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Articles

African Americans in Ghana: Enacting Literate Acts of Healing from Epistemic and Ontological Harm

Mohammed Sakip Iddrisu

Abstract

Black scholars across disciplines including literacy studies have theorized literacy practices and traditions that people of African descent employ towards healing. In response to Black rhetorical scholars' call for the discipline to examine Black diasporans' healing practices in charged sites of trauma such as the Pikworo Slave Camp in Ghana, I devise methods, informed by Indigenous decolonial approaches, to study and theorize African Americans' creative literacy practices of healing at a historic site in Ghana.

Keywords: Healing, Literacy Practices, Indigenous Decolonial Methods, Sankofa, Ontological Harm, Epistemic Harm

Introduction

Ours is a time of intense racial reckoning and communal investment in diverse healing practices that span across local, national, and transnational borders. In these times, many communities such as the African diaspora—specifically African Americans—are reimagining and investing in creative literacy practices of healing, as decolonial endeavors, from the harms of colonialism and anti-Black racism. These healing practices have found expressions in various cultural spaces in post-independent Ghana, West Africa, a transnational rhetorical site beyond the Euro-American context of the U.S. which is deeply and systematically anti-Black and inherently colonial.

Historically, Ghana has been a cultural site of refuge and anti-colonial protest for African Americans especially since the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Given its colonial history as a former British colony and one of the first Black African nations to gain independence from colonial rule, the nation-state of Ghana, as an institution, has had a long history of beckoning African Americans to return “home.” Such institutional calls have historically created expectations of how African Americans should *be* in Ghana and have scaffolded many of the projects—symbolic and material—that African Americans have initiated and participated in in Ghana. For a start, consider the fact that in 1957, at the behest of the nation-state, Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent African Americans traveled to Ghana to participate

in the new nation's independence celebration, a symbolic yet impactful voyage that shaped King's civil rights rhetoric upon his return to the U.S. (Gaines). In the contemporary, the nation-state continues to call African Americans to Ghana. This call is motivated by the nation-state's own structural and economic interests to attract capital investment (Attiah). Thousands of African Americans have responded to this call (Dini-Osman; Taylor) especially since 2019 when the government of Ghana initiated the "Year of Return" to commemorate 400 years (1619-2019) since the first enslaved Black Africans were violently captured and shipped from the coast of West Africa to present day Virginia, stripping them of their very humanity. What I investigate here are their practices of healing, particularly those that circumvent the institutional status quo and primary economic interests of the nation-state. Participants in my study creatively initiate literate social practices geared towards reclamation of their humanity and healing from the ongoing residues of colonialism and contemporary anti-Black violence.

For centuries, African Americans have been engaged in different types of healing traditions manifested through spirituals, healing narratives, healing circles, wounded healing, and diasporan literacy (Boutte; Hill; King). In addition to these healing traditions, several Black scholars including John Henrik Clarke and bell hooks argue that people of African descent need to engage in heritage knowledge—African Americans' knowledge and memory of their collective histories—to heal and attain "complete self-actualization" (hooks 47). In Clarke's view, heritage knowledge, which includes re-establishing some ties with Africa, will liberate Black communities "from the old ties of bondage" (86). Against the backdrop of over 400 years since the African Holocaust, brutal murder, exploitation of African labor, and denial of access to their ancestral homeland and cultures, African Americans are returning to African countries including Ghana to reconnect with their ancestral heritage as a way of healing and reclaiming their humanity. Indeed, Black scholars argue that the African Holocaust or the Holocaust of Enslavement caused varied degrees of emotional, physical, and psychological trauma and wounds from which Africans and people of African descent need to heal (Browdy and Milu 235; Karenga).

As a Black African from Ghana, I recognize the atrocious impact that slavery and colonialism has had and continue to have on Africans and people of African descent. Accordingly, I share in the call for healing among continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora. My positionality and experiences of living in Ghana as an *African* and in the United States as a *Black African* deeply inform my approach, particularly my methods and analyses, in this study. As an insider (African) and outsider (not African American), I approach this topic with a personal and nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and communal intricacies involved. My own complex identities and positionality allow me to explore this topic with profound sensitivity and empathy and a sense of shared cultural heritage with my African American participants.

In this study, I explore African Americans' literate social practices of healing in Ghana and theorize how they initiate creative literacies shaped by Indigenous epistemologies. My study focuses on participants engaging in practices aimed at reclaim-

ing their humanity and healing from the ongoing impacts of colonialism and contemporary anti-Black violence. My analyses are predicated on the fact that in a world where anti-Black racism runs rampant, healing has become a desirable and prioritized goal of every Black person. Rhetorical scholars Ronisha Browdy and Esther Milu contend that “Black people everywhere, continental and Diasporic, must seek approaches to healing from the physical and psychological wounds caused by the African Holocaust” (235). The prolonged experiences of colonialism, slavery, anti-Black racism, and ongoing coloniality have resulted in Black people experiencing varied degrees of harm and disorders, including colonial mentality (Fanon), double-consciousness (Du Bois), inferiority complex (Wa Thiong’o), and epistemic injustice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni). In Ghana, the African Americans I studied enact literate social practices of healing both at a historic site and in their everyday lives to heal from different forms of harm. In this analysis, I categorize these forms of harm into epistemic harm and ontological harm.

Transnational mobility—forced and voluntary—occupies center stage in the denigration and reclamation of Black humanity. From a colonial perspective, the Transatlantic slave trade that forcefully transported enslaved Africans to the now American side of the Atlantic constitutes a damning example of racializing, degrading, and exploiting Black humanity and bodies for the benefit of Western nation-states and corporations. More recently, people of African descent in the diaspora are actively engaging in various practices of healing as decolonial endeavors. Such endeavors have engendered some version of Black/African American transnational mobility to the continent of Africa, especially Ghana. Accordingly, the movement of African Americans from the Global North, the U.S., to the Global South, Ghana, presents a somber epistemic space to account for how individuals in the African American community are constructing radical change by inventing new practices for being and healing transnationally.

Such transnational mobility poses a challenge for decolonial researchers. Methods must attend to how local epistemologies cue literate social practices of transnational subjects returning to their ancestral homeland to experience more just and more dignified versions of being human. In this study I theorize how, in Ghana, African Americans initiate creative literacies shaped by local, Indigenous epistemologies and how our methods can attend to such literacies. These literacies challenge the field’s dominant, traditional, and institutional views of literacies. Accordingly, our methods need to account for these unfamiliar, albeit insightful, literacies—situated as they are in spaces embodied by African Americans elsewhere and otherwise. This orientation contributes to several disciplinary conversations.

Literature Review

Rhetorics and Literacies of Healing: Expanding Disciplinary Borders

Research in the discipline has complicated the linear associations of trauma to healing including the fact that joy may be a source of healing. Also, complexities such as the relationship between writer and audience open opportunities for healing. For example,

across different disciplines that are concerned with trauma and healing, writing (primarily textual practices of journaling, poetry, and creative nonfiction) has emerged as one of the popular activities that people engage in as an instrument of or on the path to healing (Anderson and MacCauly; Ryden; Vieira). Over two decades ago, the National Council of Teachers of English published a collection, *Writing and Healing*, edited by Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy, that heightened the field's interest in the rhetoric of healing and writing. In her work where she examines the place and dialectic of private and public approaches to healing through writing in the composition classroom, Wendy Ryden suggests that we need to pay "attention to the rhetoric of audience" as "an effective means of showing us the way" in responding to complicated ways through which writing is therapeutic and cathartic. While many studies in the field focus on writing and trauma, Ryden argues that writing to heal should not always emanate from a place of pain; it can also stem from a place of joy or other forms of experiences. Thus, the experiences writers invoke to heal are complicated by the audience, including themselves, with whom they engage in a rhetorical exchange.

The complex somatic dimensions of literacies and healing are conditioned by the way power dynamics override our bodies. At a time when our world continues to experience increasing rates of oppression across many intersectional identities and power imbalances, Kate Vieira in "Writing's Potential to Heal: Women Writing from their Bodies" asserts that we need to further theorize the conditions under which writing as a complex, embodied, and social practice contributes to physical healing (20). In her work with mostly white women seeking physical restoration, Vieira theorizes writing as a complex social and bodily practice imbued with the potential to heal people from their physical and emotional traumas. Yet, this access to writing's potential to heal is not available to everyone. That is, it is constrained by people's access to power including ways in which the systems of power that they are exposed to help and privilege their narratives as well as social contexts that afford them the opportunity to use writing to connect their bodies and minds. To account for such unequal access to healing through writing undercut by power and context, as she notes, the discipline needs further qualitative studies that capture the experiences of "diverse groups of writers" (35).

To extend this line of inquiry in the discipline across transnational borders, I contend that we need to theorize other forms of literacies of healing that go beyond writing because writing, itself, is a privileged literacy that may be constrained by power and inaccessible to or uncommon in certain contexts and cultures. Expanding our disciplinary borders to attend to various literacies of healing is critical because there are numerous cultures that use non-alphabetic text and oral practices as methods of healing. In rhetoric and composition scholarship, for example, Iris Ruiz and Sonia C. Arellano theorize medicinal history and quilting as decolonial methods and alternatives of healing from colonial wounds and reclaiming marginalized people's ways of knowing and being in the world.

Ways of Healing in Black Scholarly Writings and Communities

Black scholars across disciplines including literacy studies have theorized various literacy practices and traditions that people of African descent employ towards healing. These scholars demonstrate that healing as a continuing process requires reimagining the traumatic impact of racism on our heads and bodies (Menakem), rethinking what constitutes grief and sorrow within the contexts of systemic oppressions (Wade), and reassessing our thoughts and feelings through embodied mindfulness to increase our emotional resilience (Magee). At its core, knowledge, newly constructed and reclaimed, is the foundation upon which Black people's journey towards healing and reclamation of their humanity rests (Busia). That is, a critical component of such literacy practices and traditions revolves around knowledge-building and learning that center African Indigenous epistemologies, histories, and knowledge of Black people's collective experiences of cultural and epistemic dispossessions (Boutte et al.). Renowned Black literacy scholar Joyce E. King, in what she terms "Diasporan Literacy," argues that one of the ways of healing the souls and minds of Black people is to teach them to appreciate, own, and reclaim their histories and identities as "Africa's children" (321). For King and other scholars, literacy practices including storytelling about the experiences of the African diaspora have the potential to facilitate Black people's capacity to heal by affirming their sense of agency, wisdom, self-recognition, and a repossession of their ancestral/heritage knowledge (King).

Textual practices have afforded African Americans and people of African descent methods of healing. These practices include stories, testimonies, poems, and songs. In many of those practices, the legacy of slavery has been a prominent subject. In the contemporary, Black women writers are exploring "strategies for healing without engaging slavery directly, focusing instead on more contemporary maternal figures...as healers" (Williams 77). For example, this writing documents the healing tradition of laying of hands by the healers who are perceived to possess ancestral spirits similar to priests and priestesses in the African tradition (77). In "Healing Traditions" and *Healing Narratives*, Black scholars Stephanie Y. Evans and Gay Alden Wilentz, respectively, chronicle an array of healing practices such as composing poetry, memoirs, song lyrics, and pursuing cultural reconnection in the writings of Black women writers. Critical in these writings is the function of healing traditions as interventions against mental, emotional, and physical harm perpetrated against members of the Black community.

Further, oral literacies enacted through healing circles constitute a major tradition aimed towards healing in Black communities. Black feminist sociologist Jennifer L. Richardson advances healing circles, in the tradition of African Ring Shouts, as a pedagogical intervention that people of African descent, especially Black women, use to heal. In her research, she theorizes that healing functions as a political and social act of resistance and healing circles allow Black women to create a free space where they can exercise self-care, reflect on their experiences, and build emotional, political, and social bonds to overcome the trauma that media violence has on their humanity (285). Like Richardson, Black psychologist Erlanger A. Turner and others note that emotional emancipation circles are also a type of healing cir-

cles with “an African-centered communal cultural orientation” that Black communities use to “target whole communities for healing since racism creates emotional pain and threatens optimal functioning” of Black communities (559). For example, Marc Lamont Hill in his framing of wounded healing suggests that sharing stories of pain and suffering within Black communities and in the classroom creates an opportunity for healing both for the storyteller and the listeners (262). Given that the traumatic experiences emanating from anti-Black racism affect Black communities, these group-oriented healing circles where oral literacies such as storytelling are used emphasize the relevance of community healing as a key component towards the reclamation of Black humanity.

Hybrid Literacies at the Ancestral Slave River Park in Ghana

Given their Western orientation and African heritage, African Americans in Ghana enact hybrid textual and non-textual literate social practices of healing in various local contexts and for various rhetorical purposes. Such practices further complicate both what we constitute as literacies and how we study those practices across diverse communities. As I describe later, a typical example of a context in which African Americans in Ghana exhibit hybrid textual and non-textual rituals of literacies is the Ancestral Slave River Park in the Central Region of Ghana. This is the river site where enslaved Africans captured in the hinterland took their “last bath” before being transported for auctioning. In this context, many African Americans engage in embodied rituals of healing and then later, they write down their names and brief notes on the “Memorial Wall of Return” (Fig. 1).

The Memorial Wall of Return functions as a kind space where African Americans and other Africans in the diaspora symbolically inscribe their names as evidence of their return to their ancestral homeland. This gesture is in defiance of colonial structures that sought to deny them of their right of return home when their ancestors, enslaved Africans, were made to pass through the “gate of no return” before boarding the vessels that took them to the New World. Such complex literate social practices provide insightful cases for us, as scholars, to expand our epistemic borders within community literacy research.



Figure 1: Memorial Wall of Return at the Ancestral Slave River Park in Ghana. Seven concrete slabs stand on an elevated concrete floor surrounded by trees and grass. Beside them is a shorter concrete slab with the inscription “Memorial Wall of Return”

Decolonial Indigenous Methodologies and Methods

Scholars in literacy studies and rhetoric continue to grapple with devising methods that expand and challenge the conventional print and text heavy methods of doing literacy research (Snyder 141-2). Recently, scholars such as Ellen Cushman and Esther Milu, among others have theorized literacy practices from decolonial perspectives that honor various literacies and language practices of Indigenous communities. Such decolonial perspectives challenge us to expand our methods to attend to practices—textual and non-textual—that colonized peoples enact towards decolonizing epistemologies, healing, and other knowledge practices (Browdy and Milu; Mamdani). My methods in this study are informed by Indigenous decolonial approaches (Chilisa; Milu; Smith) for conducting literacy research and community-engaged inquiry among colonized peoples.

The prominent African Indigenous decolonial theorist Bagele Chilisa observes that rediscovery and recovery are critical components of processes of decolonization within Indigenous methodologies because they highlight *how* colonized Others reclaim their histories, cultures, and identities (16). Concerned with how African Americans travel to Ghana to rediscover themselves, reconnect with their ancestral homeland, and recover from the traumas of slavery and anti-Black racism, I employ methods of rediscovery and recovery as they allow me to witness *actual* practices of healing that African Americans enact in their ancestral homeland. Guided by such Indigenous decolonial framework, I go on-the-ground to engage with the local sites in Ghana where African American participants embody and enact varied literacy practices in the service of healing. These methods thus honor African Indigenous methodologies and respond to Browdy and Milu’s call for Global Black Rhetoricians to theorize healing in charged sites of trauma such as the Pikworo Slave Camp in Ghana (235) and Mahmoud Mamdani’s call for public intellectuals to “be as close to the ground as possible” in doing epistemological decolonial inquiry with local and transnational communities (79).

In our contemporary world where global problems compel peoples to move, travel, and migrate, transnational mobility creates new contexts for writing and demands new literacies (Lorimer Leonard). These realities complicate our methods for doing literacy research. Rhetorician and decolonial methodologies scholar Godwin Agboka has argued that when our participants cross borders into new territories, our methods in decolonial research must adjust to and maneuver around those borders to attend to new questions and account for the practices that our participants engage in within the proper context (319). On the ground, theorizing African Americans’ literate social practices in their transnational mobility from the Global North, the U.S., to the Global South, Ghana, presents intricate methodological challenges such as figuring out how to witness firsthand their situated literate social practices at charged

cultural sites. As Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton assert, literacies have the “ability to travel, integrate, and endure” (337) and in the case of African Americans in and visiting Ghana, the creative and situated social literacies that they enact in their travels facilitate their learning, unlearning, and healing.

Methods

Data Collection

I collected data for this study in two ways: first, by observing African American participants at a historic site in Ghana, which included taking photos of literacy artifacts that structured participants’ activities at the sites; and, second, by interviewing African Americans about their experiences in Ghana. This two-part approach sought to capture and honor the complex and liberating literate practices of African Americans in Ghana that I became acquainted with as a member of a Facebook group that seeks to provide different resources for African Americans who are visiting or repatriating to Ghana. I learned while participating in this group that in Ghana, African Americans conjure the spiritual and perform varied embodied rituals in real time at charged historic sites and in their daily lives in Ghana. At historic sites such as the Ancestral Slave River Park, I learned that they also infuse these embodied, performative rituals with writing their names and brief notes on site. Based on what I was reading/learning in the Facebook group, I wondered: What is the relationship between these complex and hybrid rituals in relation to African Americans’ return to their ancestral homeland? What are these performative rituals and literacies in service of? I was intellectually curious to undertake a study that would systematically theorize the deeper significance of such practices and the methods by which we might study those African-centered practices.

Observing and Engaging Participants at an Historic Site

African Americans regularly visit several historic sites in Ghana. Most of these sites, such as the slave dungeons dotted across the coast of Ghana, Pikworo Slave Camp, and the Ancestral Slave River Park, are connected to slavery while others, such as the Gbewaa Palace and Manhyia Palace, are connected to the richness and dignity of Ghanaian culture. For this study, I traveled to Ghana in the summer of 2022 to observe African Americans’ embodied literate social practices at the Ancestral Slave River Park located in the Central Region of Ghana.

On the day I visited the park for my ethnographic observation, I spent about six hours at the site. I first went to the office to introduce myself to the tour guide on duty and explained to him my research objectives for visiting the site, showing him documents such as my student ID and IRB approval from my institution. He gave me consent to participate in and observe activities on site and informed me that he was expecting some visitors on site.

After waiting for some time, I noticed that some minivans carrying visitors had pulled over the parking lot of the site. Most of the visitors were Black. For the entire

time, I observed two separate groups of visitors who arrived at separate times. Before the actual “tours” of the site began, the guide on site asked people where they had come from. These organized activities are framed as tours, and I use that language here although it gives me great unease to perceive them as touristic activities. For each of the two groups, many of the people present were from the U.S. and a few were from the Caribbeans, and the U.K. Despite that these other Black diasporans may be returning for similar reasons as African Americans, within the limitations of my study, I focused specifically on African Americans for this research as a case study. I surmise that different Black diasporan communities, given their unique experiences and geographies, may engage in healing practices that account for a particular harm relevant to those unique experiences and we need different studies to theorize similarities and differences in healing practices among Black diasporan communities in and visiting Ghana.

Throughout the tours, I observed certain sequenced activities that cut across many of the African Americans. For example, at the beginning of the trail near what is called the Memorial Wall of Return, as the tour guide told the history of how captured Africans walked barefooted and in chains along the trails to the river for their last bath, I saw several African Americans removing their footwear. Then, they walked barefooted along the trail in moments of silence, being attentive to the history being told. At the river, many of them went down the stairs to the bank of the river that has been designated the “First Bath of Return”, stepped into the river, washed their faces and hands from the wrist to the elbow, walked back from the river, walked back still barefooted to the beginning of the trail, and then inscribed their names and brief notes on the Memorial Wall of Return. Among the second group, I observed that a few African Americans shed tears along the way.

During the process, I made notes of these observations in a small notepad and took photos of artifacts without intruding on the personal space of the visitors. At the end, I wanted to hear from participants as they hurried to the tour vans that had brought them to the park. One visitor, Bryt, consented to an interview. She had engaged in all the activities I have described above. She glossed for me the significance of walking to the river and back. In my analysis, I reference her responses regarding the meanings and curative potentials of those literate activities that she performed at the park and her overall travel to Ghana.

For me, these on-the-ground participant observations were significant in three main ways. First, they allowed me to walk alongside African Americans and to bear witness to how their literate social practices embodied their grief and desire for healing in a park memorializing the atrocities and dehumanization that our ancestors were subjected to. Second, this vantage point afforded me opportunities to see the rituals I had read about on Facebook unfolding in time and space in relation to visitors’ engagement with and in the park’s history. Third, I, too, given my positionalities as Ghanaian and Black, had an embodied experience in solidarity with those with whom I share a common humanity. These experiences informed my coding of the data from the observations and my subsequent interviews with African Americans in Ghana.

Recruiting and Interviewing African American Participants

In addition to Bryt, with whom I had the brief interview at the Ancestral Slave River Park, I recruited the African American participants for this study through Facebook community groups for expatriates in Ghana. I am a member of two closed Facebook groups called “Expat Life Ghana” and “Africans Leaving America.” With permission from the administrators, I made a post on the group pages informing members about my study and my search for African American participants. In my post, I invoked our shared history as people of African descent and informed my target audience about how the stories they will share with me will be beneficial to me as an emerging scholar who is dedicating his research to theorizing their insightful practices of healing and decolonial endeavors in Ghana and to the members of the global Black community who have a desire to participate in this communal healing.

After the post, several members indicated their interest in the study and I reached out to them privately. At the time, I was still in the U.S. Given that these were individuals who had agreed to share some of their intimate embodied experiences with me, I wanted to build some relationship and rapport with them over time through regular chat on Facebook. For some, I offered recommendations about strategies for finding accommodation in Ghana, educated them about local fabrics and ethics of dealing with strangers, and suggested other historic places that they may visit to expand their knowledge of cultures in Ghana. When I traveled to Ghana, I met some of the participants including Malik at the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Center for Pan African Culture in Accra. My interview with Malik, for example, took place after a month of our in-person meeting. For me, the relationship I built with these participants, some of which moved from the digital space to in-person, increased the level of trust between us and allowed participants to share their deep stories and practices of healing and learning in Ghana with me.

In total, I interviewed 10 participants. While some like Tim and Mia (who has taken an Indigenous name and spells it unconventionally as “Adjua” and not “Adwoa/Adjoa”) have lived in Ghana for a few years, others such as Jeremy and Malik had been in Ghana for less than a month. All the interviews happened over Zoom and, with their permission, I video recorded the interviews in compliance with IRB approval from my university. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, and I transcribed the interviews for analysis.

Data Analysis through Grounded Theory and “Sankofa”

I coded the interviews using grounded theory to identify and consolidate themes related to the participants’ literate social practices of healing. As a methodology for engaging primary data, grounded theory allowed me to systematically code themes and concepts as they emerged from the data and to render those concepts as analytical narratives to advance the relevant theories I used in this study (Charmaz). Then, I situated those themes that emerged from the data across scholarship on decolonization, epistemic injustice, and ontological denigration of Black being before theorizing the literate social practices of the participants through the lens of Indigenous African

concepts and knowledge systems such as Sankofa. Sankofa is an Indigenous Ghanaian philosophical and epistemic concept. Literally, Sankofa is from an Indigenous Akan word that is typically translated as “to return and take it,” “to return to your past,” or “it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost” (Temple 127). This concept is a practice of intellectual renewal that imbues in Africans to “learn from or build on the past...in their march forward” (Quarcoo 17). It recognizes the epistemic legitimacy of Indigenous African thought and ways of knowing and advances the need for Africans and people of African descent to repossess all the positive aspects of ancestral and traditional knowledge systems. Christel N. Temple observes that Sankofa, as an African diaspora practice, draws its influences from various perspectives on African consciousness: (a) It is viewed as a heritage of innate cultural behaviors traceable to enslaved Africans and preserved through epic memory by those enslaved Africans who arrived in the Americas; (b) it is considered an act of resistance against Eurocentric knowledge systems and worldviews. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of utilizing African conceptual frameworks to define and characterize contemporary African life; and (c) it also serves as symbolic gestures embraced by Diasporan Africans, signifying a desire for “returning to the source.” These gestures represent psychological, epistemic, and ontological steps taken to reconnect with Africanness and embrace their cultural heritage. In my analysis, I show how African Americans in and visiting Ghana embrace this philosophical concept as an intervention towards repossessing their ancestral homeland and heritage knowledge.

Healing from Epistemic Harm: Enacting Travel and Sankofa to Un/Re-learn Black Histories

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that Western colonial systems and structures constitute a cognitive empire that perpetuates epistemic injustices against Black people through theft and misrepresentation of Black history and epistemological denial of Black civilization and ways of being. In America, such epistemic injustices permeate the educational system, popular culture, and our everyday lives (Maldonado-Torres). In the American educational system, for example, Boutte et al. observe that Black history is taught in ways that misrepresent Black people, beginning their history with slavery and framing continental Africans as savages deserving to be civilized. Such historic and epistemic misrepresentations are not only inaccurate, but they are also unfair in ways that harm the intellectual fortitude and history of Black people within and beyond the American educational system (Boutte et al. 75).

African Americans are actively engaging in healing from these epistemic injustices and harms by exposing themselves to knowledge systems and histories that honor Black humanity and accurately represent the origins of Black histories. In my study, many of my participants decried their experiences of learning about Black histories in school. They noted that the refusal to respect and recognize Black history and ways of knowing contributed to the justification of slavery and significantly perpetuates anti-Black violence and oppression that African Americans continue to experience in the contemporary. Epistemic freedom has thus become a desirable

point of healing for African Americans. While all participants had indeed traveled as a source of healing, here I highlight the insights of three participants, Malik, Jeremy, and Bryt, and interpret their insights through the lens of the African concept of *Sankofa*, “to return and take.”

To achieve epistemic freedom and intellectual healing, African Americans embark on traveling to Ghana as a radical literate social act. Given their mistrust of the histories of Black people that they have been exposed to in the American educational system, African Americans travel to Ghana to learn and unlearn the histories of Black people in a socio-historic environment that they regard as credible, experiential, and intellectually empowering. Malik, an African American who has been teaching African American history for over two decades, and whom I met at the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture, observed that:

our histories and identities and how we know who we are as Africans, African Americans, or Black people got distorted the very moment our ancestors were captured and forced through the Middle Passage to America. So, for us, it is involuntary travel that resulted in the distortion of our identities and histories. Sometimes, the disease and its cure might come from the same approach, you know. So, I see traveling back to Ghana as a very crucial step towards reclaiming the knowledge about us as people of African descent that has been lost, hidden, or misrepresented...whatever negative word you can use to describe the miseducation about Black history that goes on in America.

Within the context of literacies, travel is a radical literate act in the service of a particular epistemic social action: to un-learn and re-learn Black histories. When Malik conceives “traveling back to Ghana as a very crucial step,” I argue that he is framing travel, firstly, as a radical literate act. Secondly, that act is geared towards a goal-oriented social action to reclaim “the knowledge about us as people of African descent that has been lost, hidden, or misrepresented.” As a literate act, traveling to Ghana for African Americans becomes a means—a complex literate act that includes all of what is required to undertake a transnational journey—to an end: to reclaim Black histories and humanity. In addition to reading about Ghana, for instance, and writing to set up vaccination appointments and apply for visas to Ghana, etc., African Americans engage with non-textual activities including listening to fellow travelers’ recordings on YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook or in conversations when the opportunity arises to hear first-hand about the experiences of other African Americans who have visited Ghana. For example, Jeremy, an African American participant in my study, recounted that listening to his friend Angie tell her story about her “journey through West Africa, Ghana...inspired me to take on a decolonial experience. And I am grateful for that.”

From a decolonial perspective, the oral histories and stories told by others such as Angie B. Jones who have visited Ghana constitute literate traditions that create learning moments for people like Jeremy to begin their un-learning and re-learning of Black histories from sources they trust even before they arrive in Ghana. These

oral histories and stories are not only consistent with African and African American literate traditions, but they also legitimize the epistemic value of such traditions. In this sense, traveling as a literate act accounts for the complex reading, writing, and exchange of oral histories as, in the words of Malik, a “crucial step” to a broader social action: to un-learn and re-learn Black histories. Thus, for African Americans in Ghana, traveling in all its complexity is a goal-oriented literate act with epistemic potentials in that it sets in motion opportunities to un-learn and re-learn Black histories and by doing so reconciles internal tensions that disturb the mental and intellectual stability of African Americans. At its core, African Americans traveling to Ghana and across Ghana gain experiential knowledge that allows them to not only decolonize epistemologies about themselves but also to challenge biased versions of histories that they have been exposed to and internalized.

When Jeremy visited Ghana, he was struggling with a version of epistemic harm emanating from “the history they told me” and causing him “anxiety...that hurt” him emotionally and exhausted him physically. He and his wife, who is white, were expecting a baby, and he felt unprepared to teach his daughter the history of their ancestral heritage. He noted that he needed to embark on this journey to “take on a decolonizing experience” and attain “a level of reconciliation and healing” that would prepare him to be a father to a Black girl in America. He made the conscious effort to visit historic cities such as Kumasi, Accra, and Cape Coast in Ghana that are rich in Ghanaian cultures before visiting the slave castles or dungeons. For him, this decolonizing experience allowed him to unlearn the rhetoric that Black history begins with slavery and to re-learn that he shares a “rich rich history” with a “sophistication we were never educated about.” Jeremy and others highlight that there is a curative potential in the epistemic-literate work of going on the ground to experience, hear, and recover histories that are told by people who share in and recognize their humanity.

At the Ancestral Slave River Park in Ghana where I met Bryt, she asserted that traveling to Ghana has equipped her with experiential knowledge to challenge widespread claims that Black history started with slavery and also allowed her to reclaim her humanity. Bryt argued that travel is an epistemic-literate social endeavor because:

knowledge is not only learned in schools or the classroom, you know. You can experience knowledge when you travel. You can see it, feel it. That’s what I get from being in Ghana...When I return to America, nobody is going to tell me Black history started with slavery. I have been to Ghana. I have seen the structures of slavery and I have seen the villages and towns, if you like, that existed way before those wicked Europeans reached the shores of Ghana. I have seen the people living in dignity in so many different ways.

You see, I write my name on this wall because I believe my ancestors embodied this space, but they could not leave any traces for us. So, I write my name to remind generations yet unborn that I found my way home on behalf of our ancestors. Today, I have reclaimed their humanity and I hope, in death, they feel at peace.

Across these participants and others, decolonizing the episteme about Black histories is a phenomenological and experiential literate act. It requires traveling and enmeshing oneself into spaces and among people who, as Jeremy puts it, “know their history.”

That African Americans enact travel as a path towards healing by reclaiming their histories in their ancestral homeland is consistent with Indigenous Ghanaian concepts of preserving and repossessing knowledge. As African Americans travel to Ghana to reclaim their histories and humanity, they embody and practice the Ghanaian philosophical and epistemic concept of Sankofa.

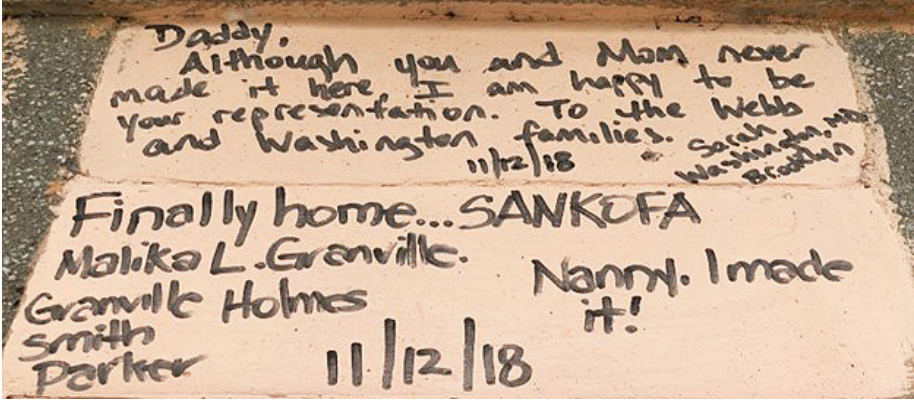


Figure 2: Examples of Inscriptions on the Memorial Wall of Return. Inscriptions such as “finally home,” “SANKOFA,” and “I made it” are written in black ink with a light orange background on a concrete slab.

As a practice of intellectual renewal, Sankofa as invoked in the artifact above advances an African-inspired philosophical orientation and consciousness that empowers African Americans to return to their ancestral heritage and homelands to reclaim knowledge systems and ways of knowing that reject Eurocentric knowledge systems that denigrate Black histories and humanity. In fact, Black psychologist and scholar Thomas A. Parham observes that Sankofa is applied in Black therapy “to help an individual return intellectually, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually to the source of truth, harmony, and spiritual place in their life” (116). Thus, when African Americans reclaim their histories and epistemologies by traveling to their ancestral African roots, the journey has a curative potential of dismantling the cognitive empire that perpetuates anti-Black epistemic harm and injustices that they had been exposed to in the U.S.

Healing from Ontological Harm: Clothing and Naming as Symbolic Literate Acts

On the back of colonialism and on-going coloniality, being Black and human has become an oxymoron. The two cannot or should not co-exist because Western epistemologies equate humanity to whiteness and denigrate Black being. This entrenched

epistemic denial of Black humanity and its attendant violent assault on Black lives throughout history and the present is what Calvin Warren terms ontological terror against Black people. Decolonial scholars Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh have argued that epistemology frames ontology (106). Thus, Western colonial knowledge and the institutions and structures that sustain such knowledge have framed Black people as non-human or sub-human devoid of a culture and in need of re-humanization through Western civilization. The outcome of such colonial imposition of non-humanness on Black being and the denigration that accompanied it is that Black people suffer from ontological harm.

Ontological harm manifests when people's sense of humanness and being in the world is constantly questioned, denied, and brutalized. Historically, the maltreatment of enslaved Africans through colonialism and the Transatlantic slave trade was a major mechanism through which Black people experienced ontological harm. In the contemporary, widespread racist and anti-Black violence against African Americans in the U.S. are further manifestations of ongoing ontological harm. That is, although there are countless cases of physical violence and painful death that Black people suffer, I contend that such instances of violence are predicated on ontological harm that makes Black lives available for murder and rape in the daily lives of Black people (Maldonado-Torres 255). In fact, Nelson Maldonado-Torres contends that the colonial and racialized invention of blackness in an anti-black world becomes a mechanism through which people of African descent and other colonized subjects consistently experience the denigration of their humanity across different spheres of social, educational, health, and public life.

To heal from ontological harm, African Americans in Ghana are reclaiming their humanity and as Ndlovu-Gatsheni puts it, "forcefully proclaiming... that their lives matter" (896). They are actively enacting various literate social practices aimed at re-humanizing themselves and their families. In essence, they are engaged in an ontological reconstruction and repair to reconcile Blackness and humanness. Such ontological reconstruction is experiential and manifests in intentional everyday literacies of action such as clothing and taking Indigenous names that liberate them from the ontological harm inscribed on their bodies.

Feeling Black and Human in Indigenous African Clothing

Tim, his wife, and son relocated to Ghana in 2019 after witnessing prevalent police brutalities against unarmed Black men and the protests it engendered in the U.S., some of which he participated in. During the interview, Tim told me about how he and his family have embraced wearing Ghanaian made fabrics with African designs as a deliberate practice to value their African heritage and belonging. His rationale for wearing Ghanaian clothing was a direct critique of experiencing the degradation in the U.S. of things African and Black. He said:

I used to not like wearing them (African designs) as much in the U.S. not to feel real Black...But now, I wear my African print anywhere because now I'm not afraid of standing out. I know there is history; there is a legacy; there

is richness of culture connected to it. It is a way to bridge the cultural and identity [as Black and human] gap explicitly and externally through clothing.

Clothing becomes a symbolic tool of literacy through which Tim learns to reconstruct and assert his sense of being and feeling Black and human as inseparable. Literacy scholars have theorized that youth from minority populations enact various forms of identities by weaving together literate symbols including clothes “to communicate values, produce meanings, and participate in desired social and cultural communities” (Kirkland and Jackson 279). Indeed, within the African American community and the Black diaspora, “dashiki”, an African-inspired clothing, is worn as a cultural symbol of freedom, Pan-Africanism, and global Black solidarity. Given that Tim relocated to Ghana on the back of anti-Black violence against Black people, when he states that he didn’t like wearing African clothing in the U.S. in order “not to feel real Black”, he is asserting an ontological concern about the possible consequences of feeling real Black in a country that has, as he puts it elsewhere in the interview, “historically oppressed most of the individuals who look like my mother, my father, my uncle, my brother, my cousins.”

To highlight the ontological harm of appearing real Black through sartorial representation and the potential anti-Black violence that it may engender, Tim cites recent cases of police brutality against Black people and contrasts that with his experiences in Ghana:

When you look at stories like George Floyd and so many others, it’s hard. But when you come to Ghana, and you know, no matter where you going in the country, generally speaking, unless you open your mouth, no one will know that you are an American. You can go anywhere in the country and no one will call the police because you are a Black man in let’s say a fancy neighborhood...In America, to be Black is to be a burden but in Ghana as a Black American, you are the favorite. So, there is a certain level of privilege, so I think you can exist in Ghana without the consciousness that my color is a burden that I have to bear every day. And that in itself is psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually liberating...In Ghana, I don’t feel Black. I can simply exist as a human.

The reclamation and proclamation of humanness by Tim are forceful ontological assertions. On the American side of the Atlantic, Black being has been ontologically damaged and brutalized such that it has compelled African Americans to seek to repair and reconstruct their sense of being and humanness on the opposite or African side of the Atlantic. The contrast of being Black on both sides of the Atlantic that Tim expresses accentuates the oxymoronic tension between being Black and human in Western epistemologies and Ghanaian/African epistemologies. For Tim, to be Black in skin color and feel Black through clothing in Ghana is dignifying to his sense of being in the world because it affords him the experience of being treated as a “favorite” and with “privilege”, the outcome of which is healing and “liberating.” These experiential dynamics of being in Ghana speaks to the healing potential of a mundane act such as clothing when it is intentionally performed as an act of literacy.

Taking Indigenous Names

African Americans in Ghana re-name themselves through adoption of Indigenous Ghanaian names as a literate social practice to re-claim their humanity. Historically, enslaved Africans relied on their literacies of naming practices in Africa to rename themselves in the New World as a form of resisting, “reasserting themselves and reaffirming their humanity in a hostile world” (Mphande 104). Lupenga Mphande further notes that African Americans continue to invoke self-renaming as a social practice to reformulate their identities, reclaim their African heritage, and dismantle “the paradigm that kept them mentally chained for centuries” (104). Several participants noted that they have taken Indigenous Ghanaian names as a form of rebirth and emancipation from the legacies of slavery that desecrated the humanity of their ancestors including changing their names. Adjua was one of such participants.

Adjua, a U.S. military veteran, repatriated temporarily to Ghana in September 2020. Although she travels to the U.S. occasionally, she told me that she has lived much of her life in Ghana since the time she repatriated. A year after repatriating to Ghana, she got “married to a Ghanaian man.” Adjua has taken the Indigenous name “Adjua” (common variant spelling include “Adwoa”) which is a name given to females born on Monday among the Akan and Fante ethnic groups in Ghana. Adjua asserts that she has taken on this Indigenous name to signal not only her reconstruction of her ontology as a dignified human being of African descent but also to dissociate herself from the legacy of slavery that imposed the names of slave owners on enslaved Africans. She believes that:

the reason why I want to do that [take an Indigenous name] is because you know, every African American in the States don't have their original last names, okay. We all have slave owners' last name and that's just facts, right? So, when I do this naming ceremony, this is probably the name that I would have been called, maybe if none of that [Transatlantic slavery] had happened. So, it's very important for me to have my own name and not the names that were given to me by a slave master.

Indigenous Ghanaian names perform a spiritual and ontological function in the life of the person so named in the sense that names are believed to influence the person's sense of being in the world. Among the Akans, “Adjua” embodies the Indigenous appellation of “peace” (Agyekum 215). In Ghana, many African Americans take on such Indigenous names during different occasions such as an actual naming ceremony organized by local communities or on Emancipation Day organized by the Ghana Tourism Authority.

In African knowledge systems and worldviews, the essence of a human being is their spirit and names symbolize such spirit (Parham). In *African Names – Reclaim Your Heritage*, Sharon Bernhardt observes that names perform an ontological function in the African worldview because they represent the “person's soul” and not merely “the flesh of the child” (7). Thus, when Adjua renames herself, she is reclaiming her soul, healing from the dehumanizing legacies of slavery, and in essence rehumanizing herself. Although Adjua chose the name “Adjua”, she noted that her choice

of name was based on “research” on names in Indigenous Ghanaian cultures and the knowledge she has gained from the research has allowed her to enmesh herself into Ghanaian culture given that her husband is Ghanaian. For Adjua and other African Americans in Ghana who have the agency to freely adopt Indigenous names, they heal from the ontological harm that dehumanizes their sense of being in the world through the active literate social practice of Indigenous self-renaming.

Conclusion

For colonized peoples, the place and practices of healing may be conjured in multiple ways including a return to ancestral homelands thousands of miles away and enactment of literate social practices that are in tune with Indigenous epistemologies and local cultures. While undoubtedly scholarship in the discipline has established the curative potential of writing and its limitations within power dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural contexts, African Americans in and visiting Ghana are engaged in literate social practices of healing that challenge us to expand our scholarly borders about literacies and healing as well as to devise emergent methods that honor such practices and the sacredness of the places where such practices are performed.

As African Americans radically pursue healing from the visible and invisible residues of colonialism and ongoing anti-Black violence across transnational borders, they lay bare the complex literacies of healing and the curative potentials of mundane activities such as traveling, wearing clothes, and naming. These literate acts constitute deliberate decolonial endeavors in their performance and effect in that they are geared towards overcoming and liberating African Americans from the epistemic and ontological harms evident in colonial institutions and exploitative anti-Black systems and structures that are manifestly widespread across the U.S.

What is more, African Americans’ pursuit of healing in a distant nation-state, Ghana, which has its own capitalist interest in inviting them to return home and invest in its economy, is radical, circumventive, and a refusal to have their pains exploited for economic gains. As evident in my analysis in this study, African Americans in and visiting Ghana rather invest primarily in reclaiming their humanity through healing their bodies, souls, and minds in ways that are experiential and spiritual in performance and epistemically and ontologically liberating in effect. Theorizing such investments in healing foregrounds calls by Black rhetorical scholars for scholars to engage this area of research (Browdy and Milu; hooks). Further, the African-centered and Indigenous practices so enacted by African Americans to heal legitimize the potency of Indigenous decolonial practices of being and knowing (Chilisa; Milu; Smith).

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