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Resilience rooted in the earth: stories of black women’s survival

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements - 2 -

Introduction - 4 -

Chapter One ♦ The Illusion of Medicine - 9 -
  *History, a Public Transcript* - 9 -
  *Medical Traditions* - 14 -

Chapter Two ♦ The Story That Fell Between the Cracks - 20 -

Chapter Three ♦ Rooted in the Earth - 29 -
  *An African Folktale, Our Reminder to Give Thanks* - 29 -
  *Folk Healing* - 32 -
  *The Stories of Plants* - 35 -
  *Plant Medicine* - 36 -
    *Boneset* - 40 -
    *Mullein* - 43 -
    *Yellow Root* - 46 -
    *The People’s Medicine* - 49 -

Chapter Four ♦ Transforming the Act of Healing - 52 -

Chapter Five ♦ Conclusion - 58 -
Introduction

The condition of black women in America is one of the central topics of discussion in contemporary medical research. The story of its significance goes like this. When you type into a search engine, “black women health” you get links upon links of disparities that afflict black women: obesity, diabetes, and cancer. Compared to most racial groups, black people have higher rates of undetected diseases, higher illness rates, more chronic conditions (such as hypertension and diabetes) and generally a shorter life expectancy.¹ The National Institute of Health has acknowledged structural racism creates barriers to getting adequate medical care. Additionally, racial discrimination is a significant factor in stress-related health problem among black people in the United States. Stress related to racism also may underlie the overeating and resultant obesity common in black women and may be associated with the greater prevalence of both diabetes and hypertension among black women relative to white women.² Hazardous work environments and shoddy living conditions have further exposed black Americans to the omnipresence of ill (non-optimal) health.

When I researched the relationship between black women and medicine I saw a design right away. A story of the plight of black women and their need for biomedical intervention. Many will stare at this image, as they may with the optical illusion depicted on my title page, and only see the most obvious image. This image depicts the story of biomedicine’s significant role in prolonging black women’s impermanence. There is this narrative of dependency that wrongly portrays black women’s relationship to medicine. Many will stare at this image and never see that the image is an illusion. Once it is pointed out that there is another competing image, it

² Ibid. p. 30
becomes apparent that many have missed out on part of the story. The National Institute of Health presented a preliminary thought to uncover this hidden record,

“Although the greatest amount of health-related research and data about any population of color exists for African Americans, being the most studied racial/ethnic population has not translated into their being the healthiest, despite the nearly 400 years of Africans (and their descendants) in the United States.”

The vast amount of research done to document the health statistics of black Americans has not actually improved their health or their access to medicine. This fact led me to question why none of the research papers have documented the medical practices that have been used to improve access to medical care among black communities. I started to imagine that the research done could have translated to a collection of historical medical documents that list the remedies black communities have used to heal their bodies from illnesses. Exposure to racism, toxins and scarce living conditions suggest that black women have a greater need that other racial groups for preventive health care. How can the field of medical research be transformed to reflect a new vision of history that documents the preventive health practices? How do stories fit into the equation?

I focused my investigation on medicine. Medicine is the field of study that describes how people heal their bodies from affliction. But I found little medical resources that saw the importance of black women’s healing traditions. I was not convinced that a lack of resources meant that the traditions didn’t exist. I have learned from studying science, technology and society that the stories silenced are usually hidden to protect those in power. As we should investigate science and its politics, we should do the same with medicine. Useful medical

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4 Ibid. p. 29
knowledge can improve the quality of life of those most marginalized and mistreated in our society. The active silencing of black women’s voices is a violation of their human rights. Historically, women were not given the resources to read or write. The lushness of their history is encoded in their oral stories. This work will circumvent the political desires of many, but we must investigate the institutions that have been given the most authority over knowledge and actively seek out the voices that have been silenced.

This thesis is a fearless pursuit to enlarge the private and public patriarchal world. By intentionally not centering men, I am pursuing growth from narrow views of life and health. The black women before me survived under scarcity; conditions that stifled the creative fire within. I follow faint footsteps of the women that moved intricate routes. I walk blindly to find their voices because I feel their strength.

Stories have the power to heal. The stories reveal our descendants and send life to our courageous people. Women’s teaching tales of transformation were lost but not destroyed. The bones, the architecture of their stories remain in the soil that they tread. Therefore, their story has not ended. Every day she continues on. There where she stood leaves traces of her, of her survival. The very act of surviving, an act of resistance.

I was enthused at the idea of finding pathways for solace through natural elemental energy that help sustain us through our daily life. I was moved and knew there was a route for liberation through this pathway that can open up networks of communities. I sought a philosophy written by black women about this connection to the earth that highlighted how they have fearlessly continued on, into the wild equally comforted by nature and fearful of the human beings that misunderstood her power. I encountered in my research however, a lack of models. This situation is exemplary of the condition Alice Walker describes in her well cited collection.
of essays, In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens, “She [A black woman] must be her own model as 
well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model which is to say herself”.
Models in growth of spirit and intellect enrich and enlarge one’s views of existence. Then what
does it mean that I find a lack of models in academic research? Is the survival of black women 
not a remarkable thing to study?

Black women refuse to see themselves as invaluable. Womanist authors such as Alice 
Walker, and Angela Davis challenge others to see the inherent value in black women as well. In 
the words of Angela Davis,

“If and when a historian sets the record straight on the experiences of enslaved Black 
women, she (or he) will have performed an inestimable service. It is not for the sake of 
historical accuracy alone that such a study should be conducted, for lessons can be 
gleaned from the slave era which will shed light upon Black women’s and all women’s 
current battle for emancipation.”

My multifaceted intervention uses poetics, myths and stories in an attempt to blur the lines of 
what constitutes scientific history and essentially what has the authority to claim truth. I want to 
show the creative possibilities of exploring medical history with all senses and feelings.

African American traditional folk medicine was cultivated out of the necessity of its 
people to survive. There was no attempt to systematically heal the wounds, and the abuse done to 
our bodies. The sacred meanings of the medicines procured in the wild were as important as they 
were nutritional. Our ancestors had vast knowledge of healing plants and spiritual strength that 
taught us resilience to survive oppression. This history is rich with herbal remedies that were

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6 Davis, Angela Y. 2011. Women, Race, & Class. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. p. 4
used to treat and cure many ailments from the common cold, fevers, bronchitis, cuts, wounds and more. The remedies are intertwined with health maintenance rituals.

The sacred knowledge of plant medicine allowed black women to create alternative meaning of birth, life and healing in a context that embraced kinship and spiritual protection. I investigate, in both a historical and contemporary context, how remedies involving medicinal plants have persisted throughout the transient lives of black women in the African diaspora across the United states, the spiritual beliefs connecting plant medicine to the earth and the importance of this relationship to the land to examine how herbal medicine practices have taken new shape with the advent of new technology.

_A Note on Terminology_

I want to mention here that by referring to black women as a collective I do not mean to imply that there is a universal black experience or a single black identity. It exists as a term that represents the multiple forms of black identity that exist and that are in the process of being formed along many nation-state lines. I do feel internal conflict when using this word because although it has been reclaimed, the word and the categorizations of race were used to divide communities and sever them from their interracial connections and mutual expansion. When I refer to African American and black Americans interchangeably, I do not wish to stereotype black cultures as static and hegemonic. Cultures are dynamic and are as interconnected with other cosmic forces. But I am actively searching for a way to create alternative identities that are defined on our terms, and not by the ones that wish to control our lives and movement. I highlight the writers that understand the importance of the expressive power of the individuals that have been forced in categories of difference. Because cultures of the Africana diaspora were not developed in a vacuum, there were many exchanges with other cultures that served as vital
sources. For example, the use of Native American plant lore was integral to plant knowledge and healing among African Americans but for the brevity of this paper will not be covered, but offers another field of study to delve into at another time.

Chapter One ♦ The Illusion of Medicine

Our modern society has certain patterns of behavior that has disabled the manifestation of possibilities in our world: the stark distinction between history and stories. History gets advertised as a well organized file cabinet of the events that have occurred in the past. Folk stories get associated with mystic qualities that cloud the veracity of the events being recounted. History is taught and stories are shared. History gets printed and encoded while folk stories are shared by word of mouth. A question posed by James C. Scott that motivates my investigation follows: how can we deconstruct power relations embedded in how we understand our world history when the powerless are often forced into silence in the presence of the powerful? Also, how can we be disillusioned by the dominant narrative? If we explore the construction of scientific history and actively seek the limitations in the dominant narrative, hidden life histories start to emerge and illuminate a story we have not learned in textbooks.

History, a Public Transcript

History is a transcription of events in the public that are observed with significance by those that dominate. This domination can take form as systems of oppression encouraged by the dehumanization of capitalism or it can be the elitist institutions that produce scientific knowledge. This public transcript, coined and theorized by James C. Scott, is "designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize
the dirty linen of their rule.” The history that normally reigns in situations of domination is a public transcript that closely conforms to what the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never controls the stage but their wishes normally prevail. Therefore, history is skewed in the direction of the discourse affirming the dominant. This is the history that is printed in textbooks and sold to readers as truth. This cleaned up version only has space to include the heroines of major conflicts. In their defense, a history cannot realistically document every single thing that happens in a single person's life. But a person or an institution's societal biases may blind them from seeing the value in some stories and never give them the authoritative position to make history. The process of domination creates a public oversight and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken into existence in the presence of power.

Behind the official story, the power relations piecing the public transcript together become unhinged. The main abstraction that crumbles is the idea that the public transcript is the whole story. The history of medicine in the United States is an exemplary case study to show when a dominant narrative was carved by throwing away rich material.

Medicine has been a litmus test of great achievements in our society. It has emboldened a collective myth in our culture. This myth tells of an inspired and motivated rise from savagery life in the jungle, toward slow and steady improvements in tools and technology that improved health over time. Modern efforts tame the unyielding wildness in traditional cultures and their Stone Age tribal practices. Let's look at how the field of medicine have displayed these historical achievements. Historian of science and author of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.

Thomas Kuhn, studied textbooks as academic vehicles that document the history of science in an abridged form. You see the names of the men that have founded theories and tools in the natural sciences that have left an everlasting impact on the development of new technologies that have revolutionized the capabilities of medicine. The modern physician has inherited a collection of life-saving tools: X-ray machines, computers and microscopes that add depth and scope to diagnosis and treatment. Although textbooks contain a little bit of history (enough to make the students and professionals feel like participants in a long standing historical tradition), much of the history included refers only to a specific part of the work of past scientists that can easily be viewed as contributions.

I'll mention again that it is impossible to include the contributions of every person that may have helped an idea develop into a revolutionary shift in the way science is understood. Yet this watered down history starts to take a permanent form. This myth history occurs when the messy nature of scientific discovery is ironed out to make an easy to understand, and persuasive text about the linear progress of science. It claims history but actually contributes to myths of progress that shows uncanny similarities to colonialist ideals of abandoning traditional ways for the promise of modern progress. This perception and tendency to make the history of medicine look linear and cumulative is detrimental to the significant value in stories and other forms of knowledge that get swept under the rug.

We live in a culture founded on the validity of science and few have questioned its limitations. Yet conventional medicine has been devoted to the possibility of objectivity. We must understand the fundamental error implicit in the practice of scientific inquiry by returning

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to the fundamental blocks of our modern scientific culture: certainty of scientific knowledge. As a society, we believe in scientific knowledge because of its objective pursuits to figure out how something works. Eliminating as many variables as possible, science attempts to define the object of observation through reproducible experiments. A medical journal would consider no other research acceptable for publication. However, reality is observer-dependent, what is seen depends on the individual seeing. Objectivity is not a possibility. We have aligned our truths with a certainty in the objectivity of science but what appears to be an objective statement is a statement of collective agreement among elite scientists concerning the commonality of their subjective experience.

Modern technological science has a network of contributors such as biologists, chemists, physiologists and pathologists that have gone through additional educational training to get their degree and credible expertise in their field. They conduct studies in controlled laboratories. Within the network, there are institutions that hold more power than others. Power is established through access to higher education, literature, new technologies and technology. Individuals study the glorified history and ritualize the problems and exercises as the scientists that came before them did. These are the individuals that write the reports, journals and manuscripts detailing how the world works. Then these educated scientists seek research positions and employment at institutions that hold the power to say what is today's greatest achievement of humankind. The network in power of distributing knowledge and drafts the public transcript of medicine.

The hidden transcript takes place behind the theatrics of laboratory science and beyond observation by power-holders. It comprises of the portion of the story that was driven offstage.
The hidden transcript is actualized in the creation of a social realm in which those that were subordinate can safely speak out and reply to the forms of domination imposed on them.

In the not so ancient past, our laboratory consisted of the natural elements surrounding us. The plant world provided constant sources of tools and inspiration for new medicines, and nourishing food. Medicine was a holistic art form with an earthly network of plant allies and a network of community elders and experienced artisans. Knowledge was shared through oral storytelling and told time and time again within families. The stories were too vibrant to capture simply into words. There were little resources to encode these stories. These myths and stories connected the rational to the mystical, and people to their communities and their universe without imposing any objective doctrine. The family elders were venerated for their life experience and wisdom and listened carefully to understand the workings of the world. Their medicinal practices were cognizant of the vital communication with natural elements through a holistic framework, one that takes the whole patient and not simply the ailment into account when practicing medicine.

The hidden transcript, African-American folk medicine, has no reality as pure or authentic; it exists socially as it is practiced, articulated, enacted and disseminated within these offstage communities. These social spaces allow the hidden transcript to grow as an achievement of resistance. When the myths behind the historical achievements of medicine are dismantled, it becomes apparent that we have not received the whole story. A hidden transcript arises from a

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10 Ibid. p. 119
public oversight that has been proliferating with our collective belief that the history of medicine has no purpose dabbling in African descendant practices in the wild.

*Medical Traditions*

Our current medical system is directly linked to racist, oppressive ideologies of colonialism in this country. Power has been maintained as the medicine mirrored the same patterns of white elitism and rejecting all knowledge that was unfamiliar. Just as dark skin was understood as a spectacle of inferiority and subjugation. Medicine has professionalized the act of healing and cast a shadow of incredibility on the way black folks healed their bodies. All the while crafting a history of medicine that glorified scientists’ inventions and physicians’ great achievements. The dominant narrative makes the public aware of the significance of rational experiments that led to knowledge that continues to help young and old learn ways to understand the natural world. Yet as mentioned earlier, a dominant narrative overdramatized their mastery has failed to provide evidence for their research and studies. Who were these experiments conducted on? Enslaved people's bodies were used for anatomical study. Their bodies were enlisted in the pursuit for medical knowledge without their consent. The continuation of exploitation of black bodies constantly takes a similar but different form. The reach of power given to colonial plantation owners now extends to the plantation doctors and the physicians that profited off of the bodies enslaved Africans and Indigenous people as spectacles under the microscope.

I sought the story that was not told in textbooks. I knew there was a medical history that explained how the women came before me. The stories of black women unfold in hidden spaces that takes place beyond the dominant white gaze. When the depth of their lives characterizes a
discourse, it illuminates a hidden transcript. A hidden transcript is a declaration that breaches the etiquette of power relations, that breaks an apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of spoken truth to power. That spoke truth to the horrors done to them. A history that not only saw the significance of their trauma but the underlying persistence in their will to live and to thrive.

Black female bodies contributed and continue to supply the medical system with numbers and data for their own scientific gain. It is pertinent to start the discussion of medical traditions with the reproduction of enslavement in the United States. This discussion is focused on events that occurred in the antebellum South, the period before the Civil War in 1861. It was during this time that plantation owners began to focus on the repopulation of enslaved labor on plantations by fixating attention on black women and their reproductive abilities. The white plantation owners’ interest incorporated certain paternalist tastes about their care.

Deirdre Cooper Owens, a black female writer and author of Medical Bondage, critically analyzes the hidden transcript of medicine. Her work unveils the story behind the achievements of America’s most infamous physician, J Marion Sims of Alabama. He was a prolific medical writer and his interests ranged from dentistry, to pediatric medicine, to general surgery and then gynecology.

“By the 1860s, Sims had become, arguably, the nineteenth century’s most famous gynecological surgeon; his experimental surgical work on enslaved women had transformed the medical field. His reputation derived from the consistent positive outcomes he achieved based on the experimental gynecological work he performed, quite an accomplishment for the era in which he lived.”

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Sims developed a cure for vesico-vaginal fistula, a troubling condition where there is an abnormal tract extending between the bladder (or vesico) and the vagina that allows the continuous involuntary discharge of urine into the vaginal canal. Black women, were targeted by their blackness, and their seeming susceptibility to certain gynecological diseases. Although the biomedical research that nineteenth-century doctors conducted sought to substantiate scientific racism, white doctors used black women’s bodies in their research because they knew that black women’s sexual organs were identical to white women’s. Black women’s organs were used as physical specimens that were displayed for observation and dissection so that white women’s pathologies and sick bodies could be cured.

Between 1844 and 1849, Sims’ medical experiments were completed exclusively on enslaved women’s bodies to aid him in locating the cure for vesico-vaginal fistula. His systematic erasure of the black women’s voices, concerns and discontent was blatant.

“In a speech he made before the New York Academy of Medicine, he explained how he had become a successful gynecologist. “Building a little hospital as a special field of experiment,” he told his audience, “I readily got control of these cases, all of them healthy young negro women.”

The growth of gynecology allowed for the medical maintenance of black female reproductive bodies under the institutions of slavery. Most doctors who abused enslaved people’s bodies did so to protect the economic interests of slave owners and their racist ideologies but all while expanding the scope and skill set of medical practitioners.

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“Preserving diseased and damaged reproductive parts, performing experimental surgeries, and canvassing slave communities for sick patients helped southern doctors, medical colleges and museums, and their faculty and students advance their medical knowledge quite literally on the broken bodies of black [enslaved people].”

The twisted history of medicine continued to spiral into scientific supported racism that fundamentally weakens the foundation of medicine in this country and the avenues of healing that have been endorsed for the nation.

During the plantation period, slave holders were invested in the growing population of an enslaved people to constantly supply their labor market. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 stated all those enslaved held captive in the southern rebellion states were declared free. However, the country’s investment in medical science based on racist experimentation validated efforts to further deepen the wounds on black bodies and minds. Another example of the danger institutional health care posed to black people was sterilization programs. “Programs that sterilized African Americans, without their knowledge, to end reproduction under the racial purity ideologies of eugenics grew during and after World War II, particularly in the South.”

It is important to recognize the amount of time that had passed since Sims’ medical experimentation. Crossing boundaries of time to the twentieth century, the world has acknowledged the atrocities against human rights in cases of genocide, and war. During the civil right’s struggle for justice in the early 60s, black women were routinely sterilized without their informed consent and for no valid medical reason. In 1961, Fannie Lou Hamer received a hysterectomy by a white doctor without her consent while undergoing surgery to remove a

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uterine tumor. Such forced sterilization of black women, as a way to reduce the black population, was so widespread it was dubbed a “Mississippi appendectomy.”\(^{16}\) By the 1970s, sterilization became the most rapidly growing form of birth control in the United States, rising from 200,000 cases in 1970 to over 700,000 in 1980.\(^{17}\)

Reproducing Race by Khiara Bridges provides a contemporary example of the invested medical interest in black women. Khiara Bridges is an American anthropologist creating work at the intersections of race, and reproductive justice. Her ethnography locates Alpha Hospital\(^{18}\), a New York City public hospital, as the integral case study. The hospital resides in an area of poverty with high populations of black, and immigrant families. The hospital provides the community with the closest to quality healthcare in the area. Many argue that black women depend on these medical interventions to treat undetected diseases, higher disease and illness rates, more chronic conditions (such as hypertension and diabetes), and shorter life expectancy than other racial groups. But the medical technology is intrusive, excessive and pathologizing their bodies for their demand. Bridges shines new light on the politics of healthcare for the poor, demonstrating how the “medicalization” of social problems reproduces racial stereotypes and governs the bodies of poor women of color. Compared to private hospitals, this public hospital administered excessive tests for drug and alcohol screening, glucose level, STI’s and pushed long-term contraceptives on women who just gave birth\(^{19}\). Since these women are insured by Medicaid they must follow these guidelines and all the physicians and midwives practicing on


\(^{17}\) Mitchem, Stephanie. 2007. African American Folk Healing. NYU Press. p. 65

\(^{18}\) Alpha Hospital is a pseudonym.

them must abide. It’s really a travesty and to think that the invested interest in healing black people has always had economic benefit for white slaveholders or for white physicians.

The dominant-subordinate power relations that were integral to colonial thought and expansion continue to reproduce knowledge. I refuse to let people think colonization is a thing of the past. We must acknowledge it was built off the bodies of enslaved workers and their descendants from all corners of the world. Colonization provided a constant threat to black individuals to stay silent about their experiences. The power dynamics of colonialism remain in the minds of all active and passive participants that go on to write down history objectively. There was no check in after colonialism “officially ended” to evaluate how colonial thought has shaped the way we live, and perceive the world. There was no attempt to heal the wounds of trauma.

I had to wade through upsetting truth after another to find the stories of healing that I sought. I highlight the lives of black women in the Africana diaspora as an effort to amplify their voices and break their silencing in historical production. Their dissents were ignored when they were forcibly labeled property. I sought for their stories written in their voices. When I learned their bodies were used for medical experimentation. I sought the remedies they used to heal their wounds, physically and emotionally. Their vitality continually under the gaze and ownership of white men. Yet black women’s vitality was never contained.

There has been too much power given to the history of medical practitioners with ill intentions. How can someone find care, solace, and healing from an institution that profits off their abuse? Too long the discussion has been on the public transcript of medicine and little has been done to uncover the biases that have filtered out black women’s contributions and
persistence when there were attempts to stifle them at every step. Is the survival of black women not a remarkable thing to study?

Chapter Two ♦ The Story That Fell Between the Cracks

The majority of African Americans had little or no access to the developing institutionalized medical practice for most of the twentieth century. When such medical care was available, it was dangerous because of the license taken with black bodies. But behind the public transcript, black women were not simply complicit to their mistreatment. Black women were often drafted into the medicine vocation whether by necessity or as a role appointed by the plantation owner. When I uncovered the hidden transcript of their medical healing practices, I found that they actively sought ways to heal themselves from their mistreatment and collectively create alternative meanings of health that incorporated values steeped in nature and African-based philosophies.

“Simply put, enslaved African Americans were not passive victims of medical malice, nor were they helpless dependents on white health care. Instead, communities in slavery nurtured a rich health culture, a constellation of ideas and practices related to well-being, illness, healing, and death, that worked to counter the onslaught of daily medical abuse and racist scientific theories. At each historical juncture, enslaved communities cultivated their own practitioners and therapies, and they influenced southern rural health practices in the process. Slave insurrectionists deployed protective medicine to shield themselves from white patrollers and pursuing hounds. Black midwives visited slave dwellings and white households to attend mothers and catch babies. Elderly root doctors built regional reputations among a multiethnic clientele. Skilled herbalists cultivated local botanical expertise that significantly influenced southern domestic medicine. Any serious
exploration of African American health culture in the antebellum South quickly puts to rest the myth of slave dependency on white health care.”

Autonomous medicine practiced by enslaved women negated the style of official biomedicine and contradicted its environment and practices. In contrast to the official transcript, the offstage medicine practiced emphasized African philosophies based in connecting to nature to find medicinal herbs and partaking in cultural practices in healthcare.

Black women held the role of leading and healing their communities. The elder black women fostered expressions of medical care in varied social sites. These were environments of greater autonomy among the enslaved, in the circles of kin. Evidence of these practices are derived from stories, and memories and expressed poetically. Enslaved women made use of nature to find solace. Most of this history is embedded in oral histories, plantation records, and interviews collected throughout the years. These sources have given life to the role of African American midwives, and herbal healers in the South.

Sharla Fett’s book, *Consciousness and Calling: African American Midwives at work in the Antebellum South*, uncovers the insights about the intimate and public forms of power and its influence on health in the American south. Enslaved midwives blurred the lines between individual freedom and enslavement, mediated between birth and death, routinely crossed boundaries of economic classes. Enslaved midwives traversed: conflicting cultural beliefs/definitions of the birth of enslaved people contrasting the economic self interest of the slaveholders, and between two domains of antebellum medical knowledge, mother-wit and obstetrics.

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21 Ibid. p. 4
Enslaved midwives created alternative definitions of birth that took into context kinship and protection. Chattel slavery attached political and economic associations to black people and their families, “the public writings of both planters and white doctors fused economic self interest with the language of pro-slavery amelioration to argue that enslaved women’s reproductive health comprised of an important facet of a well-regulated plantation.” For black women there was the constant threat of having a child ripped from her embrace and forced into the same system that kept her enslaved. Therefore, enslaved midwives had to cross blurry definitions of assisting birth. The role doubled as a job to maintain the plantation but was also a gifted vocation that allowed black women to create a sphere of community healing shielded from those that wished to keep them enslaved. The development of hidden transcripts depends not only on the creation of communities protected from dominant surveillance, but additionally on the human agents who create and disseminate them. These agents are often as socially marginal as the places where they gather. The alternative meanings enslaved midwives attached to health and birth constitutes the hidden transcript of the dominant narrative in medicine.

Most midwives were older women who couldn’t do fieldwork but whose wisdom extended from weaving, sewing, cooking, domestic work and caring for any condition that affects women. For example, enslaved midwives were skilled in the following: teaching cycles of fertility with the lunar calendar, explaining the bodies’ vulnerability to natural and spiritual forces, and performing rituals surrounding healing and birth. Their responsibilities were not

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24 Ibid. p. 123
25 Ibid. p. 69
limited to this list because their work overlapped with many types of healing. These women’s
dual role as plantation caregiver and community leader were supported by their mother-wit, "a
blend of God-given wisdom, common sense and the instruction of older women."26 This form of
knowledge production and preservation relied on oral transmission and was grounded in
religious and ancestral authority from African and American born foremothers.

Mother-wit had more social credibility than doctors during this time in history. “The
lower cost of midwives and doubts about medical doctors’ competence created demand for black
midwives in white households outside the ones in which they were enslaved.”27 Black women
became valuable in a system based in dehumanizing them. This interesting power dynamic for
enslaved midwives and healers became subverted by white male physicians. Dominant medical
practitioners began a strenuous effort to abolish or control these sites of vital autonomous healing
by co-opting African medical-botanical knowledge, failing to credit them.

Enslaved women were a rich source of medical knowledge and this was not lost on the
professional doctors of the antebellum South, whose livelihood and economic profit came from
tending to sick enslaved people. The medical-botanical knowledge of the African enslaved
women has widely contributed to the practices of plantation physicians. Women reported using
the resources of their environment, and in many cases they cultivated the same plants that were
traditionally found in Africa, as well as the Caribbean, a cash crop plantation hub along the
Middle Passage.28 African American women were sought for their knowledge of herbal remedies

26 Ibid. p. 75
Calling: African American Midwives at Work in the Antebellum South.” In New Studies in the
American Medicine.” The Western Journal of Black Studies; Pullman, Wash. 11 (4): 200
and the knowledge absorbed by white physicians contributed to a significant era in medicine in the United States.

Plantation owners were encouraged to delegate a competent enslaved woman responsible for treating the sick. Doctors looked to healers in communities of black women and looked to their practices and knowledge on how to cure the diseases of the enslaved population. Many women shared their remedies and once the knowledge was in the hands of the medical community, the information was disseminated in medical publications and in meetings of the professional medical men. Martia Goodson traces the career and influence of Dr. Francis Peyre Porcher, a man that was credited to significant contributions in medical practices in the United States while he learned much of his medicine from black women. Francis Peyre Porcher studied the conditional diseases in the South and the potent herbal remedies through operating a hospital exclusively serving enslaved people. Dr. Porcher published his findings in the Charleston Medical Journal and Review and with his reputation as a scholar of plant material, he employed all the knowledge that he could to have a robust collection of herbal resources to use by the Confederate in the war effort. Therefore, black women’s knowledge was exploited for the gain of the plantation owner and his efforts to continually keep their bodies and minds trapped in an oppressive system. Dr. Porcher was eventually elected Vice President of the American Medical Association. The evidence shows that the African heritage and herbal wisdom contributed heavily to the development of medicine around the years of the Civil War, yet there is little acknowledgement of of black women’s contributions. White physicians’ writings showed their

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racist biases in their efforts to continue the chattel slavery imposed on black bodies without acknowledging themselves that black women had valuable knowledge.

However, enslaved midwives’ sense of authority and identity led to a form of resistance. Their resistance took the form of mediating or even opposing slave owners’ interest during certain cases. Subsequently, this asymmetrical power balance highlighted black women as a social threats conflicting with the interests and cultural beliefs of white males. Some doctors accepted midwives as an ordinary feature of rural health care on the plantation, but more vocal opponents saw them as a southern health problem.\textsuperscript{30} Midwives were viewed as competing scientific contributors and practitioners. Their role was not limited to healing enslaved communities and instead their knowledge was integral to advances in American medicine that benefited the entire world.

The discourse of resistance cannot exist without the carving out of social spaces protected from control and surveillance. Enslaved midwives practiced autonomous medicine in their communities and expressed in folk stories, spirituality and rituals. Within the social space of the hidden transcript, there are embedded power relations among the subordinate.\textsuperscript{31} Interviews and stories of black women’s adolescence in the antebellum South illuminate the dynamic role held by the elders in the community. Women recall the times their grandmothers brought them along to séances where you talk to spirits. Wise grandmothers would go around and heal different people in the neighborhood, give them baths, herbs, roots, poultices, whatever she could to heal you if you were sick and they called on her. Sometimes she’d stay all night.”\textsuperscript{32}


these social spaces allows for alternative definitions of health to be codified and developed. The communities have a stylized sentiment, an expression of folk knowledge that held power and authority akin to medicine practiced by colonial physicians. One woman reflects, “maybe if Mama had the proper schooling, she would have become a nurse or a doctor. She liked dealing with people that were sick. It just come to her naturally.”33 The alternative definition of health drafted in the hidden transcript valued black female healers’ existence, their knowledge and their practices.

Enslaved women made use of secluded woods, bushes, gardens and households to find plant medicines, meet and practice in safety. These social sites connected women with the earth and in turn the women’s awareness was heightened to the varied seasons and cycles of nature. This cosmological wisdom was shared by elders in the community and provided solace and comfort from the plantation owners impeding threat. Evidence of this relationship is expressed in works of creative pose or poetry of black writers. Since for most of America’s history, it was punishable by law for a black person to read or write, the daughters of these enslaved women have codified their oral traditions.

Poet Maya Angelou invigorated the restoration of this fragmented history. She provided stories that stir up the old memories we yearn for. Her writing asserts the relationship black women have with a wildish nature, a source of solace coexisting with harsh realities. Enslaved and indebted black women did not stumble upon the wilderness. Instead, they actively sought out the land around them searching for healing, refuge and salvation.

33 Ibid. p. 102
Woman Work

by Maya Angelou

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I've got shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine
Rain on me, rain
Fall softly, dewdrops
And cool my brow again

Storm, blow me from here
With your fiercest wind
Let me float across the sky
`Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own.

In nature women can find “a permanent and internal watcher, a knower, a visionary, an oracle, an intuitive, maker, creator, inventor and listener who guides and urges vibrant life in the inner and outer worlds.” Maya Angelou illustrates this relationship in the last four stanzas. Sunshine
warms the skin to the touch. Rain drops cool her dewy brow. The stormy winds can remove her from all her daily burdens. The star shine, the moon light is all she can call her own. Maya Angelou’s writing moves with the inhalations and exhalations of a wild nature. Although this breathing can fall under our conscious awareness, she paints the beauty that surrounds her with intention because it’s all she can call her own in a world where black women were sold like cattle, children torn from her grasp, her body beat, her heart bruised. In the long history of landlessness, whether as individuals or as a community, black women have irrevocably connected to the natural elements surrounding them. They are conscious of this wise, vast cyclical size of nature. Day follows night, seasons unfold periods of transformation. Maya Angelou’s “Woman Work” describes with rhyme and reason the vast, cyclical nature of being a black woman.

I have studied their stories and continue to be in awe of the liminal spaces black women traversed and the creativity they used to create alternative meaning of medicine in a context that embraced personal power, kinship and spiritual protection. By studying this hidden transcript of medicine, it becomes apparent that enslaved black women adapted to the lack of access to medical care, by incorporating the herbal knowledge from their African ancestors to heal their communities. Black individuals actively subverted medical intervention from plantation physicians and looked towards the elders who shared stories and medical knowledge. These oral traditions were collectively shared and the effort towards storing this history continues to this day.

Chapter Three ♠ Rooted in the Earth

An African Folktale, Our Reminder to Give Thanks

“A tale is a thing of wondrous mutability. Just as water assumed the shape of whatever containers it is poured into, and yet its essential properties are not harmed or changed, so the tale. A folktale assumes the shape of its teller, through the teller’s voice colorations, vocal timbre, and rhythms, gestures, a sparkle in the eye, a cocking of the head, the tale is recreated and made new.”  

- Julius Lester

This myth has been retold many times by elders, the storytellers of their communities. This black folktale has gone under the title “Why Men Have to Work”. I chose the title, “Our Reminder to Give Thanks” because the message that holds the most value in this tale is that our ancestors gave us a story to remind us of the bounty among us all and how easy it may be to fall into the habit of taking advantage of the abundance of life.

In the beginning, the sky used to kiss the Earth. It was so close that you could reach up and touch it with your own hands. In fact, if you ever got hungry, you could break off a piece of the sky and eat it! So in those days, people always had enough to eat without ever having to work a day. People didn’t have to sow the seeds or plough the fields. The sky provided a bounty that was enough for everybody to eat.

With the constant abundance, people grew careless with the sky’s gifts. What did it matter if they broke off more than they needed? Who cared about a little wasted sky? After all, the sky was so vast, there would always be enough to feed everyone.

Maybe it didn’t matter to them but the sky was keeping tabs. As the people continued to take, without gratitude for what they have, the sky lost a bit of hope. Soon the sky’s sorrow turned into anger after seeing itself lying on the ground, half-eaten.

The sky’s eyes flashed like lightning. Clouds covered the earth. The Sky spoke out and said, “Now look here! I can’t have this! Nuh-uh. Can’t have you people just breaking off a piece of me anytime your stomach growls then only taking a lil bite and throwing the rest away. Y’all gotta cut it out, or I’m leaving! I’ll move far away if you don’t treat me with respect! This is my final warning.”

With lowered eyes, the people promised to be better. After that, no one broke off more than they could eat and they stated their gratitude for the sky’s bounty. The sky shared delicate slices of morning sky, pink and glistening. A mango sunset, absolutely luscious.

But people are forgetful and begin to take more than a spoonful. Without a thought, people started reaching up and scooping the sky with their hands. Bringing down big slabs of sky that could feed families for a month! They took little bites and threw the rest over their shoulders, continuing on happy and dumb.

Without a word, the sky sighed and with a great rush of air, it lifted itself up as high as it could. High above the earth rose the sky, far beyond the reach of humans.

The people wept, they no longer had any food. Their tears fell to the Earth. And the Earth said, “Dry your tears, I can feed you. But you will have to work for your living. You will have to learn to sow seeds and plough fields and harvest crops. Remember what you learned today. Take only what you need and I will gladly give”. They promised through tears to never take more than they need.37

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This myth speaks to a story that shows that African communities and their descendants were always taught to revere the land. In the present, we are collectively apathetic to the natural world. Stories can ease our passage through this cosmological alienation by pointing out which path to follow. Subsequently, the stories can become the medicine of the future.

There is a collective illusion that sees the Earth separate from our lives. We have located our consciousness in intellect, reductionism and linearity of time and space. Nature cannot be understood in its totality through intellectual analysis. It requires a critical aspect of communicating with that natural world through relationships with plants. Humans, like plants are sensory organism however humans have been uprooted from this relationship with the Earth.

Colonial thought and knowledge production sought to sever the spiritual veneration of land to objectify its qualities and control our emotions in our understanding of the ways the world works. Succinctly put by anthropologist Marimba Ani, “rob the universe of its richness, deny the significance of the symbolic, simplify phenomena until it becomes mere object, and you have a knowable quantity.”

During the Middle Passage, Africans were physically removed from their ancestors’ land, their spiritual lifeline. Similarly, their familial connections were also severed without an inkling of guilt through enslavement, auctioning family members to different corners of the new world, and enacting emotional and sexual violence through breeding practices. All of these were attempts to detach an enslaved person from their oral traditions that spoke of divine strength, and healing. Through this control, an expansive universe described by stories and orally transmitted pieces of knowledge can be objectified into what is only deemed significant to scientific discoveries. African American spirituality was not valued and

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subsequently demonized by racist ideologies. Yet the relationship they wished to extract had stronger roots in the soil. The beautiful quality about oral traditions is that as long as someone remembers, African Americans can uncover the roots of stories and healing practices buried deep through layers of silencing. With their words and stories, we have the ability to see the world through a lens of their experienced reality.

**Folk Healing**

“Folk healing was a practical expression of resistance culture, brought from the South to the North, and used to deal with everyday problems. Resistance culture, in this instance, was not some form of political defiance but was tied to the efforts to survive and thrive in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.”

African-American folk medicine is a form of healthcare that has stood the test of time. Indigenous medicine has evolved in different societies and captures the social and biological homeostatic connections within a community. Folk medicine involving a larger way of thinking that extends beyond the body and the mind. People of African descent and of the diaspora are attuned to perceiving certain illnesses in social, physiological and spiritual dimensions of the human experience. The healers are the mediators between the natural and spiritual world. Healers usually spend years as an apprentice to a relative or fellow healer.

Medical intervention is typically in the form of herbal concoctions administered orally, or topically through open incisions. Herbal concoctions include herbs, herbal materials, herbal preparations, and finished herbal products that contain parts of the plant or other plant materials

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as active ingredients.\textsuperscript{40} The most common traditional medicine in practice across the African continent is the use of medicinal plants.

Profound knowledge of herbal remedies in traditional cultures developed through trial and error over many centuries. Some herbal treatments are used as placebos, others for sympathetic magic, but many have definite medicinal value. Medicinal plants are sometimes the most easily accessible health resource available to the community to heal common ailments. However, the efficacy of traditional medicine goes beyond the removal of physical symptoms and signs.

African diasporas are collectivist in tradition. Collectivistic cultures emphasize concepts of family and social interdependence as well as having a spiritual worldview.\textsuperscript{41} Healthcare is not omitted from this societal tradition. Although traditional medicine cannot be subsumed into a paradigm that applies to all societies, traditional healers in African societies typically follow three principles: patients must be satisfied that they and their symptoms are taken seriously and that they are given enough time to express their fears, the healer studies the patient as a whole individual instead of a body of individual and separate units. The diagnostic process not only seeks answers to the question of how the disease originated (immediate causes), but who or what caused the disease (efficient cause), and why it has affected this particular person at this point in time (ultimate cause).\textsuperscript{42} Throughout the healing process patients are treated as integral agents in the act of medicine and the act of healing.


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
The all-embracing nature of traditional medicine also takes into account the social and spiritual factors that are relevant to the timing of the illness. The etiology of the illness could stem from disobedience of social taboos or malevolent ancestral spirits. These moral, social and spiritual dimensions are just as likely to lead to illness as biological origins. Disease is viewed as a supernatural phenomenon governed by a hierarchy of vital powers beginning with the most powerful deity followed by lesser spiritual entities, ancestral spirits, living persons, animals, plants and other objects. Many Africans believe that if the ancestors withdraw their protection and gift of good fortune, the descendant is left vulnerable to all sorts of misfortunes and diseases. The wrath of the ancestors is usually evoked by unrest in the home, the violation of customs and traditions or non-observance of certain rituals. This concept is part of the foundation of healing. If there is a disturbance in the harmony or a discovery of violation of established order through supernatural divination, the hostile source must be removed. Removal can be accomplished by the neutralization of the sorcerer or seeking ancestral forgiveness to appease their anger or by herbal medication. A folk healer’s ability to orchestrate these natural powers invokes healing.

None of these healings are fantastic or superstitious to the practitioners but have been proven over time.” The importance of folk medical remedies is that their healing abilities helped the body recover from wounds but also connected people to their history, and their ancestors’ practices, each cure expresses a belief in the interconnections of nature and humans.

The Stories of Plants

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Mitchem, Stephanie. 2007. African American Folk Healing. NYU Press. p. 64
African American traditional medical knowledge cultivated an art of healing with plants. The stories of the plants provide pathways for us to understand the world. I remember the first time I tasted a weed that grew unabashed in every open space available in the soil. I weeded the vegetable beds because weeds compete for nutrients with the growing vegetables and I wanted the vegetables to have the highest nutrient content. But every day that I pulled the weeds, I admired their divine geometric shape and their resilience to survive in unideal conditions. I put wood chips down to shade the soil, removing the sun’s influence in plant growth. And yet, a few days later I was back weeding. I smothered the soil with a tarp, and weeds grew their way between the threads. Since I spent majority of my time with the plants that were undesired, I became really interested in the plants that were considered weeds.

Weeds are just plants. All weeds are different. They vary in physical appearance and biological properties but what they all have in common is that they are all truly resilient. They are able to take root and bloom all over gardens and farms. They grow in the most unlikely places under conditions of scarcity of sun, soil and water. In between the cracks in the sidewalk and amidst industrial life lies the opportunity for a weed to grow. Upon close examination I realized that most of the weeds that grow in abundance have multifaceted uses. Because they grow in stressful conditions, their genetic makeup is attuned to struggle. They regenerate life in our soils, break up soil compaction, and provide food and medicine. These plant allies provide a model that not only reminds me of resilience and the ever-existing capacity to heal but also of the ability within everyone surviving in scarcity, to bloom wherever we place our roots. Black women, like weeds, have been downtrodden and retrained to unkempt areas.

Plant Medicine
Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African Healing presents a window into the medical expertise that enslaved Africans carried with them throughout their travels across bodies of water and vast landscapes. Working the Roots is a culmination of first-hand interviews, conversations, and apprenticeships Michele Lee experienced with traditional healers in the southern region of the United States from 1996-2002. The text is rich with stories of healing with plants that were used to treat and cure many ailments, and sustain the bodies of black women. It also contains routines for preventive health maintenance practices that are still applicable today. Many of the elders that agreed to share their wisdom and stories have passed away therefore a body of work such as this one would not have been replicable if written today rather than 20 years ago.

The herbal recipes combine the medicine with spiritual worship of African spiritual philosophy and the individuals’ ancestors. The medical recipe takes two forms in the healing process and in the the way the knowledge is transmitted: the recipe ritual and recipe stories. The recipe formula details the standard way of preparing the medicine. Each plant has a variety of preparation techniques and rituals ranging from teas to poultices, from smoke blends to baths. The flexibilities of the plant’s treatment prove its efficacy in adaptable forms and the importance of the patient’s individualized needs and desires.

Of the varied practices, I highlight the preparation of teas, baths and tonics because of their frequent use for health maintenance and prevention of ailments that affect a black woman’s ability to face the world with courage. Teas were a common form of preparation assuming from

47 Lee, Michele Elizabeth. 2017. *Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African American Healing*. Wadastick. The term “workin’ roots” means that working with herbs often involves incorporating prayers and affirmation in order to access their spirit energy. To simply use herbs without honoring their life force insults their spirit.
the ease, “put it all together in a pot, poor water on it and boil it and drink it”

Sally McCloud an elder healer from North Carolina paints the picture of tea’s role in health maintenance,

“Yeah, they kep that kettle on in the winter time…kep the medicines made up, strained out and when one of us gets a cough, maybe once or twice, they go in that icebox and get that medicine…they say ‘come on’…don’t care how bitter it was or how sweet it was, you had to drink it… and they didn’t carry us to no doctor neither…didn’t have to…didn’t have to pay no doctor…we had to try to keep groceries here, pay bills…no, we didn’t have no money to throw away like that…thank God we made it”

Most elder women had a recipe or two that they relied on during the times where the body was susceptible to an illness. Baths promoted relaxation and healing by incorporating the herbs in a basin of water. Tonics were prepared to boost immunity and fight against viruses, fungi and bacteria.

The medical stories are intimately related to the history of the individuals, specifically how they were introduced to the herbal medicine in their family or community. Each person’s individual stories and connection to the plants form their generational traditions. Many practitioners’ cultures pay homage to the spirit of the leaves and of the earth by saying a prayer or leaving a small offering of tobacco, flower petals or vegetables at the base of the plants before harvesting their share. These established spiritual connections build one’s faith, strength, hope, resilience and determination. Spirituality maintains an individual’s connection to infinite live and a sense of greater and higher purpose.

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Here is prayer of gratitude spoken before harvesting medicinal herbs according to Yoruba spiritual philosophy:\(^{50}\):

\[\text{Iba se} \quad \text{I pay homage to the} \]
\[\text{Ori ewe.} \quad \text{Spirit of the Leaves} \]
\[\text{Ire alafia,} \quad \text{The good fortune of peace,} \]
\[\text{Ire’lera,} \quad \text{The good fortune of a stable home,} \]
\[\text{Ire ori’re.} \quad \text{The good fortune of wisdom.} \]
\[\text{Ewe, mo dupe, ase} \quad \text{Leaves, I thank you, so be it}\(^{51}\)

Spiritual practices were intimately intertwined with overall health practices. Elders modeled daily rituals and prayers based in nature. This act of healing is truly patient centered and caters to the inner desires of each person. As Anita Poree beautifully said,

“\text{You have a relationship to the herb that ranges from what phase of the moon you planted in to what kind of offerings you make to the earth before you plant it…and, what kind of prayers you do before you harvest it, what the process is for preparing it, when you take it, and the folklore that embodies it.}”\(^{52}\)

Healthy living comes from spiritual origins and subsequently, the plant medicine practiced by African American gives freedom, power, and protection.

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\(^{50}\) Predominantly found in Nigeria, Yoruba one of the largest ethnic groups of West Africa. Their traditional religious practice is called Ifá. Enslaved Africans practicing Ifá brought this spiritual practice with them to the Western Hemisphere and have adapted and transformed the practices into multivariate forms.


There are thousands of herbal remedies that have trialed and tested within families, but there are a few medicinal plants that are mentioned frequently and enthusiastically in interviews. Oftentimes the healer being interviewed would mention that the medicines they found around them grew in abundance in the woods or in the bushes around their homes. These plants grow unabashed in some soils and may be a bother for those that consider them weeds in their garden. A weed may be defined as any plant or vegetation that interferes with the objectives of farming or gardening. A weed may also be defined as any plant growing where it is not wanted. However, some plants are still considered weeds regardless of where they grow. It's easy to discard an herb just because of its very 'ordinary' nature. But that is a mistake because some of the most powerful medicine in nature have the most unassuming of shapes and grow in abundance.

Boneset, mullein and yellow root will be discussed based on these criteria. These plants have resilience to grow and thrive that attracts me to them and I believe its equally significant that these are the plants that black women sought to heal their bodies and sustain their health. The rituals of preparation and stories of healing of these medicinal plants illuminate a truly dynamic healing practice within African American folk healing that has transcended distances and time to continually affirm the strength and resilience of the daughters from Africa.

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**Boneset**
Figure 1. Boneset, a common perennial plant in the sunflower family that is abundant in the Northeastern region of the United States.\(^{53}\)

**Botanical Name** Eupatorium perfoliatum

**Rituals**

*Tea:* Pour a cup of boiling water over 2 to 3 teaspoons of dried herb (leaves and flower tops collected as the flowers blossom in the late summer or early fall), cover and let steep for 10 to 15 minutes.

**Medicine Stories**

Author Michele Lee interviewed Sally McCloud, an elder healer born in 1910 in North Carolina. Lee often found herself being lulled by the smooth and beautiful poetic diction. The tone she found familiar was the oral tradition that taught Black folk family matters: morals, respect, discipline, community, spirituality, resilience, determination, foundation, discretion, negotiation, medicine, good health, and taught us how to live successfully in two worlds.\(^{54}\) Sally

\(^{53}\) https://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id_image=2230
McCloud was raised near Baysville Church. Her father was born in the South and her mama was Indian, “some of the knowledge about the medicines came along from the two of them”\textsuperscript{55}

Boneset was one of the herbs Ms. McCloud listed for health and healing.

“We use boneset for colds… it’s kind of a real thin weed… calamus for colds too… I just mix it all together and its good for colds… Boneset, calamus, and yellow root… when I get all three of ‘em… I put it all together then boil it and strain it out, sit it in the frigidaire and I just drink it when I need it… kept me goin’ good ‘til here of late.”\textsuperscript{56}

As a general tonic, boneset stimulates resistance to viral and bacterial infections and promotes health in the immune system.\textsuperscript{57} Boneset got its name in the treatment of break bone fever (dengue), a viral infection that manifests in the form of intense muscle pain that it feels like your bones will break. A tea infusion of boneset leaves is used to treat colds and flu, break up congestion, induce sweating and relieve aches and pains. It is also a bitter and astringent which is effective for loss of appetite, indigestion, and constipation.

Pete Smith, son of Sally McCloud talked extensively with Lee about boneset, its bounty and daily use among households for drawing out sickness and promoting health.

“Boneset. I done drunk a many bunch of boneset. It good for colds and draw da fever out. It’s good to drink if you got a broken bone; it helps to set it back. Back den, most all of old people, dey have a bush of it and grow it ‘round dey house and da yard and stuff like dat. Most all people had a bush of it and if dey out, dey go to da neighbors and get a lil piece from it and bring it back home and grow dem a big bunch of it.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Lee, Michele Elizabeth. 2017. Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African American Healing. Wadastick. p. 17
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. p. 7
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. p. 9
\textsuperscript{57} Lee, Michele Elizabeth. 2017. Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African American Healing p. 231
Boneset was a necessity in the garden for families and the medicine it provided helped heal communities. Boneset’s medical strength and potency was significantly sought after so much that many people transplanted wild roots near their homes to make the herb even more accessible.

A respondent for the Federal Writer’s Project\(^{59}\) from South Carolina, John Davenport, mentioned the use of boneset to treat chills and fevers:

Some of de folks had remedies for curing like making hot tea from a wed called “bone-set.” Dat weed grows wild in de woods. It was good for chills and fever. De tea is awful bitter.

Common descriptions of boneset locate its origins in the wild, untamed natural landscapes of the southern states of America. Its availability allowed medicine to reach enslaved communities and their descendants.

The medical applications of boneset alongside the folk healing interpretations show that the public transcript of medicine during this time period may be undercutting the significant value in its use. In African-American spiritual medicine, boneset tea can be used to wash the body and remove negative energy and illness.\(^{60}\)

**Mullein**

\(^{58}\) Ibid. p. 12  
\(^{59}\) The Federal Writer’s Project compiled a large collection of first person narratives of folklore and life histories of enslaved black people living in the south during the late 1920s and 1930s.  
Figure 2. Mullein has adapted to live in all types of climates around the country and it widely used for medical treatment for skin, throat and breathing ailments.  

Botanical Name Verbascum thapsus

Rituals

Tea Preparation: Pour 1 cup of boiling water over 1 to 2 teaspoons of dried mulleins flowers and leaves. Cover and steep for 10 to 15 minutes. Strain and drink up to 3 cups daily for respiratory ailments. Sweeten with honey if desired.

Bath Preparation: Cut 4 to 6 dried leaves per 5 cups of water. Boil in a pot and soak your feet or whole body in a bath for at least 20 minutes. Mullein leaf bath soaks were often used for arthritis and joint pain.

Medicine Stories

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image source: https://njaes.rutgers.edu/weeds/weed.php?mullein1
Mullein has an antiquated medicinal reputation, especially as an astringent and emollient. Mullein is rich with vitamins and nutrients including iron, magnesium, sulfur, potassium vitamins B-2, B-5, B-12, and D, choline, hesperidin, PABA, mucilage and saponins.
Mullein has large grayish-green wooly leaves that rise from the soil. The leaves are harvested when mullein is in bounty spring to summer. In African American healing traditions, mullein has effectively been used to treat colds, cough, congestion, respiratory and pulmonary ailments including chronic bronchitis asthmatic coughs and excessive mucous.\(^{62}\) Mullein may be prepared in the form of a leaf tea for respiratory ailments, a bath soak for joint pain, a leaf poultice or wrap to reduce swelling and in a smoke blend to relieve pulmonary congestion.\(^{63}\)

Several of the Federal Writers’ Project narratives referred to the use of mullein as a preventative tonic and as a treatment. Works Project Administration respondent Thomas Anderson of South Carolina recalled a mullein bath soak:

> Younguns on de plantation was bathed two or three time a week. Mullin leaves and salt was boiled in great big pot to put in de babies wash water and also in de chilluns’ water. Dis would keep ’em from gitting sick.\(^{64}\)

Dr. George Washington Carver a black American agriculturist and inventor once stated,

> “I wish to say that mullein is one of the oldest of our medicinal plants and is a noted remedy for all kinds of coughs and colds, rheumatic troubles, stopping of blood, asthmatic affections, and all manner of things that humans ills are heir to”\(^{65}\)

The herbal remedies of African Americans have given medical scientists clues as to which plants may contain beneficial therapeutic compounds.\(^{66}\) Mullein’s uses are consistent with modern

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\(^{63}\) Ibid. p. 289


understandings of the medicinal properties of the plant. Some increase in coughing and cleansing of the lungs is to be expected with mullein when this is needed and this does not change its efficacy. No adverse effects have been reported from taking mullein, even in high or frequent doses. Current research on the medical components of mullein have investigated the possibility that this common weed could provide treatment for tuberculosis.

In spiritual medicine, mullein tea is taken to enhance prophetic dreams and encourage astral travel. Burning mullein as incense assists with communicating with deceased ancestors during rituals in sacred altars.

![Yellow Root](image)

Figure 3. Yellow root commonly used as a winter and spring tonic to combat colds.

**Botanical Name** Xanthorhiza simplicissima

**Ritual**

“Of the 119 plant-derived pharmaceutical medicines recently examined by the WHO, about 74 percent are used in modern medicine in ways that correlate directly with their traditional uses as herbal medicines by native cultures”
Tea: Pour 1 cup of boiling water over 1 teaspoon dried root. Cover and steep for 10 to 15 minutes or use the traditional decoction.

Traditional decoction:

- Clean root and let it air dry
- Chop up the roots and stems and place in a mason jar until ¼ is filled.
- Fill the jar with room temperature water and let the medicine sit until the water turns yellow.
- Sip on the mixture daily directly or drink one to three cups a day. The mixture can be refrigerated for later use. 67

Medicine Stories

Yellow root goes by many different names among its users. It has commonly been called goldenrod or goldenseal in narratives documenting use of a golden yellow root. The leaves are bright green and low to the ground. Under the soil lies the yellow medicine.

Mother and folk healer Ruth Patterson born and raised on a farm in North Carolina shares her stories of healing and taking care of all her children.

“Them goldenrod is good for colds. It’s gotta leaf brought yeah long, look like sage leaf, only its shiny and is has a heap of leaves grows up on it, and the stem go straight up, jus ‘bout dat high. Dat’s bitter. “I aint never had no cold. I drank dat yellow root twice a day.” 68

Healers recommend for preventive health measures to drink one cup of yellow root tea three times a week or store the tea in a mason jar and sip on it occasionally as needed. Patterson fondly

recalls getting all kinds of herbs to drink and it wasn’t a bother because she would often take them on a regular basis,

“They’d mix it up and keep it in a jar in the house. You be out dere in the cotton field and yo nose be sneekin’ and snotty da next mornin’, go in dere and get dat jar and get you some of those herbs right now.”

The intensive work schedules imposed on black agricultural workers put added stress on their bodies’ immune systems. Patterson would always look out for her kin. She shared the recipe with her brother who also admits, “He say dat yellow root the only thang helps him. He say he can take dat yellow root and he be getting’ on good.” The popularity of yellow root as a preventive health treatment has led to overharvesting. Those out of touch with folk stories like, Our Reminder to Give Thanks, may not realize the danger in taking more than needed. When foragers find a patch of plant medicines, they may try to take all of it. The importance of oral traditions is to transfer knowledge of conservation of our earth that provides protection, food and medicine. Healer Hattie Hazel Pegues-Clark reflects on the conservation of wild plant medicines,

“If it was a lil’ patch we don’t take it all, we jus’ pick some and try to find another patch. It used to stand up out the dirt near the swamps, but you cain’t find it no more. It’s rare. You used to go out in the field and find all your medicine but you cain’t find certain type plants now. They burn the underbrush where they grow the new pine trees fer them to grow up tall. It kills off all the other stuff that gets around it, all the medicine” (Lee 60).

The plants grew in abundance as if to prove that there is more than enough medicine to heal individuals and communities if one is paying attention and practicing gratitude. Black women’s relationship with thanking the land for its bounty go back hundreds of years to African based

69 Ibid. p. 93
70 Ibid. p. 94
philosophies and myths. Gratitude reminds people to only take what they need. African based spirituality and reverence of the natural world provide a culturally vibrant perspective of medicine and health.

African-American folk medicine is a transformational practice that has allowed black women and their families to survive under conditions of scarcity. Their ancestors’ medical knowledge gave them the strength to take back the authority of their bodies. The people’s medicine was not owned because everyone contained the power to heal themselves. The plants reflected this freedom. Boneset, mullein and yellow root grew freely in the wild and in abundance. Our plant allies remind us that medicinal practices are rooted in rituals of herbal preparation and storytelling.

The People’s Medicine

A healer does not heal you. A healer is someone who holds space for you while you awaken your inner healer, so that you may heal yourself.  

Maryam Hasnaa

Most families relied on one person as their primary consultant amongst the recognized community of great healers in their environment. This community of experts sometimes shared remedies, asked advice and consulted each other. No one owned the knowledge or the medicine. Folk medical knowledge was continually passed down. The knowledge of the power to heal was a form of inheritance for black people.

“What you learn from your people, that’s your inheritance. All of it! It’s a shame to have inherited all of that and then to have a culture twist itself so that it’s not possible to really

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know and appreciate, and pass on the value because it’s not honored. It’s up to us to make sure its passed down.”

In a world where black people have been told lies for their history, the knowledge passed down of healing practices tell a story of resistance. The remedies have survived through stories of elders healing their children from plants they found in the wild. This creative resilience resulted in the survival of communities and constitutes a practice of medicine that involving black bodies and embraces their powerful history.

Black women have been integral to the transmission of this knowledge to kin and their larger communities. Elder Sally McCloud interviewed by anthropologist Michele Lee described how she shared her healing remedies in the South:

My chil’ren, dey know when I was givin dem dat same than my mama and granna give me. I gives it to my child’ren and I told dem what I was givin’ ‘em and what it was for and what dey had.”

Sally McCloud’s experience was typical. For most black people, these plant medicines were the only treatment they had.

Pete Smith, son of Sally McCloud, one of the last remaining of a legacy of almost 200 years of Black farmers and sharecroppers in the south. Smith described the transmission of knowledge from his mother:

I learned all of dis from my mother. When she was givin’ me dat stuff, I was learnin’ then, what it was for and then what they say I had. Den I was learnin what dey givin’ me and dat’s the way I knew what it is. And it pays to know.”

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This knowledge inheritance gave people the agency to heal their bodies with intentional practices. It saved many individuals money and resources because biomedical treatment was expensive and inaccessible to black folk. Additionally, many people were skeptical of the physician’s motives. After my discussion of the mistreatment of black female bodies during the advancement in gynecological medicine, it should come as no surprise that many black individuals questioned the physician’s self interest.

“When you get sick, folks just got to go to a doctor,” Mr. Pete says. They don’t know they makin’ the doctor rich. Once you go, he gonna wear you out. Keep you comin’ back every two weeks; coming’ back for those pills and they change up pills on ya… But jus’ like dey try different medicines, sometimes you have to try different weeds and roots to see what’s gonna work, but it better for you”74

This protective measure led to even more creative and innovative ways to use the immediate natural environment for medicines. Many thought the doctor may be hiding information for his own financial benefit.

The beliefs surrounding plant medicine continually unfold in many forms in varied time periods and spaces. Plant medicine holds significant value in folk healing practices for black women. Nature provided a healing environment that provided accessible medicine that cured common ailments that make surviving under racist oppression all the more difficult. The ever-shifting times and places black women have travelled have also changed the rituals of these medical practices. Although the practices of African American folk medicine have not been scientifically codified, the free flowing nature has allowed the medicines to be adjusted to the varying changes that may occur in one’s life. There is an intergenerational understanding that,

74 Lee, Michele Elizabeth. 2017. Working the Roots: Over 400 Years of Traditional African American Healing. Wadastick. p. 11
“Illness is a call to the transformative potential within us. We must proceed on our own path, guided by our own inner healer and refuse to give our personal power away to our physicians or anyone else.”

Our bodies are different and what works for one person may not work for everyone. The valuable perspective of African American herbal medicine is that people’s personal and spiritual connection to healing is real medicine and not only provides curative properties but also reinstates their personal power and freedom.

Chapter Four  ♦  Transforming the Act of Healing

The carriers of the hidden transcript vary greatly by culture and over time. Mothers, sisters, aunts cultivated healing practices that transcended place and time. Migrating people have travelled far distances carrying their traditions and adapting to the way medicinal plants are used in different environments. Succinctly put, “shifts from South to North or rural to urban; and finding answers between institutional medicine and home practices. The realities of living, including physical, emotional, and economic health, required thinking in alternative ways.”

Descendants of the women who fed our thoughts and studies (Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Luisah Teish, Michele Lee and many others cited in this thesis) have set the stage for creatively transforming the counterculture of resistance embedded in African American healing traditions. Their intellectual frameworks provide us with the tools to uncover ways black women are presently using innovative learning and teaching techniques to share ancient wisdom of plant healing to those called to heal themselves.

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Developments in medicine, science and technology and cultural forms of ancestral reverence have resulted in creative traditions around health maintenance for black women. The migration to urban locations has changed women’s connection to the earth. We as a collective have habituated rituals that alienate us from exploring this connection in our immediate surroundings. Large populations of marginalized black women and their families have been crowded in public housing that fails to value the green garden spaces that allow for healing and growth. In these environments it might not be so clear that feeling soil, harvesting plants and using plant medicines would be a cultural practice that needs adequate care. Stress related ailments have drawn people inward to find solutions. Stress is an omnipresent threat to thriving in a life that exhausts our stimuli and send our bodies into fight or flight mode. We as a society hold tensions and discontents within our physical form that manifests in chronic anxiety, depression and pain. We get stuck in this scarcity mindset where we fear our own personal power because we constantly bombarded with alarming news around the world and convinced that there is always someone that is doing better than ourselves. However, this mindset is being acknowledged, challenged and transformed by elements of African American folk healing.

African American healers know there is a healing agent in the medicines they use that transcends medicinal properties. They are capable of unleashing this power, physically through teas, and tonics, and spiritually by the spoken words and affirmations. Four elements identified in the medicinal practices via storytelling: (1) a sense of connection with a spiritual dimension; (2) the use of ritual to connect with the spiritual dimension; (3) belief in the power of words; and (4) the use of dreams as omens of, or providing direction for, the future.  

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Mitchem, Stephanie. 2007. *African American Folk Healing*. NYU Press. p. 83
The proliferation of social media networks has opened the gates of knowledge and storytelling for populations that have systematically lacked access. The scope of knowledge is not limited to institutional biases. It exists publicly in domains such as YouTube and Instagram. YouTube, a multi-media streaming website, and Instagram, a photo and video sharing platform, require little educational or financial resources to gain access to all forms of educational material. Information that was once hidden under layers of historical silencing is coming to the surface. Individuals seeking this knowledge have expanded their awareness beyond textbooks in grade school and have embarked on a radical journey to reclaim knowledge and transform their existing and stagnant philosophies about health maintenance.

Black female content creators have created a subculture on social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, that embraces educating communities and prioritizes their desires to learn about their bodies and ways of healing. Consumer culture has demanded videos of influential people living by example and sharing ways to incorporate new lifestyle habits. These lifestyle videos share daily rituals of gratitude, nutritious eating habits, and recipes of plant medicine to combat illnesses or to sustain health. Holistic Nutrition Coach and womb wisdom specialist and author, Veladya Chapman of Earth Mama Medicine has created a community of over 79,000 individuals interested in her mission to expand consciousness around food, medicine and reproductive health. She has published a variety of videos that normalize healthy lifestyles from the perspective of black women in today’s society. Some of her content is titled, “Natural Stress Relief-Adaptogens 101”, “Learn to Have a Peaceful Menstruation”, “Herbal and Intentional Abortion”, “Seasonal Depression” and many other video blogs that document Chapman navigating life while expanding the collective awareness of their health and prosperity. Her Instagram is a platform for her to educate through images and short thoughtful captions. She
welcomes in the energy of spring time by sharing a photograph of her bare feet touching the roots of a tree, her spine aligned with the trunk and her arms outstretched like branches.

The caption reads,

Now is the time to return to the trees. I feel it.

The energy is rising from the roots to the tops. Flowers blooming, baby birds singing, LIFE is emerging. Hibernation is over.

One way that we can tune our bodies to embrace the shift is by connecting with our tree family. Come together in love and return to nature. There’s a big difference between being IN nature and connecting WITH nature. Look at how animals behave; they migrate, know when storms are coming, and move naturally with and in the elements. They are tuned in and online.

To upgrade our spacesuits we must too, get online. Nature’s web.

My dear sister, Ceka, told me that she received a message and now must tell everyone to go to the trees. The changes happening in our world with 5G internet are not for our greater good. They’re destroying life and making us and our planet sick. Trees must be cut down for 5G to work. Man-made internet and wifi attempt to do exactly what trees do. Internet cable runs underground, what trees do naturally with their roots. Trees communicate to each other with their roots. Cell towers are built above ground (after trees are cut) to send signals back and forth the way trees do naturally.

Trees emit and receive frequencies and signals. They are amongst the most intelligent beings on this planet. Connecting with them is a way of making amends with our planet and Source. A way of saying, we honor you. Please forgive us for all that we have done to hurt you.
So, as Ceka has told me, I will tell you: Get to the trees. The tallest trees in your area. Tall trees are way above ground and their root systems run extremely deep into the Earth. They will transmit our love, frequencies & intentions further out into the land and our universe. Go without your cell phone or any other wifi possessing device. Go naturally with pure intentions and a pure heart filled with sincerity to truly make amends. Be barefoot and put your back up against the tree. When we align our spines to the trees with our arms outstretched upward on the tree, we are rebooted.

Imagine if thousands of us did this. We’d be on an upward spiral, together. Get out there.78

Her writing reads as powerful love rituals and affirmations. This post illuminates an awareness of the natural cycles of seasons and personifies the seasonal transformation to the growth within individuals. She reflects on the growing developments of internet connectivity to appease society’s growing obsession with technology and urges us to deprogram our behaviors by getting outside. Her knowledge is steeped in black spirituality and philosophy. She sees the importance of saying thank you to the earth and apologizing for all the harm our capitalist desires have afflicted on the earth’s land. Veladya Chapman is a dynamic woman that has been called to raise the collective consciousness to a place of unconditional love.

Social media networks have made education accessible to all people of all education levels. Roots of Resistance is an educational project aimed at highlighting black medicine, healing ways interrupted by colonization. Roots of Resistance, founded by Sade Musa, operates under the belief that bodily autonomy and culturally relevant medical care are essential to liberation. Learning to heal ourselves is a liberating practice of self determination and resistance.

78 Earth Mama Medicine instagram
It is dedicated to helping historically looted communities advocate for their well-being, access quality healthcare and to find alternatives if western healing models fail them.

Coming from a lineage of families suffering from illness due to stress arising from economic difficulties, a racist society and environmental pollutants, Sade Musa always felt the call to be a healer. She first desired being a medical doctor, but the educational pursuit is a heavy debt to hold. She considering naturopathy, but realized either of these degrees wouldn’t truly allow her to reach and help heal her communities. She began a journey of researching the history of Afro-botany to address the medical issues that specifically affected her people. But researching wasn’t as applicable with the urgency she saw in her community. Once she studied herbalism in earnest, she realized the distances her knowledge could travel. She works diligently to uncover the medicines her ancestors used and stays critical of those that try to suppress her opinions.

Roots of Resistance has a following of 6,000 on Instagram that is ever growing. Sade Musa uses the platform to share the stories of plants. She documents how to make medicine with plants by walking through the process of harvesting, gleaning what is medicinal, preparing tinctures in pictures and videos. Her knowledge developed into classes that she offers in person in Los Angeles or online about reclaiming healing traditions of the African diaspora. Additionally, she currently teaches a class on sacred smoke medicine: hands on incense making workshop. Instagram provides an international audience to her journey healing and educating. It also provides a platform to argue that herbalist spaces are predominantly white and Sade Musa actively challenges these organizations to step up and make changes to center women of color practicing herbal medicine. A lot of the labor is challenging white herbalist spaces and communities that claim “diversity” but are actually just upholding white supremacy but
dismissing engagement with concerned people of color. In the context of an ahistorical public transcript of herbalism practices in America, Sade Musa’s work is evidence that in creating a hidden transcript of African-American healing there will be strenuous effort made by dominant groups to control the marginalized. Sade Musa is an advocate for preserving Afro-inspired knowledge and medicine and works tirelessly to evidence that it is a worthy endeavor.

Earth Mama Medicine and Roots of Resistance are just two example of the educational outreach black women have engaged with in order to teach their communities to be critically conscious of themselves. There is a growing movement of consciousness among the black community that is continually adapting to the growing research on the way technology has affected our collective health. These women remind us of the importance of embracing our personal power in the face of adversity.

Chapter Five ♦ Conclusion

Everyday I hear news of racist, xenophobic crimes that cost the lives of all human beings. It is not only a crime to be black but to be living, to be thriving, to be a woman. I am asked if I have heard of the latest killing, latest lynching. I am asked my opinions on the matter and on the current state of the world. And I do not know. And I will not focus on finding fixed answers to those questions. I live in fear some days but I fearlessly go on. My heart aches but I get myself out of bed every morning. What impact does it have on my body to fearlessly go on? What impact does it have on my spirit that emboldens every passion of mine? Where do I find solace? Where do I find comfort? My dreams guided me to a place close by. A piece of land that welcomed me with a bounty of love. I was accepted for a fellowship affiliated with a local non-profit farm dedicated towards creating a just and sustainable food system. This fellowship has
allowed me to delve into and discover a self care practice that rejuvenated me. Working with my hands, working under the sun, changing my work activities to the shifts in weather has connected me to the earth in such a palpable way but also to myself and body. In the beginning, I found myself using my body as a tool, a machine of efficiency. But after using my body as just a tool, and feeling how angry my bones and muscles were at me, I have learned that with hard work, there should always be hydration and rest both mentally and physically. After you delicately plant a new sprout, you ground it in the soil, water it and watch it grow. I felt like with every seedling I planted, I was grounding a new piece of knowledge about myself, giving it all the nutrients it needs and watching it manifest within me and also physically grow into a beautiful plant with fruits to share. I connected with bounty of life and love that could not be contained.

My story opened up a world of knowledge. I was now aware that medicine can be defined personally. Although I was not physically ill when I embraced my relationship with the land, it did heal parts of myself and my history that were uprooted for hundreds of years. Stories hold the importance of beginning human-land relationships but certain narratives can also block human-land relationships from forming.⁷⁹ The dominant narrative of black women’s connection to the land tells a story of chattel slavery, unpaid agricultural labor, and then a gradual alienation from nature through industrialization and the migration to cities that lack shades of green. The most immediate significance of this story is the high mortality rate of black women in America and the chronic stress of their conditions and environment that increase their likelihood of dying at a young age. But this is a one-sided narrative, that does not completely capture the vibrant lineage of black women. The paradox of medicine is that myths of progress and necessary

medical intervention hide a story of independence and resilience found in the medicinal practices of African Americans.

If medicine is the art of healing, then medicine practiced by black women outside the control and surveillance of their oppressors is comparable to the public transcript of medicine. The hidden transcript of medicine values black women’s resilience, strength and commitment to survive and acknowledges their practices rooted in the earth. African inspired and adapted herbal practices highlight how women have taken agency over their health and the health of their community. Herbal medicine has taken new forms in a time of post-capitalist alienated labor and how its use and practice can shape the way women of color navigate the world. In order to help the black communities most at risk for fatalities, the dominant narrative of medicine and the history of medicine must embrace the healing modalities that have served black communities for years and give them the agency and power to choose how best to heal themselves.

The development of a hidden transcript occurs in an environment with existing social and cultural barriers between the dominant medical physicians and black women. This creates almost an opaque wall between the autonomous lives of black women and mainstream medicine. However, if we don’t critically analyze the growth and cohesion of distinctive health-related subcultures, we will actively prevent ourselves from engaging in the diverging dialects of medicine. The hidden transcript becomes a powerful social unit as the experiences are mediated by a shared way of looking at the world. The hidden transcript comprises of people with the common cause of defining and seeking a world where we all can flourish. There will always be institutional push back when centering black women in a world that is implicitly and explicitly based in Eurocentric logic. It is learning to dismantle these myths, stories and histories that no longer serve us. The mere fact that it is in constant dialogue and argument with dominant values
ensures that the hidden and public transcript provide both sides of the illusion of “objective” medicine in America.

Remedies involving medicinal plants have persisted throughout the transient lives of black women in the African diaspora across the United states. The craft of plant medicine was not just to resist oppression but to revitalize a future of bounty for people of color that is stifled in societal imagination. Hidden transcripts of medicine have persisted in myths, poems and folk stories. Folk tales and myth become a form of communicating about the operations of the universe, human relationships, and, therefore, healing. It is not rational or an objective form of medicine but we must trust in it because it is how we think and how we heal. The work of black female writers and visionaries illuminate transformational healing practices and share the stories of their ancestors so that their work can speak for itself once again.