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Remember Your Mother: A Spiritual Path to Healing Ancestral Wounds of Slavery

Abstract: How does one heal without one's mother? Can the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans achieve spiritual wholeness and union with the Divine and heal from the wounds of slavery without attending to intergenerational grief and soul wounds resulting from their ancestors' forced separation from their "Mother" Africa and the rupture between them and their African siblings who sold them? Through an autoethnographic approach, this chapter applies the theology of Ubuntu as a framework for understanding the role of the healing of this rupture to the restoration of one's relationship with God, oneself, all others and the natural world, along with Africa and the descendants of African slave traders. It will draw upon Saidiya Hartman's narrative *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, and Harriet Jacob's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as foundations for understanding the roots and implications of this separation and rupture, and the spiritual work of disentangling one's soul from what Jacobs calls the "demon slavery". It will also reflect on the author's personal healing journey engaging in spiritual practices and beliefs rooted in Black and African diaspora religion and culture. These stories and narratives will be employed to interpret the multiple dimensions of the spiritual and relational healing work that can cultivate Divine Consciousness and lead one back to Mother Africa on the path to restoring one's relationship with God and oneself. These illustrations will reveal the inner, relational work and the reflective listening required to hear what needs to be healed within oneself. The restorative practices can help lay the foundation for the heart-centred listening between these two groups required for nurturing healing ground. This approach is intended to serve as an invitation for the reader to engage in their own healing journey to illuminate the power of praxis and the critical role of reflection and healing oneself on the journey to collective healing and liberation.

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Keywords: healing, ancestral wounds, slavery, restorative practice, Black and African religion

Motherhood

God told me when my child would come. My husband and I decided to begin trying to conceive in January 2007, a few years after we were married in 2004. At the start of 2007, I was told that the baby would come by the end of the year. In May 2007, we confirmed that we had conceived. Motherhood changed me. The alchemical process fuelled by my baby's heartbeat and growing heart consciousness transformed my spiritual DNA. This baby, who I knew was a light bearer, initiated my rebirth. As his heart, mind, soul, spirit and consciousness developed within my womb, my consciousness expanded. My husband and I heard his heartbeat in the early weeks of pregnancy in the doctor's office before he had even begun to take form. Before there was a body, there was a beat. For nine months, I housed two hearts. Two beats. During those nine months of carrying this precious gift, I had new eyes to see with and new ears to hear through. The second heart that I carried expanded my capacity to feel and intuit God's love and presence profoundly. If you are attuned to the Spirit, embodying another soul's heart can sharpen your own heart's consciousness and cultivate your Divine Consciousness. I absorbed old texts, embraced new ideas, and metabolized painful memories, with greater clarity and sensitivity to the presence of the Divine at work. I didn't realize it at the time, but that nine-month gestation period was birthing more than a baby in me: it was preparing me for a new way of being in the world.

My responsibility for this new life amplified my call to healing justice. The sense of urgency heightened enormously. Motherhood was and is a process that galvanized my life's mission. Its greatest lesson has been to expand my understanding of the depths of God's love. It redefined it. Love cannot be contained or quantified. Motherhood has helped me to understand that love's capacity, and Divinity, are beyond "what I can conceive of or imagine". It has transformed my relationship to love. When a person comes to the world through you, the African philosophy of Ubuntu that guides me—"A person is a person through other persons"—which is prominent in the southern region of Africa but present throughout the continent through the ethos of interdependence, becomes an embodied experience. Carrying a baby inside of you for nine months and literally feeling them grow and ultimately emerge through you is a sacred, ancient lesson in interdependence and interconnectedness. Interdependence and interconnectedness are how we know love.

It's also messy. Taking care of someone on the inside of you is complicated. As they grow, your body responds in ways that are beyond your control. During my first trimester, I could smell things I couldn't see that had the power to make me weak. A consistent feeling of nausea with no way to alleviate it was almost unbearable. As was the invisible itch on my skin that was ignited whenever my feet and calves touched water. Pedicures were no longer pleasurable; they were too painful. The 40 pounds added to my small frame took me to a place on the scale I never thought I would ever see. The pressure from the baby and the extra weight left my stomach unrecognizable and a lingering bulging hernia. My final days of pregnancy were spent travelling back and forth to the hospital to get my levels checked because my placenta was hovering over my cervix, a condition which meant I had to deliver my baby via caesarean section (c-section).

I gave birth on 31 December 2007. The procedure took about an hour. Even though I asked a friend who had recently delivered her baby by c-section what to expect, nothing can adequately prepare you for having your stomach cut wide open and your organs moved around for a baby to be pulled from your womb. My friend told me to expect to feel pressure. I felt more than pressure. There was a swarm of doctors, and it felt like they were pounding on me with hammers and tenderizing a huge piece of meat. It was like I was being pulverized. My husband looked over the curtain to see what was happening, even though the doctors had warned him not to. My face revealed the significant pain and discomfort I was in, and he had to see what they were doing. He's 6 feet 4 inches tall, so it was easy for him to sneak a peek. He said it looked like the doctors were a bunch of mechanics working away under the hood of a car. One was even bent over me with his knee up on the operating table. I could not see all of the doctors, but I could feel them. The room was full of medical professionals ready to receive this precious new human coming into the world. I remember the experience like it just happened. As I breathed through the pain, I silently prayed the Lord's Prayer the entire time. "Our father, who art in heaven...". My doctor had told me the process should only take about an hour. My mother always taught me to say the Lord's Prayer whenever I was in trouble. So, I knew that if I could just say the Lord's Prayer, the hour would go by quickly and we would be ok. And we were. Within the hour, I heard the baby's cry as I watched the doctor hold him up and carry him over to the scale to be weighed. Then they wrapped him and brought him over to me. I looked in his face and asked the nurse to give him to his father. My body was still wide open, and I was in too much pain. I did not want our first interaction to involve him experiencing me in pain. But soon I was all sewn up and my baby was nestled in my arms as we were rolled out of the operation room and down the hall. Once we arrived in our room, he was unwrapped and placed on my stomach. I remember feeling and watching him

slowly inch his way up. I imagine he was listening for my heartbeat as he searched for my breast to nurse. He navigated the new terrain outside of my womb so easily on his own. He found his way to the milk like he was following a map. Feeling him on my body, my skin touching his, and feeding him from my breast, redefined throughness for me. There is a deep healing that is transferred through the act of nurturing. It runs both ways. My body was healing and being nurtured as he nursed, and my heart expanded wider with each suckle of my breast. We nursed for nearly two years. This was possible because I was blessed to be able to stay at home with him. I had the support of a loving husband and a community of other mothers who were nursing. The directive from the Spirit to not return to work outside of the home was as clear as the notice regarding his arrival. God knew that we needed that extended, intimate time together. We were tethered to each other in a way that cultivated an important attachment.

During my pregnancy I had read about attachment theory and the importance of babies developing healthy attachments to their caregivers. When they are close to their primary caregivers and know that they can trust that they will always be present in their lives, their internal fortitude evolves.¹ This strong foundation serves them well as they grow. They have an increased capacity to take risks because they know that they have a safe, dependable provider to return to.² My baby benefited from the nurturing from both his parents and the village of love that surrounded him. Breastfeeding amplified his internal stability and a deep connection and sense of safety were reinforced while he nursed as he looked at me.³ He listened to the familiar sound of my heart and felt the comforting rhythm of its beat. It was the sound that soothed him in the womb. And my heart needed his. This sacred act of tethering was timeless, and it expanded his time in the womb. Each feeding closely replicated the warmth and intimacy of the womb and helped us to continue cultivating our connection and strengthen our bond. We fed each other. Something was happening on the inside of me as well. While my baby's emotional and cognitive intelligence enhanced through nursing, I was developing too. The hormones activated while breastfeeding can increase our awareness, empathy and sense of connection to our baby and our surroundings.⁴ Healing is rooted in a relational epistemology. I understand myself more fully through my relationship with my child and my ability to nurture and nourish him and any other human or living being. As a mother, the relationship I had

1 Modak, Ronghe, & Gomase (2023). The psychological benefits of breastfeeding: fostering maternal well-being and child development.

2 Modak, Ronghe, & Gomase (2023).

3 Modak, Ronghe, & Gomase (2023).

4 Modak, Ronghe, & Gomase (2023).

with my baby as his provider and primary source of nourishment for nearly two years, even with all of the complexities, taught me volumes about empathy and interdependence. It was one of the hardest parts, if not the hardest part of mothering. Nursing is a selfless act. You are forced to offer a part of yourself for someone's well-being and survival, even when you do not feel like being bothered. Even when you are exhausted and overwhelmed by a lack of sleep and self-care. Even when it is painful. Because their life depends on yours. "A person is a person, through other persons". We become fuller humans together. Through each other.

My experience of interdependence through birthing and nursing my baby laid the groundwork for my understanding of Ubuntu as a theology. I do not remember when I first heard the word Ubuntu, but I know that it became important to me as I learned about President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu describing it as the philosophy that undergirded the Truth and Reconciliation processes in South Africa. I remember hearing Nelson Mandela humbly make his first speech after being released from 27 years of imprisonment for freedom fighting and hearing the love and grace in his voice. I began reading about Archbishop Tutu's Ubuntu theology when I began my formal study of theology not long after becoming a mother. Tutu, who was Xhosa, was exposed to Ubuntu through the Xhosa saying "*ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*", which roughly translates to mean "a person depends on other people to be a person".⁵ In his book *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, Michael Battle shares what he asserts is one of Tutu's first references to Ubuntu made when describing the African worldview:

In the African *Weltanschauung*, a person is not basically an independent solitary entity. A person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be is to participate. The summum bonum here is not independence but sharing, interdependence.⁶

Tutu, as a man of deep faith, knew that Ubuntu, deployed as a political philosophy, would not be strong enough to dismantle the forces of apartheid. As Battle asserts, "His ability humanly to stare down apartheid was precisely through ubuntu as a theological spirituality rather than a political program...".⁷ His capacity came from God and who he knew himself and all other humans to be in relationship to God:

⁵ Battle (1997). *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, p. 39.

⁶ Battle (1997), p. 39.

⁷ Battle (1997), p. 47.

We will grow in the knowledge that they [white people] too are God's children, even though they may be our oppressors, though they may be our enemies. Paradoxically, and more truly, they are really our sisters and our brothers...⁸

As Battle explains, this was Tutu's way of amplifying the power of Ubuntu to fight apartheid. He contends that Tutu believed that "ubuntu would humanize the oppressors in the eyes of blacks and that a sense of common humanity would form..."⁹ Tutu knew that the power to enable oppressed people to see their oppressors as not only humans but as siblings could only come through God. This was the work of the Spirit and not a political power. As Battle explains, Tutu understood that Ubuntu created the atmosphere required for transformation. He asserts, "Ubuntu, for Tutu, is the environment of vulnerability that builds true community. This vulnerability begins when human divisions are set aside."¹⁰ Vulnerability emerges when we allow ourselves to let go of the false notion that we can do all things on our own and with our own strength. When we open our heart to receive love, support and nurturing from sources outside of ourselves, we remove the barriers between us.

Ubuntu affirmed the lessons I learned from my family, faith community, and ancestors. I was raised in Baltimore, MD, in the Baptist church, and in a home where the values of faith, love and common humanity were instilled in me. I am also the descendant of Africans who were enslaved in this country, whose humanity was denied by law, and yet many acknowledged the humanity of their enslavers and their descendants because of their faith. But the framing of Ubuntu resonated in a different way. Understanding myself as a human, through other humans, moved me beyond scripture. My child came through me. His nourishment came through me, which the Divine provided through me.

We are all created with this capacity to love, nurture, connect and depend on others. Even if we were not nurtured by the mothers who birthed us. Or if our birth mothers lost the capacity to nurture us on the outside. We have it because Love created us, and it is in our primordial DNA. When we come into the world, we have to journey back to it. What that journey will look like will depend on our experience inside the womb, and the world we inhabit when we get out. Motherhood is more than a memory. Regardless of who birthed us, the residency in the womb is a site of a creation that can't be undone. It is where Divinity rushes in and takes form. The baby's Divine Consciousness is protected.

⁸ Battle (1997), p. 47.

⁹ Battle (1997), p. 47.

¹⁰ Battle (1997), p. 47.

The Rupture

My journey to remember Mother Africa began long before my journey to motherhood. Even though my bond with my own mother and father has always been secure, I grew up with a twinge of “homelessness” in my spirit. It is that same feeling that other children of the African diaspora whose ancestors were ripped away from Mother Africa through the transatlantic slave trade have expressed experiencing. In high school I began wearing West African style clothing to try to feel a connection to my heritage. I even wrote a story in my city’s local newspaper about young people who were honouring their African culture and wearing Kente cloth and clothes that expressed their love for their roots. It was around the same time in high school when some of my friends and I began advocating for parts of our curriculum to include more Black history. Even though my high school and hometown are predominantly Black, structural racism always animates the distance between Mother Africa and her children.

When I visited Ghana and the slave dungeons for the first time years later, I experienced what many children of the African Diaspora who return experience: a profound sense of the spiritual attachment that was cultivated in Mother Africa’s womb and that led me back home. The attachment to her was real, even if my siblings did not recognize or acknowledge me. In her captivating narrative, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman illuminates forces that created and sustain this separation, including those connected to the African traders who were our kin.¹¹ That longing to belong in a place outside of Mother Africa’s womb grew the more I became aware of what we had lost. What I didn’t learn in high school, I learned on my own through books and through the consciousness-raising hip hop that flourished in the 90s. By my freshman year in college, hip hop’s legendary group Public Enemy had deepened my Afrocentricity and political consciousness and helped me to understand why: “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back”.¹² I didn’t know it at the time, but I was on a journey to be healed. It was a spiritual path to wholeness that required me to reconnect to my African roots and the ancient African Spirituality that nourished and sustained my ancestors long before the slave trade.

But how does one heal without one’s mother? Hartman’s journey to Ghana in search of traces of her African kin illuminates the sobering truth about malevolent forces that have kept many of Mother Africa’s children in the diaspora beyond her reach. Ghana was one of the places on the continent where the trafficking of

¹¹ Hartman (2021). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*.

¹² This is the name of Public Enemy’s second studio album from 1988.

humans was sanctioned. As Hartman explains, the Portuguese and the British built dungeons that held the enslaved. The British, who by the end of the 17th century emerged as the lead slaver in Africa, constructed slave holding cells that were positioned underground to make it difficult to escape. Hartman observes that storing the enslaved underground was a tactic that communicated to the Africans that “slavery was a state of death”.¹³ She asserts, “Who else but the dead resided in a tomb?”¹⁴ The slavers intended to create a space for each of the captured humans to undergo a destructive transformation. “As they saw it,” Hartman asserts, “the dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born.”¹⁵

But before the Africans were transported to the “womb”, Hartman explains that their African trader kin took them through rituals designed to make them forget their homeland and culture. Hartman was told that the culmination of all of the practices throughout West Africa where Africans were sold into slavery was that “the slave loses mother”.¹⁶ She learned that the enslaved were guided through groves and around a “tree of forgetfulness” to wipe away their memories.¹⁷

The natural world that surrounded them, a sacred extension of Divinity, was manipulated and used to try to trap the enslaved in a state of disassociation and forgetfulness. Hartman explains:

Every part of West Africa that trafficked in slaves possessed its own Lethe, rivers and streams whose water made slaves forget their pasts, dense groves that trapped old memories in the web of leaves, rocks that obstructed entrance to the past, amulets that deafened a man to his mother tongue, and shrines that pared and pruned time so that only today was left.... In Ghana, captives were given ceremonial baths before sale to wash them clean of old identities. Medicine men, fetish priests, and slave traders recited songs and incantations that lulled the captives into embracing servitude and that eradicated all visions of home.¹⁸

We were ripped from our Mother’s womb before we left her fertile ground. The rituals to induce the rupture were meant to disrupt our psyche and spirit by severing the cord from the Mother that nurtured, fed and provided for us in every way. Being trapped in a process designed to create separation between you and your mother, one supported by your own siblings, is heartbreaking. They turned on us and manipulated our plant kin to aid them in the rupturing.

¹³ Hartman (2021), p. 111.

¹⁴ Hartman (2021), p. 111.

¹⁵ Hartman (2021), p. 111.

¹⁶ Hartman (2021), p. 155.

¹⁷ Hartman (2021), p. 156.

¹⁸ Hartman (2021), p. 156.

Hartman was told about a plant named *Crotalaria arenaria* that was also called *manta uwa*. It is a leguminous undershrub that means “forget mother” in Hausa.¹⁹ The manipulators of the plant kin deployed *manta uwa* like it was a magic wand with powers to erase their kin’s DNA. Hartman explains, “Manta uwa made you forget your kin, lose sight of your country, and cease to think of freedom. It expunged all memories of a natal land, and it robbed the slave of spiritual protection.”²⁰ The aim of the plant’s poison was to try to make you “a stranger to yourself” while living as a “stranger in a strange land”.²¹

The “afterlife of slavery”²² highlights the lingering psychological and social effects of the horrific institution of slavery, as well as the poisonous plants and rituals of forgetting. Many scholars have written about the connection between slavery and the contemporary challenges that Black people face in the United States, such as various forms of violence in Black communities, race-based health disparities, barriers to equal opportunities, premature death and mass incarceration. Some argue that the dehumanization Black people experienced in the system of enslavement plays out in the acts of violence Black people commit against each other today.²³

For several years, I have been meditating on the writing of Harriet A Jacobs, a formerly enslaved woman of African descent who wrote her own narrative—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs refers to chattel slavery as the “demon slavery”.²⁴ This framing underscores the power of the malevolent force that animated this oppressive institution. Evidence of slavery’s afterlife proves that demons don’t die on their own. They persist and possess vulnerable vessels wherever they can. The plethora of deadly gun violence in many Black communities and the thriving racism and white supremacy across this nation are examples of its staying power. Suicide is another.

In their book, *Lay My Burden Down: Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis among African-Americans*, Black psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint and Black journalist Amy Alexander contend that the relentless presence of racism in our society has “created a psychological risk for black people that is virtually unknown to white

19 Hartman (2021), p. 157.

20 Hartman (2021), p. 157.

21 Hartman (2021), p. 157.

22 Hartman (2021), p. 6.

23 DeGruy (2005). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*.

24 Jacobs (1861). *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, p. 54.

Americans". They assert that this is called "posttraumatic slavery syndrome".²⁵ They explain:

Specifically, a culture of oppression, the byproduct of this nation's development, has taken a tremendous toll on the minds and bodies of black people. We see the increasing rates of black suicide in the United States—and the remarkable fact that blacks comprise less than 13 percent of the U.S. population but represent the overwhelming majority of those doing time in the nation's prisons for violent or drug-related crimes—as part and parcel of that oppression.²⁶

For many Black people in the United States, the decision to end one's life is a culminating response to the relentless pressure of societal stressors that are intensified within the country.²⁷ For far too many Black people, the United States has become like the womb tombs that Hartman describes as having held the enslaved Africans underground to transport them into a state of death in order to birth them into slaves.

But it is not just gun violence and suicide that carry the residue of slavery and signal an enormous separation between Mother Africa and some of her children. There are other forms of violence that manifest through internalized racism and self-hatred, causing Mother Africa's children to not love themselves and to disconnect from their True Selves. The consciousness that produced the scientific racism that promoted the lie that people of African descent were inferior and that justified slavery and other dehumanizing systems of oppression still thrives in the United States and around the world. It animates white supremacy. Black people must continue to actively resist the lie that we are not beautiful, brilliant, or enough. We must engage in ongoing self-examination of our interior lives and explore the ways that slavery and racism have infected all of us, including the natural world. We must heal from the destructive patterns of pain and historical intergenerational trauma and break our soul ties from the demon slavery. To liberate our souls from the demon slavery and eradicate its presence,²⁸ we all must do this sacred heart work, including the African descendants of former slave traders. They must also commit to this soul clearing work so that we can collectively heal. The trauma fallout from slavery is impacting all of Mother

25 Poussaint & Alexander (2000). *Lay my burden down: Unraveling suicide and the mental health crisis among African-Americans*, p. 15.

26 Poussaint & Alexander (2000), p. 15.

27 Poussaint & Alexander (2000).

28 Author curated the 2024 exhibit "Harvard Divinity School & Legacies of Slavery & Resistance: A Site for Reckoning, Healing & Repair through Love" and references soul ties to the demon slavery in the exhibit.

Africa's children. A critical part of this healing work is addressing our individual and collective grief.

In their article, *From Grief to Grievance*, psychologists Da'Mere Wilson and Mary-Frances O'Connor argue that the concept of grief must be expanded for Black people. They assert:

The racialization of Black people in America has been marked by enslavement, historical and ongoing racial violence, historical and ongoing economic and land dispossession, pervasive structural inequality, and staggering amounts of loss. We must expand our definition of grief to account for the pain that occurs within the Black community after the loss of a loved one, the loss of land, the loss of a sense of safety, and the loss of members of the community due to direct and indirect acts of racist violence.²⁹

They argue that the scope of Black grief is expansive. They contend that it includes “the unequal distribution of grief, vulnerability to premature death, and historic and ongoing violence”, and that it is “both different in sheer quantity (because mortality rates are disparate) and qualitatively different (because collective grief is an unstudied but defining feature)”.³⁰ We need a village of grief counsellors and therapists for the survivors of the Middle Passage and for all of us who are living in the “afterlife of slavery”³¹. The grief is more profound for those who have stronger memories of Mother Africa. How do you grieve what you can't remember?

Remembering Our Mother

The rituals of forgetting and the poisonous plants were not as powerful as the African traders had hoped they would be. As someone Hartman met on her journey in Ghana remarked about the ineffectiveness of the so-called tree of forgetfulness, “The tree didn't work because now you are back.”³² While there are those who have been lulled to sleep and even suffer from self-destructive behaviour that breeds in the gap between them and their Mother Africa, they haven't lost their memory of her completely. Motherhood is more than a memory. The residency in the womb is a site of a creation that can't be undone. It is where Divinity rushes in and takes form. The baby's Divine Consciousness is protected.

²⁹ Wilson & O'Connor (2022). *From Grief to Grievance: Combined Axes of Personal and Collective Grief Among Black Americans*, p. 2.

³⁰ Wilson & O'Connor (2022), p. 2.

³¹ Hartman (2021), p. 6.

³² Hartman (2021), p. 156.

In her article *The Cosmology of Afrocentric Womanism*, Christel Temple (2012) highlights Anna Julia Cooper's 1886 "Womanhood" address to African clergy at the convocation of the Protestant Episcopal Church where she, speaking to Africana women, underscores the sacred responsibility of motherhood. Temple asserts, "Cooper's elevation of motherhood to the divine as consecrated stewardship associates both the Africana woman and child as vital factors of an ancestral cycle that sustains the culture".³³ Many of Mother Africa's children have remained attuned to the sacred experience in their birth mother's womb and received African principles and practices that their mothers retained through the Middle Passage. Not only is this transference of the gifts from Mother Africa helping to sustain the culture, as Temple notes reflecting on Cooper, the connection to African culture, spiritual principles and practices cultivates their Divine Consciousness and keeps them rooted in the Love that birthed them. Our connection to Mother Africa fuels our connection to the Divine.

Formerly enslaved people such as Harriet Jacobs and her family are examples of children of Mother Africa who resisted the rituals of forgetting. Their African retentions helped to shield them from the full impact of the psychological and spiritual warfare unleashed by the demon slavery. Harriet was a powerful woman of faith raised in a family of people rooted in faith and love and who practiced Christianity. They did not let the demon slavery crush their spirits or contaminate their hearts. Harriet's narrative is stirring. She writes her story in a way that reveals her vulnerability, her faith and her humanity. Harriet gives us access to her heart. She is an example of what it looks like to embody Ubuntu. She kept her heart open and refused to let it develop hatred, even for her enslaver whose unrelenting oppression forced her into a life of hiding for seven years. As she writes, "My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him."³⁴ She knew that even though her enslaver did not recognize her humanity, she had to acknowledge his. She implores her readers to resist ingesting the poison of hate. She asserts, "Reader, did you ever hate? I hope not. I never did but once; and I trust I never shall again. Somebody has called it 'the atmosphere of hell' and I believe it so."³⁵ Her refusal to hate even those who enslaved her and her family highlights her awareness that she is interconnected to all human beings, even those whose behaviour is oppressive. Further underscoring her Ubuntu

³³ Temple (2012). *The cosmology of Afrocentric womanism*, p. 25.

³⁴ Jacobs (1861), p. 28.

³⁵ Jacobs (1861), p. 40.

consciousness, when she became free she became an abolitionist and worked to help secure the freedom of others.

Harriet Jacobs was able to live a heart-centred life committed to love because she was equipped with spiritual and ancestral technologies from her family. Her parents and grandmother shielded her from the fact she was enslaved until she was six years old. She writes, “I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away.”³⁶ This important nurturing from her parents and her grandmother established a strong internal foundation for her. They cultivated a vibrant network of family and fictive kin that protected her and nurtured her during her early childhood, and remained present throughout her life. There are many points throughout her story where she mentions being in town and seeing many people that she knew. She notes these instances in a way that reveals her closeness to them. They were not just acquaintances; she was highlighting her community. Through her family, particularly her grandmother, she learned the power of prayer and of meditating on and embodying scripture. She had a robust prayer life, attended church and was nourished in worship through the spirituals and music that animated the faith of her people. Harriet’s writing reveals how she integrated scripture into her life. She absorbed the word of God in a way that fuelled and sustained her. When reflecting on the challenge of an enslaved person opening their heart up to love in a life where their bodies are not their own, she cried, “Not my will, but thine be done, O Lord!”, which is a reference to the gospel of Matthew 26:39.³⁷ In spite of this challenge, Harriet allowed her heart to be open to romantic love, and she loved on her own terms.

She also maintained a rigorous practice of stillness. In her tiny 9 feet by 7 feet “loophole of retreat”, where she hid from her oppressor, she maintained quietude in darkness for seven years. These practices illuminate Harriet’s interior life and her commitment to cultivating intimacy with the Divine. She knew that she could not love her enemies and defy the demon slavery through her own strength. Like Tutu, she knew that her ability to “stare down apartheid” in the United States was only through the strength of the Divine. In addition to these spiritual technologies, Harriet shares further evidence of African ritual practices her family retained from Mother Africa, including honouring her ancestors and praying at the grave for strength before she set off on her plan to escape from her master’s plantation. She talks about an encounter with the ancestral realm: “As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house where, before Nat Turner’s time, the slaves had

³⁶ Jacobs (1861), p. 5.

³⁷ Jacobs (1861), p. 266.

been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave. I rushed on with renovated hopes. My trust in God had been strengthened by that prayer among the graves."³⁸ She also highlights her community's retention of African divination practices, which she says a white minister referred to as evil in a sermon one Sunday.

Harriet's open heart and love for her enemies through her connection to the Divine and her strong community of family and friends are not the only ways her life reflects the Ubuntu theology; her life also reveals her dependence on the natural world. Nature was a place of refuge and safety. Nature's role as a hedge of protection is illuminated through her story of her escape from the plantation. When she decided to flee her master's haunting presence and forge a way to freedom for herself and her children, her community that aided her hid her in nature. Shortly before Harriet was taken to the tiny garret that would shelter her for seven years, she had to experience a short period of hiding on the water in her uncle's vessel until dawn, when he and her family friend brought her back to shore to hide her in the Snaky Swamp. The swamp, which was full of overgrown bamboo and briars and infested with snakes and mosquitoes, was the same hiding place for "maroons (encampments of fugitive slaves)".³⁹ In addition to extending Ubuntu to the natural world, Harriet's story regarding her prayer at her father's grave and hearing his voice demonstrates how Ubuntu extends to the ancestors and the spirit realm. Battle explains, "Ubuntu means 'humanity' and is related both to *umuntu*, which is the category of intelligent human force that includes spirits, the human dead, and the living, and to *ntu*, which is God's being as metadynamic (active rather than metaphysical)."⁴⁰ Harriet's life exemplifies the breadth of Ubuntu and its utility as a framework for understanding how our interdependence with God, family, community and others, nature, and the ancestors can help us to live heart-centred lives, even in the midst of oppression and in a world replete with violence.

Through Harriet's life we see the way to Ubuntu and how embodying its principles functions as a healing medicine that helps individuals to live in a state of oneness with the Divine and all living beings. This way of being in the world keep us from becoming strangers to ourselves in a strange land, and it shields our hearts from hate and other poisons resulting from the demon slavery. These practices reflect the African spiritual and cultural practices that Jacobs'

³⁸ Jacobs (1861), p. 91.

³⁹ Jacobs (1861), p. 276.

⁴⁰ Battle (1997), p. 39.

family retained from the womb of Mother Africa and that helped them to remember her throughout their lives in a strange land.

The spiritual wisdom of enslaved people of African descent in the United States such as Harriet, who harnessed Divine power to elevate their consciousness and transcend trauma, is underutilized as a resource for today's work of healing the wounds of slavery and separation. Jacobs' capacity to love while being viciously oppressed was not only evidence of her embodiment of Ubuntu but of her Divine Consciousness, which she cultivated and maintained through the spiritual and ancestral technologies she employed. These technologies fostered her spiritual, psychological and emotional fortitude, which increased her capacity for resilience and resistance, and helped her to live a heart-centred life committed to love and justice for all. Harriet is among the transcendent visionaries who possessed the spiritual capacity to see beyond what is before them into another dimension, and who could hold on to a vision of a world healed of all of the legacies of the demon slavery.

Harriet is one of my ancestral guides. Her intimacy with God and ability to remain committed to justice and liberation for herself, her children and all others while rooted in love resonates with me profoundly. I teach a course where we use her life as an epistemological site for exploring how to advance racial justice and healing in pursuit of a vision of a world healed of racism and oppression through spiritual and ancestral wisdom and technologies. I seek Harriet's guidance as I prepare. She sets the agenda for each class. I have sought her guidance as I write about her here. Like Harriet, I come from a family where intergenerational love and faith are prominent in my lineage on both sides. My parents and my ancestors before them laid the foundation for me to know how to navigate this world and the United States as a descendant of enslaved Africans in a strange land where we are too often still treated as strangers. They are the foundation for my embrace of Ubuntu and my commitment to justice and healing the wounds of slavery through the faith and spiritual and ancestral technologies that have been passed down for generations from Mother Africa.

Healing through our Mothers

I was raised in a family with parents who were people of faith. They demonstrated their faith through the way they parented. My mother and father loved me and my sister unconditionally. Even though they ended their marriage when I was in middle school, I never experienced a gap in their love. My mother took us to church every Sunday. But my parents' love was my sanctuary before I ever sat

in a pew. My mother was very active in the church, and she taught me the power of prayer.

I grew up in Baltimore in a family, in a culture that prioritized prayer. Beyond prayers at mealtimes and bedtimes, prayer was a practical resource embedded in our family culture to nourish our soul and spirit, and to provide a hedge of protection. I have vivid memories of some early mornings before school, as our family was hustling about trying to get ready. The phone would ring. It was my mother's prayer partner from church, Mrs. Johnson, on the line. My mother would stop everything and make time to pray, even if we were running late. She demonstrated to me and my sister the power of prayer partners, and I have maintained intimate prayer warrior partnerships with friends of various faiths and backgrounds that I have relied on heavily throughout my life. I only remember hearing my father pray before meals. But I learned later that he had a prayer life but just didn't display it. Prayer is an ancient spiritual technology that has transformed me the most. I can remember growing up in church and hearing the deacons praying prayers from their heart and soul that integrated their vibrant testimonies about how God helped them through struggles, along with their petitions. They taught me how to keep a record of grace and prioritize thanking God first before petitioning for more. Their prayer posture also modelled vulnerability before God and community and the connection between prayer and faith. My prayer life has been critical in the cultivation of my intimacy with the Divine. These experiences are an example of how the church served as an important site for spiritual growth, community and refuge. Being emersed in an environment where spirituals, hymns and gospel music, along with prophetic preaching, Sunday school and spirit-led prayers, nourished my soul and spirit each week. I was baptized by immersion in the water and accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and saviour. These practices, particularly the singing, kept us connected to our African roots. As theologian Katie Cannon describes, the music that is in the tradition of our ancestors comes from "musicians who fashioned their songs from biblical lore, traditional African tunes, Protestant hymns, and the crucible of their experiences under slavery. Using their own distinct phrases, improvisational structure, polyrhythms and call-and-response patterns, Black women and men expressed their consciousness and identity as a religious people".⁴¹ These patterns and practices began shaping me while I was in my mother's womb.

My paternal grandfather was our pastor, but my father only attended church on special occasions. He said it was because he needed a break from having to spend so much time in church growing up. But he imparted a critical spiritual

⁴¹ Cannon (1995), p. 35.

lesson that has been very important in my life. He taught us that we were not allowed to use the word hate. I have a vivid memory as a child casually saying that I hated something inconsequential like broccoli and he reprimanded me: “You don’t hate anything” he said. I’ve never forgotten this. Prayer and resisting hate, like Harriet modelled, help to protect my heart.

While I grew up attending church and Sunday school consistently, I didn’t become serious about intentionally cultivating an intimate relationship with God until my early 20s when I was in law school. I graduated from Howard University, a historically Black college, and went straight to Howard University School of Law. I continued learning more about my Black history and African heritage while in college, and by the time I got to law school, I was ready to stop chemically straightening my hair. I came to terms with the truth that I had been straightening my hair because I thought I looked beautiful with straight hair. It was a product of internalized racism, a remnant of the demon slavery that had convinced me that making my hair look like the hair of white women would make me more beautiful. Rejecting this lie and healing from self-hatred was the fruit of my immersion in my Afrocentric culture at Howard and my increasing intimacy with God. Mother Africa was calling me, and one of the ways back to her was to heal through embracing my natural beauty. After my first year of law school, I cut off all my hair and took it back to its roots. My short natural afro made some people uncomfortable, but I never felt freer. It brought me closer to home.

Throughout law school, my spiritual practices intensified. My prayer life became more robust, and I began reading metaphysical books and spiritual material that helped to expand my consciousness about God. I had become a vegetarian when I first started law school, and I believe that my diet and disciplines, along with the spiritual activation from shedding my chemically processed hair, opened a portal for me. I became more in tune with God. I began learning more about Jesus through a metaphysical lens and began learning what it means to cultivate Christ Consciousness as an extension of my divinity. It expanded my understanding of Jesus and took him out of the box I had placed him in. I developed the capacity to hear God’s voice and sharpen my discernment in order to be anchored in the will of God. Over the years I have continued to engage in spiritual and ancestral practices that help me advance in my lifelong journey of healing myself and drawing closer to the Divine to reach wholeness. Along with prayer, I have studied the Bible rigorously. I participated in an intense weekly Bible study for many years that helped me not only learn scripture but absorb it and integrate it into my life, like Harriet did. Other practices such as meditation and writing in my gratitude prayer journal help me to create space to be quiet and reflect, and to hear God’s voice. I have a walking practice which allows me to connect to the natural world and focus on my breath. Spending time at the

river also grounds me in nature. I also have a Black woman therapist. These healing technologies reinforce my connection to all my family and friends, to all living things, and to my ancestors. Several years ago, as I was writing my dissertation, I created an altar at my desk. It contained pictures of my ancestors, including my paternal great grandparents, who were people of faith, and a picture of the site where my formerly enslaved great-great paternal grandmother is buried. She was also a woman of great faith. In recent years, my family has been visiting her grave when we are in the area for our homecoming family reunion. We hold ceremony there, saying prayers and pouring libation to honour her and our ancestors. I also have pictures of a slave castle I visited in Ghana, West Africa, where Africans were held before being brought to the Americas. My altar, with these and other sacred items, help me to remember my Mother Africa and that I have the same power at work in me that animated and sustained my ancestors. It reminds me that they are with me.

My most important spiritual practice is the quiet time and space I create in the morning to spend with God. Each morning before I leave the house, particularly on workdays, I spend at least an hour engaging in a variety of practices, which could include prayer, meditating on scripture and other spiritual materials, writing in my gratitude journal, and listening to spiritually nourishing music. This time fortifies me and strengthens my faith. I'm putting on my armour for the day, which helps me to keep my heart protected and to engage in my work of justice and healing in love, and remain hopeful in a world that provides a plethora of reasons to give up. I hear God's voice often directly through the materials I'm reading and reflecting on during my meditation. My gratitude journal grounds me and helps me to follow the prayer pattern I learned in church by starting with giving thanks before I write my petitions.

This is also a time when I record my dreams. Writing my dreams helps me to discern messages from the Divine. A few years ago, one of my dreams took me to an incredible place and activated the next phase of my healing journey. The dream awakened me to the need to understand and appreciate the role of nature in healing the wounds of slavery and achieving wholeness and oneness with the Divine. In the dream I was a part of a group of people doing a deep dive under water, and we were exploring new life, another dimension. There was a whole civilization down there and I was surprised that we were able to swim without any deep dive water gear. It was exciting. I woke up realizing that the water involves understanding that there are multiple dimensions to the work of raising consciousness.

Shortly after that time, I shared this dream with one of my dear friends and prayer partners, after she looked at a picture of me in a dress and said that it was giving her "mermaid vibes". She told me that Yemoja was on me. Yemoja is an

Orisa in the Yoruba tradition. I was familiar with Yemoja as a result of my informal study of West African religion and cultural practices, but I had very limited knowledge of Yemoja beyond her connection to water. I knew that I was being called to learn more. My friend introduced me to a friend of hers who is a healer with spiritual gifts. We met, and they confirmed right away that Yemoja was indeed guiding me and that I was to be more intentional about my relationship to the water. We had three powerful sessions, and they told me that I needed to continue the healing work, but that they had taken me as far as they could without being an initiated priest. I needed to meet with a priest. They said they could connect me to a Baba based in Baltimore whom they highly regarded, and I would be in good hands. They were right. I connected with the Baba for a session, and it was revealed, quite prominently, that I was to be initiated into Ifa.

As far as I could remember, I had never heard the word Ifa before, but all that was shared that day, and what I have been learning since, is deeply familiar to me. Ifa is “the cosmic intelligence of Yoruba cultural expression”⁴². Ifa is a nature-based practice. In his book, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, Baba Ifa Karade explains, “The Yoruba contend that the study of nature is foremost. Nature is viewed as the manifestation of Olodumare (also called Edumare), or God through infinite degrees of material and spiritual substance.”⁴³ A few weeks after I received the guidance that I was to become a practitioner of Ifa, I left on a previously scheduled trip to Ile-Ife, Nigeria, which is the “holy city of the Yoruba religion”.⁴⁴ I didn’t learn about the significance of Il-Ife until I arrived. I was still in the nascent stages of learning about this tradition and this path. I knew that Yoruba was prevalent in Nigeria, but I did not know that I would be travelling to this sacred city. As Robert Farris Thompson explains in his book, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, “The Yoruba believe themselves descended from goddesses and gods, from an ancient spiritual capital, Ile-Ife.”⁴⁵

The timing of my trip confirmed for me that I had been guided to Ifa. I believe Jesus, and my ancestors, led me to Ifa. They used Yemoja to get my attention. Engaging in my spiritual and ancestral technologies creates the space for me to be still, turn within, and strengthen my connection to the Divine. This process helps me to remember more of Mother Africa’s wisdom and practices. As I have been drawing closer to the Divine, I have been remembering more and more about Mother Africa. As I incorporate more of her spiritual and cultural practices

42 Karade (1994). *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, p. 120.

43 Karade (1994), p. 29.

44 Karade (1994), p. 121.

45 Thompson (1984). *Flash of the spirit: African & Afro-American art & philosophy*, p. xv.

into my life, I elevate my Divine Consciousness and arrive closer to wholeness—oneness with the Divine. I have been on this healing path all my life, with focused intention for the last thirty years. Over time, I began to understand that my path was rooted in an African worldview and that I was drawing on what I knew had been passed down to me through the generations from my West African ancestors. Ifa has given me more specifics and has helped me to name principles and practices and understandings that I have been intuiting through the ancestral spirit realm. Karade's description of the teachings of Orunmila illuminates this. He explains,

The teachings of Orunmila provide religious aspirants with the means and potential to reach what's called in Yoruba tradition *titete* (alignment). By studying the Ifa corpus—the once oral scriptures passed from one generation to the next—devotees strive to reach a state of divine oneness. The oneness comes about when one's *ori* (earthly consciousness) is developed and elevated to the place of unification with one's *iponri* (heavenly consciousness).⁴⁶

The aim of all of my spiritual and ancestral practices throughout the years has been to not only reach but to maintain a state of oneness with God. Reaching a level of Divine Consciousness where there is complete peace on the inside through a permanent oneness with the Divine is my divine nature. My desire for oneness with the Divine stems from Jesus and his record in the 17th chapter of John's gospel that all who believed in his word would be one with God as he is one with God. Jesus knew that I needed to remember the details of the wisdom of Mother Africa in order to reach this state of oneness to be healed and whole. I need both. Thanks to a DNA test, I know my roots trace back to Nigeria. Ifa came into my life at a time when I have been led to learn more about the African origins of my Christian faith tradition. I have been initiated. I am now a practitioner of Ifa. I am an *Aborisa*, which means student of nature. I call myself a Christ-centred Aborisa.

I am still very new to the practice of Ifa, but I have been integrating what I learn into my spiritual practices. My morning time in my “prayer closet” with God has been enhanced. I have incorporated a prayer thanking God for my *ori* (consciousness), and I have an ancestor altar where I pour libation and offer prayers to my ancestors. I also offer prayers to the *Orisa* whose day it is according to our Ifa calendar. This helps me to regularly read about their characteristics and incorporate their qualities into my prayers. For example, here is the description Baba Ifa Karade provides of Yemoja in his book, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*:

⁴⁶ Karade (1994), p. 13.

Yemoja is the divinity of all the oceans. She's said to be the mother of all orisas and expresses her mothering throughout the earthly and heavenly realms. Yemoja is the matriarchal head of the cosmic universe. She's the amniotic fluid in the womb of the pregnant woman, as well as the breasts that nurture.⁴⁷

On her days, I have also prayed for her to help me better understand my relationship to the water and what I am supposed to do in the water. She has confirmed what she exposed to me in the *Orisa* dream, which is that I am to learn how to scuba dive and to facilitate healing work for the healing of the wounds of slavery, in the deep water. I have begun exploring scuba diving and plan to begin lessons in the near future. I sometimes pray to her for help being a better nurturer to myself, to my child, husband and family. I ask her to help me to be a better mother and to have a better understanding of my son's needs. Each time I reflect on Yemoja and pray to her, I am developing a closer relationship with her, which means I am drawing closer to God. Each *Orisa* helps me to better understand myself and God.

Being a practitioner of Ifa has expanded my understanding of motherhood. When I began developing this chapter in December of 2023, I had been exposed to Ifa but had not been initiated. At that time, my concept of motherhood extended to our need to remember Mother Africa, Mother Earth and the Divine Feminine on the spiritual path to healing the wounds of slavery. I am now an *Aborisa*, and I have also been initiated into the Sode society and am in relationship with the Great Mothers. As a result, I have been introduced to Ìyá Nlá, the primordia Yoruba Mother. To conclude this work, I will turn to a lesson from my biological mother.

"Never let anyone else define you." I cannot remember when my mother first poured this wisdom into me, but it rests in my spirit memory and awakens in those moments when the world and the demon slavery try to lure me away from my true self. My mother received this wisdom from her mother, who likely learned it from hers. This fundamental lesson in identity is an example of my mother's enduring love, and it predates her. It's ancestral, and it extends even beyond the mothers in her lineage. Before my mother Maxine's mother Margaret, and before Margaret's mother Della, the Primordial Mother nurtured us in her womb with her love laying the foundation for us to love ourselves. The Primordial Mother has been calling me. Leading all the mothers. She has been calling me to remember who I am and my place in the universe from the beginning of time when I was in her womb.

⁴⁷ Karade (1994), p. 35.

In Yoruba cosmology, The Primordial Mother Ìyá Nlá is “the first female principle, symbol of origins, wisdom, integration, evolution and resolution.... She is the first wisdom that represents feminine power and the eternal womb.”⁴⁸ The Primordial Mother helps me to understand God as Mother. Her eternal womb reminds me that my homeland is not only connected to a continent or an earthly place. My Motherland is within Divinity. It is within the heart of God that is not tied to a particular place. She is saying to me—“Let go of Africa as your Motherland—your mother is Divine Mother Father God within and wherever you are. You will never ‘feel safe’ in an earthly home. That is not your true shelter.” While this eases my longing for a homeland and softens my resentment towards my African kin who traded my ancestors, I remain on the journey. But I am free because the Primordial Mother illuminated the wisdom Jesus instilled in me. He said, “The Kingdom of God is within.” (Luke 17:21).

We need our mothers to heal. We need all of them. It is my connection to Mother Africa, Mother Earth, the Primordial Mother and my biological mother that is leading me to the level of Divine Consciousness where I hope to one day achieve oneness with the Divine, back to the level of Divine Consciousness in the womb. I need all my siblings, too. Each time I return to Africa, I feel the separation between the descendant children of the formerly enslaved and the descendants of the Africans who traded us. Ubuntu as a theology represents the Divine Mother’s reach that embraces us all. We will only be able to fully heal and be fully human if we allow ourselves to heal through the healing of each other’s wounds. This is spiritual work that requires rigorous commitment to practices that help us examine our inner life, face our unhealed trauma and free our souls from the shackles of any land place, connecting through the Spirit of Love, heart to heart, in Divine Mother’s open-heart space.

I heard my baby’s heartbeat before there was a body. A mother hears her baby’s heartbeat before he has the ears to hear in the flesh. Before there was a body, there was a beat. Mother Africa hears my heartbeat even though I was born outside of her body—outside of her womb. I didn’t lose her. Her heart’s rhythm drew me back to her through my spiritual and ancestral practices. My physical birth, then my spiritual rebirths through Christ and Ifa, root me in the centre of her heart—the heart of the Divine Mother, my home, where I turn within and am free.

⁴⁸ Alcamo (2006), p. 27.

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