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# Journeying Home through the Body: An Introduction to Resource, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship (R<sup>4</sup>)

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*This paper will explore the connections to Black cultural reclamation, liberatory healing, and future building through a framework of cultivating a sense of home in contemplative body-based Resource, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship (R<sup>4</sup>). Home is a concept that has been historically disrupted for Black and Brown bodies across generations. As people of African descent, we carry stories of homegoing, stolen histories, and politicized futures. Displaced from our motherlands and separated from our resources, home is lost. In a society where we are racialized and subjectively treated and mistreated by the rigidity of white cisheteropatriarchal supremacy, home is needed. Through the reflective experiencing of deep commitment to invest in our individual and collective bodies through intentional practice, home is found. The "R<sup>4</sup>" approach is offered as a conceptual framework that proposes an embodied lens to contemplation as a lineage practice that connects historical memory and resilience across the sequence of lineal descents from ancestry to the present experience of the body and informs creative responses for the next generation. When practiced as an expression of Black liberation, R<sup>4</sup> in contemplative practice has the power to reclaim, heal, and build. While the physical location of home is complicated within a broader cultural context, this exploration will support a conceptual framework and practical strategies for home as an inner embodied resource to facilitate individual and collective liberation. Future directions for research and practice are discussed.*

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*“The ache for home lives within us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” – Maya Angelou*

Embodiment is the practice of actively being, feeling, and experiencing one’s body. What we experience in the world can disconnect us from this state of being, especially when our journeys contain historical and contemporary expressions of oppression. To re-experience the cultural body in a safe and healthy way, is to offer a path *home* and a connection to cultural healing.

*I recall such a homecoming through a visit back to Haiti, the land of my ancestors. As a Black, first generation Haitian-American, I pieced together the narratives of our lineage through my elders’ short and fragmented responses to my many curious inquiries. My conclusions were informed by my sensitivity to the tension and constriction that was observed in their upper bodies as they responded to curiosities. I was raised with an internal awareness of silenced narratives from my immigrant elders who had been impacted by complicated histories of Port-au-Prince during the political rule of former President, François Duvalier (also known as “Papa Doc”). The tone of their voices and the restraint in their bodies communicated a sense of fear and anxiety and I internalized this and the silence that contributed to an experience of invisibility. These perspectives, and my marginal experiences in the U.S., contributed to a disconnect with a culturally rooted sense of self. However, I connected to a different story in my embodied experience on the “land of mountains”—Ayiti.*

*During a jet skiing outing on the Caribbean Sea, right off of the western coast of Haiti, I experienced a revitalizing thrill that reverberated through my bones. Overcome with a playfulness that felt both natural and unfamiliar, I impulsively turned off the jet ski and jumped into the ocean. In that moment, I submerged myself in this massive navy-blue body and floated between a large mountain range and a distant island. I settled into a felt sense of freedom, communicated by the tin-*

*gling sensations that traveled throughout my physical body. I felt divinely home. I sensed the mix of cool and warm currents flowing around my limbs and the spaciousness to tread water with the strength and ability of my arms and legs. The sun beamed on my face and the warmth felt like a gentle kiss from God. I could smell the air, the water, the land; it smelled like history, like untold stories. I laughed at the pure joy of the experience, and my whole body smiled as I reconnected with Ayiti in her natural beauty and remembered my ancestors and their journeys. When the moment of remembering passed, I felt deeply betrayed that I had accepted a narrative that was far from the true paradise that I was experiencing as home to my lineage. I had been stuck carrying intergenerational trauma, in the way that beloved ancestor bell hooks (2018) noted, how cultures of dominance rely on fear to maintain obedience. The connection of this moment, brought upon by an intentional awareness of my body in space, place, time, and experience, demonstrated my embodiment as a key to access healing wisdom for coming home.*

Inspired by an interdisciplinary perspective utilizing critical (Collins, 2002; French et al., 2020) and cultural (Harrell, 2018) frameworks, trauma and interpersonal neurobiology theories (e.g., Levine & Frederick, 1997; Menakem, 2017; Ogden et al., 2006; Siegel, 2016; van der Kolk, 2014), and deep reflexivity (Teo et al., 2014) in practice with cultural somatic practitioners and yogis and contemplatives of color, *R*<sup>4</sup>—**R**esource, **R**esilience, and **R**esistance in **R**elationship—integrates a cultural body-based approach of being, embodying, and healing in a sociocultural context. The conceptual framework of *R*<sup>4</sup> intentionally interrogates power in relationship to exploring the racialized experience of the body and offers an integrative approach to embodied practice for contemplative practitioners of color, especially those racialized as Black. This author presents a theoretical overview as an attempt to explicitly integrate experiences and expression of the body into contemplative practice and embrace expressions of safety, strength, and liberation as transformative processes. *R*<sup>4</sup> suggests the body as a site for radical (French

et al., 2020) and psychocultural (Harrell, 2015) healing through its emphasis on building capacity to occupy the dialectic of existing in both spaces of resisting oppression and moving toward freedom, through the work of humanization, (re)connection, reclamation and restoration, truth telling, and empowering transformation (Malebranche & Harrell, 2021). In honor of the sacred, R<sup>4</sup> highlights the body as technology for accessing internal resources in the power of land, ancestry, and future building held in relationship and emphasizes an innate capacity to rebuild our connection to a liberated home.

Contemplative practice has the power to bring us back to the body through processes of sensing, experiencing, and cultivating. Black Feminist political theorist and contemplative, Jasmine Syedullah (2020) refers to the process of “homemaking” as a contemplative practice. In her collaboration with Poverty Scholars, she discusses creating a home within oneself to counter the lack of felt experience in a land where our racialized body is hunted, brutalized, demonized and marginalized. People of the African diaspora have had to unlearn internalized oppression to relearn that the body carries lineage wisdom that has been lost between political trauma, trafficking, immigration, separation and survival. Writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015, p. 10) reminds us that, “racism is a visceral experience ... You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.” The recognition of this truth leads us to the source of wisdom for racialized healing. The sociocultural and political histories and contemporary realities of Black communities, as a result of *Ma’afa* (Richards, 1981)—a Swahili term for great tragedy used to refer to the impact of the African Slave Trade—demonstrate the Black body politic as a great carrier of grief and trauma. Through state sponsored violence, political conflict, forced migration, and ongoing experiences of marginalization, microaggression and oppression, one begins to disconnect from the body as a method of survival. Consistent with Black Feminism (Collins, 2002), a recognition of race with gendered body politics in the outcomes of systemic oppression and marginalization is required to understand examples of this trauma adaptation through the body

being perceived as unsafe through overidentification or hypervisibility (e.g., Mowatt et al., 2013), fragmentation (e.g., Edelman, 2018), and internalization of body shame (e.g., Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). While social conditions of oppression shape the body to become a vehicle for understanding how oppression is unconsciously perpetuated through bodies (Caldwell & Leighton, 2018) and can often perpetuate intergenerational and cultural trauma (Akbar, 2017; Brave Heart & Yellow Horse, 2000; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; DeGruy, 2005; Robin, Chester & Goldman, 1996), this author proposes the notion of moving toward embodied contemplative practice to uproot internalizations and embody wholeness and sites of wisdom amongst “bodies of culture” (Menakem, 2017).

Various manifestations of movement, breath, and meditation can support thriving and remembering that we are integrated beings of mind, body, and soul. However, it is the centering of the *soul* within practice that allows the wisdom of the Black experience to permeate through cultural soul wounds, internalized racism, intersectional oppression, and collective trauma (Duran et al., 2008; Grills & Ajei, 2002; Harrell, 2018; Myers 2013; Nobles, 2006). Harrell (2018) integrates Afrocentric Psychology and African cultural influences and worldview to demonstrate this divine connection to spirit in contemplative practice as *soulfulness*. The interrelated connection of “the energy of the embodied essence (the soul of a person),” “the energy of the emancipated experience and emanating expression (the soul of living),” and “the energy of enlightened engagement (the soul of connectedness)” (Harrell, 2018, p. 15), supports the inspiration for cultural embodiment through processes that can occur within the body as a site for healing and practice. For communities of color, contemplative practices that express the spirit through the body, such as singing, dancing, drumming, and artmaking, are culturally meaningful and have been traditional ways to intentionally reconnect individuals and collectives back to their bodies to explore a sense of homecoming (Holmes, 2017; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Price, 2013; Spencer, 2017). As individuals within the Diaspora, we recognize that to engage the practice of coming home to oneself, there must first be a critical consciousness of where disruption and sep-

aration occurred and recognition of how this may create additional challenges to feeling safe in the embodied expression (Fanon, 1967; Watts et al., 1999; Watts et al., 2011). Therefore, it is critical that we include the body in contemplative practices, while paying special attention to the Black experience.

### **Embodiment in Contemplative Practice and Black Wisdoms**

The etymology of embodiment comes from the verb *embody*, which is in reference to a soul or spirit to “invest with an animate form” and the ideas to “express, arrange or exemplify intelligently or perceptibly” (Harper, 2001). *Em* comes from the French word *en*, meaning “in, into” and “put in or into, bring to a certain state,” *bodi* refers to the body, and *ment* is related to an action or resulting state. The connection between feeling into the body, an expression of spirit, and transforming a state of being or tangible actions is present in the awareness of embodiment as a process. Of the many definitions of body, the notion that body is the “main,” “central,” or “substantial” part of anything should warrant our attention. The body should be regarded as primary; it plays a role in information processing through psychological mechanisms (Körner et al., 2015), while also emphasizing a spiritual perspective in centering who we are, with sociocultural implications of how others perceive and interact with us.

Contemplative practices are defined as “practical, radical, and transformative ... capacities for deep concentration ... in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life ... to help develop greater empathy and communication ... supporting a loving and compassionate approach to life” (Contemplative Mind in Society). Contemplative traditions and mindfulness-based teachings have historically explored sites of the body and embodiment as a primary domain for experiential present-moment grounding. In Buddhist traditions, the first foundation of mindfulness is of the body and one’s relationship to it (Gunaratana, 2002). Buddhist practitioner and teacher Sebene Selassie (2019) quotes the Buddhist text *Majjhima Nikaya* when she noted how the body must be cultivated to cultivate the mind. This foundation is further exempli-

fied in one of the standard teachings of a guided Body Scan within the secular Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) curriculum (Kabat Zinn, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2006), where the focus is maintaining an awareness of the body in its sensations, breath, experience of emotion, and specific movements. Integrating these perspectives of the body in mindfulness practice and movement-based contemplative practices such as Yoga, Qigong and Tai Chi (see Schmalzl et al., 2014) emphasizes body awareness for the purpose of regulation and response to external stimuli. When we are aware of sensations occurring within our internal experience, we engage in the practice of interoceptive awareness—a practice that can increase our capacity to assess physical and psychological safety and accelerate trauma recovery (Loizzo, 2018; Loizzo et al., 2017).

Caldwell (2018, p. xx) calls our attention to *bodyfulness*, described as “lived experience of our body we can use to feel and express directly, creating powerful and direct locating of ourselves in the present moment.” In this framing, embodiment is explored in time and context as a trauma sensitive (Treleaven, 2018) contemplative practice that “holds our ability to rest our care and attention into our direct, immediate experience on a consistent basis” (Caldwell, 2018, p. xxiii). Yoga philosophy and Vedic traditions also understand the body in relationship to the soul or spirit, through energetic layers of the body (e.g., physical body, subtle body, casual body) that encompass koshas (Roeser, 2005) that correspond to the natural elements and use repetitive breath and movement patterns to integrate subtle and physical bodies (i.e., Kundalini yoga). However, it is important to consider how in practice, American mindfulness does not often operate to free oppressive systems, which is needed for those practicing in intersectional bodies racialized as Black, but instead can work alongside oppression. A critique of embodiment as “code [for] white bodily processes and states” (Sherrell, 2018, p. 149) orients our attention to understand the process of racialized bodies inhabiting a guarded experience through the engagement of various contemplative practices (DeLuca et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2016). Despite the existence of diverse explorations of the body in contemplative approaches, the integration of the sacred and dynamics of



power, which are critical to cultural expressions of embodied wisdom and a contextual application in culturally responsive practice, can be further explored.

In African traditions, the body has roots in spiritual and knowledge systems. For example, Nigerian author, Akintoye (2010), describes how *ogbun*, referred to as knowledge received by Yoruba people, was divided by the gods of Yoruba to incorporate *ogbun-ori*, knowledge of the head, and *ogbon-inu*, knowledge of the gut. In contrast to Western culture that privileges intellectual and cognitive ways of knowing, the symbolic expression of the body-mind wisdom is predominant in indigenous teachings across the Diaspora. An Ancient Egyptian proverb, “The body is the Temple of God within you. Therefore, it is said [Man]: Know Thyself,” recognizes our experience connected to the sacred and beyond the physical body. Some African practitioners have understood “thy [true] self” to be a reflection of Kemetic Anatomy of Creation (including sahu: spiritual body, the khaba: casual body, the ab: emotional body, the khat: physical body) (Anpu, 2017). This understanding of the body and its authentic spiritual self, has cultural salience for people of African descent. Re-conceptualizing embodiment to include concepts of historical-cultural-spiritual expressions may be more culturally appropriate.

Many cultural expressions are practices of embodiment; our expressions of lineage, history, and Blackness can be found in the use of our bodies in presencing practices such as music, song, dance, rhythmic movement, spoken word, and artmaking. However, bodies conditioned by societal forces carry cultural legacy that has taught “masking,” which has been inhabited in the body, and therefore, has impacted our cultural embodied presence (Bryant-Davis, 2019; Carter, 2007; Menakem, 2017). In this disconnection, spiritual connections have been lost in the difficulty to breathe or lack of breath that is experienced in Black communities. Furthermore, the body becomes political in understanding how we get shaped by socialization and how it expresses itself through the holding of power relations—Whiteness, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism—in our emotional and embodied selves. To subvert these learned embodiments of holding our breath (to unconsciously signify not needing so much or to exemplify a frozenness in one’s own body

or lack of awareness of our own needs), it is important to incorporate racialized and cultural body history of embodied narratives of strength, power, brilliance, agency, and resistance in the present moment and the transgenerational experience. The remainder of this paper will focus on the conceptual framework of the author's R<sup>4</sup> approach to support a culturally relevant embodied contemplative practice that honors a (re)embodiment of the body as a sacred site for Black liberation.

### **Home in R<sup>4</sup>: Resource, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship**

A psychospiritual understanding of "home" can refer to a place, space or presence, where one feels a sense of refuge, connectedness, and belonging. The R<sup>4</sup> approach was inspired by the author's belief that a safe home is a birthright, especially for those who have experienced forms of violence that have oppressed their sense of safekeeping. Integrating theoretical, practical, spiritual understandings, and the author's reflexivity of lived experience and contemplative practice, R<sup>4</sup> is presented as a working framework that centers Resource, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship as core elements for experiencing the [individual and collective] body as an embodied *home*. R<sup>4</sup> posits that the body is sacred and is the present moment expression of lineage. It values an orientation to contemplative practice and an iterative process of development to acknowledge and incorporate the multidimensionality of cultural embodiment that evolves through the facilitation of individual and collective liberation. It is implemented and practiced as radical healing (French et al., 2020) and a form of psychocultural healing (Harrell, 2015) to access and embody home, while existing in both ongoing spaces of oppression and in the pursuit of actualizing freedom in our shared environments.

The first three core elements of R<sup>4</sup> are conceptualized through three corresponding primary expressions of cultural embodiment that are associated with Black liberation: land, ancestors, and future-building. The fourth embodied core element, Relationship, is conceptualized as an encompassing contemplative practice, one which threads the other elements together. Collectively, these core elements and primary expres-

sions uplift critical connections in the service of addressing dynamics of oppression through humanizing our experience with reconnection to the Earth body, reclaiming our narrative with restoring our relationship to benevolent ancestors, and accessing empowerment and transformation in reclaiming future building practice as a resistance to internalized oppression. R<sup>4</sup> is about recentering our needs, values and cultural expressions. Trauma sensitive and liberatory healing processes of safety, strength and empowerment, creative transformation, and sustainable engagement are incorporated throughout this exploration and suggestions for practice.

### **Power of Resource: Land Expression**

The power of home as an embodied resource, or inner support, is meant to establish a felt sense of safety and stability that is often disrupted through experiences of oppression, racial trauma, and disconnection to our cultural lands. To that end, the use of the body to facilitate psychological, or inner, resource can be complicated by the experience of trauma. Ongoing experiences of chronic stress and traumatization can negatively impact the process of reconnecting to the body's capacity to experience grounding beyond oppressive conditions (Levine & Fredrick, 1997; Treleaven, 2018; van der Kolk, 2015). Mind-body trauma researchers and practitioners suggest an effective process of finding internal safety as 'befriending' the body and taking ownership and agency of the body to heal separation and disconnection (van der Kolk, 2015), utilizing sensory inputs (e.g., Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Warner et al., 2020), including interoceptive awareness (e.g., TC-Trauma Sensitive Yoga; Emerson, 2015). However, these explorations do not holistically situate the disembodiment experienced by cultural trauma. In the R<sup>4</sup> approach, resourcing for safety with intentional use of embodied processes are explored in relationship with the land.

Our cultural history deeply connects us to the divine significance of land. The phrase, *Ayibobo*, giving honor and respect to the God and your Soul within your Body/Land, is used in Afro-Haitian religion, Vodou, to acknowledge alignment in our body as our soul's land (HACC, 2021). Similarly, used as an affirmation, like the African acknowledgment *Ase*,

and Sanskrit greeting *Namaste*, it points us to *Ayi*, or land/body, and *bobo*, one's physical body (*tibo-nanj*) and divine origin (*gwobonanj*). To understand our body, is to understand the land. Indigenous teachings have offered a healing relationship with the natural world as a support both surrounding us and within us (Somé, 1999). Considering how our ancestors have lived off of the land for food and resources, developing a deep intuitive knowledge of the emerging natural changes in the environment, embodying one's connection to natural resources—in earth, water, sun, wind—is offered as an expression to restore a sense of safe resource in the divine experienced with the land. While well-functioning systems of oppression perpetuate (White, cis, able, heteronormative) body supremacy and actively teach no agency to our individual bodies, reviving our root system with the land can offer an alternative practice to reclaim a felt sense of embodied resource. Suggestions for body-based practice and trauma sensitive adaptations with the land are further explored.

### ***Practicing with the earth***

Practices that use the body to engage in the supportive qualities of the earth are one of the initial needs for building embodied safety in our community. Practices may include sitting on the ground and imagining one's sitz bones firmly planted in the earth for the experience of stability and support. When contacting the earth, visualization of roots stemming from the sitz bones, located at the bottom part of the pelvis, into the core of the earth, may be especially stabilizing for those who may experience hyperarousal and increased dysregulation. You may be curious to try physically touching the earth with your hands, while visualizing rooting down in a sitting meditation. Sister Peace (2019), a nun in Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing, describes an embodiment where one can "breathe like a tree in the storm" contacting the visceral experience of a tree's roots, trunk and emerging limbs. Contemplative reflections of being physically held by touching the earth engages our root system and sense of safety by validating the right to *be*, sourced in love, grounding and remembering (Owens, 2019). You may consider a grounding prac-

tice where you touch the earth, inhale, touch the earth again, and exhale while gathering earth energy back into your body.

Adaptations to increase supports that are sensitive to various arousal levels impacted by chronic stress and trauma, can include mindful experimenting with sensory inputs (e.g., increasing or decreasing tactile inputs, proprioceptive input, vestibular input). Suggestions to explore sensory inputs may include walking barefoot on the ground to feel various sensations and the curves of the earth. In addition, dissociation, or disconnection to one's experience, can be a common experience to cope with chronic stress and traumatization (see Boon et al., 2011). Therefore, adding and subtracting incline while contacting the earth during walking meditations can add sensory satiation through intensity to regulate the nervous system and activate muscles in contacting the earth.

### ***Practicing with water***

When we offer up a sense of surrendering to the earth for safety, it is common for not only discomfort to arise, but carried grief of our historical and contemporary experience can also (re)surface. Water is one of our natural resources that can be used as refuge. The simple act of touching, submerging in, or imagining bodies of water can facilitate a sense of comfort and soothing, especially to the chronically threatened nervous system. Personal agency in the body can be found through mindful movement that brings together an understanding of experience through felt sense, while mindfully creating attention of connection to oneself in time; water offers a natural expression of this process. The body can utilize proprioceptive and vestibular inputs while submerged in the water, to experience spatial limits and freedom of flow. For example, considering variations in physical ability when practiced submerged in water, you are welcome to notice your relationship to floating, being in, and treading water, as parts of your body move and find stillness beneath the surface. Some Afro-Caribbean spiritual worldviews believe that the ocean is a Spirit that offers cleansing energy. To that end, rituals that include touching water (e.g., working with a bowl of water), visualizing (e.g., bodies of water), or embodying water (e.g., natural states of flow) during meditation can offer the experience of safe refuge in the quality of cleansing as emotional relief.

Trauma sensitive modifications in working with water as an embodied resource may be useful for some of us. Exploring various temperatures of water and noticing both internal and external sensory information may be a regulating strategy when actively practicing with water and physical touch. Given that interoception refers to the physiological qualities of embodiment that give us physical cues that are often registered in the body before understood in the mind (Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Seth et al., 2012), one might integrate inquiry with embodied exploration. Inquiries one might explore include: How does my body respond differently to cold, warm, and hotter temperatures of water? Do these changes increase a sense of comfort experienced in the body; what can I notice about how my breath adapts to this comfort and/or discomfort?

### ***Practicing with the sun***

The sun, in reference to the element of fire, can provide additional resources for interoceptive practice. African proverb states, “while the sun is shining, bask in it!” Although we cannot touch the sun, its rays can offer a tangible experience to activate processes of interoceptive awareness through its source of heat, power and light. You may have tried sitting or moving beneath the sun; here, you are invited to “drink in” the warmth of the sun and notice what internal sensations (e.g., tingling, tightening, releasing) that may arise underneath this heated element. The element of fire, associated with the energy of the sun, can be more of a physical resource for ritual contemplative practice. This energy also comprises qualities of transformation, enlivenment, energizing and activation that can be experienced in the core of our bodies. You may include inquiry in your practice to notice and locate in your body any reactivity that may arise.

Adaptations may include a countering practice to balance the intensity of sensations. For example, you may try integrating a cooling quality (e.g., other elements like water and air) to explore shifts or changes in your experience of security and safety. Combining inputs for sensory satiation is always an option.

### *Practicing with wind*

The wind, or air element, can offer a resource of spaciousness. Resourcing with the expansive quality of air can be a regulatory practice that counters the experiences of restriction and minimization. Wind mimics the breath and connects the embodied expression of breathing with its reflection in nature. You may explore tactile inputs of a breeze moving across your skin or add movement to experiment with proprioceptive inputs of your body in space. The practice of taking up space may also be embodied in a synchronous practice of breath and movement in relationship with air surrounding the body. Some embodied inquiries might include: What are the felt experiences of air as a source of safety? What are the feelings associated with reestablishing safety in the process of inhaling and exhaling air? Where in my body can I locate an experience of release or openness? Spaciousness can also be explored as a quality of care. Lama Rod Owens (2019) has noted this feminine energy in stating, “space is the mother, it gives rise to everything.”

Attention to trauma sensitive modifications can also be applied when practicing with the air element. Flow, as an alternative to constriction, can be additionally supportive in an expression of stability in one’s experience, when practiced with the earth. Growing the experience of spaciousness may feel too wide for some individuals, potentially overwhelming the nervous system. You are welcome to counter these practices by returning to grounding in the earth or exploring incrementally adding and subtracting grounding in earth practices.

Mindfulness of these embodied practices with elements of the land, allow us to bear witness to our experience with what is right in front of us. It can encourage us to act in savoring, reconciliation, or letting go of what is carried (both known and unknown) that can support a felt sense of safety (Malebranche & Bryant-Davis, 2019). By reclaiming ownership of the land/body and restoring body/ground, we can encourage embodied connections through cultivating the sense of each natural element in the body to create safety, refuge, and stability.

### **Power of Resilience: Ancestor Expression**

The power of home in embodied resilience can be experienced as protection, strength and nourishment. Victimization experienced by racial and ethnic minorities can result in an experiencing of “shattered” self-concept that may be connected to the cultural conception of the self (Bryant-Davis, 2008). However, when well-resourced, our bodies have the innate ability to be generative, creative, adaptive and relational to benefit both the self and the collective (Mijente, 2020). Discovering this resilience in our bodies is a protective process that can connect us to the nourishment of our cultural wisdoms which build capacity for facing adversity. French and colleagues (2020) articulate the importance of practices that strengthen racialized communities through the acknowledgement of suffering of oppression while also fostering hope for justice and psychopolitical freedom; such practices can be reflected in the legacy of our ancestors. In the R<sup>4</sup> framework, we practice remembering our roots to reclaim power in the body.

Contemplatives of color are offered a pathway to transgenerational healing by engaging in the practice of embodying our ancestors as benefactors. Bryant-Davis (2019) indicates, “you cannot heal where you haven’t gone.” As we reconnect to our bodies, we do so to our cultural wisdoms by understanding our identity in a lineage of ancestors who existed before us in harsher conditions yet held capacity to dream us into reality. Also referred to as “cultural memory” (Mijente, 2021), the tapping into what is already known, using cultural work to remember practices, traditions, and medicines of our ancestral lineages. In the practice of honoring, remembering and embodying benevolent ancestors (both known and unknown), we gain access to reclaiming a narrative identity that the body can experience in the present moment. Lived experiences can be conceptualized along a continuum, where reclamation and restoration can occur in the exploration of who came before and how their embodiment gets expressed in one’s present embodiment. Exploration of the body’s experience functions within a purpose of understanding what is carried, where it is carried, and discernment of what and how it gets passed on and carried forward. Suggestions for body-based focus in meditation practices with benevolent ancestors are further explored.



### ***Practicing walking with ancestors***

Of the traditional meditation postures—sitting, standing, walking, laying—walking meditation is one that can be directly connected with cultivating ancestral resilience, a healing source, in the body. Walking meditation calls us into mindful awareness of the physical sensations of moving. Consider: What begins to move and shift when you walk with the awareness of the ancestors? Is there a sense of struggle that arises, where might it be located in your body, and how can you find strength in the practice of remembering? Allow each physical step to reflect the steps taken before the present moment by ancestors in your lineage(s). Notice what sensations arise in the body and invite resources from the land to support your awareness. For example, you are welcome to explore the internal sensations of feeling supported by the earth, with the recognition that it is the same earth that held and supported the ancestors in their fullness. You may also explore various postures that your body inhabits and expresses; imagine the shapes that your body takes as a representation (e.g., message, virtue, quality, affirmation, characteristic, trait) from ancestors in your lineage(s) or play with adjusting your form to embody a representation that you wish to carry as an “ancestor-in-training.” What needs to be expressed through the body? As you embody these representations, you are invited to notice the emotional expressions that accompany your sensations. The body is in continuous relationship with the moment; practitioners are invited to explicitly acknowledge the presence of internal moment-to-moment awareness as part of a continuous wisdom that is present before and after this moment. When we acknowledge our power to deeply feel in this way, we engage in a life-long process of re-establishing self beyond harm and traumatic events to connect to the essence and historical wisdom of who we are.

### ***Practicing care with benevolent ancestors***

In a comfortable position, you are welcome to practice calling in a circle of care to support you in the moment. While your practice may include people, things or beings in your life that support you, you are invited to cultivate a circle of care with ancestors of your lineage(s). This may in-

clude individuals from your family or may include individuals who came before you to pave the way for your experience in life (e.g., mentors, teachers, authors, leaders). If it is possible for you, you are welcome to imagine intentionally inviting these figures to form a circle around you. See if you can check in with your body to indicate how close or far you would like them to be from your body. Perhaps you embody a sense of touch or space for resonance between you and the ancestors. Notice if there is any urge to move in a particular way or perhaps, you inquire from within your body, what is needed in this moment. See if you are able to sense a feeling of care or compassion that strengthens you. You may be inclined to make noise or voice something and experience the sensation of movement in your upper body. Try centering or holding values, or ethics close to you that can be nourished by the presence of your ancestors. How might this shift your experience in your body?

***Practicing with transgenerational qualities of ancestors***

You may practice *Sankofa*, the practice of fetching and returning to bring forth qualities from the past that may be supportive. In a seated or standing posture, try meditating on your sense of origin by perhaps visualizing a place, or sensing qualities of ancestors and elders who have contributed to the creation of your existence. Recognizing complex histories that we may have with our elders; you may notice a range of emotions and sensations that arise in your body. In the moment, see if you can locate, in various sources of your body, any qualities of constriction to expansion that may be identifiable through the rising and falling of internal sensations and emotions. Where can you access dignity in your body in this moment? It is important to make space for the possibility that nothing may arise at all. If you would like, allow yourself to include tactile inputs through personal touch to contact specific activating or numb locations of the body. You are welcome to include land resourcing and add movement to your practice as support throughout your exploration, as needed. Allow your attention to follow the needs of your body. To deepen the practice, notice how you situate the embodiments of the feminine/matriarch, as well as the masculine/patriarch lineage(s) in your body. Can you be aware of the expression, posturing,

or communication style of these different ancestral embodiments? Connecting with a sense of origin (i.e., feeling of home, belongingness, or simply the right to exist and just be), can be supported in the body and experienced as a strength or protective factor.

A practice that acknowledges the present body across time can also deepen this exploration. In addition to the embodiment practice described above, the body in the present can be extended both forward and backward in time. You are welcome to feel into the core, or heart center, of your body, to sense the experience of power or source. Allowing the body to move and enliven a shape that expresses power can also be helpful. When you are ready, you may be interested in practicing extending the sensation of power, perhaps through a beam of light or resonant sensation, through your back body, as if it were extending backward through generations of your lineage(s). Notice the felt sense of an exchange to and from your ancestors supporting you from behind. You may notice shifting in your body and are welcome to embody any shifted form that feels nourishing in the moment. This practice can be repeated in extending that same light, sensation or energy forward through the core, or heart-center, into future generations to come. This position highlights the strength of being in an embodied experience of an ancestor-in-training. Notice what sensations, emotions, and embodied shifts that may occur. In addition, you may integrate extending qualities forward and backward. Allow the power cultivated in the moment to strengthen and support you in relation to your lineage.

As a byproduct of accessing this ancestral resiliency, I have witnessed an embodiment of unapologetic expression of self and a liberatory reclaiming of identity amongst historically marginalized communities. Embodied contemplative practice that interrogates oppression by redistributing power in our individual and collective bodies, offers choice to show up in one's whole self-expression. Here, the practice of embodiment is used to acknowledge sensation, emotion, and cognition as cues to build greater capacity to recognize and respond to injustice individually and in community.

Furthermore, it is important to note that building individual resiliency is not the solution, but a necessary quality toward critical en-

gement. The facilitation of resilience building should not be misunderstood to promote individual responsibility for structural implications of harm; instead, it should help us create space to live our lives in full expressions of liberation and build more power. While our practices should continue to support us in identifying the problem in the system that continues to require generations of our strength and resilience, they should also encourage the resources needed to move toward action and creatively think and behave in new and transformative ways. The intentionality of pause and inward focus to the breath and body helps us assess our areas of power and its impact, as well as identify our needs, before going into action. Inner resources are cultivated to assist us in modulating ourselves and co-regulating with our community while we move through the difficult work of social change, without resorting to stress and trauma responses.

### **Power of Resistance: Future-Building Expression**

The power of resistance rests in the process of reclamation of one's unapologetic self in response to internalized oppression, in the service of envisioning and enlivening home as liberatory futures in the present. Much like our ancestors and elders, our bodies have always been a site of resistance considering ongoing oppression and persistent emotional, physical and psychological violence. A negative effect of racism, and systems of oppression alike, is internalizing the limiting beliefs about one's cultural identity through the lens of oppression (see David, 2013). Over time, we disconnect from our cultural roots of being, and attach to the ideas and practices of the oppressor and transfer these strategies as tactics for survival (e.g., DeGruy, 2007). R<sup>4</sup> interrupts this process to consider what is needed for us to reconnect to liberated futures that can be lived out in the present moment. The expression of future building is practiced with the body to support the process of transforming and uprooting internalized oppression.

Future building emerges when we vision beyond the present moment to manifest an expression of self, relationality, and structure that can support and nourish our full human experience. Embodied contemplative practice makes this expansion possible. In R<sup>4</sup> framework,

the foundation of building resource and resilience through the body is actualized through a resistance practice where the body becomes a vehicle for individual and collective change. Future building is critically influenced by our collective ability to center restorative spirit in our change work. To that end, our bodies are supported to reclaim authentic practices that subvert expectations of the oppressive system and “repurpose” what the body is here for; we are here to thrive and create (Bryant-Davis, 2019).

Giles (2019) notes that “cultivation” of the future “is not about study, it’s about practice.” The body represents a technology to practice imagining possible futures through a Black cultural lens that can be embodied in the present moment. In a culture of dominance where authentic practices of liberation are stifled, we practice visions of liberation for the future as an embodiment of possibility in the present. The Resistance component considers (a) how we hold our bodies in support of, or resistance to, White supremacy and intersectional oppression; (b) what are we able to feel; (c) what practice(s) can open our ability to feel; and (d) emphasizes the possibility to embody freedom in external conditions of oppression. Ancestor Audre Lorde (1984, p. 38) reminds us of the power of our felt sense: *“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.”*

As we increase our presence with our felt sense and sensations, more choices are revealed to us in the moment. How might the body help us choose what to do with this critical awareness? Suggestions for body-based exploration that honors our bodies as resistance in natural expressions of liberation are explored.

### ***Practicing with the breath***

In mindfulness-based practice, we facilitate the breath as an anchor, but must also recognize the politicization of the breath—that many of us struggle to breathe and for some of our siblings, the breath has been stolen from its home in the body. Restoring the breath and reteaching ourselves how to breathe is a radical practice of justice. You are welcome to try and start with experiencing the breath and noticing if it takes

different shapes through the inhale and exhale. Is there a widening or a sense of constriction, can it flow throughout your body, or might it feel stuck in a particular location? You may begin to notice the quality of the body and heart as something arises with your breath. Feel free to explore the life force, which is acknowledged through your breath, as you breathe awareness into your body's messages of power differentials or a felt sense that highlights any dominance in the body. For example, try increasing your awareness of internal conditioned hierarchies of your emotional expression.

The practice of witnessing all parts of self through breath practice is a process of coming home to oneself in opening up to the wounding and heartbreak of forced narratives and holding space for those narratives. You are welcome to invite a simple affirmation on the inhale to breathe in what is our birthright, while exhaling carried experiences of toxicity of racial and other dominance. Depending on what you notice, you might shift your attention from breath being an anchor to breath becoming a guide and a connection to our role in honoring present embodiment, the collective struggle of our ancestors, and the vision for our future generations. Notice what feels more or less accessible in this practice. You may experiment with breath as the "meeting place" for your body, mind, and spirit (Anpu, 2017).

You are welcome to deepen the practice to explore how you might support gaining compassion for aspects of the self that have been policed and border controlled by oneself and others (e.g., what emotions we allow and accept vs. emotions that we hide and avoid). Perhaps the breath helps you meet this experience or contact how this awareness shifts the body that holds the breath, as well as the breath that makes its way through the body. One may notice being confronted by the connection of one's physical experience as a representation of internalized experiences (e.g., psychological fear and anxiety) in the holding or resistance that may be present in the body. For example, your breath may tell a story of scarcity through a tendency to hold one's breath or difficulty in controlling one's breath. Try bringing a sense of curiosity through safe tactile inputs on the body, deeper breaths, or breathing techniques to explore your embodied relationship to the experience.

May this awareness be an invitation to integrate resourcing or resilience supports as necessary and as available to you. You may explore changing your breath or using various breathing techniques to transform the internal bodily experience with your felt life force. Notice any shift that may occur in this compassionate witnessing, or full embodied seeing and feeling, of any internalizations that may be felt in your experience of the moment. Here, we recognize how ‘witnessing’ can be examined in the context of White supremacy, where merely being seen or noticed by Whiteness has led to violence and harm. Perhaps you may offer a practice where your breath can be witnessed by your ancestors and witnessed in your body for safekeeping.

### ***Practicing with free movement***

Exploration with movement can be a practice to uproot and move reactions and defaults of internalized messages of harm. Stories can be unlocked in the body to support mind-body healing (Levine & Frederick, 1997). To counter movement restrictions often experienced by structural racism, the invitation is to practice agency through taking up space and making choices with our bodies. Try witnessing your internal experience, as you make choices about how and when to move. You are invited to acknowledge what your body might want or need in the moment and respond accordingly with increasing or decreasing sensations in your body. This practice of noticing and responding along the spectrum of movement takes us outside the metrics of systems of inequity to feel, set boundaries and meet our needs; our increased capacity to feel may be a pathway toward freedom. In this practice, to feel is to resist numbness, disconnection and dissociation.

Importantly, movement does not always have to be expressive and visible to others, and in contrast can be boldly expressive and lively. You are invited to acknowledge intersections of ability to explore ways to practice movement in the subtleties (e.g., breathing, blinking, stimulating, or self-stimulatory behavior) and in full body expressions from hands to feet (e.g., expressions of rhythmic movement, liturgical dancing, yoga asanas). For example, you can contrast micro movements in

the fingers and toes, with macro movements from your limbs, as accessible for you. The false binary of stillness and movement can be challenged as we notice how our bodies are always in a constant state of moving. You are invited to become aware of the sensations of feeling, seeing, and expressing yourself across the spectrum. Perhaps building a practice to discover one's growing congruence in allowing the external experience to connect with the internal experience of the body may be an ongoing exploration.

### ***Practicing with rest***

Rest is a radically sacred practice that acknowledges the whole body. We recognize how our bodies hold generations of fatigue and contemporary stress while operating within oppressive conditions in society. Therefore, you are invited into moments of pause, settling, and renewal through the embodied experience of rest as care. Practices can range *from* tactile inputs of soft or deeper touch to parts of the body to allowing the weight of your body to be held or carried by another support. Seeing if you can sense the qualities of soothing and renewing, perhaps in the proprioceptive experience of the body in supportive space, or the interoceptive awareness of sensations from within the body. You are welcome to invite the felt sense of allowing the body to rest from being perceived by another; here, may you rest from hypervisibility and the demand of the gaze.

Rest as a spiritual practice can impact the subtle levels of the body in the present, while also functioning as an intention to choose rest for the ancestors who had no choice, who moving was the only path forward. In this practice, rest is deserved, not earned. While full body rest is always welcome, you may also choose to explore the shifting experience of the body when restful moments are threaded into your daily experience. How does your nervous system respond to moments of protecting your energy or setting a boundary? Noticing what sensations arise and how one might embody the qualities of rest can expand our capacity to respond creatively in systems that have made it difficult for us to do so.



### *Practicing with joy*

Joy may be one of the most beautifully disruptive practices held in this framework. “Black joy” celebrates and declares that people of African descent can experience pleasure and happiness, despite ongoing trauma and a history of oppression. Try leaning into experiences that bring full-bodied enjoyment, noticing the qualities of spaciousness, energy, reverberation, and aliveness that may be available to you. Integrating play and youthful practices are a way to stimulate experiences of authentic joy. You may inquire into your relationship with these practices through how your body responds to the moment. You are invited to acknowledge emotions that may be associated with your experience and are welcome to embody joy as a state of mind or a state of being. Using intentional awareness to feel where we can and cannot sense the experience of joy sparked in our bodies can also be a practice to cultivate space to hold sadness and other unpleasant states of our experience.

This author reflects on the frank words of her immigrant mother, “I’ll be still when I’m 10 feet under” and considers the structural conditions that are necessary for us to practice “stillness.” Her words illustrate an extensive history of disembodiment alongside an intergenerational commitment to survival. The truth of her reality reminds me of the transgenerational narratives that shift from surviving to thriving each time I choose to engage in practice amidst variable external conditions. However, inward focused attention can reflect inherited residue of harmful and unaccountable systems that produce internalized damaging effects. Through embodied contemplative practice, the body regains its capacity to liberate and subvert internal systems of hierarchy and domination that, at times, looks like fragmenting ourselves and identities (e.g., *embodied code switching*, Edelman, 2018) and policing emotions through inherent structures of privilege and power. For example, when certain emotions are denied from certain bodies (e.g., anger expression from Black bodies), it exemplifies the ways in which one’s humanity can be denied and the ways in which dehumanization is reinforced by the suppression of emotion (Majied, 2020). While the ability to suppress parts of self (e.g., grief, desire, anguish) is unconsciously developed to sustain safety, body-based contemplative practice can restore our con-

nection so that the site of healing grows from the resiliency of the body and a renewed experiencing of adaptive qualities in sacred emotions (i.e., anger and rage).

R<sup>4</sup>, especially the element of resistance, supports the act of embodied practice that interrupts generations of dissociation as a survival mechanism, builds capacity, and develops skill to heal generations of trauma moving forward. Such practices increase body awareness of habitual patterns and lean into authentic expressions of self, thus helping to expand patterns and create intentionality and choice around reactions to move through environment. When Whiteness is practiced, disembodiment is also practiced; engaging the felt sense of resistance through liberatory expressions of future building in the moment can offer guidance to creative ways to resist.

### **Power of Relationship: Collective Expression**

We establish home in the body as resource, resilience, and resistance for embodied healing of cultural trauma and oppression in order to re-engage relationship with self and each other more meaningfully. James Baldwin writes, “if it broke your heart, know that it broke mine first.” The interconnectedness expressed in Baldwin’s words highlight a culturally inherent relational and communal sense of connection that can be used to explore the collective body. African worldview notes the experience of self in relation to other bodies, or the “extended self” (Nobles, 2006). It is further understood through African modes of being through concepts of *ubuntu*, “I am because we are” (e.g., Edwards et al., 2004; Washington, 2010) and *umoja*, one of the *nguzo saba* (seven principles) of African heritage meaning unity, expressed by staying connected and normalizing shared experiences of vulnerability. The framework of R<sup>4</sup> establishes home in the collective body through community building as an extension of contemplative practice, while the practice of community building in and of itself is also experienced as a practice of critical contemplation (Malebranche, 2021).

Contemplative healing practices within a community context have long been an effective coping strategy for communities of color, as a source of connection, healing, and physical and psychological resil-

ience (Bruce et al., 2018; Harrell, 2018). Embodied healing seeks to support the integration that allows us to be in community, create connections and feel viscerally grounded. When the body is safe and regulated in the face of stress, our process for social engagement is activated (Porges, 2011). Home found in connection and relationship is proposed as the core pillar to supporting healthy Black embodiment, where resource, resilience and resistance must happen within relationship to one another. While oppression breeds separation and isolation, embodied contemplative practice in beloved community can play a role in prioritizing healing in relationship and awaken the essence of who we are as a collective.

Cultural embodied knowledge stems from the lived experiences of being seen, witnessed and valued in one's own embodiment within both context and relational community (Malebranche, 2021). It is supported by a deep witnessing, honoring and acceptance. Strengthening *sawubona*, an ancient Zulu greeting to indicate "we see you," is about a collective witnessing that resists participation in dehumanizing dynamics of oppression and engages in meaningful healing (Harrell, 2021). In this experience, we observe home reflected in the social capacity around us in two ways: accountability and acceptance. Relational accountability to show up in radical presence is held and promoted as a practice of solidarity.

Beloved community, popularized by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., centers nonviolence principles in a community of all-inclusive siblinghood. In the practice of this community, the self is engaged in a supportive system that provides holding space and nourishment that holds one another accountable in deep love. It is in this beloved community, formed by affirmation of our cultural legacies (hooks, 1996; Yang, 2017), that complexity and multidimensionality of who we are in diverse experiences of Blackness and Black embodiment can be held by others in shared authentic expression. In community as practice, how are we making space for people to be complex, holding different experiences with harm and subjugation? It is essential to have aligned ethics and processes that support each beloved's needs being met in the practice of

community building as contemplative practice and embodiment of the collective body. Embodied contemplative practice, conveyed through community, aligns healing in relationship to self and others with a purpose to center healing for cultural, political, and social wellbeing. The power of community is highlighted by the late Vietnamese peace activist and spiritual leader, Thich Nhat Hanh (1994):

It is possible the next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community, a community practicing understanding and lovingkindness, a community practicing mindful living. And the practice can be carried out as a group, as a city, as a nation.

Relationships in non-violent community and open heartedness to struggle can provide a safe and sustainable container for centering embodiment experience and utilizing the body as a path toward individual and collective liberatory and transformative healing. While embodied power relations can be explored through Resource, Resilience and Resistance practices, embodiment is most clearly demonstrated rationally with each other. How we shift and change is allowed, supported, and accountable to transforming power dynamics through practicing in the body and in relationship with each other. In beloved community, we are invited to practice becoming aware of and shifting our embodiment in an environment that allows and supports transformation and liberation.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, this author seeks to explore the cultivation of safe embodiment for Black bodies and other bodies of culture, through the offering of a conceptual framework, with associated practices, for compassionately building an embodied sense of home. While on this journey, it is apparent that external societal conditions remain under examination and (re)construction. Therefore, embodied contemplative practice of R<sup>4</sup> reorients individuals when met with ongoing violence, oppression and marginalization to have new skills for responding. The integration of Resource, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship fosters metab-

olization, rather than separation and disembodiment. Contemplation encourages the reflection of how we are consuming and metabolizing the moment, whether or not it is leading to separation and disembodiment or connection and engagement, and how one's practice plays a role in this power dynamic. The integrated awareness not only supports the present experience, but the honoring of generations backward and forward. The reality of "I can't breathe" becomes transformed into the ongoing practice and internalization of "I am breathing and will continue to breathe" despite external conditions. The more grounded and embodied we become, the more we begin to impact the space around us with intention and critical awareness.

### **Future Directions**

Initial explorations of R<sup>4</sup> as a working conceptual framework have been discussed. This author intends to continue developing the R<sup>4</sup> framework through integrated methods of research and practice in community. Foundations can be further explored through applications in communities of color, utilization of narrative inquiries, and emancipatory research methods. Specific methodologies to frame further examination and practice will highlight power-sharing approaches and prioritize community engagement and accessibility, maintain ethics of social justice and shared knowledge, center reflexivity with an ongoing analysis of privilege and oppression, and normalize iterative processes of reflection, planning, and action to inform change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Duran & Wallerstein, 2017; Lee et al., 2021). Future research may explore related outcomes (e.g., *fierce compassion*, Majied, 2020). Practical application can also be explored to deepen shared understandings of the four guiding elements and their related cultural expressions. It will also be important to explore iterative strategies for development and evaluation of guided practices and protocols.

The intentions of R<sup>4</sup> seek to acknowledge that when the racialized body has been targeted as a site for trauma, embodied practice can be critical to reestablishing the body as a safe, protected and empowered home for healing the self and for embodying a vehicle for healing the collective. This author believes the statement that it is "radical to

be Black and still” (Bryant-Davis, 2018) in the violent conditions of our environment. The conceptual framework of R<sup>4</sup>, Resources, Resilience, and Resistance in Relationship, both disrupts and reclaims the existence of Black bodies, and those of the Global Majority. By engaging an embodied present moment practice to build a sense of power, opportunities are cultivated to liberate the self from external influences, increase self-focused attention to build capacity for change, and share transformative responses across generations. To practice homemaking, it is critical to lean into embodiment as radical healing. We remember the words of ancestor Maya Angelou and work to normalize connection and integration of safe and uninterrupted home within ourselves and amongst our beloved collectives.

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