harm. The core of my tension remains: I am a Blackgirl leading in a space that not only wasn't designed for my leadership, but was intricately designed to snuff me out. My resistance is exhausting... and yet my survival necessitates that I resist in whatever way I can, hold hope for something different and lean into love daily.

Processing // Everlasting

As I begin the slog phase of this process, I continue wrestling with the expected voice of academia and the perpetual desperation to hold onto *my* voice³⁵. This neurospicy³⁶ brain spins webs connecting the dots of words from academic scholars to the images, lyrics and poems³⁷ from my journey that they evoke(d). The patchwork in the footnotes³⁸ is certainly a sidequest, if you're so inclined; but also reflects my own curtain of Oz, providing a running dialogue of bonus content that captures what this full experience has been for me. Admittedly, my brain is equally a barrier to this process: the timelines alone require a clarity of thought and a discipline in the process that has been... elusive. As I wrestle with these words on the page, I'm navigating how to write *my way*—from a place of home³⁹—where the vibrations fill my spirit, I am whole, full, still, connected, fully present and activated. But this place isn't that; this is the

³⁴ You, me, we, all of us striving to live/love/lead in our whole humanity. "Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world" (hooks, 1994, p. 265).

³⁵ "The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (hooks, 1994, p. 11).

³⁶ I was introduced to the term "neurospicy" on TikTok (arguably the leading space for language development in the 21st century!). Neurospicy is internet slang for neurodivergent; evoking the internet culture reference to spicy as "narrative-challenging". I claim it here as an emergent part of my identity and positionality. See more at the Stimpunks Foundation (Boren, 2024).

³⁷ "For wom[x]n, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 37).

³⁸ "No black woman writer in this culture can write "too much". Indeed, no woman writer can write "too much"...No woman has ever written enough" (hooks, 1999, p. 30).

³⁹ Home feels like the song from Robert Glasper (2024), the melody slows my heartbeat, the vibe thumps at my chest and I feel my breath deepen into my spirit. ["Going Home", Letting Go \(2024\)](#), close your eyes and feel it for yourself:

stranger's house full of rigid expectation and sharp rules that outline the *white way* to write: to be heard, to be worthy of hearing⁴⁰. Perhaps one day, this piece may become the dissertation I dreamt of: a scrap book of storied pictures, family artifacts, recipes, maps and lyrics. And perhaps one day a version of this project will be coupled with a companion guide for others to share in this journey for themselves. *Perhaps*. Until then I wrestle with the tension to tell what I can tell, in the way I can tell it, in this space and at this time. And perhaps the first lesson in healing is letting go⁴¹ ... of (useless) anger⁴², of expectation, of perfection... instead holding tightly to the melodies of home⁴³. And perhaps, that's enough for now.

??? // 2026

We just passed the first anniversary of Trump's second inauguration and I can feel the collective sigh. Some days it's the sigh of resignation and I can feel helplessness in the air. Those days are the exhale of hot coffee breath: stifling, oppressive and kind of funky. The days feel stale and slightly bitter. There's been quite a few of these days for me lately. State violence isn't a new chapter in the American story. *I'm gonna say it*: white America skimmed that reading at best (acting new new). As a Black woman, this feeling isn't one of surprise. It's one of expectations met in the worst way. *Of course he/they did/are/will*. Don't misunderstand, on these exhale days, the resignation is not defeat. To create change we must understand the present. These exhale days are that understanding, the helplessness is in knowing exactly why it's happening and what comes next. Today doesn't feel like one of those days. The sky is grey, the air cool but not cold, and the sigh is one of a decision made. It's the huff before you move to lift the heavy thing. It's the space created for that last bite of food. It's the puff of dust as you tug to straighten your jacket. We are being met with anti-DEI keyword searches, racists being paid us to 'hunt' us, threats about

⁴⁰ "I was in a stranger's house (the academy), a white stranger's house, trying to tell my blackgirl truth" (Boylorn, 2016, p. 47).

⁴¹ "Learning as an act of futurity. ... You can't map futurity; you can only map possible futurities. Learning, similarly, is an act of letting go of what one knows for what one does not yet know" (Patel, 2015, p. 95).

⁴² "When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar. I have tried to learn my anger's usefulness to me, as well as its limitations" (Lorde, 1984/2015, p. 126).

⁴³ "When you are at home with yourself you feel at home even at somebody else's house" (Boylorn, 2016, p. 45).

de/funding, bombs and war, and erasing legacies to replace the name of do-ers with the name of talk-ers.

Today feels like a second wind and it carries with it resolve. *We have breath left to fight, and we will.*

Chapter III. It Sounds Like a Whisper⁴⁴

I learned how to braid my hair from between the knees of my auntie Kimmie: a big pillow below me, another at my back, and a rubber hair tie pinched between my fingertips. From the living room floor I learned lessons about how women coach and counsel, joke and love on each other; sometimes over a meal and always with music floating in from somewhere. From the passenger seat I learned the importance of visiting our elders when we're in town, and the warmth of the hug waiting in the arms of an auntie at the doorway. These moments and spaces were, as bell hooks (1990/2014) describes, *homeplaces*. The Black women in my life created spaces where I felt seen, heard and beloved⁴⁵. From this homeplace I come to understand my life and experiences and thus this project on leading through love.

Consider Big Mama's lazy-boy rocking chair as the epistemological standpoint: endarkened feminism as described by Cynthia Dillard (2000). Dillard sets a foundation of comfort and strength in the space from which (she and) I view the world: how I know what I know to be true in my spirit. From there, this project centers Big Mama's gallery wall as the way we see and understand the world. Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) synthesis of Black feminist thought⁴⁶ serves as this theoretical framework, to reclaim a definition of leadership. This chapter offers an overview of both, spotlighting the theoretical tenets for this project, and how they serve as the photo frames or methods in healing through storytelling. I close this

⁴⁴ Known as a protest song, Tracy Chapman's (1998) "Talking About a Revolution" has always struck me more as the slow build *before* collective action—the personal transformation as what's happening is coming into focus. Before the protest chants are the whispers seeking out allies tuned to the same frequency. Throughout this project whispers have also become how I think of our ancestral wisdoms—the known that's unstated, but felt and heard all the same.

⁴⁵ "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (hooks, 1990/2007, p. 55).

⁴⁶ I go on to use "Black feminist thought" and "black feminisms" seemingly interchangeably; though I do believe they are conceptually distinct. I understand BFT as a synthesis of common themes in the work and writings of Black feminist scholars (e.g. a school of thought). I understand black feminisms more specifically to refer to those thoughts.

chapter with an imagined talk at the kitchen table, featuring scholarly ancestors whose writings have shaped my application of Black feminist thought as theory.

Grounding in Black Feminisms

We must begin to tell [B]lack women's stories because, without them, we cannot tell the story of [B]lack men, white men, white women, or anyone else in this country. The story of [B]lack women is critical because those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it.

~Kimberlé Crenshaw⁴⁷

The Rocking Chair: Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

Big Mama's lazy-boy was well-built, sturdy but comfortable, worn through the years and shaped by her bodily form. I find that same comfort in Cynthia Dillard's (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology. I recall my first reading of Dillard's (2006) piece, *When the music changes, so should the dance*—it felt as though she was writing just to me. Like my church auntie, the one that calls herself 'spiritual but not religious', is a little "woo-woo", always vocalizes a yet-to-be-considered insight and makes me feel deeply seen; *she* is endarkened feminism. Amidst a number of incredible scholars, within the reading list of a program dedicated to exploring what it means to decolonize education, Dillard's (2006) was the first in which I felt struck by the reality (not merely the hope) that there is a path to humanize research, education and leadership in material ways. I had been frustrated in our exploration of paradigms, and the feeling that none were quite 'right'—they felt unsettled in my spirit. None held sufficient space for the way that I understood the world as a Black woman, educator and researcher.

Two assumptions from Dillard's (2000) work, are the foundations of the decision to ground the theory of this project in black feminisms. Before exploring those assumptions, I must honor Dillard's intentionality in the language of endarkened feminist epistemology. *Remember, language understands*

⁴⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited in a piece [by Donna Owens, Her Dream Deferred: Black Women Convene In D.C. To Explore Our Status In America](#), published by Essence.

and it creates. First, is the use of *endarkened*. Dillard (2000) recognizes that a number of scholars⁴⁸ have explored the power that language holds to construct realities and its use historically as a tool of oppression. Endarkened is more than a colorful pivot from “enlightened”—which was meant to acknowledge the “new and important feminist insights” of the white feminist thought—endarkened suggests a deepening of thought, a *return to old* insights (Dillard, 2006, p. 70). By positing an epistemology that centers the lived experiences and ways of being of Black women, Dillard also demonstrates the opposing power of language to move us *toward healing and transformation*. Second is Dillard’s challenge to the prevailing metaphor at the time: research as a recipe. Instead, Dillard presents “*research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (p. 663). There is liberation in the assertion to re-center humanity within research/er as fundamental to an endarkened feminist epistemology—to honor research as a reflection of humanity *as subject* as opposed to the study of humanity *as object*. Understanding *research as responsibility* also acknowledges what Collins (1989) called the outsider-within status that I feel as a Blackgirl leading in a historically, systematically and pervasively white dominant industry (American education).

In addition to the paradigmatic shift toward *endarkening* and *research as responsibility* are the two assumptions that endarkened feminist epistemology uniquely adds to a lens of Black feminist thought. The first is Dillard’s (2006) *assumption #1*: “self-definition forms one’s participation *and responsibility*⁴⁹ to one’s community” (p. 71, emphasis added). The relationship to self, to others, and in responsibility to both fosters the capacity for change. Self-definition is not an individualistic act, but an act of resistance to adopt stories that are not ours⁵⁰. While we (Black women) each have our own sense of

⁴⁸ Dillard (2000) cites Asante (1988), Morrison (1993), and Thiongo (1986) “and others” as among those exploring the sociocultural phenomena of language as an oppressive tool, and its epistemic nature to construct realities (p. 662).

⁴⁹ “To know something is to have a living relationship with it, influencing and being influenced by it, responding to and being responsible for it” (Dillard, 2000, p. 673).

⁵⁰ “The development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war for Black liberation” (Lorde, 1984, p. 41).

self, we also share in the drive for self-definition as an act of collective resistance. For Black women this connection includes a *legacy of struggle* (Collins, 1991) along the margins of power and domination. One of these legacies is the myth that Black personhood began on “this side of the water”—a myth that serves to further erase the strength, power, legacies and spiritual wealth that pre-dated a violent arrival on this, North American, continent (Dillard, 2011, p. 387). Endarkened feminist epistemology lifts a *both/and orientation* (Collins, 1991) that sees and honors both the pain⁵¹ and love within this legacy. These are spaces of immeasurable, communal strength.

One of these spaces is understood in Dillard’s (2006), *assumption #2*: “research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose”(p. 71). Embedded within this assumption is an acknowledgement of the relationship Black women have with the spiritual. Dillard talks about spirit in the context of the function of research: “uncovering and constructing truth as the fabric of everyday life (a spiritual pursuit)” (Dillard 2000, p. 674). bell hooks (1993/2015) offers a definition of spirit as well:

Living a life with spirit, a life where our habits of being enable us to hear our inner voices⁵², to comprehend reality with both our hearts and our minds, puts us in touch with divine essence.

Practicing the art of loving is one way we sustain contact with our “higher self.” (p. 138)

Whether a connection to Dillard’s (2006) ‘spirit’ and/or to hooks’ (1993/2015) ‘divine essence’ and ‘higher self’, the spiritual is inescapable for Black women as researchers—spirituality is a compulsion for truth, purpose and meaning that connects to our humanity. In the context of identity, Dillard (2008) describes spiritual as one of the many layered forms of memory. The acts of teaching and research help us to recall within our spirit, to (re)member ourselves: “*we must learn to re-member the things that we’ve learned to forget*” (p. 89). In building on these notions of responsibility and (re)membering, endarkened feminist epistemology calls for an ethic of care and consideration in the process and production of

⁵¹ “True resistance begins with people confronting pain...and wanting to change it” (hooks, 1990/2014, p. 229).

⁵² *C’mon with the whispers!* We quiet our minds to (re)member the inheritance we carry with us.

projects such as this one. Said plainly, this is a call to treat this exercise as a sacred process and to honor those that engage with me, and it, along the way. *That includes you.* An endarkened epistemology, just as Big Mama's lazy-boy, anchors me/us in this work, it holds us in the ways that we need to be held (with care), and firmly plants our vantage point at the foot of the gallery wall—the theoretical framework of black feminism.

The Gallery Wall: Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought stands to serve as Big Mama's gallery wall, shaping and framing this project into a call for action:⁵³ *imagine what we might learn were we to center Black women as our lens to understand (and lead the change in) our world.* As an intersectional framework, Black feminist thought translates to the academic lexicon what is already understood by Black women. That is to say: Black women understand the world through lived experience from the crossroads of power and domination—we don't have the privilege of not knowing/seeing/naming the impact of exerted power. Collins (1991) highlights an understanding across black feminisms that at these intersectional⁵⁴ crossroads "oppressions work together in producing injustices" (p. 18). By situating this standpoint to redefine leadership, Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework raises questions about *how* (not, if)⁵⁵ Black women experience leadership as defined by antiblack (*and anti-Black*⁵⁶) racism and male superiority. Equally as important, Black feminist thought elevates how Black women create, nurture and protect opportunities

⁵³ bell hooks (1984) provides a brief definition of theory: "the guiding set of beliefs and principles that become the basis for action" (p. 30).

⁵⁴ Crenshaw (1991) introduces the language of *intersectionality* through her legal scholarship, as a call to recognize that Black women are uniquely compartmentalized under the law into *either* Black or woman, but in reality, live under multiple oppressions, impacted by both race and gender power relations.

⁵⁵ Black women *done been* leading, and America *done been* racist and sexist. Math is mathin' on this one.

⁵⁶ Reminder of my love for nuance! Lest we forget that antiblack (ideas) racism is also anti-Black (people)... how many of us have encountered the white colleague that "loves Black people" while hating on all things blackness, and also the one that is clearly anti-Black but engages in all things blackness. I tease these out at this moment, as a reminder that "the devil stays busy" or so my Grandma said.

for hope, joy, love and redefinition. Through each of the highlighted tenets of Black feminist thought, this project and the subsequent methods are aligned, in this interest.

Intersectionality. Continuing the *both/and orientation* (Collins, 1991), Black feminist thought recognizes that racism nor class, nor any other system of oppression (-isms) can be considered, nor changed, in isolation. Collins (1991) expands further to center the matrix of domination—specifically naming how these intersections are organized and enacted. As discussed, Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1989) legal scholarship foregrounded the material and tangible reality of the *standpoint* Black women engage from within institutional structures (the legal system included, but not exclusively). Our educational system is also an institution that is embedded with and perpetuates Collins’ matrix. For Black women leading, definitions of leadership must acknowledge our full humanity. To do so, Collins (1991) asserts that “resistance must show comparable complexity” (p. 203). The impetus of this project is my experience of leadership within (American) education, recognizing its complexity within the matrix of domination and the standpoint of Black womanhood that could disrupt the whole farce.

[Untitled: In Being At Home with Myself] Robin M. Boylorn

Blackgirl.

So that the words look the way they sound on my tongue.

Blackgirl,

not

black

(then)

girl.

There is no pause in my identity.

Blackgirl,

not

black

(space)

girl.

There is no space left in me.

Blackgirl

(no space).

because there is no protection between my race and sex.

Because I am never seen or experienced as black by itself or girl without race.

(Boylorn, 2016, p. 49)

Criterion for Meaning. Black feminist thought discusses the lived experiences of Black women from both an axiological and ontological perspective. Black women's lived experiences inform and are informed by their values (axiology), such as beliefs in collectivism and ethics of care. Black women's lived experiences also inform and are informed by the nature of reality and existence (ontology), our lived experiences *are real* and *we are real*. Said differently, Black feminist thought centers lived experience as the criterion for meaning, for ourselves and for our lives. Collins (1991) describes lived experience in the context of wisdom and knowledge. "This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women's survival" (Collins, 1991, p. 257). Black feminist thought as the theoretical frame for this project *knows* that Black women lead, and thus asks, *how*. This tenet recognizes that Black women seek meaning (wisdom) in community, through relationship and dialogue, Black women resist⁵⁷ through both witnessing⁵⁸ and telling⁵⁹ our truths.

Collective Action. Black feminist thought extends beyond the individual or even the whole of Black womanhood. We hear this in Collins' (1991) acknowledgement that "while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate the lasting institutional transformation required for social justice" (p. 290). Black feminist thought aims to dismantle the oppressions that dehumanize *all* people. Rooted in an endarkened epistemology, in honor of the connection all people hold to each other and to spirit; our liberation must then also be connected. hooks (1989) captures this connection poignantly: "[w]hen we end our silence, we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence" (p. 17-18). This effort towards collective liberation is embedded within expressions of *legacies of struggle* (Collins, 1991), calls for *collective responsibility* (hooks, 1984), and in an

⁵⁷ "Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of a subject and an object. It is humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 131).

⁵⁸ "Our interpretation of safety and comfort, indicated by the willingness of participants to bear witness to one another, forged opportunities for self-definition and self-valuation" (Patterson et al, 2016, p. 68).

⁵⁹ "It is important that black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing" (hooks, 2014, p. 8).

emphasis upon the power of *voice*⁶⁰ (Lorde, 1984). Within this frame, Chilisa (2020) positions the activist feminist researcher as a transformative healer with the responsibility to ensure our work supports community healing. In this call to action I find hope that this project, done in this way, at this time, might serve to reclaim a leadership that centers healing and love. I imagine that this project might serve more tangibly as a tool for continued and collective action; as a journey book⁶¹ for other leaders to witness and (re)member their own legacies to realize a leadership that allows them to lead authentically as humans, first. *May all those charged to lead, lead toward healing and love for all*. This is my dream⁶².

Core to this project is recognition that Black women are de-centered in the praxis of leadership, through the erasures by antiblackness and idealized (white) leadership. The harm is disconnection from self as human, as a part of a whole, and as a leader. As the anchor for my work, Black feminist thought holds space to understand, (re)learn, and push on what is (un)known, as acts of resistance. In that space are strategies of inquiry that (a) center the lived experiences of Black women, (b) allow me/us to share those experiences in the method that relays them best, and (c) that support efforts to create connection and visibility in our collective struggle towards liberation.

Healing Through Storytelling

When we are taught that safety always lies in sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is the choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. (hooks, 2000, 68)

⁶⁰ “We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 37).

⁶¹ Love and respect to my Professor (and friend, please) Dr. M. Billye Sankofa Waters, who introduced me to the journey book as a scrapbooking method texturing stories with images, artifacts, reflections and all the things. #BlackFolxAreRich

⁶² I am reminded of a poem by Guyanese poet, Martin Carter (1951) in the collection *The hill of fire glows red*, “who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change the world” (Brathwaite, 1977, p. 9).

As the elders are passing, there is an urgent buzz in the family; to share stories, to document, to celebrate and to mourn *together in love*. Black feminist scholars (hooks, 2000; Dillard, 2006) have offered conceptions of love as an *act of will*—requiring intentionality to nurture and commitment to mutual growth. From the position of *researcher as transformative healer* (Chilisa, 2020) I use a qualitative research methodology, framing Big Mama’s gallery within a curated set of antique frames: healing methodologies that necessitate and evoke *loving care* (hooks 2000; 2001). Through an autoethnographic⁶³ approach, informed by an endarkened feminist lens and “the notion of we-ness”—*nkwaethnography* (Dillard & Bell, 2011; Allen-Handy, 2021), I choose to center what is life affirming⁶⁴: “culture, community, and symbols” (Dillard & Bell, 2011, p. 344). In looking forward to specific strategies of inquiry, I draw upon the potential for transformation in the land of narrative inquiry methods that lift ideals of “unconditional love, compassion, reciprocity, ritual and gratitude” (Dillard, 2008, p. 287). These principles lend themselves to Black storytelling (Sankofa Waters, 2023); individual interviews and group dialogue (table talks); family artifacts; and self-inquiry through reflexive journaling. These methods provided space for the praxis necessary to engage this project as both researcher/ed, while challenging that which would render their/our stories silenced. Thematic questions crafted to elicit stories of Black womanhood, guiding values/wisdoms/poetry, and ideas of home/strength/spirit. By grounding methods in narrative as the strategy of inquiry, I left room for the stories to shift my methods, my thinking and the process as we engaged *together*. These methods situated my research unapologetically for, by and with other Black women.

⁶³ While auto— means self, for me/us/Black women, self is plural, connected and tethered. “Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community...” (Collins, 1991, p. 113).

⁶⁴ Dillard & Bell (2011) call this *nkwaethnography*, informed by endarkened feminist epistemology as “an ethnography that embraces “nkwa,” a Twi word meaning sacred or life affirming” (p. 344).

My People & Our Places

Where else but to sit at the knees of my aunties and grandmothers? I was inspired by the call to engage time and space on this journey to (re)member (Dillard & Bell, 2011). To engage the story of (dis)connection to leadership in my own family, I traveled to my familial roots in Texas, visiting a total of three places that have held us for over a century and the land we know as home. Three generations—myself and a cousin, both approaching forty, born in the Pacific Northwest; an auntie in the latter half of their 60's who grew up (and remains) rooted in the Pacific Northwest; and three (great)aunties (late 80's to mid 90's) who grew up in rural Texas—offering a kaleidoscope of stories woven from firsthand accounts (Sankofa Waters, 2023). As my grandmother passed in year one of this program; in visiting her sister, and her sisters-in-law, I hope to be visiting memories she (and Big Mama) would have shared. As a family who has furthered the pattern described in African ascension, across our shared memories, we will piece together a picture of what Black leadership has looked like in our family, the strengths that I might carry forward, and the suffering we might bring toward the light—to heal in communion with one another. As I engage through practices of love, compassion, reciprocity, ritual and gratitude, to hold space for what could be a heavy experience, I don't feel the need to zoom out with additional participants, but to *zoom in with intention*.

Reciprocity: A Letter To My Aunties

In alignment with my spirit—what feels right in my being—consistent with my commitment to *research as responsibility* (Dillard, 2006), and to *researcher as transformative healer* (Chilisa, 2020), practices of reciprocity are critical. One of these practices is presence—in mind, body, and spirit—with my aunties. To support that practice, I record quick notes during our conversations with dedicated time to audio or video record my reflections thereafter. Whenever possible (and when not a distraction), I use an audio recording device, to capture exact quotes and frankly, the sound of voices I will one day long to remember. A second practice is to share my notes and re-storied writings while in draft with my aunties.

WE ARE OUR OWN MEDICINE

As co-creators, and in honor of their words, I *knew* they would have editor's notes and their feedback is the only feedback that matters in the end. This practice supported opportunities for healing through collective praxis—revisiting past conversations, rehashing understandings, details and emotions. Lastly, and perhaps the most fundamental practice of reciprocity is the commitment itself. To capture this commitment, a letter and poem that served as my formal ask and invitation to join me on this journey.

Beloved family, kinfolk, elders:

I'd like to spend some time with you, some real time, to understand *our* story. While I'm approaching this as a 'research project,' my hope is to protect sacred time to listen to, to seek to understand, and to record the legacy of leadership in our family. I *know* it exists, because I see it in you, in my grandma and in Big Mama—may they finally rest. As a part of my journey to rediscover, to recover, to (re)member myself and to celebrate—I want to offer the same to you, and to treat this time together with the care that it deserves. In the end, I hope *we* can create something beautiful, to share our story with the next generations, to build on and up. In that spirit, I offer a poem, in hopes that it inspires our storytelling and holds me accountable to these promises I make to you:

Like the dandelion, we
have been misunderstood
underappreciated
undervalued
under water, under fed.
But I see you.
I cherish you, for you
are divine.
I will only ask of you
what is needed
honor the medicine you offer
through story
through space
I will be present
in the joy
and in the pain
of (re)membering.
We are our own medicine

From the cotton field to the one-room house
the kitchen table to the church pew
I commit to see you
To cherish you, for we
are divine.

At The Kitchen Table⁶⁵: An Imagined Conversation

Imagine first, a well worn table, a warm room, adorned with thrifted frames of smiling ancestors—blood, spirit, and intellectual—tethers spun into a transcendent, metaphysical ‘safe space’. They activate a forcefield of Black wisdom that settles over the room like a gentle fog rolling up from the Sound. Auntie bell was the first to arrive, bringing with her the first dish on tonight’s menu: a creamy green soup to cleanse the palate, preparing us for the meal and conversation to come. She speaks of the ethic of love—just as the heat and spices swirl to activate a warmth in our bellies, an ethic of love requires conscious decisions and active practices of loving care (hooks, 2000). Between sips of her sweet tea she reminds us of the pain of isolation, and the opportunity love offers for healing—as an “act of communion” (hooks, 2000, p. 68). Auntie didn’t need an invite to this party; in many ways she founded these table talks, encouraging critical inquiry and reciprocal exchange (hooks, 1994). She nurtured the wick of Black feminist thought, as she did for so many of us. In doing so she created and maintained the candlelight; allowing us to see different angles, or to better articulate the angles we’d always seen. What I love best about Auntie bell is that yes, she offers a Black feminist theoretical lens, but is quick to remind me that she’s not the first. With her and in her she carries our othermother (Sojourner Truth) and so many aunts and cousins (Ida B. Wells, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde) from long before I joined the tree. Auntie bell’s words always resonate, though they have a particular reverberation in this

⁶⁵ The concept of ‘table talks’ and conversations at the kitchen table isn’t new nor uniquely Black. However, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the Black aunts behind [The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press](#): Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Cherrie Moraga, and Audre Lorde. Their effort to create a ‘for us, by us’ press to lift the literary genius of women of color as a community, and an act of collective resistance against the erasure of our voices is a reminder that black feminism requires action beyond theory.

question of Black leadership identities and wholeness. She reaches for my hand, and I parrot the point: *in such a loveless place, at such a loveless time, where else to begin but at a recommitment to love?* She squeezes her approval and looks to her left.

Beside her, another auntie leans in and her eyes smile in the way that only aunties do best: just before they spill a wisdom held in the depths of their spirit. Auntie Cynthia nearly coos across the table: *we must heal ourselves, each of us, and as whole—we have generations of healers among us—now but also, always.* Her arms held wide, the surety of her grin stills the room as if we all needed to breathe in that truth. Cynthia Dillard, too, needn't an invite to this table. She is a caretaker: her fingers glide in front of her, wiping away old crumbs and leaving smooth the delicate lace draped over the wooden table. Auntie Cynthia speaks of the task of (re)membering and the role of identity in teaching, education and thereby research (Dillard, 2011). Our elders beam at her as she reminds me that looking backwards, (re)claiming and (re)membering our stories, moves us all forward and (re)connects us to ourselves (Dillard et al, 2000; Dillard, 2022). Tonight, she brought with her endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000; Dillard et al, 2000); itself a heavily seasoned pot of hearty red beans, kale and rice. All of us, elder and youngling alike, hang onto every word; each is as rich as the aroma wafting from the pot. She reminds us of who we are and encourages us to lean into *all* of that magnificence. *We are divine.*

I owe Auntie a lot. Her wisdoms are as I imagine looking into a true mirror for the first time to be; an introduction to self, to seeing emotions held hidden, unlocked and brought to the light. I saw in endarkened feminist epistemology, an opportunity to explore the stories of authentically Black leadership, through the lens of spirituality and spiritual pedagogy (Dillard, 2000; 2022; Dillard et al, 2000). Auntie Cynthia (Dillard, 2022) asserted our spirituality as our inheritance (p. 370), something to be reclaimed, nurtured and for us to teach (and I argue lead) authentically, something that needed to be everpresent in our work and understanding of our world. In this way, Cynthia Dillard is like a spiritual grandmother, beckoning me on a journey to reconnect to my own sense of spirituality, and the lineage

therein. As we talk, and laugh over this table and discuss the reality of Black leadership as an untold story, Auntie Cynthia's conceptualization of ubuntu as a praxis (Dillard & Neal, 2020) informs the methodology swirling in my mind. She collects each of our plates as the next dish is brought hot to the table. Leaning over the candlescape, she offers a final reminder: *honey, "we are Black on purpose for a purpose"* (Dillard, 2022, p. 2) *if you start there, what can you learn about the story of Black leadership?* Her question floats in the air, settling atop the dense sweetness of a perfectly baked seven-up pound cake.

If I didn't know better, I'd think cousin Billye stole my grandmama's recipe, but in this room it's clear we all share grandmamas somewhere on the tree. Cousin Billye is different from the others, her take is funky, informed by 90s era hip hop and all things Southside. She's a bit more radical, a bit more fearless; though I'm sure she'd say even the unapologetic have fears. In her pound cake she brings the richness of those things that connect us across time and the physical world: recipes, music, and other types of stories. Cousin Billye taught me about firsthand, handmedown, and kaleidoscope stories; lifting the types of "everyday stories and experiences that we often take for granted as well as those we cross oceans for" (Sankofa Waters, 2023). Like Auntie Cynthia and Auntie bell, Billye is a part of a line of Black feminist theorists, and a Black Storyteller that's pushing against the margins of what we're *supposed* to talk about, how and with whom.

As she moves the last bite of cake around her plate, she thinks aloud, *you know girl*, "[e]thnographic work allows for deep intimacy and demands reciprocity. It shoulders risk and engenders an erotic/spiritual process of knowing" (Sankofa Waters, 2023, p. 711). I know she's right; to engage in this question I need to be ready for the tension in being an insider/outsider; and as a biracial Blackgirl there's a reconciliation with the dilemma of the colonizer/colonized that I can't lose sight of (Villenas, 1996). Through that lens, I hear her loud and clear: remain committed to what Auntie Cynthia preaches routinely, *research as a responsibility* (Dillard, 2000, p. 663). I offer my tension to the table. Billye's eyes

are flickering and she's got that look that says, *c'mon!* "[T]elling our stories engenders healing" (Sankofa Waters, 2023, p. 706) *and girl, if what you want is to connect to what is 'us' you need to get your crew together and you need to talk about it. Tell the story!*

Auntie bell takes a few too precious crumbs along with my plate, and flashes me a pursed lip that no doubt means, *you heard her*. And I do, so I sit with Billye's nudge and the umpteenth reminder tonight that we are our own medicine. I recall Billye once saying, "Our stories provide light. Our stories provide strength. Our stories offer roadmaps to find and see one another. Our stories honor God. Our stories build homes" (Sankofa Waters, 2023, p. 706). *If that's not medicine, I don't know what is.*

The room has settled into the post-dessert calm, coffee is poured and Uncle Jimmy, quiet most of the conversation, taps my elbow with his. He leans in to whisper, though I think the man only has one volume, his voice is clear and his message resonates across the now captured table. "We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children" (Baldwin, 1962/1993, p. 7). The room mmhmms and uhhuhhs. I know what he's getting at. If our adults are disconnected from their power, certainly our children are as well (by design⁶⁶). For them, for us, and for all those adorning the walls, I take it as my charge to ask questions, to listen, and to tell our stories for us, by us. And because there is love, always love, our stories *will* heal.

Chapter IV. At The Kitchen Table

Within the framework of Black feminist thought, the context of this research project is hyperlocal; centering myself and my family as the sources of knowledge. To connect the dots from the hyperlocal to

⁶⁶ Critical race theory serves as a background track to my worldview, and to this project; with shared foundations in black feminisms. Again, for readers unsure about the permanence of racism or the design of the American k-12 system to diminish and dismiss Black folx, I encourage, at the least, Bettina Love (2019, 2023) for a modern analysis.

the systemic, a review of a few threads in the scholarship is helpful. First, a conversation on the institutionalization of *antiblackness* which offers insights into the systemic and historical context for Black America's invisibility within educational leadership conversations. Second, the discourse of *Black leadership* from the perspective of Black scholars, Black feminists, and Black educational leaders themselves. This cooperative definition as an expansion of self-definition establishes a collective call for leadership spaces informed by and for our blackness. Lastly, *love as resistance* offers the basis for my choice of action—to rediscover, recover and (re)member—through family legacy. As the third thread, this section acutely frames the aim of this research project, as an opportunity to claim a Black leadership future that is humanizing at its core.

Foundations in Antiblackness

Black leadership has been systematically dismissed, and worse erased, from our collective memory. This began with conceptions of whiteness and blackness in an inverse relationship to humanity. Scholars in afropessimism explore this positioning of the Black body and persons as subhuman (the rationale supporting enslavement) and the structures that maintain Black subjugation. Grounded in an afropessimist understanding, Michael Dumas (2016) offers this conceptualization of antiblackness:

[A]ntiblackness does not signify a mere racial conflict that might be resolved through organized political struggle and appeals to the state and to the citizenry for redress. Instead, antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard. (p. 13)

Antiblackness as a presumption of white supremacy positions blackness and Black bodies as inferior, and that this belief is institutionalized within the structures of America. To rationalize centuries of forced enslavement in the U.S., laws were established to exclude Black people from legal recognition as human beings; first as persons with rights, and then as citizens with constitutional rights. The lore of the 'paper bag test' enacted white supremacist beliefs that darker complexions lacked the civility for skilled or

intellectual labor: Black was synonymous with subhuman⁶⁷ (Dumas, 2016). Laws about personhood cited biological lineage in the ‘one drop rule’, enacting white supremacist beliefs in racial purity. As the question of who was white (and therefore *not* slave) refined, racial purity laws narrowed the legal definitions from one-fourth (a single grandparent), to one-sixteenth (a single great grandparent), to *any* Black ancestry. The Jim Crow era was marked by the establishment of laws further codifying white superiority through the ‘separate but equal doctrine’ and in hindsight, served as a precursor to the civil rights era that demanded the acknowledgement of Black humanity. This story is told vividly in the 1968 sanitation workers’ strike after the death of two Black men while working, and the subsequent refusal of the City of Memphis to pay out any death benefits⁶⁸. The strike’s slogan—‘I AM A MAN’—was a demand for the dignity denied to Black men, as well as an assertion of visibility.

Scholarship exploring critical race theory offers a necessary lens to understand how Black erasure has been institutionalized within legal and social contexts in the United States. Black legal scholars (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Williams, 1991), have shaped the foundations of critical race theory in response to explorations of post Civil-Rights efforts, radical feminism, and the exclusion of Black experiences in legal education. Some argue critical race theory is misapplied in education⁶⁹, generating a popular soundbite used to critique calls to reform⁷⁰ American schools. However, the core tenet is too often muted (by design) in the conversation: “racism is everywhere and all the time” (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020). Legal scholar and educator, Derrick Bell (1980) posited that the U.S. legal structure, as

⁶⁷ “Black humanity is, as Frank Wilderson asserted, ‘a paradigmatic impossibility’ because to be Black is to be ‘the very antithesis of a Human subject’ (2010, p. 9).” (Dumas, 2016, p. 12).

⁶⁸ The History Channel produced a powerful piece, [The 1968 Sanitation Workers’ Strike That Drew MLK to Memphis \(2020\)](#), including photos and videos of the events leading up to the march, the march, and Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. ’s speech: *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*.

⁶⁹ I’ve chosen not to cite these dissenters (and therefore generate more traffic to their red herrings) though I acknowledge the dissent exists—*by design*.

⁷⁰ I use this word loosely. I could have said (further) whitewash, strip all critical thinking, strip all documented historical facts, or course correct schools back towards the banking method of generating barely literate workers—but I’ll use “reform” instead. *All the shade*.

a reflection of the social reality, is embedded with white supremacist ideals that underpin and undermine the social realities of Black America. Situated in his critique of the true task of *Brown v. Board*, Bell (1980) highlighted the influence of racism in both proponents of the decision as well as that of dissenters.

Their [poorer whites] fear of loss was intensified by the sense that they had been betrayed. They relied, as had generations before them, on the expectation that white elites would maintain lower class whites in a societal status superior to *that designated for blacks*. (p. 525-526, emphasis added)

White America's sense of self, relies upon the minimization of Black America, whereas Black America's sense of self has too been positioned in relation to a white American perspective. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2021) speaks of what he calls "double consciousness"; the reality of the Black (man) to be permitted only to "see himself through the revelation of the other world" (p. 3). Du Bois is naming the complexity of Black identity in America, *as defined by what whiteness isn't*. In the context of leadership, these ideas—the permanence of racism and double consciousness—might expect that Black leaders feel othered within, or excluded from, leadership spaces but the experience is not a neutral one.

Antiblackness functions as a cultural tenet within America's ideas of leadership; far past neutrality, antiblackness asserts that leadership and Black people are oxymoronic. Viewed through the lens of intersectional oppressions (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991), Black *women* in leadership are made nearly invisible through antiblackness. Put plainly: if white supremacy does not believe that Black people are people, and if white supremacy believes that leadership is a monopoly of white men, certainly a Black woman cannot be a leader. In the context of (American k-12⁷¹) education, antiblackness permeates leadership spaces as well as classrooms. In the education space, scholars (Williams, 1991; Love, 2019; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020) have explored antiblackness and its impact on educators, students and

⁷¹ I only specify because *this* project is contextualized in the U.S., *however* I am certainly not suggesting that antiblackness is not evident within educational systems internationally. *That's just not what we talkin' bout, today.*

families. Dumas (2016) describes the ways in which educational spaces, policy and discourse serve as structures perpetuating the dehumanization of Black people “as a form of (everyday) violence” experienced by Black educators, students and families (p. 17). More viscerally, scholars Patricia J. Williams (1991), and more recently Bettina Love (2013, 2016), have called to task the structural pervasiveness of antiblackness as spirit murder⁷². At a time when leaders across America are being directed to abandon “diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives” (Executive Orders: No. 14151, 14170, 14173, 14190), critical race theory scholarship would suggest this course is a steady one... continuing the work of institutionalizing antiblackness.

Herstories of Black Leadership

Before digging into the scholarship on Black leadership, a few caveats are emerging that I must acknowledge. First, Black leadership is not new—there is a long legacy of Black leadership—I know this in my spirit; my epistemology and theory both presume this truth. Documenting this truth from within my own family, is indeed the focus of this project. However, in considering the scholarship that informs and is informed by this project, a review of the ‘herstories’ must center what black feminisms offer about Black leadership—and be further refined by discussions among contemporary Black feminists. This acknowledgement feels critical as to not suggest in any way that Black women leading is new, novel, nor a uniquely North American experience. It is also to acknowledge that Black leadership predates (and is not defined by) the nonsense I’m about to get into...

From the standpoint of Black feminist thought, antiblackness clearly functions in two distinct ways defining leadership as the exclusion of Black women. First, antiblackness reinforces a eurocentric definition of leadership. Asante (1991) offers two foundations of eurocentrism which point to the paradox of Black leadership through whiteness. First, eurocentrism’s reliance upon notions of white supremacy to

⁷² Patricia J. Williams is credited as ‘coining’ the term, in her 1991 text *The alchemy of race and rights*; Bettina Love is largely credited with applying the term explicitly to educational contexts in her 2013 piece “I See Trayvon Martin” and throughout her work on abolitionist teaching pedagogies.

“protect white privilege and advantage”, and second the imposition of a singular, universal experience grounded in that of “the particular historical reality of Europeans” (p. 172). Efforts to assert (and define) leadership through such a lens, would then serve to perpetuate hierarchies of power within racial and sexist constructs. bell hooks (1981/2015) talks about this in *Imperialism as Patriarchy*, as a criticism of the Black (male) leadership seen throughout the U.S. Black civil rights movement of the 1950s and the Black liberation movement of the 1960s. hooks (1981/2015) describes the implicit presumption that to lead is to exude proximity to white maleness—as seen in the writings and actions of Black male leaders of the era.

Sexist ideology was the core of the matriarchy myth. Implicit in the assertion that [B]lack women were matriarchs was the assumption that patriarchy should be maintained at all costs and the subordination of the female was necessary for the healthy achievement of manhood. ... By allowing white men to dictate the terms by which they would define black liberation, [B]lack men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of [B]lack women. And in so doing they were compromised. They were not liberated from the system but liberated to serve the system. The movement ended and the system has not changed; it was no less racist or sexist. (p. 181)

hooks’ observation is a cautionary echo of sentiments shared by Audre Lorde (1984/2007)⁷³ and Derrick Bell (1980)⁷⁴ who both focused their scholarship as a call to action for Black folks who in seeking liberation might fall prey to the realities of interest convergence. That is to say, to the degree that we seek to allow *some* domination, regardless of those who are to be decidedly dominated, regardless of *intentions* toward liberation—tools of destruction destruct. Liberation cannot be built upon subjugation; if we are to maintain any system that upholds antiblackness, in any form, liberation becomes antithetical.

⁷³ “*The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).

⁷⁴ “The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523).

Antiblackness denies even the possibility of afrocentric leadership. In her work to offer an African-centered analysis of eurocentrism, anthropologist Marimba Ani (1994) articulates historical guideposts for eurocentric intellectual thought; privileging constructs of whiteness and patriarchy within a scientific-rational view of humanness, and an ideology of progress supported by imperialism. In sum, these features, applied to a definition of leadership, suggest not only that one chooses rationality over emotion or spiritual knowing, but that the latter is antithetical to knowledge production. Further, perceptions of progress and power (as “the ability to manipulate and control”) require a leadership that is driven by “power over”—domination (p. 563). The result is a leadership that is seemingly paradoxical to Dillard’s (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology. Ani (1994) offers further insight, in her discussion of the evolution of an epistemology driven by the suppression of emotion and spirit:

[C]ontrol of the emotions begins to imply the elimination of feeling, since the definition of knowledge is that which has been decontaminated of emotional response. Since this definition comes to dominate and supplant all others, Europeans learn to value unemotional behavior. It is by being cold, uninvolved, “rational” that they gain respect; this is referred to as the achievement of “objectivity.” ... What is said to be “human” then becomes knowable by rationally dehumanizing it. That is, it is made to fit into the system that the “knower” controls by the definition he or she gives it. Thus spirit is “defined” out of existence. ... Consequently, such rationality helps to create a certain kind of person (“individual”). Even as Europeans seek to effectively despiritualize their surroundings, they are aware of the spiritual aspect of existence. But given the premises of their rationalistic epistemology, it must remain forever unknowable, unattainable. Spirituality represents a constant threat to the ordered system they have constructed. (p. 557-558)

Through an afrocentric lens, this tension between rationality and spirituality in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding is a core issue. An epistemology (European religious thought, according to

Ani) that values rationality must fracture the natural from the spiritual - the observed “known” from the unknown. As such, the logic model flows that in this sensibility, leaders are those that *know* and to know is to be able to define, to observe, while all other ways of knowing are relegated to *merely* emotionality, irrational and illogical. Said another way, *the math continues to math*—of course I (and others) would feel excluded from “leadership” if the basis of “leadership” denies our foundational beliefs about... *everything*⁷⁵. If we choose instead, to center leadership as defined by Black women as educational leaders, *Silencing to Authenticity* (Rogers-Ard and Knaus, 2020), a study of 13 such leaders, offers a succinct starting place. Black educational leaders nurture and sustain *who* they are, to know how their “past, present, and future life impacts *how* [they] are, and how [they] operate within systems of intersectional racism” (p. 136)⁷⁶. This definition highlights layers of epistemology: for Black women leading, there is a spiritual center to knowing, an interrelatedness with self and others, and an acknowledgement of positionality as agents of change. Dillard (2011) calls this spiritual centering ‘spirituality’, Ani (1994) refers to the ‘cosmic self’ as *part* (but not whole) of the cosmos. “The universe is one; spheres are joined because of a single unifying force that pervades all being” (Ani, 1994, p. 29). Spirit, however understood, is an undeniable element within the herstory of Black leadership. hooks (1993/2015) asserts it is essential; that through spirit Black women lead with an understanding of their reality crafted through “*both our hearts and our mind*” (hooks, p. 185; emphasis added). Under the premise of antiblackness, this is a clear distinction from a leadership formed by and through power, domination and the fallacy of ‘objectivity’.

Whereas antiblackness suggests leadership as power, black feminisms and Black feminist scholars (Collins, 1991; Dillard, 2000, 2006; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000), offer a counternarrative: *leadership as relationship*. The definitions posited by Rogers-Ard and Knaus (2020) recognizes how Black women nurture and sustain self. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) demonstrates this through a personal reflection on

⁷⁵ June Jordan (1981) said it: “I cannot be expected to respect what somebody else calls self-love if that concept of self-love requires my suicide to any degree” (p. 144). I propose the same can be said of leadership. *We good on that*.

⁷⁶ Spoiler: this is the journey you’re engaging by bearing witness. *Thank you for that*. May it impact you, too.

her research as an investment by *all* of her “selves” (p. 272)⁷⁷. bell hooks (2000) talks about the necessity of self-love to heal through notions of power and control. Weaving these black feminisms together offers a definition of leadership that requires relationship to others—I suggest ‘others’ as not limited to sentient or human others. Ani’s (1994) challenge of the cosmic others includes that “knowledge of the universe comes from relationship *with it*” (p. 29). From an endarkened feminist epistemology, we understand the individual as part of a whole: “the self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community” (Collins, 1991, p. 113). This approach to leadership is about humanizing in the cosmic sense—(re)cognizing the interconnectedness of all livings toward harmony, over domination.

Black women leading through connectedness and with a collective orientation is *not* new nor novel. Within the racialized context of the U.S., blackness is defined as *not* white. *Clock that as a definition of exclusion from jump*. Black feminism offers an alternative: “rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions” (Collins, 1991, p. 113). While the field of leadership studies has not centered Black women, scholars Judy Alston and Patrice McClellan (2011) describe Black women’s leadership in three ways: *critical servant leadership, transformative leadership* and *social justice leadership*. These descriptions are defined by, and through a historical review of the lives and leadership of six figures (Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, Mary McCleod Bethune, Septima Clark, Barbara Jordan and Audre Lorde). *The Majestic Place* (Williams et al., 2025) similarly offers a lens on Black leadership as articulated by Black women and their lived experiences, though in their own words. In the context of educational leadership, and of this project acutely, a definition of a leadership informed by (and for) Black women is everything. Within the field of educational leadership, there is an increasing body of scholarship by/for Black women (Tillman,

⁷⁷ “All of my “selves” are invested in this work—the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a Black woman” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 272).

2004; Brown, 2005; Foster & Tillman, 2009; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). In one example, Sonya Douglass Horsford (2012) describes Black women's leadership as *bridge leadership*—acknowledging the space that Black women hold to connect Black communities and (predominately white) school systems. In another, Miles Nash and Peters (2020) posit *intersectional leadership* as conceptualized by Black women and for Black girls, which has been described as “the operationalization of visionary strategies” from an intersectional standpoint (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020, p. 280). In common across these articulations is that leadership defined by and for Black women centers the themes found across black feminisms—relational ethics of care met with activism/action.

Love as Resistance

When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is the choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. ... Embracing love ethic means that we utilize all dimensions of love—care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge—in our everyday lives. (hooks, 2000, 68-69)

Exploring love as a theory, ethic and practice of resistance in leadership is grounded in concepts already discussed—spirit, spirituality, the cosmic self, the higher self—each of these articulate connectedness within humanity (and beyond). In that connectedness is the promise that we are not alone in life, in learning nor in leadership. In community we find what Rev. Dr. King, Jr. (2000) referred to as *somebodiness* and what Rochelle Brock (2019) describes as *wholeness*. Dr. King describes somebodiness in the Black man forced to face unjust punishment—to “meet physical force with soul force”—to recognize and claim his humanity in the face of certain violence (p. 21). Rochelle Brock describes wholeness in relation to our necessary fight against internalized racism. To remain whole, Rochelle Brock (2019) discusses the importance of Black folx’ “constant vigil” (p. 7). As Black people have been historically and systematically de-humanized, separated from their humanity—to be objects to be owned, to be persons without voice in governance, etc.—Brock’s call for vigilance is about mindfulness of the ways in which

internalized racism is harmful to our sense of self. *It certainly ain't about loving nobody*. Our responsibility to *our spirits* is to remain connected to (and nurture) our personhood. At the core of each of these ideas is our humanity, and how that humanity embraces our blackness is an act of resistance.

bell hooks' scholarship and writings on love are prolific, and it is her *ethic of love* that lacquers the frames of Big Mama's gallery wall. hooks (2000) offers a concise theory of action; in resisting isolation, by finding in community the space (literal and metaphorical) for love—of self, of others and through one another—that we might live more whole. hooks' ethic of love as resistance includes five tenets, in no particular order. The first is to understand love as an “action”, a “choice” and a practice, which offers critical reflection on the behaviors and leadership moves Black leaders navigate in spaces that were not designed for us (hooks, 2000, p. 5). The second tenet is an understanding of love that is invested in our own, and other's spiritual growth. To lead in love, then, is to take an active leadership posture in service of the growth that comes from critical examination of how we align our actions to our values, and to our sense of purpose. As a third tenet, I extend hooks' (2000) proposition: “healing as an act of communion” (p. 215). I propose that to lead in love, truly, is to engage in community to acknowledge hurt and pain, toward healing. Extending that into the work of building, engaging and sustaining community, leading from an ethic of love requires practice in cultivating self-love, the fourth tenet. “When we give this precious gift to ourselves, we are able to reach out to others from a place of fulfillment, and not from a place of lack” (hooks, 2000, p. 67). From a place of fulfillment, an ethic of love carries forward leadership grounded in its own humanity—under the glory of both our gifts and our flaws. Lifting the work of Fromm, King and Merton, hooks (2000) draws a picture of love as an act of justice, that “lead(s) us into greater communion with the world... the primary way we end domination and oppression. [it] requires conscious practice, a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act” (p. 76-77). In whole, leadership in love—leadership as the application of an ethic of love—is an active practice guided by spiritual growth, commitment to healing and community, to self-love and to justice.

To set the groundwork for the journey into familial legacy, considering the legacy of leadership for Black people, it was necessary to start a review of scholarly discourse around antiblackness as institutional ideology and structure (systems), then to overview herstories of Black leadership (people), and to close by deepening further to the ethic of love as resistance (practice). From these understandings I situate this project not as a challenge or critique of the current scholarship, but as a contribution to the body of scholarship centering Black women's lived experiences and as a practitioner's application in vivo.

Chapter V. Bigger Than Time Erased⁷⁸

Beautiful People *Jill Scott*

This ain't a happenstance, or a whim
Our love is continual
Continuing, saint or sin
It's deeper than
Our love is bigger than time erased
Our love is rhythm and chime, it resonates
In every space, it fills the place
My beautiful people

(Jill Scott, 2026; 0:22)

This chapter represents love that is neither happenstance nor haphazard—it is intentional⁷⁹, purposeful and dynamic. This project, as an extension of *that* type of love, needed to be dynamic; able to pivot and flex whether to loosen or to wrap more tightly. Here, I present what that dynamism looked like for me, and present *my beautiful people*—my cousin and aunties (and a guest uncle⁸⁰)—who have shaped our stories across generations. I've also chosen to include the places—Grandma's Room, Big Mama's House, Grandma Ada's House—that hold onto memories for those since passed and those yet to come. The

⁷⁸ Ya'll. I know Miss Jill Scott don't know nothin' about what Sara Baker is up to; but when *To Whom It May Concern* (2026) was announced, and "Beautiful People" dropped, I GAGGED. I hope you listen to this song, and your heart swells as mine did—may we all have the good fortune to surround ourselves with our beautiful people.

⁷⁹ I'm sitting with Miss Scott's use of 'happenstance' as antithetical to love and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's use of 'haphazard' as antithetical to true compassion. There's something swirling in there—a love of intention, by design.

⁸⁰ More on this later, Unc had a good day, and deserves his space.

love here is big, it is complex, and it is sincerely meant⁸¹. Through these profiles, I hope you (and they) see the richness that we are—the depth of Black womanhood—that informed this project to (re)connect, re(member) and (re)imagine futures in which we wholly feel, love, lead and live, for real⁸².

Holding... and Letting Go

In anticipation of this process, I held a few key fears—narratives from the land of negative self-talk—that I wanted to be able to protect against, or in the worst case counter, once they got on the mic. The first fear is rooted in a lie, and while I know it's a lie, it's a powerful one. *I'm not able to hold space for myself, let alone for my people*. The fear was that this process, despite my best efforts, would cause harm—that *I* would cause harm. While I trust(ed) the agency of my people to say yes, and to share only what they chose to, I also needed to address what I was bringing into the space (and the writing). For this, I practiced a ritual focused on holding *my* space.

You may have noticed evidence of this ritual in the footnotes: I listened to *a lot* of music. Through noise-cancelling headphones, or at full volume with the bass up and the windows down, I used music to gauge and guide where I was intellectually, emotionally and spiritually before and after visits and writing. I noticed my energy levels, my mood, and the pace of my mind. I noticed the intuitive genre, beat or vibe selection and was not shy with the skip and loop features⁸³. Over the course of both the visits and the writing of this project, I found songs that moved me from one space to another or deepened the space I was already sitting in⁸⁴. The ritual of song—of witnessing⁸⁵ music—helped me to stay attuned to what I was

⁸¹ Another banger lyric from sister Scott's "Beautiful People", "Our love ain't a glitzy valentine omen// Our love ain't no fairy tale// Our love is real // Our love is the gift // When truly felt // And sincerely meant."

⁸² [AJ McQueen & Ariel J, "FEEL" \(2025\)](#) is bop and a call in. We all want to feel something real, to hold onto it, to have space for our humanity to feel all the feels and to be understood in our idiosyncrasies. Take a listen for yourself, *feel me?*

⁸³ Sometimes you just need to listen to the same song for 32 hours straight, ya know? *Is that just me? #audiostims*

⁸⁴ My (re)membering: a tracklist, is for you, in the Appendix. *Share in the vibes with me!*

⁸⁵ Stephanie Toliver (2020), talks about the call to witness as being "encouraged to participate by challenging prior suppositions, suspending judgment, analyzing the story for meaning, and situating [your] own stories within the context of the story being told. Through testimony, then, the personal and communal life of the storyteller is affirmed, and dominant stories are challenged" (p. 508). I witness, as a humanizing practice for myself and others.

bringing, as well as what I was putting onto the page as a reflection of that present. Re-grounding as a part of my aftercare routine also supported how to address my second fear: *I will get lost in the sauce—I won't be able to focus.*

The truth is, I love sauce, I struggle with focus and I love a rabbit trail (literal or metaphorical). *It merits being said that the sauce is what it's all about, and we all know there's a difference between having a brown paper napkin and a wet wipe at the barbecue spot.* I needed to be able to discern which tools I needed. To stay focused, while remaining present and trusting my intuition, I created two rituals. The first ritual was witnessing, and was layered within my practice of reflexive journaling. I took breaks to journal, journalled after visits, and whenever I felt called by reflection—trusting myself to do so in the manner that felt most authentic. No matter the medium, in these moments I simply noticed and named my present. The purpose of this ritual was to stay connected to myself, to witness my own truth, and to welcome whatever came. No judgement and no rumination, just paying attention to the experience, in the present moment. I am reminded of some self-care/ mindfulness teacher telling me that sometimes the acknowledgment of the thought is enough for it to pass, allowing you to let it go. This ritual was just that, acknowledging the present, however fleeting, and letting whatever stuck, stick. Sometimes my journaling was written, whether in full sentences, bulleted thoughts or in doodles. Other times I pulled out my phone for a video-to-self (read: rant). On multiple occasions I chose a song and just let it play. These choices were in themselves insightful data that informed the second ritual, asking myself: *is this yours and do you want to hold it?*

Asking myself, ritualistically, *is this yours*, helped me to tease out energies and thoughts, and to make a choice—hold it or let it go. As a part of my aftercare protocol, this question provided fodder for further questions. Whether the thought or feeling felt to be mine, or from outside of me, I was able to consider (or ask) its origin. As praxis, witnessing my body, mind and spirit in this way provided an iterative cycle of action/decision/reflection that felt grounding, and helped me to stay aligned to my purpose in

that moment. By asking myself, *do you want to hold it*, I was able to make decisions about which stories to follow-up on (or not) and give myself grace in the process. Whether there is or isn't a "right way" to engage doctoral work, I did this *my way*. I gave myself grace about whether I did/not record *that* story, whether my notes were comprehensive enough, whether I let the conversation wander. Choosing to hold or to let go, became an act of love.

At this pause point, reflecting on this process—this journey backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards—I recognize and release the feelings of regret, of lost time, and of lost selves. I release the angst that this finished work won't be its best version; of untenable expectations, perfectionism and rightness. I choose instead to embrace the simplest of sentiments: "love is never wasted when it's shared" (Dean, 2025)⁸⁶. Here's to loving and accepting love freely and letting the negative self-talk *all the way go*.

Gathering... Myself

Since I haven't said it yet, it needs to be said: this entire project is a privilege. Pursuing a doctoral education is a privilege, being able to afford to travel to do that research is a privilege, having an employer that offers paid time off is a privilege, and having family to travel to is its own privilege. Right, wrong or indifferent, having living relatives is the privilege I most covet, so I intended to leverage any privilege I could to have the experience I'd dreamt of with them. *For myself, for my family, for the culture... call it reparations*. For months I worked on the proposal, underestimating the timeline... repeatedly. I didn't want to disappoint the family by moving dates further and further, so I stayed quiet, keeping them apprised but noncommittal⁸⁷— waiting for approval to move forward⁸⁸. I hemmed and hawed, procrastinated and grew increasingly anxious, while riding the rollercoaster the best I could. *As your girl does*.

⁸⁶Olivia Dean's (Grammy award winning!) album, *The Art of Loving* (2025) is a play-through if you're ready to feel the feels and get into the real-real of self-love and loving in/out of relationships. *Go on sis!*

⁸⁷ An uncomfortable proposition given the realities of aging and fragility of health. My privilege extends.

⁸⁸ 0/10 I do not recommend. Talk to your people and stay connected.

Reflexive Journal entry. I'm unraveling. My proposal is stagnant, time is slipping away and the pressure is just manifesting into writer's block. *How do I craft a journey towards healing, within the structure of an institution not designed to heal?* I feel stuck. By design?⁸⁹

Reflexive Journal entry. I've been playing in the memory of South Africa all day. I'm seated across from a new friend, bell hooks' salvation⁹⁰ in my hand, the early pages of my proposal, pens and highlighters splayed across my lap and the lounge I'm using as a table. The fire blazes between us, the sky spattered with millions of tiny stars, and the moon offering more light than it should. I was frustrated by the pace, frustrated by myself—by my inability to just push through it. I was doubting myself and the dream held loosely in the pages. My new friend listened, leaned in, and breathed “encouragement” through the smoke: *you're waiting for the university to tell you it's okay to talk to your family?* I was embarrassed. I'm still embarrassed. Months later, I'm still waiting, still doubting. So tonight, I'm looking for another ember to keep this fire⁹¹ going. I've been treating my books like a tarot deck, allowing my intuition to select the title, the pressure under my thumb to settle on the page. Tonight, the ether chose *Black Liturgies*⁹² and just the chapter I needed: *Doubt*.

The betrayal of a belief is not the same thing as ceasing to believe. —James Baldwin

Even the silence

Has a story to tell you.

Just listen. Listen.

—Jacqueline Woodson

(Riley, 2023, p. 74)

⁸⁹ Is it not the purpose of the structure to provide as little space as possible to do *this* kind of scholarship?!

⁹⁰ hooks, b. (2001). *Salvation: Black people and love*. William Morrow.

⁹¹ “Sometimes a healer needs a fire. To bring out the medicine in the plants. To cleanse an infected area. Sometimes the whole system is the infected area, and a healer needs to burn it down” (Gumbs, 2023, p. 16).

⁹² Riley's work is a gift each and every time. 10/10 recommendation: Riley, C.A. (2023). *Black liturgies: Prayers, poems and meditations for staying human*. New York: Convergent.

I choose to listen and to reframe the waiting. I know I can do this, and I will. This is me gathering myself. I am preparing. I am listening in the silence, in the stillness, in the belief.

Reflexive Journal entry. Last week I had an *incredible* reading. My ancestors answered: it's time, your purpose is clear. *There is no right way.* Enjoy it, but be about business. And today, I got the yes! My proposal is approved! I can't describe the feeling without clichés: the weight is off my chest, the burden lifted from my shoulders, I feel lighter... yada yada. Real talk, I feel seen—affirmed. They spoke so much love into me, they see what I'm trying to do, they see this journey that I'm readying for. If there's a high, it's today. Tomorrow, we got more work to do. *Ashé.*

If there's one thing you should know about me: I think I can do anything⁹³. I see the family that lives locally pretty frequently, they're within an hour's drive. But this journey required a *journey*—to the family and the land in Texas. If I was going to do this, it'd be my way, but with logistics and planning. *Not my strength area—neurospicy, remember.* These weren't to be "interviews," they were visits—sitting in space, (re)membering together. I didn't want clinical, I didn't want formality, I wanted the vibe to be Sunday-after-church, sweet-tea-and-tea-cakes. *Low-key, talkin' mess in the kitchen, yafeelme?! I wanted to be in person, I wanted to have time, I wanted to cherish space.* Bottom line, I needed to hit the road, coordinate all the things and create an opportunity to be both fully present *and* recognize (a part of) the endgame was to be this dissertation. *I knew ya'll wouldn't be privy to everything, but needed to make sure I was thinking about you at some point.* Centering my elders was non-negotiable; but I couldn't forget about this project either. I would need to be close to the family, but I also needed a (re)gathering space. *Yer girl needs low-sensory time.* I found flights, a centrally located extended stay option; full bath, full

⁹³ A Leo/fire sign thing? Family inheritance? Toxic trait? Superpower? I don't know, except that it's probably as brilliant as it is delusional most of the time. *We'll save those stories for the podcast.*

kitchen, living space with multiple comfortable spaces to write, and a car so that we'd have flexibility to move around at our own pace, safely. *Boom, done, booked*⁹⁴.

As life does, life life'd and the day before I was set to fly for Austin, I was flying back from the celebration of life held in honor of my grandmother-in-love⁹⁵ in California. My heart was heavy, my body tired, and while I wanted to check spots off the menu of options I'd curated for each day, I just couldn't do it. So on day one of the visit, I gathered myself once more. Snacks, music⁹⁶, light research and rest. At the time, I felt disappointed, regretful that again, I just couldn't push. *Ancestral whispers: there is no right way*. Nevertheless, the rest of the week proved itself to be full-full. Emotionally and spiritually my cup was full, as was my belly. A part of gathering myself was leaning into living, and choosing to experience Austin for the first time. Led by a Black Austin itinerary⁹⁷, layered with google search results, we ate, drank, selfie'd and gawked all over East Austin. A closed top-pick BBQ truck led to an impromptu lunch at a Mediterranean cafe, followed by a planned visit to the George Washington Carver Museum. We cheers'd to the blessing of a midday happy hour, crisp sour beer and a sunny afternoon spent at a picnic table, surrounded by blooming vines and big old growth trees. We indulged in a boujie⁹⁸ dinner at a restaurant off 6th street (the old main drag) which in hindsight, had no business sitting in the heart of the historically Black neighborhood. *Capitalism and gentrification are complicated?* We met with a volunteer at the genealogy center connected to the neighborhood library, visited the exhibit honoring the first Black public

⁹⁴ Just kidding, you like how it sounds like I just popped online and got it done? Yea, no. Weeks of clicking around, google spreadsheet pro/con charts, and in the end, a spurt of impulsivity broke the stalemate. *Thank gawd*.

⁹⁵ Love and light to Miss Dolores who geeked out with me over genealogy and didn't judge me for not knowing how to play pinochle. *Which I still think is just white people spades. Sorry not sorry, I suck at spades too*.

⁹⁶ Loop type of day; rhythmic vibes, no words, just frequencies, melodies and vibes. Listen for yourself: [junior state. \(2019\) Nostalgic \[Song\]](#). On *Levitate*. Ch records.

⁹⁷ [Visit Austin's 'Black-Owned Businesses & Culture' 48 Hours in Austin](#) itinerary focused on East Austin's historic black neighborhood, more on that later, I promise!

⁹⁸ Tapas are so trendy. I ate *an* anchovy on a stick with two green olives and a pickled pepper. *Was it worth \$12? Defs no. Regrets? Not one*.

school in Austin, and zipped around the city taking photos of murals by Black artists⁹⁹. We visited the University of Texas at Austin campus, and picked up a couple of momentos in honor of our late grandfather. *Go Longhorns!* In total, my introduction to the city rooted us in the past, present and futures of Austin as journeyed layers¹⁰⁰, and the backdrop for memories shared and stories told. *It was the best week, stick with me, we got stories coming.*

Gathering... My People

I'm fortunate to live near two of the folx instrumental in this project, my cousin and my auntie. Early in the program I began talking with them about my ideas for a dissertation, my lingering grief, and my desire for healing not knowing what I needed that to look like. Both were quick to offer support and encouragement, and to walk alongside me in the process. *They'd been walking with me already.* When the three of us visited Texas last year, for yet another homegoing celebration, auntie made sure to "mention" my progress in the program to the family. The opportunity to talk then, in the midst of a new grief, led to yet more invitations to talk further. *Talking is healing; evoking their names, sharing memories, helps us keep them in the present, too.* I didn't know then that we'd lose a few of those elders that year, adding to the urgency and commitment to listen, to share and to document our family's past.

To listen I used tools that best matched the situation. In Grandma's Room that looked like taking photographs and scanning written artifacts, and reflexive journaling documented in writing and through video diaries. I audio recorded our kitchen and living room visits, later editing the auto-generated transcriptions manually for any direct quotations. After each visit, I wrote notes and journalled what was stickiest in that moment, and about *all the feelings* that came and/or were coming. After the visits in Texas, I debriefed with my cousin, resulting in notes that reflected our own kaleidoscope of the stories

⁹⁹ My favorite was on 12th & Chicon St. Certainly aged, whole chunks missing, but a gallery of Black wisdom tellers: Sister Maya, Sister Nina, Uncle Jimmy, Cousin Jon (Batiste), BIGGIE, Pac, Sade... you get it. The building also hosts The Little Gay Shop, The Vibe Collective and the Future Front whose sign reads "You Are Art". Ashé.

¹⁰⁰ "Journeying is a place where our stories intersect and become interconnected with other stories –*layers upon layers*" (Smith et al, 2019, p. 29; emphasis added).

we'd heard together. In the weeks to follow, and from the transcriptions of the audio recordings, I relistened to pull details and notice what I'd overlooked in the moment or in my journals. When visiting places, I was unabashedly snap-happy capturing photos throughout each day, at Big Mama's House, on the drives to and from the country and during sidequests, preserving candid moments as new heirlooms. By the grace of modern technology, my photo roll captured dates, times, geolocations for what I estimate as no less than 500 photos taken related to this project—just in the winter and spring of 2026.

Themes emerged beginning in Grandma's Room, and were refined by the stories from my elders. Unsurprisingly the themes aligned to black feminisms readily, and I elevate those that were colorized across the family's stories. As the purpose of this project is to explore my family herstories, past, present and futures, I revisited my aunties via phone to imagine the next chapter in our story. This project presents an excerpted¹⁰¹ representation of the stories told and untold that reveal the beliefs and conditions that have (and will) sustain us: the Bakers, the Jones, the Roberts and the many roots from which I came to be.

My People: The Storytellers

You are your stories. You are the product of all the stories you have heard and lived—and of many that you have never heard. They have shaped how you see yourself, the world, and your place in it. (Taylor, 2001, p. 1)

Interlude on Place

The sacredness of place, as an emergent theme, must be recognized in both the physical and metaphysical sense—the experience of land (geography/landscapes), conceptions of space and spiritual connections to place and Land (sentiency of Mother Earth)¹⁰². I sat with this section for weeks—how to

¹⁰¹ *Reminder to self: not everything is for everyone, it's okay to keep what's just for you.*

¹⁰² Breathe in Smith et al (2019) for yourself: "Land reaches beyond the boundaries of place by embodying the principles, philosophies, and ontologies that transcend the material geography of land and the making of place or placefulness. ... Land *is* spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land *is* experiential, (re)membered and storied; Land *is*

articulate the thoughts and feelings about these concepts had been elusive. To make sense of my notes, journal entries and the stories I wanted to share, I was called to revisit the writings of indigenous scholars (Smith et al, 2019; Anzaldúa, 1987/2012) and scholars lifting stories of home/place (Boylorn, 2016, 2017; hooks, 1990/2014; Sankofa Waters, 2023). *Enter meaning being (re)made in real-time*. Chewing on the words to describe the difference between sitting on the floor *in my grandma's room* and feeling connected *to Grandma's Room*, I recognized the shift in my writing. I noticed word choices within reflexive journals; from being in a place, to recognizing the essence or spirit of the place. I noticed that at some point I started to capitalize the letters, personify the descriptions, and I realized that when I imagined these spaces, I'd begun to have emotional impressions that were unique from the persons that had occupied that space. *Get lost in this sauce with me for a moment; it's been thickening on low*.

Reflexive journal entry. I am on a concrete bench, on an overcast, *frigid* Seattle day. Butt's cold, hands are cold, coffee is (now) cold. Cars honking, electrical resonance from buses, engines humming, idling at a stoplight blazing red. Folx are speed walking past me, smiling groups of tourists (presumably) making their way to Pike Place, excitedly chattering with empty totes on shoulders, soon to be filled no doubt. The city is alive and I'm on a cold concrete bench, crying. Crying complicated tears: water¹⁰³ filled with grief, relief and pride¹⁰⁴. *Flip to camera > video on > recording a revelation*.

Confused scowl.

consciousness—Land *is* sentient (see also Styres, 2017, p. 93). Land refers to the ways we honor and respect her as a sentient and conscious being" (p. 27).

¹⁰³ A personal theme of this journey has been a reconnection to the elements—earth, fire, water, air. This season has been full of water—tears, rain, still lakes, waves crashing against cliffsides, the effects of chronic dehydration (*TMI?*). Each time "[Water](#)" (2024, [Anthony Q feat. Prestige](#)) comes up on shuffle, I am reminded, there's no shame in letting water move through us.

¹⁰⁴ *Nerd Alert!* Did you know emotional tears are called "psychic tears" and are fed by our limbic system?! Our emotions guide our tears' chemical composition of hormones and neuropeptides. We flush out emotional markers, because our bodies are cool, magical and always taking care of us. Read about it: [Liang et al \(2023\)](#).

I think I just had a realization. I think the reason that I've been stewing on the land, space and place portion is connected to a quote I just read—something is clicking for me. I can feel it. I don't want to lose it. The quote is talking about the difference between space and place, placefulness, and connection to Land. It's talking about placefulness in a way that space *becomes* place through culture; storied by culture and sensory experience. The first click is inter-sensory perception as connected to the nervous system. I'm realizing the journey I've been on, from visiting *spaces* to visiting *places* isn't about the physical spaces themselves but the openness to placefulness... *in me*. I feel like I've been healing, but how? I'm realizing, this experience has allowed me to reconnect to my nervous system and to then experience these spaces in ways that are placeful. *Deep breath, staring off screen. The birds are rustling the leaves in the canopy stretching across the street. Tears start to stream.* I'm not sure how I'm going to talk about that yet, but it's making me really emotional.

Ugly laugh/cry cued.

I was re-reading what I've written about the first visit to grandma's room. Remembering how it felt; I was a visitor, just sitting on the floor wondering about story-less items. *Why did she keep this card, or that ring, this letter or that book?* I was writing, or trying to write, about how each visit felt different from the last. I haven't been able to articulate *what* was different.

Long pause and free flowing tears now.

In therapy we've been having conversations about how overstimulated I get, and the ways in which dissociation has protective factors, but it is a disconnection. My body turns off sensory input when it's too much, but there's a cost to disconnection. I'm thinking about how present I've been able to feel these past few months. Click number two: I've been taking control of those inputs, so that my whole system doesn't just shut down. A part of this journey has been about re-associating with myself... *that's (re)membering. What's been different... is me.* And that's really

cool. Coming into this, I didn't realize the connection to myself that was necessary to connect with anything else. Man, I don't want to forget that quote.

Feld's (1996) notion of inter-sensory perception allows a culture-sharing group to "turn over" the surface to look "underneath or inside," thereby revealing the subtleties, the "resonant depth" or meaning captured in place names stories, songs, teachings (p. 98, 99)—ancient knowledges that are (re)membered and embodied experiences forming deeply intimate and spiritual expressions of our connections to Land. In this context, inter-sensory perception is essentially the study of the ways information from our various senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, self-motion [embodiment] and taste), are integrated by the nervous system. Inter-sensory perception enables us to have meaningful perceptual and embodied experiences of our places. Embodied or emplaced spaces, while always intimate, are never neutral. (Smith et al, 2019, p. 26-27)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Maori educator and scholar, writes of *placefulness*—when spaces become storied, (re)membered and (re)cognized (Smith et al, 2019). Smith's wordplay creates powerful imagery of the meta/physical connections I experienced. I was (re)membering—bringing back to heart and mind—and putting back together physical forms, mending disconnection in the material world. Throughout my visits to these spaces, a (re)cognition grew, certainly as familiarity—knowing *again*—but also the knowing that comes from memories held in the senses. Knowing that comes from the smell of earth carried in the Texan breeze, the scratchy polyester of grandma's suit jacket, the greasy snap of grandpa's favorite hotlink. Reconnecting with my body allowed me to reconnect with the ether, the spirit, resonant energy and memory. *This is a little woo-woo, maybe fodder for a future project?* Spaces became places as I became able to wholly receive them, "space is empty and abstract, whereas place is concrete, sensed, and

grounded in lived experiences and realities” (Smith et al, 2019, p. 26). While revisiting notes, journal entries and my mind's eye, I began to recognize the spaces I visited as their own beings—going as far as imagining them with their own personalities, energy and to some degree their own faces—*they were being storied*. I didn’t recognize it as it was happening, but on this side of this journey, I know my people differently—these places became portals back to them and back to myself.

Here I introduce you to my people¹⁰⁵, by first sharing (storied) places that embody our family story—shedding light on the souls that move(d) in and through them. I knew that my grandmother’s room would demand its section in this dissertation, and wrestled with how to approach detailing that space as an extension of the character that was/is/will forever be my grandmother. What came as an unexpected joy was two additional spaces that appeared as their own extensions and characters during my time in Austin: Big Mama’s House and Grandma Ada’s House. On both sides of the family, our gathering places have complicated history. We gather within walls that are centuries old, on land that has been honored by indigenous stewards since before time, land that nourished body and spirit for my enslaved ancestors, displaced from their indigenous homeland, land violently commodified by colonizing governments, and exploited to fuel ‘a democracy’. These complicated spaces, holding the burdens of history *and* nourishing the present and futures of our family, are referred to in the names of our matriarchs. It’s fitting. *Picking up what I’m putting down?* These spaces, as did their namesakes, keep our family centered on the women that made us, our herstory is undeniable in these places. *Come inside, I want you to meet us.*

Grandma’s Room

When I think about my grandmother’s room, I am reminded of the sanctity that was my own childhood bedroom. It was dad’s house¹⁰⁶, but that 10’x12’ room was *mine*. It was a privilege to have my own room; I felt that—and I treated it like a sanctuary. I took care to rearrange my furniture frequently and

¹⁰⁵ If you’re like me and need a visual to orient yourself, see Figure 1 on page 70 for a simplified family tree.

¹⁰⁶ *iykyk*

often; morphing the physical space to match the emotional space I needed at the time. I'd close the door and sprawl in the middle of the floor; limbs and a rainbow of colored pencils, crayons and markers stretching just as wide. Belly down sketching dress designs or filling pages with doodles of leaves and flowers. Or kneeling, hunched over a book highlighting and notating, even in my novels¹⁰⁷. Or chin to knuckles, writing: letters, poetry, or transcribing my favorite lyrics word-for-word. I remember listening to the local radio station for hours, anxiously slamming "REC" at the DJ's announcement of my favorite song. I'd listen back to *that*¹⁰⁸ song for hours, for days, for weeks—writing out and memorizing the lyrics. I did my favorite things in my room, and it served as a snapshot of my me-ness. I left that room for a shared college dorm and then shared homes. I haven't had *my room* in decades. Entering my grandmother's room felt like a new kind of nostalgia—I long(ed) for the woman reflected in that space and feel such gratitude for the opportunity to revisit her her-ness.

This project began, at least not later than October 2023 with the passing of my grandmother. Over the prior decade her health had slowly declined, requiring that she move out of her bedroom upstairs and into a space the family created on the ground floor. With her passing, came the need to reenter *her* space. Initially we sought to extract—pulling photo albums, primarily—in preparation for a celebration of life. In the weeks and months to follow, my cousins and I revisited her room, slowly trying to triage literal trash from family treasure. In truth, our collective grief couldn't tolerate the process. Within six months of her passing the door was closed and we committed to revisiting when it felt less raw. Two years later I climbed the stairs thinking I was ready. *Spoiler: I wasn't*. At least not in the ways that I thought I was.

Nothing had changed. I knew that analytically; I knew that no one had picked up the work of the clean out, and yet I felt the surprise in my chest when I opened the door. It looked exactly the same—

¹⁰⁷ My footnote origin story?

¹⁰⁸ Why was a first grader obsessed with ["Waterfalls" \(TLC, 1994\)](#) like that? "I say the system got you victim to your own mind / dreams are hopeless aspirations / in hopes of comin' true / believe in yourself / the rest is up to me and you".

untouched, dust blooming in rays of sunlight through the window. Even opening the doors was disruptive, and I felt that: an intruder, a disruptor, an agitator. The sight of it took my breath and sent me back to the last moment I'd stood in that doorway. Grief doesn't pull punches—*that I know*. I wish I could say that that room was a sanctuary. In truth it felt more akin to a shrine—or at worst, a tomb. Four walls, a bed, side table, vanity, dresser and *stuff*... so much stuff. Each nook and cranny holding something. Sometimes tightly, like the snugly packed shelf of devotional books, notebooks, bibles and Christian authors. Other times the space held loosely, like the piled grocery bags filled with papers of all types—spam mailers, legal documents, receipts, recipes, handwritten notes and letters already read. Some items held evidence of prized status—the worn ink of the off button of her alarm clock, the patina missing from select spots on her brass candle holder. Other items either forgotten or perhaps too precious to toss—three lone valentine's candies in a reused cardboard jewelry box; they read: 'it's love', 'to', 'love her'. *She's still whispering, she's here, it's still holding her in place*¹⁰⁹. Grandma's Room provides a peek into a woman, at that moment in her life, just before it all began to wither—the space is her, but it is also its own being, holding the light between¹¹⁰.

Like Grandma, the space is layered with stories; some felt, others spoken. It holds a collection of church hats and matching church clothes—often a well-structured blazer and midi skirt set—stacks of shoeboxes protecting kitten heels of every hue, ready for the perfectly curated monochrome head-to-toe¹¹¹ look. Grandma's Room holds God at the center—photos, writings, readings, cassette tapes and *dozens* of full sermons on CD. It is organized, in theory, each corner with a function, utilitarian by design but full of nuance and surprises. I imagine Grandma's Room would look similar to my grandmother: wide-set eyes that take in everything, strong shoulders to carry all that needs carrying. She, too, would sit with

¹⁰⁹ Indigenous scholars remind us that our physical space, too, is sacred. "By inhabiting spaces — by being present in the spaces, to occupy those spaces, to story those spaces, to (re)member and (re)cognize those spaces they become placeful" (Smith et al, 2019, p. 27).

¹¹⁰ I am reminded again of sister Georgia's poem: "and love the light between" [life and death].

¹¹¹ Shoutout to the southern Black church lady aesthetic. *Chef's kiss*.

her arms crossed, hand-in-hand, knees and heels tight—unbothered and waiting to be addressed. She, too, would be stout, bottom-heavy, each step firmly planted. Grandma’s Room holds heavy, complicated emotions—similar stillness, aloofness, even. *But Grandma’s Room tells its secrets, its stories, in due time.*

I revisit Grandma’s Room multiple times over the course of the winter and spring. The first, a weekend stay, including about ten hours seated on a worn carpeted floor sifting through and discerning *stuff* from *precious things*—the latter of which was set aside as fodder for the conversations to come, or for future family projects. I took photographs of the room, and of that deemed precious—certificates, awards and jewelry, letters and cards, well-worn books, and drawings—learning that my grandmother loved to doodle pictures of cars and faces. Video journalling throughout the process, I noted what I found and any curiosities, general reflections while exploring or at times just sitting in the heaviness of the space. The second visit was a few weeks later, as an intentional follow-up to the first visit and a part of my reciprocity commitment to my auntie. On the first visit, I did not remove anything from the house—a promise made to dissuade fear of loss, and a promise made to share in the (re)discovery. That second visit allowed for time and space to share what I’d found, and to take the documents on a field trip to the local print and scan shop. *I hold hope for the future, a visit with Grandma’s Room with my auntie at my side*¹¹².

Big Mama’s House

Big Mama’s House sits on what was once nearly two hundred acres that she and Papa purchased from a Black farmer in the community, in the early 1900s. Two houses sit just off of a now busy highway, adjacent to the dirt road they carved with horse-drawn plows, built to loop through the property: her namesake, Amanda Circle (*we love that*). There are technically two houses referred to as Big Mama’s House, together with the land—I imagine them as three sisters, together caring for the family for nearly 125 years.

¹¹² May we (re)member our grief, as a welcomed reminder of our eternal love and everlasting connection. *Ashé.*

The middle sister, *the old house*, once held two bedrooms on either side of a living room, with a room for cooking just off to the side. Central to the living room was a hand-built fireplace that now lays as just a pile of bricks. The sofa is still there, or what's left of it; as is an old television I presume they bought just after the house was wired for electricity. This is where my daddy and auntie visited as children; I can imagine them in that living room, huddled around that TV after long summer days playing in the country. Today, the earth is reclaiming this place, brick-by-brick, hand sawn board-by-board; the years have taken walls, sections of the floor and of the roof. Visiting the house now is more akin to walking through a graveyard, as the house melts back into the landscape. Standing under a tree, looking into the primary bedroom is jarring—the wall is gone, the open air and weather move freely through what was once a place of shelter and warmth. The bed is still made—one of Big Mama's quilts lays with intention across the mattress—but the elements have taken their own care. The quilt turns to tatters as it moves down to the foot of the bed, the mattress steadily disintegrating, leaving behind rusted coil springs sitting directly on the earthen ground. *Who was the last person to spread her quilt, to sleep beneath it?* This house is where Big Mama and Papa raised their children, cooked their meals, laughed and cried. These walls cared for a family living and loving through the toils of rural homesteading, the births and deaths of children¹¹³, dreams dreamt and lost. The old house watched as the family grew, children married and left to start their own farms, and as the new house was placed just 50 yards away. She stood by as life shifted and she was left behind. Pink paint is still on the walls, refusing to peel despite the roof slowly giving way to the sky above. The old house is an imagined elder, still spunky, still present. She walks with a limp but walks nonetheless; *she-a-little-off*¹¹⁴ but her memory is sharp and lasting. She stands by her little sister, just close enough, just watching.

¹¹³ Big Mama birthed 8 of her 11 children in this house.

¹¹⁴ How the family describes anyone who's just a little different—a loving way to say a lot of things without saying much.

The *new house* was built mid-century in Austin, having a whole other life before coming to the country. Once all the kids had left, and after Papa passed on, this house carried Big Mama through her twilight years. The new house is the home of my memories—where we stayed when we visited Big Mama—three bedrooms, running water, a bathroom and a full kitchen. As I stand before her, my memory brings forward the smell of Big Mama’s cheesy grits (*we do grits savory, never sweet*), a pinch of pepper and a little pool of butter melted from the heat. This house held the gallery wall—literally and spiritually surrounding my Big Mama with the many faces representing her legacy. This house always felt warm, with visitors routinely in and out, sharing stories, news and laughter. I think this house absorbed a bit of that energy. Despite the plywood panels, looking at her, I see spirit glow from each window and doorway—she still holds our heart, still beating, still felt. She may be unassuming to look at today, but she *feels* large, happy, satisfied with a life well lived. As the little sister, she stood tall on the toiling of her older sisters; Big Mama’s working years gave way to nearly 40 years of well-deserved rest and care. Where the older sister was spent and left to crumble, the little sister was boarded with care, her treasures secured and claimed amongst the family. Big Mama’s House isn’t the beginning nor the end in this place, but she sits confidently, knowing she too will return to the earth with her sisters. She doesn’t seem to fight it, as the brush creeps forward, and sticky weeds squeeze between boards, Big Mama’s House is unbothered if not welcoming them in; as she always has.

The oldest sister thrums; she is the pulse, the quiet yet constant hum of Big Mama’s House. I feel the spirit of Land before I can name it. The breeze swirls wafts of sweet blossoms, the sticky weeds grab at my ankles, and the cacti seem to bend, reaching for me and toward the heavens. The houses and the Land are one, sharing memories through them; in the earth and in the air, there is a connection. This Land fed the family, fed the cattle. This Land grew the trees that my great uncle climbed to jump onto the horses¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁵Me: ‘Wow you were so brave, so independent!’ Unc: ‘Well, I don’t know about that, how else was I supposed to get up there?’ How else is a four year old to get onto their trusty steed? *This city girl don’t know anything about that.*

This Land was life, and it gave my family dignity. And yet, when the oil men came in their suits, with their offer of fractions of cents on the dollar to drop a pipeline, we let them cut into the Land. The pipeline cut across the farm, splitting the acres, and slowly separating the family. The pipeline shifted the way we talked about the Land and how decisions were made before and after Big Mama passed. But the Land is forgiving—the eldest sister has seen too much to hold grudges. I can feel her love for us¹¹⁶, and I see the ways she’s reclaiming what’s hers—and *we owe her that*.

Visiting Big Mama’s House included a walk about, sitting in silence with the Land, and a photoshoot. We walked the acreage—until we got scared of pipeline trespassing signs—noting the property lines and grazing pastures. I took the time to sit in the “silence” and recorded a reflexive video journal noting the sensory knowledges that were buzzing to/from the Land. Looping around the new and old houses included photographs from all angles and audio recordings as I wondered aloud about their individual and shared past and present. Big Mama’s House is more than two buildings on nondescript farmland. Big Mama’s House is an embodiment of our humanity—we are all just an extension of the Land, borrowed atoms remolded for a time. The hustle and bustle of humanity—the highway noise is *loud*, the speeds at which we move mindlessly across miles—is met with her stillness, with the crickets, with the birds, with the wild quietly growing and the houses just sitting, melting back into the earth, waiting to be remolded once again. Big Mama’s House appreciates life *and* death—the inevitability of it all and the beauty in between.

Grandma Ada’s House

Grandma Ada’s House turns 100 this year. A little white house, two front doors, just under 600 square feet, cut into a front sitting room, a back kitchen/living room and a bedroom plus bath—though

¹¹⁶In *Wisdom Sits in Place*, anthropologist Keith Basso learned with and wrote about the Western Apache people. Annie Peaches, an Apache elder, shared a wisdom that resonates as a comment about the Land’s love for us: “The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people” (Basso, 1996, p. 38).

they didn't have running water then. She was built in a neighborhood of predominately Black families, that would soon be designated "the negro district"¹¹⁷ in the 1928 city plan of Austin—investments in parks and "the negro school" were proposed as a beacon to draw other Black families away from the rest of (white) Austin, as "a solution" to the "race segregation problem" (Koch and Fowler, 1928, p. 57). I imagine she looks exactly as she always has, though her surroundings have changed with the same resolute persistence. To the south: a street that looks more like an alley, still dirt, never paved and shaded by mature trees. To the north: newer construction, three times the property value and four times the square footage. In the back, the most recent addition, a concrete path to the back door, bearing the names of each child raised there—poured after Grandma Ada passed. There I see my grandfather's name along with each of his siblings, some barely visible under the growth of a wild cactus in bloom.

These walls stood firm while Grandma Ada worked full time in the homes of white families, raising 12 children of her own. The description of Grandma Ada's House is the same as how Grandma Ada herself has been described to me. Sturdy, reliable, good bones ("healthy 'till the end"); sufficient and satisfied; utilitarian, "everything has a purpose and maybe more than one". All said, both Grandma Ada and Grandma Ada's House were/are holders—of people, of space, of connection and love. Photobooks taken off the shelf hold family milestones and everyday moments that Grandma Ada, and this house, hosted. Between cellophane slips, my grandfather, probably in his late forties, ever so gently wiping her mouth between spoonfuls—love and gratitude uniquely held by a mother and son, shining in their eyes. Next page, an auntie seated at the kitchen table, a niece standing over her, intently focused on setting the next roller—they are surrounded by men and boys watching with various degrees of interest. Two grown cousins seated on their grandmother's couch, a candid taken mid-laugh—at what I'm sure was the tallest of

¹¹⁷ The historic "negro district", is now referred to as Six Square, the six square miles that housed Black Austinites and continues to be bustling hub of Black history, culture, art, food and music. Shoutout to those preserving the history of Black spaces and Black community, and to the nonprofit Six Square for doing that work in Austin: www.sixsquareatx.org

tales. The last photo taken of my great grandfather—seated on the same loveseat where I spent an afternoon with his daughters—dressed in his Sunday's best, riddled with the cancer that will take him, deep in a conversation with one of his nephews. Decades later, the photos we take on our visit will end up in that photo album—photos on that same loveseat, at that same kitchen table—talking, laughing, dotting on each other as we do. Our family continues to gather and to (re)member; and Grandma Ada's House continues to hold in her absence.

Cousin Keke (Cuh-zin Kee-kee)

My eldest cousin, in her fortieth year, is a lot like my grandmother in notable (and noble) ways: the quiet caretaker, the community holder, the one that doesn't quite appreciate her own glow. Keke is the person moving in the background to keep things moving, dedicated to those around her and with her full self. When we talked about this profile, what she felt comfortable with, whether she wanted to pick a pseudonym, I asked what she loves about herself. She went quiet for a moment—'I'm the last person you should ask' *that's Keke*. Keke has built a life that holds space for others—her coworkers (past and present), her decades-long friends, her little sister, her parents, our aunt, our grandmother, our nieces and nephews, me—now, she's making space for herself. Keke is in an era of reintroduction. Beyond professionalism, beyond being in-relation to others, she's getting reacquainted with Keke in the raw. *And we love that for her.*

On this journey, my cousin has been my road dog, jumping at the chance to join me in the visits, even offering to chauffeur me and the aunties around full well knowing there would be a background track of backseat ~~criticism~~ *commentary*¹¹⁸. She can be trusted to find the next best spot to grab a bite to eat. You're in the mood for Thai food? Give her five minutes and go get your pants on; she'll find the city's best pad thai and *your* new go-to spot. *Keke will say it was mediocre, apologize, and find a new spot for next time.* Keke goes with whatever the flow is. Want to go on a hike, get full body exfoliation at the

¹¹⁸ The passenger princess(es) reserve the right to have opinions. *But we'll also bring snacks and a playlist.*

Korean spa, window shop at Target; Keke is your girl and she'll always tell you when the dress ain't it. I've been blessed to have my cousin by my side—long before this process began. In fact, all of my memories of Big Mama's house feature Keke—she still likes to tell the story of our first childhood visit and sharing the bed with me. *Imagine two elementary girls, one sleeps like a zombie (some might say it's creepy), the other a bit more active. Flailing arms and legs, a knee in the back, waking up to find not a scrap of blanket within reach.* Evidently, I sleep with full main character energy; whether or not that's true (I wouldn't know, I'm asleep), she's been my begrudged bedside supporting actress since, well ever. And she complains each time; but she still shares with me and I've not woken up with a black eye, not once. *So there's that, she also shows restraint.* In approaching the prospect of entering my grandmother's room—with a charge to find photos for her homegoing celebration—Keke was there. In those weeks after Grandma passed, and again in the (re)visit to Grandma's Room; sifting through endless scraps of paper, holding space for Grandma's trinkets and all the *precious things* we found. We sat on the floor, hovered over piles we'd created on the bed, mused aloud often *at* each other and *to* the room. We posed questions for our aunties, and remembered for each other both the subtleties of our grandmother and the many ways in which she was a character—and one we wish we'd known better. In total, Keke and I spent our first 6 hours together in that musty, dusty, beautiful 11'x12' treasure trove.

Keke rejoined me on the journey to Austin. Through lazy mornings, car rides to the country, adventures through the city, and late nights on the couch, we reflected on what was shared each day, posed new questions and unearthed the kaleidoscope of stories we'd heard separately from our fathers growing up¹¹⁹. We spent a full business week, five days in Austin, together nearly every minute we weren't asleep¹²⁰. Our conversations happened in motion going to and from, and in stillness on couches, in fields

¹¹⁹ I am reminded of a quote from Skokomish elder Gerald Bruce "Subiyay" Miller (Jennings, 2018), "Don't teach all of our children exactly the same thing. If you teach them everything all the same, they won't need one another, and the world will split apart."

¹²⁰ My gift to her was *not* sharing a bed with me this time.

and across tables covered in delicious food¹²¹.

Aunt Lo/Auntie

My auntie (auh-n-tee) is a single woman in her sixties, the only daughter in a family of five children raised predominately by a single working mother (Grandma), as one of thirty or so cousins in her generation. I remember visits to stay with her over the summer, studying her face for my features, feeling pride at our shared complexion, our lips, and where our cheeks sat on our faces. As the sister of my father, she is within my major arcana¹²² of Black womanhood. In her, I saw what I might look like in the future, learned womanhood and motherhood were not synonymous, and what it felt like to be loved by a Black woman. I envied my cousins, who lived near to her, had inside jokes, knew her favorite food and her favorite color.

She is the first generation born in the Pacific Northwest— noting that she related to feeling like a city girl during childhood visits to see Big Mama in the country, but also that the density of blackness and Black folx on those visits, and even as an adult visiting places like D.C., made her feel out of place. Carrying the legacy of caretaker, my auntie was the primary carer for my grandmother. Long before Grandma started getting sick, auntie bought a house with space to move her in, too. While their relationship was at times complicated, her connection to her mother is lasting and many decisions in the past few years have been answered by the question: *what did mom want*. Grandma is still everywhere as far as my auntie is concerned. Each time we watch a baseball game, she reminds me that Grandma was a skilled athlete in her own right, often commenting on being a better hitter than whoever is at bat. Sports remain a tether to their love and twin sports fandom. For auntie, her love began from the stands, watching her brothers compete in basketball, baseball, wrestling and football. In one visit, our conversation was peppered with

¹²¹ Shoutout to Mr. Jackson, the assistant manager at Meyer's Elgin Smokehouse, who encouraged me to call home because 'bringing the wrong thing is worse than bringing nothing' and then promptly bagged up 10lbs of the freshest of my grandpa's favorite hotlinks, to take home to our dads. He even gifted us some merch *for the culture*.

¹²² *Jykyk*, on my wishlist: the Dust II Onyx deck by Black queer femme artist, Courtney Alexander who can be found on Instagram @reallycourtney

her interjections on play calls and missed calls within the televised game behind me—*Sara, did you see that? Can you believe they missed that call? C'mon coach, what are you thinking, you just ran that play!* It was a rerun from a decade ago that she's watched more times than she can count. Now that she's retired (*get it girl!*) she has time to rewatch her favorite matchups, on repeat, and she does so without apology.

My auntie retired from the aerospace manufacturing industry, having started right from high school, shortly after the NAACP won a major discrimination case. Recruited away from a fashion merchandising program and wooed by immediate livable wages, she'd end up spending nearly four decades with the company. In reflection, while she still dreams of fashion (*just look at her closets, plural*), that decision afforded her a life of choice and the ability to invest in the things she loves: fashion, flowers, the Seahawks and family. Just as with her mother, and her mother before her, my auntie views family as those beloved to you; biological kinship being only one type of family. As a godmother and auntie to (great) nieces and nephews, she is a behind the scenes benefactor opening doors and creating legacy through memory, story, experience and traditions. In fact, it was my auntie that took me to Texas in the memory I hold as the first visit to Big Mama's House. I remember one moment vividly, like a movie scene.

The doors of the airport opened as she approached, her figure walking out into the bright Texas sun, and the excitement rising in my chest. My cousins and I were all elementary aged, walking in a row behind her, ogling the whole experience of our first long plane ride, a new airport, and being on a cousin's trip without our parents. Then, a wave of the driest, hottest straight-from-hell, a blow drier straight into my lungs assault on my everything. As if in sync, we stopped cold. Wide-eyed, snapping necks back and forth, bags dropped, our hands flying to our throats. *Texas was a different kind of hot.* Meanwhile, auntie didn't skip a beat. She kept walking straight on course, only turning back (I imagine) because our chatter had gone silent. 'C'mon you guys! We gotta go!' And that was that. When retelling this memory, I was reminded by my auntie that we were in a hurry because she'd planned a full itinerary for the trip. The itinerary of her dreams—what she wished her trips to Texas as a kid had been like. She wanted us to have

fun; we took a road trip to Six Flags spending a full day riding the biggest roller coasters we'd ever seen.

We drove out to the country, visiting Big Mama and laughing over breakfast about the *giant lizard*¹²³ that lived in the closet and jumped at us every time we opened the door. My auntie is a memory maker... even when the memories aren't for her.

My auntie and I visited in her kitchen/living room, over a meal at *her* new favorite Thai spot, and over the phone as we regularly do. In total we spent no less than eight hours together on this topic in person and countless hours on the phone *thankfully we aren't billed by the minute anymore*. Auntie served as the switchboard, getting photo numbers and addresses for our Austin trip and phoned family to check her memory as she told me stories. In addition to notes, reflexive journals and photos from my visits, my auntie provided recovered photos from her own stash and later rediscovered Grandma's photobooks. True to form, she even took old negatives and some of my favorite stills to be reprinted at a local photo shop, for my real gallery wall.

The Ain'tees

My ain'tees (AINT-tees¹²⁴) are the two living sisters on my grandfather's side of the family, born two years apart, both in the latter half of the 1940s and both quick as a whip. The older of the sisters, Ain't Lulu¹²⁵, is a single woman who lives in the family home, Grandma Ada's house, in Austin. She grew up in the house and never left, opting instead to stay and care for her mama—a gesture of reciprocity for the life of service Grandma Ada lived for her twelve children. In our time together, I could have sworn Ain't Lulu was a fire sign—magnetic, full of energy, the center of the party, full of stories and jokes, with a big laugh and a healthy dose of sarcasm. I'm not one that retains zodiac insights particularly well, but there was

¹²³ It was an incredibly agile iguana as far as I'm concerned. Turns out, in "truth" it was a common house gecko, but go with me here, the child's eye is a gift and it was a rare sighting of the wild Towel Closet Iguana.

¹²⁴ I want you to hear their voices: they are not auh-n-tees, not an-tees, they are ain-t-tees. I don't know or care if it's the Texas way, or the family way, it's their way they refer to themselves. So I will, as will you. *Periodt*.

¹²⁵ My auntie picked this pseudonym, her high school nickname. I imagine her present era as a reflection of what she must have been like back then as a teenager, and I can't help but get a giggle from the serendipity of her deLulu character.

something beyond familial familiarity between me and Ain't Lulu—cut from the same cloth is the idiom that comes to mind. Turns out I was wrong about the zodiac (*she's an earth sign?!*), which leaves me wondering if some of these traits are blood memory¹²⁶ after all.

Ain't Lulu 'talks stuff'—she ribbed us and poked fun at her sister, providing a running background track of loving smack talk and through it all, the bass beat is endearment, a loyalty and love that she'd say *isn't unconditional but is complete*. In one of our visits, Keke and Ain't Lulu were in the kitchen, Ain't Lulu hovering, quizzing Keke on a family photo book. With each page turn, Ain't Lulu's body would tense, a pursed smile on her face, tension in her jaw as she clenched the answer and waited for Keke's guess. With every right (or wrong) answer, she'd beam and either do a little shimmy in approval or eagerly jab the page narrating the who-is-who on the aged photograph. *Even C's get degrees—Keke passed the test*. Later, with multiple conversations competing for volume, a full belly laugh exploded from Ain't Lulu. Commanding the room, she straightened her shoulders and proclaimed she and Keke are both decidedly shy. Through laughter, she tells us Keke *seems to think she's shy*, and since she hadn't stopped talking since we'd arrived (an hour prior at that point), Ain't Lulu must be shy too. Ain't Lulu is funny. Genuinely, authentically, without trying to be funny, funny. She certainly also tries, but she doesn't have to.

Reflexive journal entry: Ain't Lulu had my cheeks cramping today. She invited us over specifically “not before 11” and when we arrived at noon, not only had she called over Ain't Coretta, but the two of them had been waiting not-so-patiently since at least 10:30. A few hours and lots of laughs later, she coyly asked if anyone was hungry. Turns out she'd *been* hungry, and since we were “late” she thought we'd go straight to lunch but didn't want to “be big¹²⁷” by asking sooner. She recommended her favorite barbeque spot, insisting that Keke drive her car rather than the rental,

¹²⁶ [Alkimitza, 'Indigenous Awakens' \(2025\)](#), talks about ancestral knowledges as legacy and as our inherited responsibility— we are “the future dressed in the echoes of the past.” Expect more references, it's currently on loop.

¹²⁷ Big as in fat. Which is also funny given we have a ‘big’ family, of which Ain't Lulu at 81 is objectively *not* big. Lord knows I had been well past hungry and didn't want to say anything either. *Girls gotta eat, people*.

and we were on our way. Forty-five minutes according to my GPS app, and we buckled in for a drive into the country¹²⁸. Within minutes we heard the first of what would become a moniker for the day and I'm sure a phrase Keke and I will cherish forever: *lord jesus not a toll road!* Every mile, the sign pops up—exit left for the toll road. Every mile, Keke keeps us in the right lane as previously directed. We don't exit left, and yet Ain't Lulu is hollering in the backseat begging the lord to make sure Keke doesn't catch a charge. Halfway through the drive, the sign changes and we do in fact end up on a toll road, and Ain't Lulu is *not* having it. Resolved, Keke pulls over, waits for a break in traffic (on a multi-lane highway) and flips a big one. To say that Ain't Lulu screeched is an understatement. She threw her body onto mine, one hand on my thigh and the other on her wig—*lord jeeezus!* How I didn't wet myself with laughter ought to be a commendation in my obituary. Keke will never hear the end of it. ****Update:** I've since heard this story told back to me no less than three times from Ain't Lulu, including her retelling the retellings she's given others since. Our unforgettable day together was the day Keke *"nearly killed us all, and by the grace of God we didn't end up wherever she was taking us. The tires were off the road, Sara! Lord Jesus, that girl is crazy on those toll roads! Why those people¹²⁹ charge us to drive the road we paid to make anyway?!"* Note: the toll was \$1.20—the memory is priceless.

That's Ain't Lulu, the riot, the big sister, the storyteller. When I told her about this profile and asked what she wanted folx to know about her, she gave me a lesson on truth and the reality that when folx pass, their story gets beautified. She doesn't want that. Ain't Lulu wants to be remembered as "an okay Black lady". Not perfect, not awful, just okay—a *good human*. She told me about how she remembers people, their faces, their stories, but is awful at names. She told me about her "best friend, the white lady

¹²⁸ 10/10 recommend a drive out to Lockhart to visit Chisholm Trail BBQ if you're ever in the Austin area. You want to specify that you want the *wet* brisket though... dry brisket ain't where it's at and should be called something else.

¹²⁹ I learned "those people" is code for unnamed white people, the law, the government, etc.

across the street” that’s lived there the past 15 years. Ain’t Lulu knows her daughter and told me the daughter’s whole life story: her name, her university, her good nature, her boyfriend. Then Ain’t Lulu got quiet on the phone (*that doesn’t happen*). “Sara. I have to tell you something. She’s my best friend down here, she’s been over here 15 years, you know in the house, we just be talkin’. I’ve been in her house too, she’s real nice and we look out for each other.” *Okayyyy*. “Sara. Someday I’m gonna have to just come out and ask her, I’m gonna say, you’re my best friend down here you know: what is your name?!” That’s Ain’t Lulu, the riot, the big sister, the storyteller, *the friend*.

Ain’t Lulu’s energy is complemented by her little sister (just shy of eighty), Ain’t Coretta. Aunt Coretta is what people call a ‘god-fearing, church lady’, or at least she used to be. Ain’t Coretta is the calm in the middle of the storm—that day on the toll road, Ain’t Coretta didn’t bat a lash, hands clapped in her lap, unbothered. Perhaps that comes from being the youngest in a family of twelve children raised in close quarters, perhaps it’s a vestige of her faith—“all will be as it’s meant to be”. Ain’t Coretta and I sat on the couch for hours in Grandma Ada’s House. In this era, Ain’t Coretta is a widow, her eyesight is declining but she’s otherwise in good health, both in body and mind. She let me in on a secret that maybe all little sisters already know: she *pretends* not to get Ain’t Lulu’s jokes—*I don’t know if that’s like an uno reverse joke, but her smirk tells me yes*. Ain’t Coretta is slick like that. She lets her sister tease her about not being able to see what’s going on, and about walking too slow, but Ain’t Coretta is still quick with her retorts.

Ain’t Lulu: Well let’s get ready to go. I’ll go grab my wig, I need to find us some husbands.

Ain’t Coretta: I don’t need no husband.

Ain’t Lulu: Yes you do. I’m going to find us two handsome Mexican husbands. I’ll give you the good wig.

Ain’t Coretta: [Tightening her hot pink signature bandana] I don’t need no wig and I don’t need no husband. You find two and you can go-head an’ keep both of ‘em.

And that was that. Ain’t Lulu and Ain’t Coretta have always been close. Now that they’re the last of the sisters—their last living brother lives in another part of the state—they see each other multiple times

a week. Often they're there in Grandma Ada's House, on the little loveseat in the kitchen/living room surrounded by a lifetime of memories. I hadn't originally planned to visit with both aunties, but life and family have a way of doing what they do. Once word had spread that we were in town, each of our visits had guests and this was just the first of multiple visits that occurred just as they were meant to. We ~~spent~~ *survived* the very best day together. I audio recorded select conversations, and took notes throughout the day. In the subsequent weeks we reconnected via phone, often layering on previous stories or the newest version of the memories we now share.

The Country Kin

Visiting with my grandmother's living siblings in Texas was a personal plan, but was not originally something I planned to document for this project. My uncle is the sole living brother of my grandmother and the only living son of Big Mama. At ninety-one years old (*he's earned every one of his years!*), Unc's good days are unpredictable and I was concerned about applying unnecessary pressure. However, Unc lives directly across the highway from Big Mama's House, so there wasn't a world where we could enter Cedar Creek, let alone visit the property without visiting him—nor without him knowing, so we learned! Keke and I pulled up to Big Mama's House, going 60 miles per hour (*the posted speed!*) on a now bustling multi-lane highway. We pulled off, coming to an immediate (and jarring) halt with not much more than a car length from the highway to the property gate. Our plan was to spend some time on the property before heading over for a visit—but we realized quickly that hopping fences in Texas isn't the best idea. I dialed Unc's home phone; he later told me he only answered because it said "Baker" on the caller ID.

Unc: Hello?

Me: Hey Unc, it's Sara and Keke, [dad's and uncle's] daughters!

Unc: I don't know what you're talking about.

Me: Uhhh, we're Rosa Mae's grandbabies? You remember, we're over at Big Mama's House.

Unc: Oh. So you're in that white car?

Me: Oh! Yes! [waving wildly] You can see me?!

Unc: I can't see you. I see the white car.

Me: Oh! [waving more wildly and jumping around] I'm waving...can you see me now?!

Unc: I said I can't see you. I see the white car. Are you coming over or what?

I didn't think Unc was having a good day. I was wrong. Unc and his grandson, Keke and I spent a few hours together in the living room on an unseasonably cool Texas morning. Unc had his wheelchair pulled up to the window, a cellphone in one hand, the house receiver in the other—gazing out the window towards his mother's house. A steady volume of traffic zipped by, a consistency that muted itself over time, as one or the other phone rang at least every 15 minutes. Unc can't see well, but enjoys the blur of the colors as cars, trucks and freighters move along what was once a quiet, dusty stretch of country dirt road. Unc told stories of his mother, of their childhood on the farm, of the land, church life and Cedar Creek 'in the early days'. His grandson, who lives in a trailer on the property and watches out for his grandmother and grandfather, is a bit of a family griot himself. Often interjecting with factoids found on genealogy sites, prompting or offering favorited details his 'Gran-pa' forgot to tell this time. While the intent of this project was to curate stories from my female relatives, Unc is uniquely positioned as the eldest living son and my grandmother's brother, to layer stories from and about my Big Mama, grandmother and aunties. As this journey began in earnest with the passing of my grandmother, the visit with Unc was the type of healing experience I hoped for—his choice of words, the matter-of-fact tone, his wide cheeks and full lips, and the way that he scrunched his eyebrows when he was listening—all felt like echoes, a welcome flash of my grandmother. She would have corrected his stories too. Again, I used audio recording for much of our conversation and given that Unc keeps both phones real close, I called with follow-up questions in the weeks to follow. I caught him on a few good days, a blessing for more reasons beyond the benefit of this project.

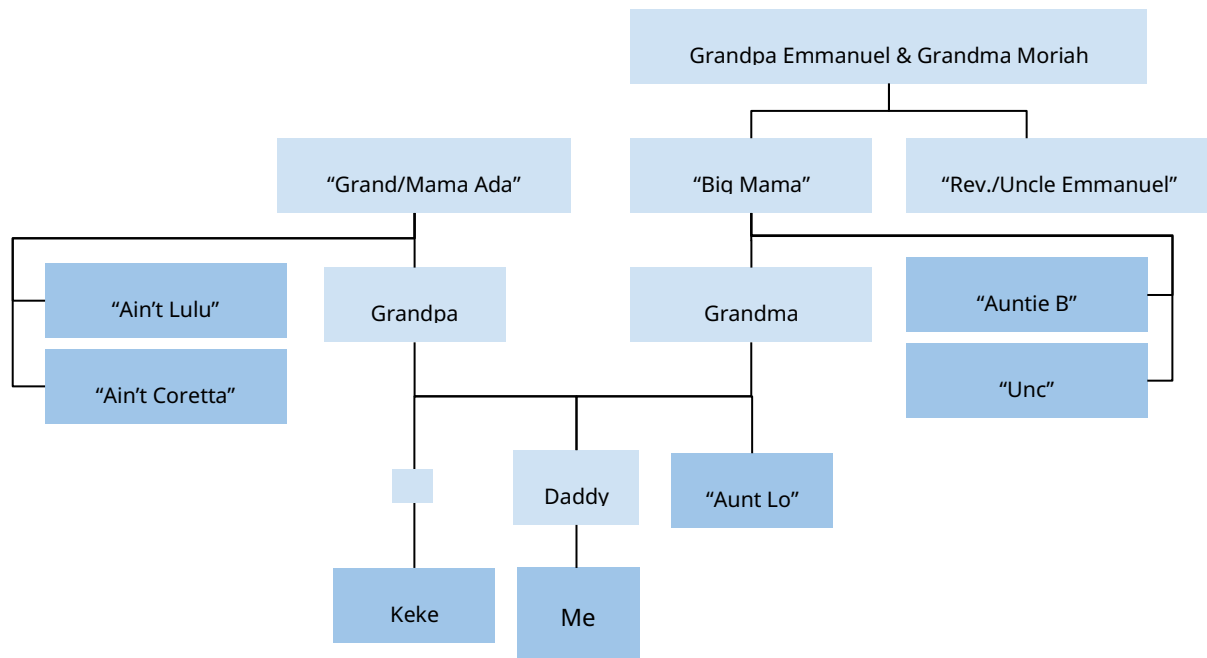
As with her brother, my auntie and her late husband purchased land close to her mother's house. Our family is close; very close¹³⁰. All three houses are within 0.2 miles of each other. The space between is filled with open meadow, farm equipment offered to the elements, current and former garden beds and various native plants—the pretty ones with little purple-blue buds tend to be near the pokey ones that grab at your ankles. The option was to walk through the wild or along the bustling highway... so we drove. *Sorry not sorry*. Similar to Unc, auntie's health as of late has been rough, having fallen more than once since the autumn. We were fortunate that she was staying with her daughter in the country during our visit, rather than with her daughter in the suburbs about forty miles south. It meant that we got more time with her, and directly after having visited her little brother. In fact, she had been one of the phone calls to Unc, resulting in the best surprise. *It was truly another great day*.

Auntie B, Grandma's and Unc's older sister, is ninety-three years old this year. She is currently moving between her daughters' houses, and she, too, was having a 'good day' full of stories about school, her role in the family cotton-picking business and her teen years driving into Austin to walk "the avenue". The two sides of the family, my grandmother's kin and my grandfather's kin were connected to this county—which held at least fourteen known freedom colonies. The families are intertwined for generations, which was reinforced in her stories about driving into "the city" to meet up with friends, including Grandma Ada's daughters, for food and shopping along 6th street—the heart of the negro district. As she told stories, her giggles filled her daughter's living room, and my heart. With each memory her giggle cemented as a new favorite sound. I don't know if our laughs change as we age, but Auntie's laugh can't have—she still sounds like a preteen schoolgirl, just giddy. Just as with the other visits, I audio recorded our conversation and spent the drive back to Austin dictating notes and immediate reflections and replaying that giggle over and over.

¹³⁰ Auntie's late husband is also my grandfather's brother, another of Grandma Ada's sons. She's a Texas-style double auntie. No shade to other regions. *Maybe a little shade*.

Figure 1.

Quick Guide to the Family Relations



Chapter VI. Our Gallery - Past & Present

Up to this point in writing this project, I thought the stories (the data) of our family's past and present were to be the medicine I was seeking. Billye Sankofa Waters (2023), mother, daughter, artist, educator, and researcher talks about stories in this way: "Our stories provide light. Our stories provide strength. Our stories offer roadmaps to find and see one another" (p. 706). In preparing to share with you the stories I gathered, through the themes of black feminisms, I find myself recognizing a shift in my thinking, something has been illuminated in the light of this journey. After hours spent in dialogue, in exchange, witnessing remembrances, learning and laughing, the *process* of storytelling—that was medicine.

I enter this phase of curating and retelling, feeling more healed¹³¹, more full¹³², more whole¹³³ and known¹³⁴.

The themes presented emerged from my study of black feminisms, not as objective categories or coding matrices but as subjective truths—concepts that resonated with my being—illuminated in the giggles from Ain't Coretta, the tall tales of Ain't Lulu, the furrowed brow of Unc, the steadfastness of Cousin Keke and each time Aunt Lo took my phone call with grace and genuine interest. Reflecting on the stories I've chosen to share, affirmations emerged: we are storytellers, we are believers, we are learners and we are joy finders. While this journey began with a focus on my leadership identity, these themes transcend "leadership". These affirmations are a proclamation that we refuse to lead as fractured identities—we lead as the people we are. Organized under these (re)membered truths, these stories represent the gallery wall I sought to (re)create as I (re)membered who *I* am. They offer glimpses into our family past and present, the best and worst of us; they are not fixed formulas. They are not the ancestral wisdom: they are the path leading back to us. We are storytellers, we are learners, we build community, we are believers, and we are joy finders: *these are our wisdoms*. I present *these* everyday stories¹³⁵ not to document our survival but as a counterstory of how we live, love, and lead. They are presented from my perspective, as I am here and now, today. I welcome you to linger in our gallery, as the wall will change tomorrow and I hope you'll revisit it then too. I certainly will. *Bet on it*.

¹³¹ "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible" (hooks, 1989, p. 9).

¹³² "By definition, striving for some idealized self-image is incompatible with being authentically who one is. We have to begin with accepting ourselves fully" (Mate & Mate, 2022, p. 375).

¹³³ "I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" (hooks, 2014, p. 2).

¹³⁴ "The needs to know and to be known are powerful aspects of the human condition" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 268).

¹³⁵ "Stories are felt theories that help us make meaning of our lives and they emerge out of our everydayness" (Marin et al, 2020, p. 2200).

We Are Storytellers: We Resist.

Throughout black feminist scholarship, storytelling is discussed as a form of dialogue and communion (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989, 1994), as a specific praxis—loop of reflection and action—for resistance (Delgado, 1995; Sankofa-Waters, 2023; Toliver et al, 2024), and as a modality for healing through connection to self (Akpovo & Dillard, 2019; Boylorn, 2013; Toliver 2020). Prior to this journey, I viewed storytelling as epistemological, as a method or a tool for knowledge—to share and gather our truths. My learning was a (re)membering that storytelling is also ontological—it is a way of being in our truths (reality). Storytelling is my inheritance because our stories, and the act of sharing them, is how we *are* in the world—relationally, reflexively and in communion with our people—across all of our selves. Sister Audre is forever whispering—by telling our *stories*, we claim, create, curate and nurture our *selves*—defending against what is not ours.

I am reminded of a widely¹³⁶ popular TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from 2009, *The danger of a single story*. Her message is clear: when we understand anything (e.g. anyone, anywhere) through the lens of a single narrative, we not only limit the possibility of each other, but we replicate that rigidity over and over again. Robin Boylorn (2017) gives a similar warning, “[s]tories are fragments of larger narratives, snapshots of lives that keep going long after the telling” (p. xi). My family tells stories, many stories, that offer fragments—snippets—of joy, of happiness, and of pain¹³⁷. We are each of these things—joyful, happy, pained—the whole of our human experience necessitates each expression. For this project I offer stories of resistance, of love and connection; not to romanticize or glorify, but as a counterstory to those single stories told about Black folx and Black American history. *Told to you, but also told to me*. Chimamanda calls on the power of dynamic stories, to restore “broken dignity” and to

¹³⁶ As of today, the video of this talk, hosted on the TED webpage, has over 42 *million* views! That fact makes me feel hopeful; hopeful that we might one day live in a time when our many stories are all held with care.

¹³⁷ “To move toward love, we must confront the pain of abandonment and loss. This means speaking what may have once been unspeakable” (hooks, 2001, p. 31).

(re)member our collective humanity (Adichie, 2009). I come from a family of storytellers, griots and scribes, and we resist being reduced to a single story.

Reflexive journal entry.

Nikesha Breeze (2023-2027), artist and curator of stories: “The edges of our collective consciousness are teeming with untold stories, marginalized lives and visions, anonymity and absence.”

*Black is... the refusal to be reduced*¹³⁸. That is the title of an exhibit I visited today at the Tacoma Art Museum. I find myself wondering, what is the “it” that is oppressed by oppression—not who, but what? A teacher/mentor/friend¹³⁹ once told me, *culture is life affirming, therefore all that is not life affirming, cannot then be culture*. We were talking about how patriarchy victimizes¹⁴⁰, and specifically defends, violence against women and girls (“it’s just our culture”). I think about that conversation often. So easy it is to say that whatever structure, action, or policy is *oppressive*—to distance ourselves from the tool and the action but also to distance ourselves from the life being denied, refuted, the erasure, the invisibility starts just then. The being-ness, the who-ness, the me-ness and you-ness—the spirit of humanity, snuffed. Oppression is often discussed in definitive terms, silencing the truth of resistance—of the act or actors decrying denial and demanding to be. I believe our humanity bubbles in us; it refuses to be made small, to go unseen, to allow our being-ness to be denied. One of the pieces in the gallery¹⁴¹ used human hair to create a panoramic weaving through paper. *It was stunning*. Crisp edges on stark ivory paper, delicate cuts, precision creating an optical illusion of shape. Tufts of braiding hair, deep brown like

¹³⁸ Shoutout to this exhibit’s curator and artist, Nikesha Breeze. *Blackness is... the refusal to be reduced*, has been extended at the Tacoma Art Museum into March 2027. *Check.it.out*.

¹³⁹ Shoutout to Dr. Andrae Brown, my first Black teacher (by profession), who I met at 24, in my masters program.

¹⁴⁰ Everything. The answer is everything: people, places, things.

¹⁴¹ Jarrett, L. (2022). *Migration Studies No. 21, 22, 24-27* [Mixed Media]. Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA, United States. Check out her full series *Migration Studies*: <https://www.lisajarrett.com/migration-studies>

mine, pulled taut through the methodically cut grid. The ends rise up, flowing from the top and hanging freely at the bottom, fully textured, long 24" strands. I'm thinking about the ways in which I'm that section of hair pulled straight into a preordained shape—and I'm that section hanging freely, fully receptive to the humidity and everything else, but fully and wholly doing me. I'm thinking about *The Matrix*¹⁴² and the fallacy/promise that there are choices/perspectives. And I'm thinking about the artist's medium—the use of hair—to make the human(ity) explicit. I'm thinking about my dissertation and I wonder, how have we resisted being contained? How have we demanded our imprint on this place/space/time? How have we shouted/whispered/cried out: *we are/were/will be here.*

We Are Griots

Griots are the orators, the storytellers tasked *or called* to pass along inheritances—of family, of people and places, and of community wisdoms—too precious to lose to time. Oral storytelling was/is also a reality of necessity. When *written* history is preserved for the privileged, oral history is its own act of resistance¹⁴³. Through oral storytelling, our griots disrupt the processes of colonization that would otherwise erase the stories we have for/by ourselves (Smith et al, 2019)¹⁴⁴. The griots are of course not referred to as griots in the family, they are endeared as the “ones to talk to”, often described as those that “be talkin’ ... be sayin’ stuff... be knowin’ everything”. Ain’t Lulu was described by others that way, though she refutes the responsibility—she doesn’t think she has the memory for it. *And yet I heard stories from*

¹⁴² One of my many Roman empires—complex ruminations existing rent-free in my mind—*The Matrix* (1999) is a deeply philosophical and spiritual call to action disguised as a pre-Y2K techpocalypse scifi action flick. #hottake #canon

¹⁴³ Every time I reread this section, I'm reminded of a song, *of course*. It's a banger that keeps thrumming: '[Indigenous Awakens' by Alkimizta](#). I also want to honor my indigenous kinfolk who, too, found ways to sustain as language/history/tradition/faith were stripped through immeasurable violence for generations. May we (re)member each other, together. Ashé. “Call me rebel, call me savage, call me heathen // But I resurrect civilizations still breathing” ... “Every rhyme a ritual, every verse a prayer // To awaken the millions who forgot we're still there” (Alkimizta, 2025, 2:36)

¹⁴⁴ Sister Audre reminded us of the importance that we hold onto *our* stories in her 1982 address to Harvard's Malcolm X Weekend, *Learning from the 60s*, “[T]hat's how I learned that if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 137).

half a century ago in vivid detail. Okay ain'tee. Unc wasn't on anyone's list—and yet—his stories unlocked stories I'd heard at my grandmother's knee, that I just couldn't understand at the time. Our griots are big personalities, characters who create characters, carrying wisdoms learned from family long passed. Our griots give facts meaning; through tone and voice they create the rhythm of living, through facial expressions they signal knowings that words fail. If the story itself is priceless, *the story of the story* is immeasurable. Without our griots, our stories would not have made it into this project, or any other; I hope to honor them in my retelling.

Unc & Pat. Unc is sitting at the window, his wheelchair angled for the perfect view of the road, his eyes struggling to focus as the cars whirr by as streaks of color. We are seated around him, three grandbabies eagerly lapping up each story. His tone drops as he accesses a memory and the room fades away, his mind pulling the four of us 100 yards to the south and ninety years back in time. He's four years old and it's midday, the Texas sun heating the earth too much for his little toesies to handle. He shuffles his feet to find the cool layer insulated by the leafy weeds; he sighs, releasing a hot breath, the relief is immediate. Papa calls out to him, it's time to check in on Grandpa. Unc knows what to do, whistling to his best friend as he starts to climb the tree. Pat knows just where to stand as Unc jumps from the branch onto his back, little legs moving quickly into place over Pat's shoulders. Unc shimmies close, getting a tight grip of Pat's hair through his fingers. Mama crosses the meadow, bringing a satchel—packed with lunch for three—she snuggles it tight just behind him. Unc gets a squeeze of the thigh and Pat gets a slap on the back. Unc and Pat make this trek as a routine—Pat knows the way with little prompting—the two set off 14 miles to the east. Unc will have lunch with Grandma Pearlie and Grandpa Isaiah, he and Pat will do a few chores and get back home in time for supper. Unc snaps us back with a smile and a new glisten in his eye—Pat was a good horse. We laugh and tease, oh to be four adventuring across the countryside with his trusty stead! He corrects us—he wasn't brave, he certainly wasn't independent—he did what he was 'posed to do. And today he did it again; griots let us do what we're 'posed to do too—listen and (re)member.

We Are Scribes

Despite the state's attempt to keep our family illiterate, our stories, as far back as four generations, were written. In the furthest reaches, literacy was a practice done in secret, covert power that protected the family but also posed a great risk. The family naming story is a prime example: literacy as salvation. As the story goes, my great grandfather and his brother were responsible for escorting the master's daughter to school each day. Each morning, and each afternoon they walked to meet her, traveling dusty dirt roads that became their blackboard. Using sticks as pencils, she taught them to read, to write and do math; sharing the lessons of the day. They practiced along those dirt roads, a secret power that would change everything. The day came that they were caught—having read a discarded newspaper, their excitement at what they found could not be contained. General Lee had surrendered to Union forces, the war was over and the abolitionists had won! The master heard them sharing the “good news” and “flew into a murderous rage” (Roberts, n.d.a). Set to beat the boys to death, the family stepped in, encircling the boys against the master and his men. *Don't play with our kids*. What the master didn't need was obstinate slaves, let alone literate ones. As “punishment” for the whole ordeal, the family, in its entirety, was sold to a neighbor—three generations passing from one household to another—an unintended gift. The new master would be their last slaveowner; remembered as a man who treated them with kindness during a time of abject cruelty. Upon their freedom, in honor of Old Abe Roberts, the family took his name. Literacy was a risk, but the reward was dignity.

The family carried this lesson forward; in each generation of farmers there was a teacher, or more commonly a preacher. Our path to literacy was laid with professions deemed “appropriate for Black folx”, or so said Unc. Both the schoolhouse and the Church offered protection to read, to write, to document and to share stories. In many of the documents I found, there was a connection to church, or to “God's word” (the bible) making it evident that the two—writing and faith—were intertwined. The gift to write

was/is understood as a divine blessing, and as a responsibility to others. Through song, poems, stories and letters, we write—to each other, to ourselves and to our future.

Grandma's Love Letters. I knew my grandmother was a letter writer; presumably a habit of her era. Before cell phones, text messaging and the ease of peeking in on the family goings on through the many social media platforms so many of us engage daily, there were letters. And my grandma was a *prolific* writer (and receiver) of letters. Grandma's letters were tucked in corners, into boxes, between books, between pages of books and into bags. Each in its original envelope, folded however many times it took to fit, marked with a dated stamp I used to track the flow of conversation. Collating the letters, like stills in a photo negative, moments shared in the 300 words chosen for *that* page, scrawled by hand, signaling the passage of time and the realized promise of age. Penmanship waned, looped letters increasingly loopy, words once spelled in full became shorthand. Each letter told a story under the story.

Grandma had letters from her niece and letters from her mother¹⁴⁵, each a response to a letter my grandmother had authored. Each made of atoms and carbon I could hold, touch and smell. Each evidence of moments taken to be still, to be intentional, and to connect to loved ones nearly 2,000 miles away. Stories were told over weeks and months, passed from hand to hand, bundled and trucked to their intended reader. Each holding new nuggets about the writer in that moment of purpose. The story on the page focused on spiritual or physical health, like Big Mama's aching hip and her appreciation for Grandma's concern about that cough she couldn't kick – though she needn't worry: "*The Lord is good to me.*" The pages held reminders to connect with others—phone numbers and addresses traded freely. Often the letters held little gifts: photos printed or found, recipe cards for strawberry chiffon squares and tea cakes, and programs of friends and family that had 'gone home'.

¹⁴⁵ Each letter from Big Mama began and ended the same: *Mrs. Rosa M. Baker, Dear daughter ... With love, Mother Amanda Jones*. The gift of these letters is indescribable, I hope you find something that feels the way these letters make me feel. The world would be a better place to be human if we each held this feeling: interconnectedness.

Grandma also wrote letters and notes to herself. At some point I stopped counting the number of notebooks we found, each with her name scrawled inside the cover. *Evidently picking out a cutie girl journal is a family special interest.* Like my bookshelf, Grandma's shelf had *many* notebooks holding only a few pages of thoughts; unlike my bookshelf, just as many were full, without a single unused page. Grandma mostly wrote to herself about God. She wrote her prayers: for others, for herself, scriptures to revisit and reflections on the day's sermon. She reminded herself of God's love, she committed and recommitted to a life of service, and she asked to be held '*in her calling*'. In the pages I found what it meant for my grandmother to be a storyteller and to be a scribe, was to author a *life of loving*: love for her family, for her mother, for herself, for her Lord God.

1991 Letter, from Big Mama to Grandma

Cedar Creek Texas 9.3.91¹⁴⁶

Mrs Rosa M Baker

Dear daughter how are you and family, fine I hope, this leaves me as well as can be expected. I am hurting in my left hip but I should not grumble, the good Lord has blessed me. I am glad I am doing as well as I am. I waited on Rev. EM to send me the information, and he didn't so I called him, and he told me that CL has his cappy up here. He said that Papa's father name was Harda Roberts. He didn't know his wife name but he said Papa's daddy name was Harvy Roberts and Grandma name was Easta. I didn't get a copy of his brothers [illegible] I can get them later. I know some of his brother's names [illegible]. Momma daddy name was Job Washington, her mother name was Leatha. Momma name Mariah and if he want me to send her sisters and brothers names I will. I am not feeling so good this morning. Listen Rosa I am sending you a sunday school book, hope you will get it. I could not send two but I hope you will be pleased. I wish you could have come home, I wanted to give you some of the fruit I put up. I close here, hope you can understand my writing. I'll close here, tell all hello for me with love.

Mother Amanda J

¹⁴⁶ As of the writing and reading of this letter, Big Mama was 96 years old, my grandmother was 53.

Recovering the Booklet(s). Hours into the visit to Grandma’s Room, tailbone aching, back cramping and a fully stuffed nose¹⁴⁷ I opened yet another nondescript bag of mixed papers. In it I found a large manilla envelope, stamped 2006, addressed to my grandmother from someone I assume to be a cousin¹⁴⁸, though I have no clue (yet) as to the direct relation. In the bag was a stack of papers held tightly by a shiny paperclip, slipped into a gallon-sized ziplock bag. A copy of copy, as evidenced by the faintness of penciled corrections and notes scribbled along the margins of a manuscript titled ‘*The Roberts Family History*.’ The papers were authored by Rev. E. M. Roberts Jr. (Big Mama’s brother, “Uncle Emmanuel”), this was Big Mama’s “information” sent 25 years after her letter, sitting in its original envelope, for the past 20 years. I don’t know if Grandma ever read it, the impression the paperclip leaves on the paper suggests perhaps not. *What a shame*. Within the pages of what he refers to as “this little booklet”, Uncle Emmanuel captures precious handmedown stories¹⁴⁹, as told to him by his father and uncle—my great great grandfather and his brother. Uncle Emmanuel begins two generations before him, the family’s capture in Africa—warring tribes and a long sea journey—towards the slave auctions in Mississippi. He highlights the family movements across state lines and slaveowners—this is where I learn the intentionality behind our naming story—the family would end up in Texas, where we’d farm the land, *for ourselves*, for generations to follow. The booklet concludes with a few short stories, beginning with a simple fact: “Mr. E. A. Roberts our father was a good story teller” (Roberts, n.d.a). This booklet is a reflection of a people who value story, beginnings and history.

Excerpt, from Rev. E.M. Roberts, Jr. The Roberts are not a sophisticated lot; they are real people; finding and fitting into the various callings of life with humility and common sense. I find that they

¹⁴⁷ A room undisturbed for years tends to kick up dust when messed with. *Your girl was struggling*.

¹⁴⁸ While in most cases ‘cousin’ in our family is a generational reference, in this case, cousin is just family – I’m not certain this person is living but one day soon I’ll track the tree to see if Uncle EM’s full book is still floating around!

¹⁴⁹ Billye Sankofa Waters (2023) describes the essence of handmedown stories: “They are true for the teller and maps for the listener; they connect us to ourselves” (p. 708).

identify themselves with the commonplace relationships of life with intelligence and dignity, never lording it over their peers or other fellowmen, but trying with wisdom to understand and relate to their own with decency and honesty. May (sic) this little booklet serve its purpose in helping the members of this family to improve and leave a respected legacy for generations to come.

(Roberts, n.d.a).

Uncle Emmanuel's hope toward legacy-building inspired me to crosswalk some of the factoids embedded within his booklet, noting that my genealogy research was long dusty on the digital shelf and it had been awhile since my last binge. *Process check: hold or let it go? Maybe just a little hold, a little baby hold?!* Within hours¹⁵⁰ I was able to cross-reference a number of the key details (names, locations and timelines), recovering new threads for future stories and a refreshed appreciation for the ways in which technology has also connected us across the centuries. *Here's a quick taste:* Uncle Emmanuel's naming story told of a cruel slavemaster ("Ellison" of Mississippi) who sold the family out of vengeance, and mister man sold the family to the neighbor ("Roberts") who ends up in Texas. *You tracking with me?* Deep in the 1840 census records, of Winston County Mississippi, I find three names in succession, listed as neighbors:

John Ellison, Dan(iel) Roberts, and Holloway Ellison. *Shook.* I know that name— Daniel Roberts is "Old Abe Roberts'" father. I know this from census records, and a passage in a family reunion program announcing the ancestry DNA results a cousin submitted. There's no denying we are kin with the white Roberts'. I flip forward and backward through the census pages. The previous and successive records confirm at least two of the elder Roberts' children married Ellisons, one of which... *that's right...* "Old Abe Roberts". Even better still, the 1840 slave schedule for Old Abe includes a Black woman (my ancestral matriarch) and a mulatto child of the right age. The right families, in the right place, at the right time. *Real talk, I cried.* Tears of triumph, but also of relief¹⁵¹. Relieved to have found them, to have found *her*. Listed

¹⁵⁰ Let's pretend it was a quick sidequest, whose counting anyway, time is just a perspective.

¹⁵¹ It's an odd feeling, to recognize when your people lost, and then regained, the dignity of a recorded name.

as an “F” and a tick in the age column, in record she’s nameless—but the family refused to forget her name. She was Ester—“Easta” in Big Mama’s letter—she would marry a fellow slave, Harvey and they would carry our family forward. *For the storyteller, details are sacred.* For those of you burdened by the ‘brick wall’¹⁵² of Black genealogy, you can appreciate that this is the closest our family will ever get to validation of the family story.

Weeks later we’re in Unc’s living room and his grandson mentions a local history museum and an exhibit on “the freedom colonies”. Of course, we go. The maps alone told a story about our family in the county names spelt out across our family tree— Wilson to the south, Washington and Harris to the east, Bell and Hill to the north, and Burnett to the west. It’s a funny feeling—the familiarity rises in the chest, exciting until the memory returns to the rationale—knowing¹⁵³ a story that cannot be unknown. The counties aren’t named in honor of *my* family...we are cousins, name twins, relics of property held. *But I digress, we’ll let that part go—for now.*

After getting home from Austin, I continued to research Uncle Emmanuel’s booklet and got to thinking about the exhibit. A few clicks later I found the Texas Freedom Colonies Project™ (Roberts & Mohammad, 2018)¹⁵⁴. The site hosts an interactive map filled with contributions from researchers, genealogists and community folks—a random upload with an autogenerated filename¹⁵⁵; offered with no note, “The History of Alum Creek, Rev. E.M. Roberts, Jr., The Author”. The file opens in the browser—a high

¹⁵² As a hobby genealogist: the ‘brick wall’ for ascendants of the diaspora, is the 1870 Census prior to which our ancestors were recorded as property, a tick mark next to a listed sex and listed race. Knowing a slaveowners’ name and county doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve found your people, but we celebrate nonetheless.

¹⁵³ “‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 70).

¹⁵⁴ “The Texas Freedom Colonies Project™ is a research, educational and social justice initiative dedicated to preserving the spaces within and heritage of historic African American settlements. Our goal is to prevent cultural property erasure, destruction, and decay in partnership with descendant communities. We are researchers and volunteers who map disappearing places and co-create resilience strategies with endangered communities” (Roberts & Mohammad, 2018). *Ashé*.

¹⁵⁵ Found linked on a submission to the Alum Creek Freedom Colony location, on the Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas <https://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/atlas>

pixel scan of five yellowed typewriter pages, pencil markings and folds in the pages, and little punched holes as lingering reminders that it was handprepped and handsewn, bound for sharing. *Uncle Emmanuel popping up in unexpected places—blessings on blessings.* Preachers were often learned men in the community, and Uncle Emmanuel enacted his responsibility to record, for all of us. The pages offer a short history of the community he served; its churches, the school and snippets of information about key figures. The Roberts' are a people whose storytelling began as orators and scribes—as resistance against the prohibitions of literacy and as preservation of spirit and purpose. Uncle Emmanuel was long gone but someone had kept, and handed down his record. For the scribe, as with the griot, stories are meant to be told, kept and shared. Our stories represent and reflect who and how we are.

In this present moment, as with Grandma's letters, the story is under the story—black feminisms echo my family's assertion—we must define ourselves for our selves. I have not yet claimed the identity of a storyteller. I'm not as funny as my daddy, or as engaging as Ain't Mary, or as intentional as Uncle Emmanuel—and I wonder if the guppy doesn't look upon the school and think *I could never*. And yet, I hear myself telling stories, using stories to connect thoughts, ideas, people and hope. I read my writing, and see my voice emerging, layered with the voices of my people and connecting all of my selves—memories, dreams, and fears. So today, looking upon my gallery I am choosing to (re)claim my place alongside them. The story under the story was a gift: we are storytellers, storykeepers, storypreservers. I am a storyteller because I come from stories, and there are stories to be told. *My humanity demands it.*

We Are Believers: We Are (Inter)Connected.

Woven across the stories (re)told by my aunties, Keke and Unc, is the thread of faith—yes faith in the(ir) Lord God, but also a deeper faith—in spirit, in divinity, in harmony¹⁵⁶ within the fabric that ties each of us to each other and to this place. Our rich history of preachers, home churches and subtle nods to

¹⁵⁶ "People become more human and empowered primarily in the context of a community, and only when they "become seekers of the type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony" (Asante, 1987, p. 185)

(Black) church culture¹⁵⁷ told me to expect the prevalence of faith, but I also expected to feel othered from this thread of “the church” that otherwise binds the family. To most, I would be considered a non-believer, a sheep astray. My relationship with the church was/is complicated. *Or is it?* Reflecting on our stories, it was my Black feminist aunties that connected these ideas of belief, faith and spirit—helping me to (re)cognize the role spirit has always served in my life—and does still. Endarkened feminism taught me that faith, spirit and connections to “God” aren’t mutually exclusive. Sister Dillard (2000) named it: we “have always been a people of spirit... we believe in the evidence of things unseen, that we can make a way out of no way, that we have come this far by faith” and we live lives of gratitude¹⁵⁸ for all of that interconnection (p. 450). Nonetheless, my journey to this (re)membering was fraught in complex feelings about “the church” and what it means to be a believer¹⁵⁹. Today, I reclaim my faith as a believer—in hope, in love and in being a one who does not need to see, to know my truth.

Me and White Jesus. As a child I had two church homes—a white one we attended with mom, and dad (in spurts), and Grandma’s Black church during summer visits. Both churches considered themselves non-denominational Christian: “bible churches”. Both churches had strong worship ministries—*which I loved*—including hardbound hymnals and even some secular songs to which we added the spirit ourselves¹⁶⁰. Both had upholstered banquet chairs in perfect rows, facing a stage that held a polished wooden pulpit in front of a full instrumental band set up. That’s about where the similarities ended; with

¹⁵⁷ Your “good dress” and “good shoes” are for church, a Sunday specialty treat that Grand/mama is known for—a recipe you treasure, the worship songs everyone knows, churchgoers and non-believers, references to Brother and Sister so-and-so as a single that they may not be blood, but they’re family under God.

¹⁵⁸ That feeling when the sun peeks from behind the clouds and warms your cheek, when the world calms and quiets to say, *we see you*. Go on a walk, on a warm day, and play [Lucky \(2023\) by Tish Hyman](#), and let the sun remind you, too. “I’m so lucky ... I got air in my lungs // I’m feeling gratitude // I know my latitude // Is based off my attitude // I know my worth is never based off my contribution // I know my rights weren’t considered by the constitution // But I still wake up every day and try to find solutions”.

¹⁵⁹ “It [spirituality] has been and continues to be, for many, our path to self-liberation and self-discovery” (Dillard et al, 2000, p. 449).

¹⁶⁰ Our white church preferred (white) Christian pop, Casting Crowns and MercyMe come to mind. Our Black church tapped into soul singers: “I’ll Take You There” by the Staple Sisters—*classic*, and “Lean On Me” by Bill Withers—*c’mon*. One of my modern favorites, “Love” by Musiq Soulchild.

the exception that in both places I felt like a visitor. I grew up with our little church family—and yet I didn’t look forward to Sundays—most of the familiar faces still felt like strangers. They were happy to see us, but the undertone was something else—as if our presence said more about their faith than ours. They smiled at me the same way the white Jesus with Fabio’s hair smiled at me from the sanctuary wall—I didn’t like the parity. We had bible story books, illustrated in bright beautiful colors with simple lessons that felt incomplete. I felt God regularly, but it didn’t feel like a ‘he’, it didn’t feel simple, and certainly didn’t feel like those smiles. It was clear to me that Sundays at church weren’t about *my relationship* with God, nor helping me to make any meaning for myself about what that meant. It felt disconnected. Instead, Sundays became about service and leadership. After worship, the kids would be released to Sunday School and I would either volunteer with mom in the baby room, or offer to co-teach the preschool lessons. I found my space at church, but it didn’t have anything to do with God, to me.

Sundays with Grandma had the same expectation: up early, looking and acting right. She would usher us to the front row, to sit in a line at her side. Every time the pastor asked who was new, *every time*, she would shoot a long look down the row, holding eye contact until we raised our hands one-by-one. She would beam at the nearest deacon and he would motion for us to follow. I don’t know how many times I was saved “for the first time,” at Grandma’s church. *Too many to count*. One summer I think I was saved three times. *Clearly I was doing something wrong*. Each time, after the sermon ended, we’d stand at her hip as fellow elders received us, examined us, and praised Grandma for bringing our hearts to the Lord. *You can imagine the strength of the eye I wish I could have rolled*. They didn’t know us, didn’t remember us, and again I felt disconnected: unseen.

Now, looking back, I’ve attended church on four continents, multiple flavors of Christianity, always with white Jesus on a wall—with loose golden curls, often smizing—gazing down on a majority, if not exclusively brown to Black congregation. And yet, I still feel God. In melodies, in a targeted ray of sunshine, in the stillness of the season’s first snow, in people and in places. Throughout this journey, God

has been everpresent—in whispers on the wind and in the belly laugh of someone who has not laughed in far too long. I felt God in the meadow at Big Mama’s house, and in the quiet of Grandma’s Room, in the lyrics of an 8 track left behind, and in words typed nearly 80 years ago. For me, God is us, God is Mother Earth, and love and connection. My faith is in our past, our present and in our futures—in a belief that it all matters and it’s all in divine time¹⁶¹. *I am a believer.*

Reflexive Journal entry. Today’s prompt: *what is an important leadership lesson you have (re)learned recently?* This journey—the doctoral program, the dissertation writing, and the many (re)learnings have been about a (re)introduction to Perspective, Gratitude and Grace. This month in particular has rocked me. Self-criticism and expectation have been loud, and I’ve been frustrated with myself—where am I in the process, more specifically how *far behind* am I? Why aren’t “we” there yet? Why is this so hard *for me*, why am *I so overwhelmed*, why *can’t I manage this*? I heard myself coaching another leader, and recognized the voices of Perspective, Gratitude and Grace. I realized these are not the voices I’ve offered myself. Amplifying instead the voices of Self-Criticism and Expectation, laden with Perfection, and of Right-ness. *It’s time to snatch the mic.* For just a moment, to listen. Perspective reminded me that what I’m going through is big girl change—systems change, emergent change, spiritual change. She reached for my hand and sat back, *it’s been 8 months*, she said. *This isn’t for you to hold alone—it’s bigger than you—it’s change beyond your reach, alone.* Gratitude beamed, her eyes glistening—*you’ve come so far, you’re doing a hard thing, you get to do hard things, you get to be wrong, you get to learn and change.* Grace snuggled my shoulder, locking our arms. Nuzzled close, she whispered into my ear, *you’re overwhelmed because it’s overwhelming. You feel like you can’t manage it, because it’s unmanageable. This is your first life, this is new to you, and you’re changing too—this is you anew.*

¹⁶¹ “When informed by truths, armed with tools of resistance, and moved by faith in justice, proclaimed love that struggles without end can make a profound difference” (Collins, 1990, p. 223 - 224).

reminders, intertwined *Sara Nakesha Baker*

Perspective sat back
this is big girl change
liberation, healing
for us, don't forget
she reached for my hand
you are not the keeper
of time, she said
this isn't for you, to hold
alone
this is bigger than you
beyond your reach
who are you
to hold it all
it's ours—all of us
we can hold the future
we must, together.

Gratitude beamed
her eyes glistening
cheeks high, heart full
whose come so far
she said, it's a hard thing
continue listening
arms wide, honor them

you might
be wrong, they learned
so learn
they are watching
you get to grow
so go on

Grace snuggled closer
shoulder to shoulder
she whispers

be overwhelmed
change is overwhelming
you can't manage
what is unmanageable
this is your first go
live, as it is
and be gentle
with her
she is anew.

Church Mothers. Grandma, Big Mama, and Big Mama's mama were all church mothers—women of the church that took on the responsibility of leadership. They were devout and they were respected for their faith, but most importantly, for their faithful service to others. Big Mama's mother, Mariah Washington Roberts was the President of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church Mother's Club. She raised funds for church improvements, organized campaigns for the mothers to sew clothes for community children and served as an example of a 'god fearing woman of faith'. She took an oath of temperance, including abstention from all tobacco and alcohol which she maintained until her passing. Her daughter, my Big Mama, was known as Miss Mandy by friends and brothers and sisters of the church. She too, was a church mother and revered elder who always had a fresh Sunday cake, advised church business, and made sure to check-in on the other mothers of the congregation. She walked to and from church, multiple times

a week, trailed by a line of her children—who knew better than to make her late for service. As evidenced by her letters to my grandmother, she was a believer until the very end, sharing the scriptures on her heart and sending her prayers for the family. *From her lips to God's ears*. Big Mama believed in God's timing, in his will, and in that belief she found peace; she was blessed and she was grateful for it.

Grandma's faith didn't fall far from the Texan pecan tree, if you know what I mean. Her belief was absolute—there was no question that God was watching/listening/guiding. Though towards what end, I'm not sure she knew. Regardless, Grandma didn't play about God. I have a vivid memory of being in the passenger seat on a drive to church. We're late according to Grandma, no matter what the clock says. She was driving fast—*my Grandma had a lead foot*—and I was too young to know the road rules. So whether she ran the stop sign or the other guy did I'll never know. But what I do know is that the look my grandmother gave that man, as she whipped up her finger and pointed across my chest—*Stop! I'm driving here, in the name of God!* That look would have stopped my heart and I would have thought God himself struck me down. She believed in speaking commands aloud, that a prayer spoken was powerful, and that by studying God's word she was pursuing her calling. Her bible study was literally and metaphorically religious. Towards the end though, after the stroke, Grandma's habits changed—her bibles began collecting dust and she didn't want to go to church—the ordeal of it all was too much. But even in the end, she'd whisper, *God bless you*—I don't know if it was a plea, or a command, or whether it was for me or for her.

Reflexive video journal - transcribed. In this moment, I just feel kind of sad. Like, there's a piece of it [Grandma's Room]—this is not a shrine, it's like a tomb. Going through Grandma's things, there are so many notes about the church. And the Grandma I knew *was* very, very faithful. Very religious. So that's not surprising, the content I feel some type of way about. So many of the sermon notes from [the church] are about wealth and about amassing wealth in order to give it to the church. Her prayer notes and the things she's saying she's praying about are all for money. And then for her, embedded in that is the desire to give it away. I just feel... intellectually, I feel resentful. In my body I don't feel that way, my body feels

sad: heavy. My mind feels resentful that this woman's faith was co-opted in that way. One of the notes that I saved somewhere is all about the theme of abundance and her own notes are about, or could be read as, to some degree, gratitude. There is a lot of wanting, but then clearly not wanting for herself. *She wanted for others*. And I just wonder what she actually felt about her faith: what she actually felt about her *life*. Her sermon notes, which is the... 9 out of 10, okay maybe 8 out of 10 *not-mail* pieces of paper. Eight of 10 not-mail pieces of paper in this room are notes with lists of verses, random, not random but not scripted notes from the sermon—what she took away from the sermon, and it's all about wealth building. There is a specific one, about wanting to 'rid the feeling of lack', or something like that about lack; on the same page as God's gift and the spirit of abundance. At first I was like, oOo *I want to keep this abundance and gratitude, that's what I want in this dissertation and in healing!* [Eyeroll]. Then the rest of the notes on that same page are about money. It's about literally, 'I pray God gives me the money'. *Closed mouths, I guess*. It's just an interesting juxtaposition about how I understood her faith, and I just hope she didn't live a life of feeling that she was lacking. I hope she lived a life that she felt was of abundance, you know?! I don't feel particularly emotional, but I feel allergy-y, it's f*****g dusty as s****t in here. My hands are dirty, and also red? I don't know what that's about. Anyway I'm kind of thinking about that a little bit. I did find an Al Green 8-track and I was like hmmm *sneaky lady*. Of all the boxes on boxes and shoeboxes of sermons on CDs and on tape, that's really the only music that I've found. Audio stuff is church sermons on cassette tapes and CDs, children's tapes that are clearly for preschool, and then this one solo 8-track. Well, actually, there were two 8-tracks but one was a sermon [hysterical laughter]. The other one was Al Green's "Call Me (Come Back Home)"¹⁶²—there's a message there, *I'm sure of it*:

What a beautiful time we had together
Now it's gettin' late and we must leave each other
Just remember the time we had and how right I tried to be
And if you find you're a long ways from home
And somebody's doing you wrong

¹⁶²"[Call Me \(Come Back Home\)](#)" is the title track on Al Green's masterpiece, *Call Me* (1973). Imagine Al Green's smooth whisper—both a longing wish and a confident promise— you can always come home.

WE ARE OUR OWN MEDICINE

Just call on me, baby, and come back home.

My Grandmother's God I Hope *Sara Nakesha Baker*

My Grandma's God hears her prayers
whispers
between pages
responses on the breeze
pay attention...

My Grandma's God is one of abundance
gratitudes
across centuries
generous in love
pay attention...

My Grandma's God gives her purpose
divine callings
felt in heartbeats
reminders
stay on course
you're not yet done.

My Grandma's God has no face
heard in a song
felt on the wind
Her God offers guidance
Her God offers grace.

God, I hope Grandma's listening
I pay attention
I am generous
whispers, reminders
in songs and on the wind
may she give me guidance
may she give me grace
may I receive this life as abundance.

We Are Learners and We Shall Not be Defeated.

I was taught at a young age that 'slaves weren't allowed to read' and 'weren't allowed to go to school', I can't remember when or any particular moment, but I understood that formal education was important—if only because those before me could not. We did not discuss college per se, nor formal degrees, and what I knew of my parents' or their parents' education was limited; but I knew / wanted to

go to college. From reading encyclopedias on the living room floor, adventure books by flashlight after bedtime, deep dives into a random topic: my heart has always held a certain sense of wonder. That curiosity has fed my hunger for (in)formal learning across spaces. As I came to understand forced illiteracy¹⁶³—as a tool to safeguard the economy of enslavement—I came to understand my own literacy as an act of resistance and as a matter of legacy. For at least four generations, my family has been literate, my father’s and uncles’ economic access to higher education was predominantly through sports and athleticism *and* they were good students. The women in my family accessed the learning spaces or topics allowable under the social mores of whichever period: secretarial school, consumer trades schools, and through ‘feminine’ professions like teaching and nursing. But I wondered, where are the roots of this determination to learn, to be curious, to go to school? *I came to find roots everywhere.* I am a learner because I accept change, impermanence and the divine cycle of growth. I am a learner because defeat only comes in stagnation.

“We [^] shall not be defeated.” A little note dated November 1, 2004. Grandma didn’t *ordinarily* move to the next page, until the page was full—yet this little note sat alone on an otherwise empty page. *A full page for a full thought.* Perhaps a reminder to self, an affirmation or a manifestation being realized, most certainly, an inheritance. My grandmother spent her childhood split between school and cotton-picking season—when the family would travel as far as California, following the harvest and opportunity to earn for the coming year. Just after her seventeenth birthday, she was married to my grandfather. He would enlist and they would receive orders to move out of state. While undoubtedly daunting, they had cause to be grateful—there was family waiting and their support network stretched to greet them. Soon she would find herself pregnant with the first of five children, faced with the prospect of raising them

¹⁶³ Consider that “fewer than a third” of our 4th and 8th graders are reading at grade level (National Assessment Governing Board, 2025). *Whose interests might be served by outcomes like that?* That is certainly a whole ‘nother dissertation.

largely alone. This context explains, perhaps, Grandma's propensity to save, reuse, and her preoccupation with financial stability—she had mouths to feed and the doors to living wage were rarely propped open for folks without a high school degree, let alone a functionally single Black mother. But she would not be defeated—she would learn. While spending days working as a paraeducator, my grandmother completed her GED through an evening adult learning program. She was in her thirties and all of her children were school-age. She didn't stop there, she would go on to enroll in an alternative teaching program, taking all five children to campus for the summers. Aunt Lo remembers the first summer—100°+ days in central Washington, spent at the university pool being annoyed by the roughhousing of her brothers, and nights spent in a family dorm watching Grandma as she studied the day's lectures. Education was an act of love and a collective responsibility. That lesson, too, was an inheritance.

School by any means. In 1921, through community organizing, donated land and philanthropic investment¹⁶⁴ Cedar Creek welcomed the first class of students to the Hopewell Rosenwald School. The school sat proudly just off of the highway, a one-room school house, two big windows split by a heavy pine door. Perched up on steps and painted white, Hopewell looked like the beacon that it was—a school for the Black children of the community, built by their neighbors, teachers and church family.

The story is unclear as to why Aunt B could no longer attend Hopewell, she was a teen now, and it sat less than a mile down the road—so perhaps she needed extended study or there was a reason lost in the truth that sometimes parents don't explain to children. The memory that's clear is the day that Aunt B was put into the car and driven over an hour to the town of Cameron. As Aunt B tells it, she'd "never seen the old lady a day in (her) life", but that night she'd move in with a stranger—a distant relative her uncle

¹⁶⁴ Please look into this history! TLDR: Booker T Washington writes his autobiography, Up from slavery, published in 1901. The founder/owner/president of Sears, Roebuck & Company reads it and hears a call to action—education is transformative and Black kids in the south aren't getting any. The two meet, become friends, Rosenwald joins the Tuskegee board of trustees and the two hatch a plan. Rosenwald creates a philanthropic fund, the primary beneficiary, the Rosenwald School Fund. Across three decades the fund would build over 5,000 schools for Black children across the south, giving millions (my math) of Black children access denied by "those people". *Sharing our stories is an act of love, of resistance, and a catalyst for transformative (read: intergenerational) change.*

knew from church—and become her caretaker. That was the deal, a teenage Aunt B cooked and cleaned for “the old lady” and she could live in the house and attend classes across the street at Cameron’s school. Big Mama and Papa were clear—she needed to go to that school, she needed to study hard and do well, and she needed to graduate. Later that year, the old lady would pass, as would the next old lady, but Aunt B would graduate from high school in Cameron. Her most vivid memory was Sundays—*her favorite days*—she’d slip on her newest dress, walk to church with *an* old lady, but get to leave with her uncle and auntie. Sunday’s meant a full spread that she didn’t have to cook and a slice of Sunday cake. Sunday’s meant hearing the laughter with her mama’s brother—hearing mama’s voice layered in it. Sunday’s meant a full belly and full heart. She would spend three years worth of Sundays in Cameron, missing her parents and her siblings, but knowing “it was important” that she got a quality education.

It *was* important to her parents, the first generation born free—and a generation that had proximity to the alternative—and they wouldn’t allow the loss of progress. Aunt B needed to study hard, because the family needed her quick wit and skills in arithmetic. On the seasonal journeys to go cotton-picking Aunt B would be in the back of Papa’s truck with the other children—Ain’t Coretta included—but Aunt B had a different job. Along the roadside, acres of cotton blooming and ready to be plucked in tufts, Aunt B would be posted up in an apron. Not the cooking apron her mother wore in the cook shack, but a money apron—she was responsible for the scales. At fourteen she remembers being charged with a thousand dollars. Papa had taken a truckload back to the town’s store or the owner, or whoever it was he took ‘that stuff’ to. Up the road (Big) Mama was cooking up hamburgers and beans; workers would pay \$1 of their earnings to get a hearty lunch between sacks. Then there was Aunt B, barely five foot nothing, making sure big burly men kept the toe of their boot off the scale, listening for the click of rocks padding the sack, and checking for the soft feel of cotton buds apart from the firm green heads that hadn’t yet bloomed. “You know now that I think about it, that was scary, by the grace of God no one ever tried nothin’ on me!” Aunt B didn’t have time to think about that on the side of the road—she had a job to do,

and she was good at it. I asked her if her parents ever talked about her job, and the old lady's—if that's why they made sure she went to the school in Cameron. She shrugged, they wanted everyone to go to school, whatever it took.

Unc told a similar story. When the parents at church complained that their children walking to school was too far, Unc was volunteered. At fourteen, the same age his sister would take over the cotton scales, Unc would take hold of the driver's wheel. The state was willing to provide a bus, but not a driver, and the last driver couldn't drive anymore. So (Big) Mama and Papa took him into the city, lied about his age, and he took on the route picking up his classmates, criss crossing town in a little Chevy bus¹⁶⁵. I can imagine this country boy, with his chocolate skin, wide smile and high cheeks smiling up to the lady at the counter. Papa had a reputation of getting what he wanted and Unc had driven plenty of vehicles by then. The farm truck, the tractor, even Mama's little car to/from church—he wasn't worried about driving, and even if he was, Mama and Papa said what they said, and the community needed a driver. Sometimes it's about more than what we want. And sometimes you have to make the win.

The me of today never doubted that learning was a part of who I was: learning is the slow burn of my life, the subplot that carries through every chapter. Learning is both *how* and *who* I am. What's new, is (re)cognition that *why* I learn is protective: it keeps me whole. I am hesitant to claim these affirmations—these identities—not because they don't resonate with my present but because I've feared that they set expectations for my future. In truth, while they do, the (re)membering is that being a learner also means accepting change *will* come. I am who I am today—and she's awesome, just as she was yesterday and she will be tomorrow, no matter the face/shape/tone/fit she takes. Being a learner means I welcome that change, and give myself grace in its discomfort. Tomorrow or next year, or ten years from now, *when* I

¹⁶⁵ As Unc tells it, his stint as a bus driver was neither the beginning nor the end of his love of driving—but it sure didn't hurt and it sure was fun. He went on to tell a story about the *first* time he drove to church—at seven years old—in second gear the whole way while his mama calmly gave instructions from the passenger seat. Hopefully he'd gotten the gears figured out before all the kids loaded onto the bus!

WE ARE OUR OWN MEDICINE

look back on this journey—on this project—and *when* I feel that moment of embarrassment or disagreement, it will be fleeting. I will honor this moment and this truth—even when it changes. I will not be defeated because I will learn, change, grow and continue healing until it all cycles again; learning is my past/present/future.

We Are Grateful and We Find Joy.

Through it all we are joy finders and in that we live with gratitude. Not because joy is elusive—we are joy finders because we are joy full. Through joy we find presence and gratitude in life, the opportunity to live, to lead, and to love in this moment. I think about what gratitude looks like—it's not a hung head, it's not averted eyes, gratitude is not submission nor shame—gratitude looks like planted feet, it looks like a raised chin and focused eyes: a present heart. *Ten toes down.* For the Joneses, the Roberts and the Bakers, joy is the expression of gratitude for life, for love, and the opportunity to be on the ride. *Even if there's a toll, ain'tee!* In the journey to (re)member my leadership, I (re)membered who I am—but also why I'm *here*. The gifts of Joy and Gratitude bring with them a reminder that I *get* to lead—not in the cliché leadership poster sense but in the divinely ancestral tone of legacy. At the knee of my grandmothers I found that leadership is not new to us (but, we knew that)—leadership is how we got here. Leadership is how the women in my family stayed connected and built communities that thrived so that I, too, might lead. In my veins runs the language of joy as medicine—the antidote to despair, to imposter syndrome, to self-doubt—in joy we've found ourselves for generations. In joy, I see how I am connected to you and to us, to little Sarie and the woman I will be with silver locs and deep, deep laugh lines. We are joy full because there is so much to find pleasure in, so much to celebrate—and we *will* celebrate—whether they come to the cookout or not. *Assuming they even earn an invite.*

The poetry of Lucille Clifton was lifted for me by a friend, *Won't you celebrate with me* and *It was a dream*—the two pieces together, sound a call not just for action, but a specific action: live. Live big, live wild, live the way you dream, live beyond your dreams. They make me think about that swell in your chest

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when you take space in a place fighting to undo you. I don't think it's pride, it's not swallowed fear nor feigned courage. I think perhaps it's the activation of ancestral joy deep in our cells. Miss Lucille's poems take the voice of my Big Mama, Grandma Ada and my grandmother—swelling with delight, calling out. They failed to stifle us, they failed to erase us, they failed to make us cower. We are joy full, won't you celebrate you me? A celebration in living, in surviving and in daring to be whole. In this era of (re)learning, re(claiming), and (re)membering myself, I call on my people and the memories in my cells because while I had no model, I am one in a series of iterations, and I am worthy of celebration. *As are you, sis.*

[won't you celebrate with me] *Lucille Clifton*

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? I had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

(Clifton, 1993, p. 25)

it was a dream *Lucille Clifton*

in which my greater self
rose up before me
accusing me of my life
with her extra finger
whirling in a gyre of rage
at what my days had come to.
what,
i pleaded with her, could i do,
oh what could i have done?
and she twisted her wild hair
and sparked her wild eyes
and screamed as long as
i could hear her
This. This. This.

(Clifton, 1993, p. 29)

Chapter VII. Our Futures

My friend, and we are friends now, by the way—I've laid bare, nekid before you—I hope that you've heard parts of your story in this retelling of mine. I hope that you've also heard parts of your future(s). This doesn't feel like an ending, and it doesn't feel like a beginning. It feels both new and familiar—a cycle—a fractional expansion in the path. Fully activated spiritually and intellectually, my body is exhausted and yet energized—buzzing with new questions, curiosity and hope. My mind is geeking out about futures yet to come—yet everpresent—reimagined in real time. *This ride is/has been/will be beyond my (ancestor's) wildest dreams.* Futurity can be understood in many ways, which will we choose? *Must we choose just*

one? The theory of quantum physics¹⁶⁶ includes an idea that multiple states exist simultaneously (“quantum superposition”), until observed—at which point there is a collapse to a single state¹⁶⁷.

Indigenous cultures from across the globe have ideas of cyclical states of renewal, looping beyond time. I prefer to think of futurity in the dummies version—Marvel’s multiverse—infinite possibilities existing in the everpresent fluidity of time. Maybe it’s all the same, but as I reflect on the wisdoms (re)membered, and the futures they inform, I want to offer a few considerations. The first, be it quantum superposition, cycles of renewal, or the multiverse, how might we hold space for *what if* and for *yet*¹⁶⁸. The second, in that line of possible yous, and possible mes, how might we honor *this* state, as we are today, *while also* honoring our yesterday’s, our tomorrow’s, our ancestors, and our descendants.

This project began at a moment I now understand as dismemberment—not a violent horror film version, but a quiet rom-com heartbreak in pajamas, pints of ice cream, and sleep lulled by the exhaustion that follows deep, long, ugly cries—as painful as it is relief. I’d lost myself to relationships with others, to work, to the bigness of the task to lead in a space that didn’t see all of me, let alone nurture me; and I wasn’t nurturing me either. Today, three years and some weeks removed from my last first day of school—I feel reintroduced, reclaimed, and remembered. What’s next for me, in a future version of this story is the dream to offer something more tangible—for you to journey back to yourself if that’s what you need. Or to journey to your next self, if she’s waiting. Until then, I thank you for bearing witness to this state of me, and free myself to jump into one of infinite futures. Before I leave you, a couple final bits of prose: a few futures for you to ponder and a final ode to us—those (re)discovering¹⁶⁹ how to live and lead in love.

Futures. *Sara Nakesha Baker*

¹⁶⁶ For dummies—as understood through Tik toks, reels and Google—*don’t quote me*.

¹⁶⁷ Judge me, if you must, but I imagine one of those horror film scenes where the person’s head shakes until it blurs, and then snaps to a still. *I hate those movies*.

¹⁶⁸ “Learning as an act of futurity. ... You can’t map futurity; you can only map possible futurities. Learning, similarly, is an act of letting go of what one knows for what one does not yet know” (Patel, 2015, p. 95).

¹⁶⁹ “Nothing I accept about myself can be used to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself” (Lorde, 1984, p. 141-2).

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The one where the nameless took a name for herself.
The one where she didn't know her roots, so she planted her own.
The one where it just was, and she was steadfast—unmoved.
The one where she took stillness and was her own lover.
The one where she loved unapologetically, no caveats.
The one where she fought in the shadows.
The one where she fought in the light.

The one where love abounded—rolling hills of wildflowers—sprawled vast and wide.
The one where it mattered.
The one where it didn't.
The one where she is fierce and free.
The one where she remembered.
The one where she never forgot.

The one where they lived, they loved, they fought, and she healed—for them.
The one where she healed for herself.
The one where she moves like water, floats in the wind, settles into the earth and burns
green.

In every future she create paths.
In every future she is because they are.
In every future they are because she is.
Every future is ours.

We are children of *yet*, of *and*, of love everlasting.
We are children of past, present *and* futures.
Our futures are ours for the making / shaping / nurturing.
Our futures are as dynamic as we are.

We are [a love letter]. *Sara Nakesha Baker*

We are building on backs that carried burdens so that we might carry legacies.
We are creating with tools undefined, whittled in dreams and on prayers.
We are connecting through code words and telling eyes.
We are fighting with persistence and a vision for something different.
We are joyful so that laughter might echo into the dark corners.
We are speaking truth to power, loudly and in whispers.
We are stewing in the sweat of freedom and in showers of ancestral wisdoms.
We are dreaming of futures reimagined for our daughter's daughter's daughters.
We are learning to hold space for our healing, to renew and recover.
We are writing our stories for those they tried to erase.
We are spreading to take up space, refusing to shrink for power.
We are resting for those who won't need to know it's call.
We are leading in spaces that despite it all wouldn't exist without us.
We are loving ourselves and each other, because love is a superpower.
We are super powerful.
We are super power full.

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We remember.

We are a love letter to past, present and futures of us.

I say this once more, in a different way, in the chance that you need to hear it one last time or for the first time: we—Black women leading in spaces weighted in whiteness—needn't perform. Their way is not our way. We are leaders because we are leading. We are whole persons, with whole stories and herstories and brilliance and wounds. In the reimagined future I am manifesting for you/us, there is healing—not perfection—a healing gilded by grace, joy, spirit and the embrace of change. In this future, our space(s) may not have changed—not one of us, nor can all of us together, undo the grip of white supremacy nor the burdens of antiblackness. *And frankly, I don't know that I intend to continue trying.* What we can do is (re)member who we are. We resist the grip that would crush us, we resist that it would reshape us, restory us or redefine us. Even for those of us isolated, looking left and right wondering where are my people at?! Even for those, I offer a final reminder that we are our own medicine—you are because I am, and I am because you are. We write our own stories, we lead our own ways, because we remember who we are and what our grandmothers told us. In honor of Big Mama, my lasting invitation is that you join me in every future with walls full of our people, our wisdoms, our reminders (we will still need them). May they smile upon us and whisper on the wind: *(re)member*. Ashé.

Bonus gift: take a listen before you go, the last addition to the tracklist of (re)membering, go ahead and [“Be Great”](#) and let the formidable Jill Scott coo my final walk-off song courtesy of *To Whom It May Concern* (2026).

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My (re)membering: a tracklist

May the music move you, too. Ashé.

...interludes for stillness.

["Going Home" by Robert Glasper, *Letting Go* \(2024\)](#)

["Smoothies" by Jazzbois, *Jazzbois Goes Blunt* \(2019\)](#)

["Nostalgic" by junior state, *Levitate* \(2019\)](#)

...we are connected.

["Love" by Me'shell Ndegéocello, *No More Water: the Gospel of James Baldwin* \(2024\)](#)

["Beautiful People" by Jill Scott, *To Whom It May Concern* \(2026\)](#)

["Couple of Minutes" by Olivia Dean, *The Art of Loving* \(2025\) – performed live at the MOBO Awards 2026](#)

["Try Loving Me" by Anthony Q \(Single, 2024\)](#)

["I Know You're Hurting." by RAYE, *This Music May Contain Hope* \(2026\)](#)

["Water" by Anthony Q, *Rebirth of the Soul* \(2024\)](#)

...we believe.

["FEEL" by AJ McQueen & Ariel J \(Single, 2025\)](#)

["Life Boat." by RAYE, *This Music May Contain Hope* \(2026\)](#)

["Lucky" by Tish Hyman, featuring LaRussel and Leon Thomas, \(Single, 2023\)](#)

...we won't be defeated.

["Talki' Bout A Revolution" by Tracy Chapman \(Single, 1998\) – performed live at FreedomFest 1988](#)

["Indigenous Awakens" by Alkimizta \(Single, 2025\)](#)

["Be Great featuring Trombone Shorty" by Jill Scott, *To Whom This May Concern* \(2026\)](#)

...we are joy.

["What's love got to do with it" by Tina Turner \(Single, 1984\)](#)

["Call Me \(Come Back Home\)" by Al Green, *Call Me* \(1973\)](#)

["Manifest\(her\)" by China Styles¹⁷⁰, *I Love Me, Loud* \(2026\)](#)

["Be Great featuring Trombone Shorty" by Jill Scott, *To Whom This May Concern* \(2026\)](#)

let it rip. [full albums]

Me'shell Ndegéocello, *No More Water: the Gospel of James Baldwin* (2024)

Jill Scott, *To Whom This May Concern* (2026)

Olivia Dean, *The Art of Loving* (2025)

¹⁷⁰ China Styles is the stage name of an AI-assisted musician and song-writer, Margaret Bynum. *We love Margaret.*