

**ELULUA:**  
**AN AFROCOSMIC PLEASURE PRAXIS**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED ON THE FIRST DAY OF DECEMBER 2021**

**TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS**

**OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS**

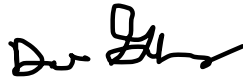
**OF TULANE UNIVERSITY**

**FOR THE DEGREE**

**OF**

**MASTER OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES**

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## **AGKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**In the name of Zambe Kana, God, Spirit, love, life, light and everyone who had to put up with me during this period of writing including my partner, my family, and my amazing dissertation advisors. Thanks eternal. A star is born.**

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## **I. Introduction:**

The crowd came to a fever pitch. Breath and movement churning, each woman's eyes closed as she journeyed deeper into herself. Forty Afro-Brazilian women circled on a stage each rapid breath gaining more urgency, more depth, and more meaning.

“Pleasure is your birthright. You deserve pleasure. You deserve love. You deserve to choose the love that you want!”

As the breathing and rapid circulation of the hands grew more and more intense, the sounds of affirmation grew louder throughout the room.

“You deserve to express yourself and be creative. You know when you wish to respect your own silence. It is your birthright”

A collective web of emotion grew. A tangible sensation wafted through the air.

“It is your birthright to be connected to the other realms. To see. To feel fulfilled and brightened by what you can see with the eyes and what you cannot see!”

“And now exhale, release all that burdens you.”

A collective exhale and sigh. A collective hug and affection. And tears, so many tears. In the mutual embrace of those who had come to engage in politics. A collective cry of those who had come to listen to discourses, discuss theory and potentiate their lives as scholars and activists. A collective sigh of relief from those who work hard every day in the world, going against the grain and undoing so many of the structural injustices that exist in Brazil.

In this somatic moment, this cloud of movement, breath, meditation, affirmation, something was found beyond the visible realm of social and material responsibility. In this moment of joy, of release of realization, something was confirmed:

*It was the possibility of our collective inspiration and origin.*

A collective origin rooted in faith, in spirit, in joy, in nodes of connectivity, in love, and in pleasure – a communal pursuit of happiness and fulfillment that would weave together the seen and unseen powers that danced within and around us.

After the 90-minute workshop, a young woman came up to me and asked me if she could give me a hug. As she released our embrace and put aside her crutches, she looked up in tears and shared that she could not remember the last time that she had experienced pleasure. She could not remember the last time that she felt justified in feeling it.

In this moment, in the buzzing metropolis of São Paulo, in the middle of an enormous stadium conference room, in the morning hours of a loaded day of programming at *Afrofeminas*, the biggest conference for Afro-Brazilian women in the world, we were reconnecting with the possibility of recognizing and nourishing the noble origins that animate our present.

It was in that moment that I realized the power of the permission to chase a desire, the power of allowing ourselves to seek fulfillment, the healing and politically transformative possibility that came in accepting joy and inviting in pleasure as our birthright.

It was in this moment that the words **Afroc cosmic Pleasure Praxis** came to me.

**Where are we going?**

This thesis is a project inspired by Black women, designed by Black women, and offered to Black women – but it is a useful pathway for all humans to reach a profound understanding of the cosmology of liberation for Black Women around this world. As Audre Lorde wrote as part of the Cohambee River Collective, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.” (Cohambee River Collective, 7)

Inspired by the wisdom of Black sexuality educators in Brazil, my spiritual teachers of African traditions around the globe, and rebel Black feminist thinkers, I was presented with a pattern of vision and action within the lives of these women who worked particularly with erotic power. There was a covert understanding amongst them as to why they would privilege working with pleasure, prioritizing sexuality education as a healing modality specifically with and for Black women. The common ground in their world view revealed to me as much about my own decisions and life choices as it did about the potential for a promising praxis for navigating a world disproportionately full of violence, injustice, and hopelessness. It revealed to me an empowering truth about my own journey, and the places and spaces that I must cultivate as a Black woman determined to tend to my joy, happiness, pleasure, and spiritual integrity. I understood that cultivating these states of consciousness would be just as much the motor for my living my best life, as it would for my tireless pursuit of a more just world.

I came to understand that my particular world view, my idea of conceptualizing the world, of acting, of imagining, of healing, and of creating community, as **The AfroCosmic Pleasure Praxis**.

Within this multimedia, experimental, somatic exploration, we will dive into the ideas of five Afro-Brazilian sexuality educators, sex workers, and erotic artists whose ways of life, theories, and therapeutic practices form the basis of an “Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis”.

This praxis is a web of carving out a systemic practice that centers both diverse and interlocking African world views while focusing on the potentials of the creative potentials of erotic power.

Now, this thesis is not a manual about how to *fight* oppression or how to *dismantle* structural racism and sexism. **This project is a ceremony, an initiation into a practice of exploring and understanding our own powers, our own stories, our own ideas, our own pleasure and how we can use it to craft a fulfilling and harmonious existence day by day, word by word, prayer by prayer.**

This project is an exploration of how to come together to understand and heal our lowest common denominators as humans by choosing and integrating our highest visions and values.

This is a project that invites you into a ritual of making a home inside of yourself, of nesting into your deepest and most worthy desires.

I recognize that this thesis is not in its most traditional form, instead it is in its most honest form – the gift of inspiration that was given during my studies as I was able to traverse worlds from academic, to material, to spiritual; as I was able to travel to multiple nations, and as I was able to enter constantly in ceremony, and dance in the importance of this mystical ritual alongside my theoretical studies.



What I came to understand from this study, from this search for healing, from this relentless nagging to understand how to be most useful, and the quest to find which ideas made me feel most alive in my body – was that each of these Afro-Brazilian women who I shadowed, interviewed, and explored brought me into a vortex of profound ceremony.

Yes, we can talk about the theory behind their actions (and we will), we can engage with the actual materials and instructions that the women give (and we will), but then we would only scratch the skin-of the modalities in their most material form. If we recognize these Afro-Brazilian therapists as leaders of ceremonies, as those who traverse multiple worlds of understanding, that build and create nuance in their realities, if we follow them into their realms of power, only then we might fully appreciate the breadth and depth of their work.

The only possibility we have to truly understand the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis is to participate somatically, to enter into this expansion of worlds, to light a candle, to say an invocation, and to experience these sensations, these visceral truths in the body. The only possibility I have to convey this Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis is to understand that theory is only one part of our knowledge –and that instead of thinking ourselves into wholeness, it is oft times in quieting parts of the mind and letting our bodies fill with joy that true revelation and fulfillment can come.

### **Who are we going with?**

Over a period of two years, I interviewed Black women in Brazil who stated that they worked with sexuality and erotic force, and that they focused some aspect of their practice specifically on working with other Black women.

These women are:

**Elania**, a professional sexuality educator, Annie, an erotic artist and art workshop facilitator, **Bela**, a musician and orgasmic therapist, and **Clarice**, a self-declared shaman in the technique of ovarian breathing and Akashic readings.

I attended workshops and talks and worked alongside these Black Brazilian women as they used sexuality and erotic power as their primary focus in their various modalities of healing, whole-ing and care.

Over a period of two years, I also studied under traditional spiritual practitioners around the world in Brazil, Argentina, Kenya, Gabon, and Cameroun – and felt a silky thread running through all of these conversations. I’ve come close to the limits of death multiple times both in ritual and in health. I’ve sat in ceremonies, I’ve been bathed in plants, I’ve eaten hallucinogens, I asked for divination, and I went through various initiations into ancient yet everchanging ways of understanding, of being, and of faith.

From these experiences, I offer this culminating thesis. I offer this as a gift to those who come. I offer this as a gift to those spirits who guided me. I offer this as an alternative understanding to what knowledge is, to what academia can mean, and to what it can signify to have “mastered” a subject. I offer this as a gift to those professors, friends, and loved-ones strange enough to believe in my visions.

### **How are We Going?**

**I offer the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis: A Ceremony of Erotic Power.**

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis is a way to make your unique empowered truth the most pleasurable thing that you could imagine.

During this exploration and journey toward your most pleasurable truth, I will ask you to engage in rituals of self-exploration, in prayer, in journaling, in writing, in breathing, in moving, and in asking yourself about your own decisions, your own community, and your own daily practices. The audio and audiovisual portion of this thesis also accompany these explorations.

### **What Should We Bring?**

You will need certain materials, tools, and technologies of transformation along the way. As you read each chapter, take the pause to do the exercises. You might be tempted to just read through the book, but the true transformation only happens when you engage in the activities. I recommend that you read each chapter, then read over the entirety of the activity or exercise that you are called to do. Gather any essential materials that you might need to enter into the exercise and then keep a disciplined log of all of your explorations. There are certain items that you should make sure you have before you read on any further.

#### **Please, carry along with you:**

- A special journal dedicated only to this journey
- A special pen/pencil/ coloring pencils dedicated only to this journey
- Either speakers or headphones to listen to the guided meditations
- A yoga mat or comfortable place to lie supported on your back
- A place in which you can feel cozy, comfortable, and intimate with yourself
- A time in the day with no interruptions
- A cloth that is special and beautiful to you
- A receptacle for water

- Your favorite incense (If you don't have a favorite incense, you could try my household favorite: burning dried rosemary).
- A bowl of earth from a significant place
- A feather

Other items and materials may be specified along the way, but this will be the core of your practice.

We are all still climbing and wriggling along the cosmic web, Dibobia's web, who you'll meet in the next chapter. We are all still recognizing ourselves and each other, understanding the pathways we must walk, bringing forth our connections. As you explore each element in this journey, I welcome your reflections back into the web.

Share them at [www.afrocosmic.org](http://www.afrocosmic.org).

**You are welcome.**

## **II. An Invocation**

*As in every part of our journey, read through this invocation, and take this opportunity to build an altar for yourself. If possible, use a private space where no one else need look at or touch your most sacred items. This will be your altar space, your ceremonial space which will represent the inspiration of your spirit, all of the elements of the earth that animate our actions, our soul's constant evolution as it bumbles into obstacles. Your altar is your own physical representation and a portal of your inner movements, realizations, and desires.*

*Within your Afrocosmic practice, the objects on your altar might become animated -- impregnated with the divine breath and infused with life. As you pray and communicate with them, they may communicate back to you. Yes, some people hear an actual voice speaking to them, whereas others might sense emotional shifts in perspective that guide them into making more conscious decisions in line with their soul values. The beauty of Afrocosmic spirituality, is that no belief is necessary – only practice. The practices that work stand the test of time. Those that do not, fall to the waste side. So without further ado...*

Gather a candle.

Gather yourself.

Gather your breath slowly into your lungs as you would gather seaweed in a net, effortlessly, and fluidly.

The following is an invocation, a humble plea made by the material towards the spirit; a call across the veil from our most ethereal wishes; a whisper towards the things and those that we cannot see.

We ask in humility.

We have the audacity to have faith.

**Ago:**

All gratitude to the eternal and the universal and all that she is. (*I take a breath, and blow it out*)

All gratitude for this vessel and all of her material form that was given to me.

All gratitude for the elements that teach me, that show me the way.

All gratitude for the spirits and ancestors who walk alongside me (*I take a breath and blow it out.*)

I ask that spirit might guide my hands, my thoughts, my words, my actions, and my understanding while coming to this place.

*I pour libations* and ask for safe passage in the name of those who have come before me, those who I know, and those who I don't know.

*I pour libations* and ask the all-knowing hands of the Spirit to guide and protect those who accompany me on this journey near and far.

*I light a candle* and ask that this light be the path that we walk, that it will always remind us of our potential on this planet and beyond.

*I place a bowl of water.* I ask that this water represent the origin of our life, the quenching of our thirst for knowledge, and the ability to always recognize what we swim in.

*I place a receptacle of sacred earth on this altar.*

*I rest my knees, my hands, and my forehead on the earth* to recognize the great power of receptivity that she provides.

*I light this incense by dipping into the light of my spirit. I ask for the smoke to cleanse my lighter bodies. To enchant the air around me with its sweetness.*

*I fan the sacred feather through the smoke to bring air, life, and inspiration into the space, through the breath of our creator*

**Ago**

I ask for open pathways and safe journey.

I pray for clarity of mind and spirit.

I place a representation of my commitments and my visions forward.

*(I clap three times.)*

The ceremony begins...

### **III. The Ceremony Begins: The Importance of Ritual and Story**

In initiatory traditions, by the time you've arrived at the ceremony, there have been days, weeks, months, and years of preparation that are unseen to the untrained eye. What sometimes appears to be a chaotic dance, is generally a masterful choreography.

As you read the following passage, imagine in your mind's eye, visualize that you are embarking upon this journey. You'll travel because you seek to feel whole again. Your walls have been worn by the day to day wear and tear of the storms and waves that have laid into your foundation. You've forgotten what it means to awake in awe of your first conscious breath. You've come to drink from the source. Your people and your community wait for you to enter into this new space and mind. It's time for you to discover your true purpose. It's time for you to tend to the embers of joy that you'll fan to become the burning fire of desire in your life.

Imagine, you'll prepare yourself to travel for an entire day to arrive. You walk without saying a word. You trek small mountain shelves with red earth. You cross over trickling sweet waters by way of fallen trunks. You are brushed by ten-foot-tall ferns, hear the crash and crackle of falling branches, smell the whiff of damp earth. You brush away vicious bullet ants as their venom throbs up your limbs, your bare feet crunch into the thousands legs and meaty bodies of the millipede.

You walk all day to arrive at the *ngosso* – the weekly ceremony where your community awaits you to be cleansed, to be in joy, to dance, to sing, and to find peace of mind.

You've come to be healed and integrated into the larger community. You've come to find your purpose and be celebrated in that purpose as you walk deeper in your life.

When you arrive, the last kisses of the sun's rays are streaming through the palm and banana canopies that dot the circular compound. You stop and realize; your feet are bulging and aching. Your mouth is parched and sweat drips down the back of your sun beaten neck. You have used your will and your determination to arrive to such a place. And you are welcomed by a small child with a glass of water. He is wearing a long *pan*, or traditional cloth around his waist, is painted white and red on his face, and seems to understand what happens around the temple more than many of the adults do. Though the child is only four years old and has the pupils the size of saucers and a vacant gaze and wobbly gait – he takes you by the hand across the compound and towards a blazing fire.

“The ceremony is about to being...” he whispers to you and indicates for you to enter into the white walled temple.

### **The Story Begins...**

*“The ceremony begins long before the ceremony begins, just as “existence exists, because Existence has always existed, even before the beginning began” (Kamene 11). The rituals have played out long before the actions became actions. And once the first actions begin because “all forms of life are connected in the time-space continuum. In this continuum, time is eternal, and space is everywhere, and when we perform libation, there is a thunder sound call from the heavens, the Creator and Ancestors claim, “One of Us Calls to Us! Let us respond through the caller” (Kamene, 13)*



So... where do we begin?

At the beginning. At the origin. It is there that we have already begun, the ceremony is already in motion. The men and women are already dressed and painted, in whites, and reds, and blacks, and sitting separately as the fire blazes in the boat-shaped compound.

You open your mouth to speak and the sentence barely leaves your mouth, “Am I...” *Shhhhh...!*, the child grabs you and sits you down at your place around the fire. You are sat next to the row of women. At the end. They cover your head with a handkerchief that one of the senior women pulls from underneath her pan.

You are sat at the fire and now the time is to listen.

An older, *nganga*, or practitioner of this ceremonial tradition stands up and calls the room to attention.

“*Bokaye!*”

“*Ai*” the room responds in unison.

“*Wenye!*”

“*Ey!*” The chorus calls back out.

The crowd is silent and attentive to the call and poised with another response.

The *nganga* tells a story as he holds an intricately carved, wooden stick:

*Mebege (Mwanga) was very lonely. He only had a spider (Dibobia) hanging below him above the water. Neither Mebege nor any of his ancestors had succeeded in creating more than one offspring to relieve the “eternal”. Dibobia hung motionless between the sky and sea and stirred restlessly on his single filament. He said to Mebege, we are alone “etametam” and there is no pleasurable activity “elulua”.*

*We must create the earth, where there may be activity and where there may be descendants whose activity we may watch.*

*Mebege agreed. He pulled out a hair from under his right arm. Then he reached inside his head and pulled a white substance from his brain. Then he dipped down into the sea and found a smooth, white pebble.*

*He put these things in his right hand and blew upon them and a beautiful and perfect egg was formed.*

*He gave this egg to the spider, Dibobia, who then wrapped it in a filament and lowered in gently into the sea. Mebege said, “Gradually that egg will become hot. When it does, come and tell me.” Once the egg heated up, Dibobia climbed back up and informed Mebege.*

*At that moment Mebege descended and poured sperm upon the egg. When the egg split open there were three people Zame ye Mebege (God on earth), Nyingwan Mebege (The Female Principle) and Nlona Mebege (the brother of God, the engine of shadow).*

*These three iterations of God were now left on the earth and Mebege and Dibobia now withdrew to regard their creation from a distance. Zame would have power over it.*

*So, when Zame came out of the egg, he looked around. There was nothing but sky and water and a small bit of raffia floating on the water. Zame knotted one of the strands of raffia*

*into a cross with the knot known as the dog's paw, Zame held in his hand the cross and he looked up to the departed father, Mebege.*

*Mebege then filled Zame with an inspiring thought (mbamba osiman) which Christians might call the Holy Spirit (nsisim eki). Zame then understood that each branch of the cross represented the four parts of the of the world. He then also reached under his right arm and under his left arm for hairs. He then reached into his head for the lining of his brain. He rolled these into a ball and blew on them.*

*With this he created the termites and the worms of the earth. He then flung them out to the four corners. They sank to the bottom and began to eat and with their droppings they built up the earth. The earth grew in the sea. As the earth grew harder, the first thing that Zame did was plant the raffia cross. It grew into the raffia tree.*

*The raffia tree grew from the four corners of the earth. The spider Dibobia's filament wove together a webbed network between these corners of the earth – which then became temples.*

*Zame was then filled with the idea to create humans.*

*Zame became the sun and Nyingwan became the moon, as well as the male and female principle so revered within the Bwiti traditions. The humans then would worship in those first temples.*

*But then, still in paradise, where food was at their fingertips, and joy at every corner, there were sexual urges and humans forgot their “good thought” upon which creation was based “to create sociable and pleasurable activity and to escape loneliness”. And so, birth and death were introduced to humankind, and the male and female principle were separated in the engosie (the temple ceremony). These separations, material trials are still to try to entice humans back into*

*working, centering and believing in the value of good thought – or this elulua- - pleasurable activity that is good for all, and brings togetherness and joy.*

### **ACTIVITY (1):**

**Listen to the following recording of the origin story with the ngombi, central African harp.**

**As you listen to the story, allow your body to move naturally with the sound of the harp.**

**Allow your body to act out, to envision, to become the movements in the story.**

**Afterwards, take a few moments to journal:**

- **What are your reactions to this origin story?**
- **What are the messages that become apparent in this story?**
- **What are the ways that the sounds, movements, and hearing the words of the story have impacted you and the way that you think today?**

### **The Ceremony of Story**

This story of origin comes from the Bwete/Bwiti or Eboga tradition in Central Africa, most famously in Gabon. This hybrid tradition which holds at its core, the psychedelic root bark, Iboga, was practiced for countless years by the forest people of Gabon, Congo, and Cameroun, colloquially called the Pygmy people, but whom have multiple distinctive tribes such as the Baka.

Scholars such as James Fernandez, trace the Bwiti tradition and the forest traditions that exist within this part of central Africa back to North African, likely Egyptian people. In fact, the Benga people of Gabon still perform a dance of their cosmology, where they trace the beginning of their lineage back to the Nile river, and claim to be Nilotic people. (Enslaved Episode 1)

However, the Fang people are a Bantu people and to our most accurate estimate originate from the Equatorial Rainforests of Cameroun over 4,000 years ago. (Laburthe-Tolra)

In the Bwiti or Eboga tradition, this origin story that you've heard read out in a linear fashion is most often danced and sang at the beginning of each initiation ceremony. The shape of the temple, the aspect of dress, even the rotation and the direction of each movement is based upon the idea of a complex set of origin stories and songs. Every part of the landscape of the temple, affirms this story. Every gesticulation is in service to the understanding of this story of origin. Every ritual can be connected into the roots of meaning from this story.

Though as a participant in the ceremony, in the moment of moving to the sounds of the story, you might not recognize the symbols, the gestures, the angles, the colors, nor immediately register or rationally confirm their significance, you are, nonetheless, part of a lineage of belief, of faith, of an ongoing ceremony that extends hundreds and perhaps thousands of years in time. The reverberations of these ceremonies then inform the way that we think, act, interpret nature, community, and understand ourselves as part of the living world.

### **The Power of Ceremony:**

Many of us are drawn to participate in or facilitate ceremonies because we have experienced in our own lives the transformational power of ceremony and ritual. A well-

designed ritual can facilitate profound inner experiences for participants, even without a logical grasp of the words or gestures that make up its form. Despite this potential, many of us grew up enduring years of empty rituals in organized religions that consistently failed to awaken a heightened sense of connection or enhancement of a communal experience. We may still be on a search to discover a path and practice that is both meaningful and spiritually potent or we may have given up along the way.

As a musician, I often found it particularly emotive to sing at weddings in Catholic churches, even though I don't engage in this particular concept of religion or union, yet I actually slept through my own college graduation ceremony! You may already have a daily practice that informs and supports your life, or you may still be searching for the ceremonial space that truly allows you to feel a connection to the divine, to your purpose, and to your truth. During this exploration, we will invite you to experience the transformative power of ritual practice in your life.

We encourage you to be accepting, kind, and curious with yourself on this journey. You may be surprised at which of your many unique gifts and acts of service arise with most generosity and devotion during this time. You may even be amazed at the messages and transmissions you receive as you deepen your communion with the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis.

I define a ritual as a specific sequence or process of actions, sounds, and movements that unlock transformational and liberating possibilities for practitioners and participants. (Ingerman) During ritual practice, we instill our actions with mindful intent, welcoming divine presence, whatever our personal understanding of that might be. A ritual, as distinct from a routine,

envelops our presence and our consciousness, and brings our awareness back to a felt sense of what matters most in our lives.

All long-lived civilizations found meaning and significance in their rituals and rites. When we connect to a spiritual lineage or work with a plant teacher in ceremony, we connect to the power of repeated actions, utterances, and intentions that may go back tens, hundreds or even thousands of years. As we deepen our receptivity, this energetic reverberation ripples through the space we hold with power and potential.

Although we understand the power of ritual to transcend logical understanding, the effectiveness of mindful action has been proven qualitatively and quantitatively within scientific, psychological and anthropological study. Empirical evidence shows that ritual can be powerfully effective, even without a belief in its inner workings! Rituals can bring a sense of calmness, stability and confidence to participants, as well as enhancing personal performance in life. Rituals can also alleviate anxiety during times of grief, loss and transition to new phases of life, making well designed, life-affirming rituals an essential part of the response to our current global predicament. (Pollan 2019)

Every spiritual and religious system includes some form of ritual practice, whether that is prayer, confession, devotional offering, altar building, or coming of age initiations at significant moments in the journey through life. While personal rituals can create a feeling of connection to what is most important, communal rituals can give us the comfort of familiarity, solidarity and shared experience, whether we are in celebration or consolation.

The very act of engaging in ritual brings us to a state of mind where we can move beyond the routine patterns of the mundane and find ourselves in awe of the sacred. When we have a profound connection with the ritual practice that we engage in, it can bring an almost inexplicable sense of peace, joy, and yes, even pleasure.

Albert Einstein wrote:

*There are only two ways to live your life.*

*One is as though nothing is a miracle.*

*The other is as though everything is a miracle.*

This presents us with a daily choice in our belief system. We can indeed, live a fulfilled and meaningful existence without delving into the realm of the spiritual, the mysterious, or the invisible – or we can understand that each step that we take is actually connected to other realms. Within the AfroComic Pleasure Praxis, our understanding is that each decision that we make is connected to the spiritual realm and in understanding that, rituals and ceremony are our most powerful forms of communication.

Unfortunately, in many modern religious traditions, rituals and ceremonies have become less concerned with reminding us of the magic of our everyday existence, and more often than not function as structures to enforce hierarchies of professionalism and power. Most of our everyday systems and structures within our material reality, whether it be at the university or at our jobs are no longer designed to awaken this possibility of power, pleasure, and joy.

We believe that rites of passage and rituals are transitional vehicles that allow us to open up new doors of understanding, birth new worlds within ourselves, and reframe and strengthen bonds in creative, profound and often inexplicable ways. We encourage you to not only



commemorate birthdays, deaths and marriages, but also to think of the cycles of your daily round, with every rising sun and moon, as possibilities to form stronger unions with yourself and your community, and as portals to allow obstacles and debris to fall away, and for new moments of possibility and potential to be born.

Now is the time for us to offer our intentions, our gifts, and our most open hearts to the divine, as we prepare an inviting space for others to do the same. Many traditions use song, dance and offerings as ways to elevate the human creative force to its highest potential. As so many before us have dedicated their time to painting temples, crafting songs of praise, arranging mandalas, and offering flowers, art is often considered to be the most undeniably beautiful narrative that we can create with our lives.

**Art may be *our* holiest form of hope.**

**Activity:**

Come back to your altar and say the invocation to your altar. As much as you possibly can during the course of this journey, we invite you to come to your altar to reflect, to pray, to meditate, to think, to contemplate, and to ask for guidance on your decisions. Add meaningful and beautiful objects to the altar when you feel inspired. This might be objects such as sea shells, flowers, nuts, stones, plants, pictures....you can be as creative as you'd like.

After you perform the invocation, take a few minutes to journal.

**ACTIVITY**

***Journal & Reflection:***

*As you sit in front of your altar, journal about the following questions:*

- *What rituals or ceremonies do you observe in your life?*
- *Which moments or possibilities make you feel magical?*
- *Have you ever entered into a ritual that allowed you connect with something beyond yourself?*

### **The Story of Ceremony:**

Ceremony brings the sacred into our material life. They are practices that provide the means to navigate change and welcome in new cycles. When we enter into a ceremony, we create an integration of our material world and the invisible, the divine, and the unseen forces and powers that run through us and around us. There is wealth of stories about the origin of the world, and often times how the vibration of the energy of words was created, and these ideas of creation and purpose are honored throughout the ceremony.

In this understanding, the world that is apparent to our senses begins as a potential, an invisible and transcendental realm of possibility. We bring these possibilities into existence with our thoughts and our words. The ways that we imagine our creation, our view of ourselves and our purpose, our understanding of the landscape and elements around us are all filaments of manifestation that create our reality. It is by putting effort and energy into these thoughts, gestures, and actions that through ceremony, ritual, we can change the fabric of our physical world. Most of this work, as you will see, the guide will involves invoking benevolent powers, divine forces and elements, intentions and focused engagement to generate a collective forcefield of physical form. (Ingerman 9)

Every ceremony celebrates the creation and origin of humankind, not only celebrating it but acting it out, embodying and enlivening it. The body begins to reenact this moment of possibility, and incorporate with movement, song, and dance the ideas of how we came to be, what we are, and why.

Each of the women who were the inspiration for the Afro Cosmic Pleasure praxis are in some way practitioners and facilitators of ceremony. Each of these women has a deep conviction, focus, and faith in powers and situations that arise from beyond the material.

Although the stories, quotes, and theory that we use spans the African continent and diaspora, all of the five interviewed women has a specific practice and faith firmly rooted in African-Brazilian religions and traditions. And when engaging with those who come to their practices, each of those women brings in these lenses of meaning each time that they are engaging with their processes of healing. This, of course, puts the “Afro Cosmic” to the Afro Cosmic pleasure practice.

### **The Importance of Story in our Lives**

*“A people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers can make nations sick. Without stories we would go mad. Life would lose its moorings or orientation... stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart larger.*

*—Ben Okri, Nigerian Poet*

Our cosmology is the study of the origin, evolution, and fate of our universe. While our understanding of creation of the universe as well as of humans may not be something that we explicitly think about each day, it provides our framework of potential in this incarnation. The exploration of our implicit modes of understanding why we are created, what it is that we breathe

and how we can live in harmony with our purpose will be an enormous part of this journey, as this can become the canvas upon which we paint our beliefs, our ideas, and our daily practices and actions.

In other words, our origin story can determine our concept of our destiny and what it means to arrive there.

### **What is your origin story?**

#### **ACTIVITY:**

*Come back to your altar and say your invocation.*

*Bring your journal and pen. Read through each of the questions twice and then spend some time in quiet contemplation with these questions.*

- *How did existence come to be?*
- *How did humans emerge on the earth?*
- *Why were humans created?*
- *What is the purpose of our incarnation, what does it mean to be alive in the world?*
- *What should we aspire to as humans? Health, wealth, success?*

*Take at least 10 minutes of quiet time to journal about the thoughts of why we live.*

*Remember that this is a very deep and profound meditation and question and doesn't necessarily correspond to only one answer or one method. Keep in mind that as you do this exercise you may discover unconscious thoughts that you didn't know that you had. You may also realize that as*

*you do this exercise multiple times that your beliefs have changed or that you'd like your unconscious beliefs to change.*

*Keep those thoughts with you and keep them safe in your journal.*

### **How does my cosmology inform my life?**

Many of you reading this might be professionals, academics, theorists, philosophers, or just humans who are navigating modern life, trying to do your best to keep up with bills, payments, and the demands of your jobs. As we navigate these day-to-day interactions with others, it's normal that our origin story and our purpose falls out of focus for a lot of us. But I'd like to remind you just how important that this re-centering of this purpose of our origin is.

There are many currents to help us understand the human psyche, the emotions, our emotional wellbeing and wellness. A lot of those also have to do with the framework of this original cosmology. As this project is an exploration of our ideas of humanity, wellness, wholeness, and purpose – let's first examine one of the most significant studies of those ideas within a Western framework-- psychology, the study of the human mind and how it effects our behaviors.

The foundation of the study of psychology within our Western world is most crowned, capped, cited and analyzed by the name Freud and then sprinkled almost exclusively with dead, white, European men who remain as the foundation of how we understand the mechanisms of a healthy emotional and mental body. Within our traditional University systems, though we may have studies such as "Eastern religions" or "alternative healthcare", we don't often find ourselves

quoting *Orunmila*, a sage from the Yoruba tradition, or Sufi scholars, within the traditional discipline of psychology.

As feminist scholar Minna Salami would say, most of our disciplines and frameworks of knowing within the greater part of our global economy are caught within a structure of Europatriarchal Knowledge, a basis of information, image, and education that is both Eurocentric and patriarchal in nature. How is this possible?

*Europatriarchal Knowledge, is a hierarchy-fixated construct of knowledge that was initiated by elite European men as propaganda to solidify their worldviews and political, and economic strongholds at a global scale. The word propaganda comes from to propagate, which originally referred to the ability of plants to breed and multiply from one generation to another. It is etymologically apt, for the ability to adapt from generation to generation is precisely the magnificence of Europatriarchal Knowledge, the narrative that centers assessment and quantification as the epitome of knowing and that positions the European phenotype and male genotype as particularly gifted in the production of said knowledge. Europatriarchal Knowledge has its roots in the Age of Discovery. It was during this period in history that European monarchs first sent explorers on voyages and expansions to world regions thought of as “the unknown”. (Salama, 20)*

Throughout this journey, I will refer to Europatriarchal Knowledge, as defined by Salama. This does not mean that this is the only knowledge or structure of knowledge that exists within our worlds, it just refers to the structure of hierarchy and dominance of knowledge that exists within our current global economy of knowledge and resources. It is a knowledge that justifies, exemplifies, and upholds certain types of information and a knowledge that fits with its

worldview, and disqualifies, undermines, and questions other types of knowledge, generally that don't fit within its narrow definition of a science.

Let's take a moment to examine the fundamental ideas that are present within this belief system and structure of living. What do these systems reflect back to us in terms of what we are as humans and what is our most expansive sense of humanity?

### **Activity:**

#### **Reflect & Journal**

- What are the subjects that we study?
- Who are the most prominent thinkers right now in that subject?
- What is the dominating thought patterns within my branch of study?
- What does it mean to create a compelling argument within my branch of study?
- What are the assumptions about humans and purpose within these studies that are implicit my branch of study?

Let's explore how cosmology, whether taught as a myth or as a scientific truth, informs our way of life. If my cosmology and origin story is based on what I've learned in my Pittsburgh Public School Education, I might believe that I have evolved from monkeys. I might believe that my survival and my ecosystem is in a constant state of competition and that my evolution depends on my being the fittest, the best, and defeating those who are weaker, my actions and my morality will be shaped around these ideas.

I might consider interdependence as weakness. I might strike first when I feel attacked. I might not consider the benefits of sharing outside of my clan and I could build fortresses around my life to ensure my protection, my strength, and my superiority within my realm.

If I've matriculated in a Catholic school, my belief system might lead me to believe that I am descendant of Adam and Eve, that angels and other invisible spirits can act on my behalf, and that I should also confess my current sins, and the original sins – the ones that I will never get over.

If the material world is the only world – then I have nothing to consider apart from what physical and scientific advance that I can see, prove, and make with my actions. This means that if I am to ascribe to the philosophical system of a thinker such as Ann Rynd, then in my pursuit of “objectivism” I will assume that I will be expected to perform and produce to the highest extent possible. This production and the material gains that I have to show for it are the most important and most noble markers of who I am.

These are just some examples of what is possible as a belief system and how these stories of origin and cosmology must change our actions and the ways that we think, act, and see the world.

Let's take ourselves as an example!

For me, during my undergraduate education at Harvard University, as an Economics major, I was given some universal laws that for me at the time were pretty hard to digest. First of all, I was told that I would be taught economics. In reality, the system of economics that I was



taught was actually neo-liberal systems of economic thought disguised as general economics, in other words, partial capitalism and partial imperialism, masked as a science of economics.

One of the first godfathers of economics that we read about in Econ 101 was Milton Friedman and his basic assumptions of economics were:

“Neo-classical economics employs three basic assumptions: people have rational preferences among outcomes that can be identified and associated with a value, individuals maximize utility and firms maximize profit, and people act independently on the basis of full and relevant information.” (Weintraub 3)

I was told that as a law within my discipline, that “man is rational”. Apart from being anecdotally completely inaccurate, as we will dive into a bit further on, modern neuroscientific studies can also now prove that humans are not rational beings at all, and our supposedly rational part of the brain is most often preceded by the messages from our gut bacteria and the tendencies of our nervous system.

Secondly, in Econ 101, I was told that these two theoretical lines called supply and demand move in mathematically predictable ways. Most predictably, at the beginning of a macro economics class, we would be taught the theoretical model of how the supply and demand curve would move. We would analyze the intersection of these curves and how they would affect the price or many other supposedly predictable variables.

However, unsurprisingly, after analyzing the mathematical approach at predicting the theoretical moves of these curves, we would look at the real life applications, which would look

like the imaginary map of a pirate treasure hunt – an imperceptible squiggle of rounds and abouts which did not resemble the original theoretical lines whatsoever.

Third, I noted there was no place to center what was a spirit, an intuition, an idea of generosity, the possibility of spontaneity—or even the idea of karma or community. Of course, these factors play into the decision-making capacity of many “rational” human beings, however, we didn’t learn how these factors of meaning making would affect anyone’s commercial decision.

There are, of course, economic studies that explore these matters. There is economics of social economies, there are those who study cooperatives and education, however, in my Harvard economics education, within four years of introductory education, as predicated by Milton Freidman, and my other conservative professors, many of whom had served on George Bush senior’s presidential cabinet, these were the fundamental rules that we were to incorporate as law for the remainder of our study of economic “science”.

You may be thinking now that, of course not, these are not concepts that have any relevance within a traditional economic structure. There is no coefficient for intuition or for guilt or for shame. This is absolutely true! I wouldn’t imagine seeking to transform the laws of engagement that currently exist within the economic discipline, however, within our academic sciences, how often do we disguise or rename certain parts of our ideas, emotions or thought patterns to fit in with a lateral or logical narrative of “what is” and “what is acceptable to present within an academic sphere”?

Let’s take another example.

Over the course of my life, I have on multiple occasions quoted or referred to scholars such as Friedman and Freud. In fact, these are some of the most quoted scholars in the world within the fields of economics and psychology.

But what are the implications behind my quotations? What is the cosmology that operates behind the quotations of Freud? Or behind an idea of Friedman?

With which paintbrush is the world being painted each time that I choose to support this framework of thought? There are many parts of Freud and Friedman's work that is incredibly groundbreaking and that has helped me understand human existence more fully however, the more that I've understood the incipience of the thought patterns that were established by these thinkers, and the arena within which they were making context and meaning out of life – the more I began to realize that I was complicit in ascribing to certain ideas about humans that I was not at all in agreement with or in alignment with.

As African Psychologist Naim Akbar explains, if we ascribe to the philosophy of Freudian psychology and many of those who operate under this cohort, "if our origin is (Europatriarchal) material and our most basic desires are rooted in the quenching of the thirst of the material, hunger, survival, sex—than this self-gratification is hedonistic." (Akbar 85)

This understanding of the human is an individualistic understanding. It is an understanding that humans are inherently individualistic, selfish, self-preservationist, and seek a form of pleasure that only benefits themselves in the moment. We may not acknowledge these belief systems that underpin the most cited scholars often, yet their origin stories create our conscious but also subconscious belief system.

As we will explore further, there is a basic understanding within these belief systems that renders Blackness, Africanness, Indigenusness, and Black Woman-ness specifically, not only uncivil, but unhuman (Stallings,). It renders our gifts, our intuition, our ability to see, to divine, to feel, to sense the invisible story that arises as completely illogical and non-human qualities.

However, what if there was another understanding of who we are which actually provided us with more of a possibility of incorporating our greater cosmology, with the possibility of valuing logic, reason, writing, order, systemization while also valuing spirit, poetry, sensation, intuition, compassion, and collective pleasure?

In reality, though thoughts from philosophers like Friedman, Freud, Rand are housed within official disciplines or mode of study, their thoughts are all also based on stories and assumptions. Stories and assumptions that privilege a specific type of knowledge, that privilege particular forms of knowledge, and a particular judgement of value.

These are all stories that create our lives, our assumptions and our ways of being. These are stories that include or exclude us. These are stories that render us object or subject. These are stories that hold or discard our ways of knowing and being.

We must choose wisely which stories we incorporate into our system of being, into our cosmology, and into the backbone of our decision-making vessel. It is wise to ensure that the stories that we are carrying around are related to our people, which some people call Afro-centric, I call AfroCosmic—stories that center African traditions, African Cosmologies, and African stories and ways of beings as it's core. We must be subjects in the stories that we ascribe to.

*Ultimately, we cannot become equals unless we are subjects. And we cannot become subjects using Eurocentric, masculinist approaches to epistemology” (Salami, 42)*

### **The Importance of our Cosmological Value System.**

If you ask me what I’ve studied, I will proudly tell you Economics and African American studies. I will tell you the University that I’ve studied in and assure you that my skills for reasoning, logic, writing, have undoubtedly become stronger from my experiences within these systems of higher education. The origin of my university was built exclusively for White European men. As delineated in his latest academic work, Craig Steven Wilder, author of *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* corroborates that “The story of elite American college is largely the story of the rise of the slave economy in the Atlantic world.”

Early benefactors who gave money to Brown and Harvard made their fortunes running slave ships to Africa and milling cotton from plantations in the American South. The slave economy earned the school the bulk of its wealth for the first 150 years of the school’s history. Many of our universities’ prominent people on campus were plantation owners and slave owners, and many of the first donors were wealthy slave owners. Scientific racism, such as polygenism, propagated by figures prominent Harvard figures such as Agassiz, who spoke actively to justify slavery (Wilder)

The emblematic red bricks themselves were built by African and Indigenous slave labor. Women were not allowed in the university until 1920, almost 300 years after the opening of the university, and a few African Americans were given the rare privilege in 1850. Some of the most

famous members of my University, have created systems and theories that support scientific racism. These systems are theories are based on stories and cosmologies that don't take me or other Black women into consideration as a subject. I am an object of ire, or projection.

However, my experience within the education system was an incredible one. I was able to work constantly within the realm of social justice, I was able to work with youth of all different backgrounds, I developed incredible interpersonal skills and my entire education was paid for by Harvard themselves.

However, I think it was no coincidence that during my four years of study, I also entered into a very deep spiritual crisis. In my last year of my Harvard education, I had just won two of the most prestigious research fellowships that the American University system had to offer and yet I was completely depleted spiritually, emotionally, and socially. After a few days not being able to drag myself out of bed, at 20, I went to see a psychologist for the first time in my life. Their verdict was that I was severely depressed and that I needed to be put on multiple medications immediately.

I looked at the psychiatrist, a woman who had met me all of 20 minutes ago; a young, accomplished Indian woman who was stylishly dressed and very emotionally detached from my entire story of feeling an unescapable existential void in myself. I thought about her offer, and then a ball of rage rose up from my stomach. And instead of accepting the prescriptions that she was handing to me, I stood up and let loose a load of profanity and indignant questioning of her morality, her humanity, and her ethical fiber.

“How could you possibly pump me full of chemical drugs that are habit forming, difficult to transition off of, that would affect my gut, affect my ability to focus, to form relationships? How could you possibly think that was a good idea without asking me about my other practices like meditation, exercise, my family life or any other strategies for coping with emotional overwhelm?”

She gave me the snarky reply, that in reality, I didn't have to be there. It was my choice. I stormed out into the cold Cambridge night and no one ever checked back in about the state of my “severe depression”.

It was then that I was determined to find other ways of achieving. I was constantly being rewarded for working myself into a pulp, for not sleeping, for being productive – but there was no part of my curriculum that wondered how my emotional or spiritual realm was functioning. I hadn't learned about the ways that I might find faith, find meaning, find purpose or find fulfillment within this structure. My studies were focused on a different measure of achievement, of practice, and of function.

It was then that I began to reexamine what was important to me and why. It was then I began to realize that perhaps the basis of my value system, and the operations of my emotions and life were resting upon assumptions, stories, and systems that were not particularly benefitting me in the most positive way.

It is there I truly began to question the values of what Mina Salami calls the Europatriarchal system of knowledge, which I was incredibly effective at navigating.

My aim here in this exploration is not to render the knowledge of Europatriarchal systems nil or to debase them. These are systems of knowledge and patterns of thought that are quite efficient and valuable and understanding certain processes. The scientific, industrial, and information revolutions would not have taken place without a race to acquire knowledge. Rationality and reason are phenomena that we indeed should guard. We should not abandon induction or impartial judgment.

“However, ironically, Europatriarchal Knowledge itself is not rooted in the rational objectivity it promotes.” As we can clearly glean when sifting through the many slave-era sciences that were developed such as polygenism, within the most “elite university in the world”, (Salami 19) we see how Europatriarchal Knowledge “is a constructed and biased narrative that brazenly centers whiteness and maleness. It is a narrative that parades propaganda as knowledge” (Salami 19)

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis is a revaluation, reorganization, and reimagination of what is possible and valid as knowledge. It is a lens that invites back in our African and African diasporic cosmologies as ways of seeing and valuing the world, as plural ways of making and finding decisions.

I am specifically interested in African and Afro-Diasporic ways of meaning making as I am invested in Afrocentric possibilities for healing. As we will continue to explore, Europatriarchal methods of meaning making swept across the globe in the realm of capitalism, imperialism, and globalism that generally did not benefit the African or African Diasporic perspective. As we see every day in Gabon, in Kenya, of our ways of being that were passed along from hundreds or



thousands of years have finally gotten to the point of near extinction due to the imperial powers and religious conquests.

Though I focus on African Indigenous worldviews, and AfroDiasporic people, Indigenous and First Nations have also been doomed to similar fates and have extensive connections with African descendant people all over the Americas. Native and Indigenous tribes and families across the globe were gathered up, forced into Christian, “civilizing schools” and barred from speaking their own dialects and languages. Their intricate systems of knowledge and knowing that were often related specifically with the landscape upon which they lived were deemed to be “barbaric” or were exploited when needed and then discarded. Their methods of planting, of regenerative systems of cultivation, irrigation, language acquisition, hunting, and animal rearing were perhaps briefly valued, but were never accepted within the Europatriarchal systems of Knowledge, indeed, these Indigenous people, much like African people were proclaimed to be barbaric and in need of Europatriarchal saviors.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Knowledge does not have to work as a dichotomy, or as a win:lose parameter. Knowledge can function as an integration of the most precious parts of our being, the parts of ourselves, our surroundings, and others which make us feel most alive, which give us the most pleasure.

**Let's explore the possibility of knowledge in another story:**

*“In the beginning, there was only the sky, the sea, and the gods. Olokun was the Sea Goddess, and Olorun was the Sky God. One day, Obatala, the god of creativity, asked the Sky God if he could create land and living creatures to alleviate his boredom. Olorun approved, and*

*Obatala created Ife, the great city that remains the cradle of Yoruba civilization. However, when Olokun found out that Obatala created earth and land in her territory without consulting her, she retaliated with a great flood that inundated the first city of humankind. Eventually Ife was rebuilt, and it became the “ondaiye (the place of creation), orirun (the source of life), and ibi oju ti nmo wa (the place from where the sun, or enlightenment, rises),” as the eminent professor Banji Akintoye describes Ife in “A History of the Yoruba people.” But the luminous strength of feminine wisdom was out of balance in the new Ife, and the genders were locked in an eternal power struggle. To prosper, the people received ogbon, which refers to knowledge, or phronesis (practical wisdom). However, the gods knew that ogbon had to affect both the minds and hearts of the people. So, they divided ogbon into ogbon-ori and ogbon-inu, concepts that literally translated mean “knowledge of the head” and “knowledge of the gut” but that respectively refer to intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence. To have only one type of knowledge, according to the Yoruba epos, was We do not view knowledge as something that can be accessed, and assessed, through the arts and their connection to the emotions, senses, and embodied experience. We associate talent with the arts but not knowledge. Yet art is also suited to explaining reality because art captures reality from the inside out. Art explains who we are because our existence is artful. We are not simply rational and mental beings; we are also emotional and physical beings. Art is a way to understand and change reality just as much as quantifiable information is. This is why ogbon had to speak to both the intellect and the emotions.” (Salami 12)*

**Activity:**

*Return to your altar and read this story at least twice. Read it until you can commit it to memory and recount the story to your altar. Act it out and practice it as if you were entertaining your whole family over the fire or over the dinner table. Record yourself. Then take five minutes of quiet time to reflect, then journal.*

***Reflect & Journal:***

- *What would you describe as your ogbon-ori?*
- *What would you describe as your ogbon-inu?*
- *How often do you think about or employ these systems within your life? Do you find that you value one more than the other?*

**Afro Cosmic Knowledge Making**

***What were your reflections of what is ogbon-ori and what is ogbon-inu?***

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis is a method of interrogating the assumptions that we have about what is true, what is valuable, what is rational, what is emotional, and understanding that we have a lot more choice than we give ourselves credit for in creating our day to day reality.

Let's say you were to choose a stock right now in which to invest. If I went to my university economics professor and asked about the ways in which I could choose a profitable stock, this person might tell me that I should privilege a logical and rational movement of the market. I should research and investigate and use probability and statistics to make the most educated guess.

However, what if I mentioned to that same professor that I would instead, like to do my research and then I would seek divinatory counsel from an African priestess to help me make my

final decision. My professor might laugh in my face and discourage this type of illogical behavior within a traditional system of economic analysis.

One decision would be heralded as logical, while another would be heralded as illogical—within the Economic Science that is heavily lauded within Europatriarchal knowledge. This is not to say that there are not economics professors who believe in divinatory practices, but to say, within the structure of Economics as a science and knowledge-making tool, using the shells of a cowrie or of a broken coconut shell, would not measure high in the ways of understanding what decision to make with an important investment. Listening to your gut or intuition would not be the way that we would be trained within this path.

As long as I have been a practitioner of African spiritualities, for a long time, I would have argued the same way. I would make spiritual decisions in spiritual situations and “logical decisions” in rational day-to-day situations. However, it is with the help of my own spiritual teachers, but also with the academic work of J. Lorand Matory that I’ve understood the real shortcomings of my prior decisions.

In his latest work, *The Fetish Revisited*, Matory argues that within the Europatriarchal system of management of knowledge and production of knowledge, there is less logic and rationality than we actually may imagine. Though we often understand these systems of making decisions as logical, and fool proof, most Europatriarchal disciplines were inherently based upon a particular conquest and *raison d’etre* and a particular narrative that pushed these systems of logic forward. Historically these reasons were white supremacy, capitalism, elitism, imperialism, or neoliberalism -- all of the ideas that bolstered our scientific, industrial and information age. These are the systems that solidified our Euro-centered systems of education, of medicine, of

socialization, of what is now thought to be civil, polite, and what is thought to be uncultured, or barbaric.

It is often assumed that African systems of knowledge, such as African religion, divinatory practices, sacrifice and ritual, as recently presented by J. Lorand Matory, are decidedly based on “fetishization” and emotion, whereas Europatriarchal systems of knowledge such as economics, psychology – well, they are sciences! Matory takes an in-depth dive into looking at two of our most quoted scholars within modern thought: Freud and Marx and breaks down the context, life-experience, and hidden desires that have bolstered their approaches to understanding, economics, psychological analysis.

He paints the picture of understanding that shows how in reality, African systems of belief, logic, and beauty within the traditional African diasporic religions that are being practiced from Nigeria, to Cuba, to the US to Brazil, work in a very predictable, logic-centered method and that they are tried and true methods of understanding. Matory shows that though European social critics, including Marx and Freud have employed the term “fetishism” to show the irrationality and lack of logic of African Gods and their system of beliefs, while disregarding the “materially embodied social logic” of Afro-Atlantic religions. At the same time, he shows how, in reality, these “rational” guides both misrepresent Africa’s practices and Gods but also have steeped their own practices and traditions in fetishism of certain ideas, traditions and practices, rather than logical thought patterns.

In reality, Matory shows us just how accurate this idea of the *ogbon-inu* and *obgun-ori* really function within our daily social lives, social constructions, and within what he calls Afro-Atlantic religions.

First of all, as modern neuroscience continues to prove every day, systems of knowledge cannot just privilege the brain or logic. Most of the decisions that we indeed make on a daily basis are much less logical than we can possibly imagine. Resmaa Menakem, author of *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts*, reminds us that the decisions that we make that are often times “most important to us” are generally not made by consulting the cognitive or rational brain, but instead our systemic body brain and nervous system flood us with a somatic feeling from which we then rationalize our response with a logical explanation. (Menakem 5)

*“In the bestselling book Thinking Fast and Slow by Nobel Prize–winning neuropsychologist Daniel Kahneman, the author makes an argument similar to the ancient Yoruba philosophy of ogbon that we mentioned above.*

*Kahneman argues that we make decisions with the aid of two internal systems, which he calls system 1 and system 2. System 1 is an emotional, intuitive system that “has little understanding of logic and statistics” while system 2 is a reflective, deductive system that is “capable of reasoning.” You could say that system 1 is comparable to ogbon-inu, knowledge. There is a crucial difference, however. In the typical binary way of Europatriarchal knowledge (if the names “system 1” and “system 2” don’t already speak volumes), Kahneman sees the two systems as involved in “a psychodrama with two characters,” with the emotional system 1 being the less intelligent character than the logical system 2. In contrast, you could say that the Yoruba mythological theory of knowledge sees the two systems in a passionate love story with two enamored characters instead. According to Damasio’s “somatic marker hypothesis,” emotional experiences (or somatic markers) override reason when we make decisions. In short, our emotional response to a situation is the basis for our rational choice.” (Salami 15)*

This means that it is most often our “gut” brain axis that decides, even when we think we are making “logical decisions”. The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis re-centers and revalues these systems of decision making of thought of creation!

### **The stories that live in our bodies.**

This is why, despite our most honest efforts to act in a just and logical manner, despite our willingness to value others’ lives, to learn about we most often act out the stories that live deeply within the cellular memories of our bodies (Levine). Those stories of repeated experience determine most of the emotions, reactions, and split-second decisions that we make.

Resmaa describes what neuroscience Daniel Siegel calls the polyvagal nerve system; instead, he refers to it as the soul nerve. This extensive enervation of our body which extends out from the spine into the pelvis, the gut, and the heart, the pulmonary system, and connects back to the brain stem, largely determines whether we feel comfortable, and we can be with, rest and digest all that is around us, or whether we feel that we are in a constant state of fright, fight, freeze, or faint.

Though we can tell our brains to stay calm, though we can tell ourselves with our rational brain to be happy, to be aligned, that everything is ok and everything is normal, though we can logically understand that we are not in danger, the body carries the stories and memories that we have lived in prior instances; the body carries the stories of our parents, the body carries the stories of our lineage, our ancestral story, the stories of our community.

Menakhem, borrowing from modern neuroscientists like Daniel Siegel and Stephen Porges, calls the most ancient part of our brain (the stem and the cerebellum), the reptilian brain. This part of us is responsible for automating breath and autonomous functions such as breathing, digestion, body temperature, and balance. (Porges 2021: Siegel 2020)

What he explains is that the 400-million-year-old “programming” is connected to an extensive system of enervation that travels through the most important parts of our bodies, often makes decisions even before the more rational part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) has had a chance to process the reaction, but more surprisingly, even before the supposed emotional part of the brain (the limbic system), has a chance to respond. (Menakhem) Porges calls this the polyvagal system, and he theorizes that because of this extensive system of nerves that connect to our gut, heart, respiratory system, pelvic floor -- our body responds to stimuli or danger before we’ve had a chance to “think about it”.

Resmaa calls Porges theory of the polyvagal system of enervation, the “soul nerve”, which connects the most important organs in our body with our brainstem. “The unifying organ of the entire nervous system” (Menakhem 138) is responsible for all of those most visceral reactions and emotional responses that your body has. Resmaa describes the “soul nerve” as being responsible for the sensations in your body when your stomach drops at a perceived danger, when you have lost your breath, when you suddenly feel sick to the stomach when you think of someone or enter into a room. However, it’s also responsible for the most impactful sensations of relaxation, heart-opening warm-and-fuzzies, the perception of deep, nourishing connection or when you can feel it in your gut that something is so right or perfect in that moment. He explains



that the soul nerve's purpose is to "receive fight, flee or freeze messages from your lizard brain and spread them to the rest of your body. Another purpose is precisely the opposite: to receive and spread the message of it's okay; you're safe right now; you can relax." (Menakem 139) The ability to navigate between these feeling-states in our body is what Porges calls "vagal tone" and THIS is vital to our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being – as it regulates your "breathing heart rate blood pressure....prevents inflammation, reduces pain, improves your mood, and helps you manage and understand fear" (Menakem 140)

These discoveries, such as Porges Polyagal Theory, and more recent theories as to how the body and brain connect and work together paint a very complex and nuanced picture of how the brain, our thought processes and our emotions really function and fit together. It has revolutionized the ways that therapists, psychologists, and healers all over the world perceive the functions of the brain and body.

It is not just the brain that thinks. It is not just the brain that is the captain of the helm of the body that is our ship. The chain of action is neither think then act, nor act than think, it is a mixture of sense, feel, think, act, react. Most of these reactions and feelings states that are alive within our bodies are actually memories or events that we have lived in our past that the body, or stories or affirmations that we have been told over and over and over that we believe to be true in each moment. Each of these the stories that we've lived, seen, heard about in our day to day life acts as unsequenced or constantly present memories that our body lives in and swims in each time we make a decision. (Menakem)

As human creatures who are embarking upon a journey of life, of purpose, of love, of living, it behooves us to understand what stories live and coexist within us and "touch" our soul nerve. It is intelligent for us to realize that unless we can find vagal tone, or the ways for the body to be

in the healthy areas of both aroused “sympathetic” and relaxed “parasympathetic” ranges of our nervous system, the most shocking stories, the most traumatic memories, and the most difficult undertakings that we’ve felt in the world will always be at the center of our thoughts, and most genuine reactions.

This bias towards our most negatively impactful memories is part of our survival mechanism as humans. One part of our brain, the amygdala, is always scanning for novelty and anything within our surroundings that is new or different and therefore could potentially cause us harm, bring danger, or difficulty. We are hardwired to incorporate and these memories and these experiences and install them in a more “present” place evolutionary, so we make sure that they don’t happen again. (Siegel)

Because of this evolutionary mechanism that works to keep us safe, often our memories live in our bodies as un-sequenced stories – so we swim constantly in the most negative stories that we have experienced, have been told, or have witnessed first-hand.

For example, let’s imagine that you grew up in a very rough neighborhood, and you were used to hearing gun shots before bedtime, which made you incredibly scared as a child. Though you might now be a grown and well-functioning adult, you’ve moved neighborhoods and you no longer live anywhere close to gun shots – you still might find yourself having trouble sleeping or waking up in the middle of the night. You might find that loud noises frighten you into uncontrollable shakes. Your body might react in unexpected and seemingly disproportionate ways if a person drops a cup or slams a car door.

Within the world of sexual and somatic therapy, this is the effect of what we call un-sequenced memories. (Porges) When we have successfully integrated something that has happened to us, a memory, or a story, then we “sequence” it into the long-term memory of our

brain. It fits snugly into a timeline of events and it lives as a memory, something that we can place in a specific time, place, and setting.

If we have not yet understood a specific memory, story, or idea that lives within our bodies – it will live as un-sequenced memory, or un-sequenced trauma. This means that though the brain might understand logically that this thing, this memory, this story has happened twenty years ago, the body still believes that it is happening, each time something triggers this un-sequenced memory or story. (Porges)

The body is floating, swimming, and living in this difficult story constantly, until it is integrated into the body, until it is recognized, until a light is shined upon it. In practical terms within the somatic sexuality profession, we call this an integration of an un-sequenced memory or trauma.

This means that to heal from a jarring event, we often times have to “face”, reimagine or reexperience that traumatic memory, story, or idea in our bodies – without being re-traumatized. As most psychologists and talk therapists can tell you – this is a difficult feat to achieve within conversation.

Our journey as we walk through this initiation process of a thesis is to understand the importance of ritual, understand the importance of the ancestral technologies that were put in place for healing within many of our most ancient societies. Along this journey we will re-center the understandings of the stories that we tell each day, the stories that we keep in our heart, the ways that we move, shake, and dance, and examine the ways that some of our most consistent cultures, as they continue to change and yet preserve the seed of their ancestral technology.

Whether African or Indigenous or European, the most effective cultural technologies most often involve using transformative processes that encourage a sense of belonging, community,

and that stimulate the integration of the *ogbon ori* and the *ogbun onu* in our bodies every day. In reality, these somatic science and neuroscience explanations that Stephen Porges and leading neuroscientists have found to healing and whole-ing from trauma and living a fulfilling and nourishing life, are very close to the African cosmological explanations that we've centered in our research and our writing. There is a centrality of the body alongside the integration of all of the senses and the landscape that surrounds us. There is a necessity to integrate self and community practices to best understand ourselves, there is also a need to move, to sing, to hum, and to laugh each day.

This is the center of our Bwiti cosmology. This is the center of our Yoruba cosmology. It is no coincidence is the center of what neuroscientists Stephen Porges, Daniel Siegel, and therapist and scholar Resmaa Menakem have determined are the center of their healing cosmologies as well.

### **The stories that shape our lives:**

With our knowledge of the “soul nerve”, and the ways that we sequence and incorporate stories we can fully appreciate how what we listen to, the images that we hear, the music, the art, the books, the cosmology that we ascribe to, the faith that we have, the sounds and people that we are around are all equally as important in our construction of our lives, and in creating a world that we love and that loves us.

This is why, if we as Afrocosmic practitioners continue to privilege thought and theory that is fleshed in the Europatriarchal modalities of knowledge where we are inculcated with ideas, whether blatantly or subconsciously that imply that African cultures are barbaric, that time is linear, that profit and business are the most important parts of our existences, and namely that

one can remain polite and civilized while still pillaging and ransacking other's homelands if one is white – then we will continue to create intellectual and physical products in a world that upholds those ideals.

As scholar John D. Niles recounts in a recent interview, “[O]ral narrative is and for a long time has been the chief basis of culture itself. ...it is chiefly through storytelling that people possess a past. It is through prized stories, often in a ritual context, that a complex religious dimension is added to life. It is through storytelling, very often, that people articulate their cherished values and...make possible a future that differs from what now exists.” (Niles)

Folk and fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes posits that stories are actually more than just means of cultural preservation, but part of the basic survival needs of humans. (Zipes) He shows that even in pre-speech eras, there was a gestural language that was used to communicate vital narratives such as where the food was located or the impending arrival of a predator. Storytelling then, is a uniquely human characteristic that provides the basis for our safety and belonging – arguably one of the most important parts of a healthy nervous system, and possibly much higher on the hierarchy of needs that we have previously thought.

Niles, corroborates that stories are the primary way that we can envision our individual identity, our group identity, and one of the primary ways that we can heal from disaster or tragedy. (Niles) Our landscape, our water, our land, our breath is all impregnated with stories that we may not even recognize. The ways that we recognize ourselves, our skin, and the actions that we take and the way that we relate to others is all fed, bred, and read in our storyscape. Whether it is something that we assimilate from an academic text or something that we've just skimmed in a magazine that made a profound impression, a scene that we've seen over and over

again in our households, or just a rumor we overheard—these stories literally become part of our being.

Stories, operating at a level much deeper than our supposed logical thinking (or the prefrontal cortex of our brain), can often times live within our bodies and determine or encourage certain actions before we even have the possibility of cognition. (Siegal) These stories that we hear every day literally live in our landscape and live in our flesh. In our smallest molecules, and in our bodies. As Sylvia Wynters astutely says, “We are not Homo Sapiens, we are homo narrans. We are not the ones who know, but the ones who tell ourselves that we know. We know, therefore have the capacity to know differently. We are word made flesh. But we make words. So, we can make ourselves a new.” (Gumbs, 4)

We may have taken on many years of formal and informal Europatriarchal education and might be drenched and dripping in subconscious valorization of concepts that don't benefit us or the planet – such as consumerism, racism, sexism, imperialism....(spoiler alert: most of us are)! And this exemplifies the importance of the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, an Afro-centric web of meaning rooted in the lens of Afro Cosmic ways of knowing that center collective pleasure as a compass for our decisions.

### **ACTIVITY:**

#### **Reflect & Journal**

*Come back to your altar and practice your invocation. Afterwards, read the following passage over at least twice, then sit with it in silence.*

*“Stories turn into knowledge, and knowledge transforms into matter. The dualist worldview separates matter from story, but narrative is the matter from which we build our worldview, which in turn becomes physical objects: books, buildings, borders, and so on. In our bodies, knowledge transforms into matter. Just as the first structure that forms in the human embryo is the spinal cord, so too is the knowledge the spine of all other ideas that shape our lives. How we move and feel in the world, the air we breathe, the health of our trees, the food we eat, the ideologies we support, the way we dance and make love are all reflections of what we know” (Salami 13)*

*Let’s take a few minutes to explore the stories of origin that exist within our head. Perhaps you have more than one that bounces around your brain. Perhaps you don’t feel a certainty as to which origin stories are correct. That’s ok. Let’s explore what you do believe and let’s find out how that works with our unconscious thought patterns and actions.*

Our central question becomes, what stories are we willing to believe to create the reality that we wish to see?

#### Swimming in Stories:

- Examine some of the assumptions you have about life that you have inherited from your parents or those around. What are the ideas that your parents or community constantly repeated to you about yourself and about your potential and possibilities in life?
  - How many of these phrases, sayings, stories or assumptions have you never examined or questioned?

- Take a minute to review some of the stories/ ideas of science or “myths” that you have never questioned in your life.
- Are there any stories or parts of your history that you have no way of verifying or that you now know is demonstrably false, but you still celebrate or reluctantly accept as your reality?
  - *As an example: my mother repeated to be constantly that marriage was synonymous to slavery, that I should never have kids and that all men are evil. I recognize this story as demonstrably false, and yet, I find that I am not married, I don't have kids, and actually, none of my mother's children are married or have kids.*

#### **IV. Power & Pleasure: THE WEIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE & Story IN THE WORLD.**

There is a weight to knowledge in our world which affects how we receive it. There is a hierarchy of what is a science, what is a thought, what is a speculation and what is just plain ridiculous. Within our global reaching and globally connected world, there is a privilege that is given to certain ideas and certain modes of thinking. These weights and hierarchies depend heavily upon the context within which we've grown up, however, due to the weight and power of certain forms of inculcation of education, certain patterns of thought have much more global force and power.

Recently, I had the privilege of interviewing Indigenous Quechua families in in the Amazon forest of Tena, Ecuador. I had naively assumed that their way of life might be relatively



untouched. I imagined the education of the youth would include a lineage of Quechua ancestors, those who used plants of power such as San Pedro, those who used methods of divination, those who lived from the forest and could live bountifully and produce all forms of their nourishment through this forest.

However, even within those villages, there is a global polyvalence of power but with a directional imbalance that allows Euro patriarchal knowledge to rein, even within the context of an indigenous village. These children, who before were being trained in their own religions and methods of cultivating plants, protecting seeds, alternating areas of living and cultivating, and planting to ensure for optimum sovereignty, are now educated in Christian schools, and enticed to take jobs as taxi drivers, waiters, and cleaners in the urban centers. According to their grandmothers and fathers, the young people's search to find more financial prosperity, due to the enticing global market of cell phones, television, and advertising have contributed to their disinterest in the ancestral lineages and traditions of their grandparents due to their desire to have a job where they can earn more money.

As we will explore more thoroughly in this chapter, we all hold a measure of power, and yet the sphere of which that power can influence others is not equal. It often depends on how much social, economic, and imperial validation that we have to support us.

Each day our world grows more globalized; commodities are constantly in exchange, most economies are dependent on imports and exports of products, services, goods, or people, particular modes of thought, language, dress, and action are privileged universally. And even if these more powerful modalities are, they are not appreciated by all, they have an onus of power and authority over countless lives and decisions and reverberate around the globe.

We will explore intersections of power further in the next chapter, but what we know is that these most influential and acknowledged modes of thought were and are generally created, thought up, and written by those who are white, European men who have specific ideas of morality, economy, and possibility. These ideas are most often rooted in a specific form of logic and rationality while challenging other forms of thinking, doing or being as emotional, irrational, or even as fetishization. (Matory) Yet these Europatriarchal deposits of knowledge hold a great majority of the voice in University, in science, and in most any discipline in this world.

Why is this?

It is because many of these patterns of thought have been supported by a specific vector of power for hundreds of years, and the economic and validating forces that have upheld these particular values and worldviews have compounded exponentially over the past 400 years.

### **Power in iterations:**

As self-proclaimed African shaman and professor, Malidoma Some attests, power is everywhere including and especially in the invisible. “To correct dysfunctional state of affairs effectively, one must first locate its hidden area, it’s symbolic dimension, work with it first and then assist the restoration of the psychical visible extension of it. All visible wrongs have their roots in the world of the spirit. To deal only with their visibility is like trimming the leaves of a weed when you mean to uproot it.” (Some 25)

Though power can be defined and employed in myriad ways, The Afro Cosmic Pleasure praxis seeks to first reorganize the ideas of internal power, recognize these inner sites of power, and then allow pleasure to be the compass for how this internal power is lobbied and externally

expressed in the world. As “power is not something to feign but rather something to embody” (Salama 160) we might describe this power as a force towards self-actualization and proliferation.

**ACTIVITY:**

*Come to your altar and practice your invocation ritual. Remember to add any objects that call to you at any time to your altar. First, read out the following questions to yourself outloud, then take 5-10 minutes to meditate on their answers before you begin your journaling practice.*

- *How do you define power?*
- *This is why the first parts of this course are dedicated to our own rites of passage, ushering us into the meeting of our self. What are the ways that we think of internal power?*
- *What are the ways that we have developed our own knowledge of self?*
- *What are the ways that we make decisions each day to bring us closer or farther away from our possibility and promise?*
- *What are the ways that we ourselves can ensure that we are choosing, joy, pleasure, and empowerment within each moment?*

**External Power:**

Even if we are experts in self-empowerment, or in self-actualization, there can be physical, psychological, or mental obstacles on our path, and this brings into focus the internal power also has its external limitations. No matter how strong our spiritual belief systems, and our ritual practice, our physical body and vessel is held within the bounds of external power structures that

shape our daily existence. Social constructions of power are very important to understand so that we are able to navigate our daily life—always seeking internal actualization while recognizing our material and external landscapes.

The material vessel within which we are born and the “accident of our birth” often predetermines many possibilities within our life path, and our physical vessels are often karmic methods of teaching us lessons that our soul will need to understand on our its long and winding path.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Go to your altar and practice your invocation. With your journal at your side, read over the following questions twice before giving yourself at least 5-10 minutes of silent and reflective meditation time.

This activity, inspired by Resmaa Menakem is a contemplative exploration of your physical vessel and how and where you were born.

- What were the circumstances of your birth?
- Were your parents born in the country of your birth or were they immigrants?
- Did your parents have a degree of choice in the employment that they pursued?
- What do you consider your economic and social status to be as you were growing up?
- Do people compliment you on your looks?
- Do you have any noticeable differences in abilities that are visible to the eye? Do you have any invisible differences in abilities that are visible to the eye?
- What made you feel at home?

- Did you feel safe in your neighborhood?
- What was your education system like?
- Who were your role models as you grew up?

### **Social constructions of power:**

Our internal power and ability to actualize our desires, the will power we have, the discipline that we cultivate are incredibly important in creating a space for an AfroCosmic Pleasure Praxis, however, we must simultaneously recognize how external and material forces of power also shape our ability to move, shake, and realize our desires in our highest place of joy.

“Barricades to power can also be socially constructed. Depending on your gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, or race, there can be similar patterns,” (Salami, 152) such as when laws prevent a young woman from getting an abortion and she therefore misses an opportunity to pursue her chosen path, or when skin color makes someone the victim of a racist attack, or when you are born into a household that cannot afford shoes or schooling. And therefore, to navigate the realms of our life peacefully, it is wise for us to have an understanding of our material realm and the ways that power circulates around us, just as much as understanding of the ways that it circulates within us.

As we have acknowledged the power of ceremony and the things that it can do in both the material and spiritual plane, we should also acknowledge other systems of power that operate in, on, and around the body. We can talk about power in many different ways and it is a force, and an invisible concept that has quite extensive interpretations and definitions of power depending on the discipline within which you are speaking about it.

Within traditional Europatriarchal understandings of power, there are three common characteristics. First, power is tied to the state and its institutions—the government, military, parliament, local constituents, and so on, which are all male dominated. Second, Euopatriarchal Knowledge defines power in ways that are synonymous with terms such as dominance, authority, violence, oppression, and coercion, words that may be related to power but are not precisely. These definitions are then solidified through sociocultural practices that reinforce Europatriarchal meanings of power. (Salami)

A traditional Political Science definition taught by political scientist Robert A. Dahls defines power as “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”. While, Talcott Parsons, who argues in *Power: Critical Concepts*, that power is the generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions – whatever the actual agency of that enforcement.

I am personally quite partial to Foucault’s understanding of how power moves and operates in the world and how we can interact with it. Though there are some shortcomings in his historical and contextual understanding of race, sexuality, and gender, the basic structural scaffolding of the ways that power moves and acts within our societies, has helped me understand my own life and way of living.

Foucault speaks about power in a few different ways:

- It is a vitalism that moves through all people

- It emerges through the production of knowledge
- It is inherent and relativist in all social relationships
- It is unbalanced in all social relations
- It is decentralized
- It is produced in inordinate amounts by certain groups of people and institutions
- It is always unstable and changing in varying degrees of intensity and reach
- It is subject to change through political strategies.
- It is everywhere

These characteristics imply that though there is power flowing through our bodies, through our thoughts, through our earth, and through our elements each day in equilibrium, there are dominations and concentrations of power dependent of the ways that certain groups, people, and institutions can leverage their individual and group power.

Let's explore the ways that the stories that you swim in, your unconscious patterns, behaviors and understandings of the world have been shaped based on the power of who has created and crafted those stories.

Which figures of authority in your life have had an amplified voice or power in shaping your thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours?

Why?

Foucault particularly points out that the following institutions are concentrated and disproportionate locus' of power that can act upon the external sphere, and simultaneously affect your internal sphere of power:

- Religious institutions
- Government Institutions
- Educational Institutions
- Judicial Institutions
- Investigative Institutions
- Law and rule-making bodies

All of these bodies have a greater possibility of generating power than the average individual, as they have greater control over the possibility and the power of the story – the power of their authority, and their ability to disseminate, with authority their views. These iterations of power emerge through the production of knowledge and the maintenance of authority through certain societal signifying powers. In other words, these bodies of knowledge have a special possibility to act upon our external bodies through these systems of control, as well as our inner locus, by spoon-feeding us a particular story about reality, often times without our noticing.

### **ACTIVITY**

*Practice your invocation at your altar and then make a space for your time to journal and reflect in meditation. Read the prompt twice and sit at the altar in contemplation and reflection for at least 5-10 minutes before you begin to write.*

*Let's explore these authority figures and how they establish webs of power around us:*

*Imagine you are talking to a religious figure that you grew up with, or an established religious figure that you have encountered during your formative years. What might they say about their ideas of:*



- *Sexuality*
- *Pleasure*
- *Gender*
- *Purpose*

*How would they or did they react to your lifestyle?*

*Now imagine your government, what are the ways that the governmental bodies can act upon you and your body and your opinions? Now what about judicial institutions? What are the messages that we've learned from the courts about what is legal and what is not legal about sexuality, pleasure, gender, self-empowerment?*

*Take a few minutes to journal about how each of these institutions had an influence on the stories that you tell about yourself, the ways that you embody your power, and your sexuality.*

*Depending on the amount of time that you have to dedicate to these experiences, you might want to split up each institution, and journal about each one on a different day.*

### **What's Pleasure Got to Do Wit' it?**

Foucault explicated that sexuality is an arena for a power struggle within the material and political world because it is a place for empowerment. Power not only regulates and censors, but power produces and generates. It operates primarily through amplification and cultivation more than obstruction or impediment. Power operates not only through violence, regulation punishment, taboo, but also through valorization and implication.

Power operates on and through the body in the erotic dimension or the domain of the sexual. So how can the sexual or the erotic arena be deployed to shift balances of power?

### **Audre Lorde's the Uses of the Erotic as Power**

Audre Lorde has most famously defined the way that power moves, generates, and changes the dynamic within the erotic arena as “the erotic” in her discourse “the erotic as power”.

She defines:

“The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect, we can require no less of ourselves.” (Lorde 88)

Lorde implies that within all of us, there is a vitalism that moves internally. This vitalism has the possibility of not only bringing us internal fulfillment, collective fulfillment but also of shifting external dynamics of relationships and interactions. This powerful force that comes from our deepest and most intimate relationship with our self, and our understanding of our own sexual, creative, and generative power is sometimes called Ki, by those who study Chinese medicine, Kundalini, by those who study the yogic arts, and often just called “energy” by those who practice New Age spiritualities. It is this erotic potential and potentiality in our dynamics of power which gives us the “pleasure” aspect of our Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis. The uses of the erotic as power is what acts in the core of our world view as Lorde creatively extrapolates.

## V. AFROCOSMIC LIVING

### What Makes an Afrocosmic Worldview

In this project, we will explore what other scholars of African and African Diasporic thought such as Jacob Olupona have called an “African worldview”; Denise Martin refers to it as an expression of Ma’at, or equilibrium, whereas I will refer to it as the AfroCosmic.

An African Worldview is a worldview that is informed by African culture (Barker 1999: Graham & Al-Krenawi, 2003). Hill (Mekada, 1999 110) states that “Afrocentric or African centered are interchangeable terms referring to the quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of African people and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of African people as the center of analyses ... the terms African-centred worldview or Afrocentric worldview have been used to describe the cultural values of people of African origin and African descent throughout the world”.

Nigerian scholar Jacob Olupona advocates for an understanding of the African world view which is celebratory and analytical of the many nuances across the continent but understands and emphasizes the common conceptual visions, and belief systems as a thread that run throughout the continent and through many of its diasporic practices. In a recent interview, Olupona weighs in that, “African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane. Even utilizing the word “religion” is problematic for many Africans, because it suggests that religion is separate from the other aspects of one’s culture, society, or environment, yet it is a way of life that is never separated from the public sphere. It

informs everything in traditional African societies – including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death.”

He continues by saying, if we lost the African Indigenous worldview, or the pre-colonial African worldview, we would lose “an entire epistemology, metaphysics, history, and practice. If we lost African Indigenous worldviews, we would lose diviners, their literary corpus, cosmologies, science, medicine, and some of the beset keepers of African history and culture. We would lose the African practice of rites of passage, age-grade initiations, which have brought Africans together under a common understandings, and worldview, and kept them connected with their communities and their past, as well as fostered a greater feeling of individual self-worth by acknowledging important milestones in one’s life.”

The Afrocosmic Pleasure Praxis is firmly based in an African-centered cosmology, which incorporates the core of the common ideas and patterns that exist throughout the continent and continue on in the diaspora. As African scholar Olupona explains, though there is such a diversity of African traditions, cultures, and spiritualities, there are common values that underline pre-colonial African thought. One of these tenants is the integration of God and spiritual belief into every single action of everyday life. Even to use the term African religions, in the mind of Jacob Olupona is a controversial phrase as religion is not separate from daily, mundane life.

Though there does seem to be a similar thread that runs through many Eastern, Indigenous, and African cultures, I am particularly interested in the African Diaspora and the ways that these African traditions continue to be upheld, the threads that continue to be woven, like a multicolored, multilayered, multitextured quilt that covers this world. It is a blanket that we have

held on to through extreme trauma, pain, displacement, separation, and incredible bouts of faith, love, joy and creativity. Afro Cosmic, is an Afro-centered praxis that is focused on the way that Africans and their descendants center faith and cosmology in their practices and how these spiritual visions in turn shape their everyday decisions. This core faith that is the center of the African world view as well as the center of the Afro Cosmic principle has many different and quite diverse iterations, however, it is, indeed, fraught with an underlying principles that hold the entire continent in a loose hammock, is precisely what Olupona calls the “African worldview”. (Olupona)

Within this worldview, I believe that African and African diasporic practices center a somatic well-being, collective participatory dance song, ritual, ceremony, divination, and at the core of these practices is a collective joy or *eros*. These specific traditions inform what I would call an Afro Cosmic Praxis.

In short, our Afro Cosmic worldview and daily practices naturally center our collective pleasure and joy.

The Afro Cosmic worldview is not a structure to dismantle the master’s house, rather it is a home to come home to within a village. It is not a place where we choose violence, seek to cancel or to slash and burn -- it is a compass that orients us towards wholeness. It is a deeper knowing, *connaissance*, an embodied possibility engendered by Afro cosmic worldviews of understanding, seeing, feeling, and connecting to one’s self and all.

So rather than starting from a place of having to prove that we are something that we aren't, we have returned back to building from what we are and what we always have been and what we can always be.

## VI. Initiation into the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis

### (Initiation into another way of understanding and making knowledge)

According to scholars Some, Olupona, Asante, one of the most important tenants of African and Afro-Diasporic religions and cultures is the process of initiation.

An initiation is a rite of passage that brings us from one stage of our lives into another stage. Within any Afrocosmic society, an initiation ceremony brings forward the individual's purpose within their community. It brings us closer to our personal meaning and how we can contribute to the world as a whole. Initiation teaches us about our role and responsibility with the community, within our culture, within our tribe. Within an Afro Cosmic perspective "we all come into this world with a gift that we must give to the world. We must undergo initiation to discover what our gift is and how to share it". (Some 152)

Our initiation processes bring us deep into our landscape of nature and awaken within us the vision for magic, for ritual, and eyes for the beauty of our lives. Each cycle of elements is introduced in some way to the ritual dance. Malidoma Some talks about each successful initiation involves three parts: a separation, an ordeal, and a homecoming. (Some)

### Separation

The separation phase is the place where we are isolated or taken away from our day-to-day modes of living. We are immersed in nature, or within a completely new landscape. We will be introduced to all of the elements of our surroundings, the elements that we might not have to fair as much with each day.

This brings us into a conscious understanding that we are truly separating not just from our family or friends and the way that they used to know us, but that we are separating from a habitual pattern of acting and behaving.

In certain traditions, the initiate may be taken into the forest, into a cave, or taken into a different village. During your Afro Cosmic initiation process, you might want to give yourself the space to explore this process in the intimacy of a separate space, in your sacred space, or completely alone in an immersive initiation in a place of your choosing.

### **Ordeal**

An ordeal means that we face some type of “extreme discomfort and emotional challenge”. This can often include some type of visioning journey or hallucination, often with the help of plants substances that are either ingested or applied topically to the initiate. In this ordeal we are pushed to our physical, emotional, or even limits of what we imagined to be reality.

During these ordeals, we enter into what we call an “altered state”, where we enter into another state of consciousness. This might be with a type of plant medicine, or this might be with a very intense journey that pushes us to our limits or this might be with a type of spirit possession. According to Some, and in my personal experiences that within these ordeals there is

some type of death, a death of the ego, a death of the old self, a death of the older ways of thinking, a death of the wounds of the child, and then a rebirth.

Within this ordeal, we often receive messages for the ways that we live our life, or indications of how we should move forward and which ways we should behave. This ordeal provides us with the somatic possibility to open up other possibilities, to feel in the body the possibility of becoming something different.

Psychedelic research scientist Micheal Pollan shares that these openings of new possibilities and ways of seeing ourselves as we entered into altered states are allowing us to move outside our repetitive, habitual, and sometimes obsessive “default mode network” – the pathway of neurons that your brain is used to traveling to make navigating daily life easier. Entering into the deepest parts of our subconscious allow us to update the stories that we carry as well as the vision that we have of ourselves and what is possible.

### **Homecoming**

A homecoming is the “welcoming back into the community with support.” (Some) There is often a feast and a celebration, as well as a renaming ceremony to reflect the new phase we have entered in our lives, and in our soul’s evolution. If we have acted with courage, nobility, and intelligence during our profound ordeal, we are welcomed back into the community and helped to find a new name, a purpose, and understand our place in the greater community. Our ordeal had shined a light upon our profound utility to ourselves, to others around us, and our community will then celebrate us for that, as well as hold us accountable as we walk our revealed pathway.



Within our Europatriarchal forms of education, we often enter into ritual practice but without the meaningful and conscious construction of community around us. We are often groomed to be successful, to find a good career, and are encouraged to make money in the world. Our most common rites of passage within our communities might be our religious rituals such as baptism, confirmation, Bar and Bat mitzvahs, or more colloquial rites of passage like graduations, birthdays, marriage, and funerals.

So many of us, without these steps into a meaningful existence feel a path of loneliness, emptiness, or seek out these initiations in ways that are often counterproductive for our lives. When we seek destructive forms of drugs, violence or chaos we can often find the mind and emotion altering states of consciousness that we seek from meaningful ritual practices— however, these episodes don't often lead us closer to a nourishing or fulfilling lifestyle.

### **ACTIVITY**

Practice your invocation at the altar. Read the following questions at least twice with your journal and pen by your side. Take at least 5-10 minutes in silent reflection and meditation time to consider the answers. Now, journal:

- What were the most meaningful rituals for your life?
- How often have you been asked to think about the purpose of your life on earth?
- How often have you been asked to meditate on the challenges or ordeals that we need to go through to evolve as people and to become assets to the community at large?

- Who do we identify as our community, family, and clan and what practices do we use to strengthen these bonds?

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis encourages and offers an invitation to perform a purposeful initiation into self. Following the activities and explorations within this book, you can invite yourself into a journey into your deepest purpose, pleasure, and joy. A self-initiation into the examination of our own stories, and how those stories shape us. A self-initiation into discovering your unique superpower. A self-initiation into the most pleasurable form of living.

Before we embark upon initiation, it is wise to understand our current situation, or the ground upon which we walk. What are the ways that we have learned to think and what are the ways that we've been trained to observe and find solutions? Once we take a good look at ourselves, as we've begun to do above, and take a good look at our current external situation, which we navigate, then we can understand how we might forge forward.

As Naim Akbar wisely explains, our possibility for self-actualization on this earth comes from knowing how to navigate both our inner and outer terrain. (Akbar). As this project is an exploration of Afro-Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, which was inspired by the voices, the realities, the situations that arise within a Brazilian context, let us first begin by examining the soil upon which we can plant, upon which we dance, and upon which we may journey and fly. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, these realities that I speak of are based on years of field research and life in Brazil, and the stories and interviews of Afro-Brazilian women who ascribe to an Afro-Diasporic religion or cultural and spiritual belief systems. The invitation is to find reflections and within these local realities and notice who certain realities are universal and

quite valid and vividly apparent in most parts of the world, whereas other realities are very particular to our own upbringing and life context.

## **VII. CURRENT REALITY: Afro-Paradise: Necro and Biopolitical Realities of Brazil**

### **ACTIVITY:**

*Come to your altar and practice your invocation. Put on headphones or close all doors around you, and shut your eyes so that you are focused exclusively on the sounds that you are about to hear and the feeling-states that arise from them in your body.*

*Listen to this Brazilian track of music.*

- *What are the first images that you think of when you hear of Brazil?*
- *What do you think of when you hear the word samba?*
- *Do you think of carnival, do you think joy and beautiful women?*

*Journal for 5 minutes about the first words that come to mind.*

### **AfroParadise**

Despite the festering myth that Brazil is both a racial democracy and a sexual paradise for all, the reality for Afro-Brazilian women shows quite the opposite is true; those who identify as Black Brazilian women are significantly poorer, more prone to diseases, more likely to be victims of violent attacks, sexual abuse, and murder than any other sector of society. All health and wellness indicators demonstrate State-sanctioned neglect and devaluation consistent with the

ideologies that chattel slavery built, and that quotidian racism continues to regenerate that Black women are destined for domestic and sexual exploitation.

Even the recent increased visibility of Black cultural products like Samba into the national dialogue, the incorporation of Affirmative Action and Afro-nationalist policies into the mainstream realm came at a price even more nefarious than the election of Jair Bolsonaro. This is because the incorporation of the smiling, available, and acceptable Black female body as public performance ritual to demonstrate a fluid and inclusive racial identity, continues to be built upon a stage of racialized necro and biopolitics reliant upon the Black body in pain and reiterations of death. (Smith)

Unfortunately, we must accept that alongside our most powerful versions of ourselves, alongside our gifts, we mingle with the biopolitical and necropolitical realities of our nations and states. While the nation seeks to profit from the life of some black people within—Afro-nationalism—it operates according to a politics of death toward others, and this death is not apolitical. (Smith). This means that not only is the constant death that stems from military violence, raids, poor health care services, a collateral damage to neglect but it is a poignant building block to ensure the maintenance of the exotic paradise that Bahia, specifically, but Brazil as a whole maintains in the visual export imaginary within the global market. This necropolitical violence is defined by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death...” (Mbembe 2003, 39) “...rooted in the legacies of racism, colonialism, and slavery, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective” (Mbembe 2003, 12).

The proliferation of both the image of exotic women and erotic paradise that attracts tourists far and wide relies on “narratives that are replotted in this space/time and spiritual and phenomenological violence that permeates the air” (Mbembe 2001). This means that not only can erotic power be used against us but the violence that is enacted has a direct effect on the somatic body, the physical, emotional, and spiritual conceptual idea that Afro-Brazilians have on themselves, as well as the ways that their bodies interact with other bodies within the physical realm. This means that not only do the stories and narratives that we consume affect our inner life, but they effect the reality of our outer life, and the possibility of being able to continue to survive and thrive wherever we are.

The most common deaths in Brazil are those of Black men caught in this state-maintained death cycle but the trauma of the Black experience with state violence is a kind of terror that not only harms the bodies of the immediate victims but also spreads pain into the entire family and community who continues to watch and expect it. Black women are most often suffering violent experiences within the private sphere, alongside doing the bulk of the emotional labor of keeping the family together while witnessing and responding to the atrocities that are inflicted upon their sons, husbands, cousins, brothers, and other masculine entities in within the community.

Activity:

- *What are the current situations and realities for Black people where you are?*
- *What are the most common images that are projected on the television?*
- *What are the realities that are lived within Black bodies around you?*

*Take the time today to observe. First think about our access to basic needs.*

- *How is your safety, access to food and goods?*
- *Are you used to hearing about or experiencing certain types of violence? If so, what?*

## **CURRENT CONTEXT IN BRAZIL for BLACK WOMEN**

According to Dossiê Mulher RJ (ISP, 2015) published by the *Instituto de Segurança Pública (ISP/RJ)*, women who self-identify as Black in Brazil are significantly poorer, more prone to diseases, more exposed to violent attacks, sexual abuse, and death from non-natural causes. All health indicators for this sector of the population show a systematic abandon and devaluation as well as a State complicit in this neglect, especially as rates that have steadily dropped for white women, such as domestic violence and murder, are continuously rising for Black Brazilian Women. (Cruz 2018).

### ACTIVITY:

*Take a moment to examine the statistics around you relating to Black women and health.*

- *What are the birth rates, the death rates, the common causes of death?*
- *What are the systemic patterns of health that are related to Black women?*
- *Within your favorite internet search engine, type in the words “Black woman” and “crisis”. What common threads do you find as you go through the populated results?*

Sexism, racism, and classism operate simultaneously as powerful pathogens to Black women. Oppressive ideologies literally take years of the lives of Black women, due to triple secular subordination of gender, race, and social class as well as compromise Black women’s personal identity, body image, and self-concept among other aspects (Barbosa 1998). Notably, gender-based violence and murder have risen over 54% in the past ten years, while these same statistics have dropped almost 10% for White women (Violence Map). Black women make up 59.4% of

all registered cases of domestic violence, 56.8% of rape cases, and 62.2% of female homicides. These alarming statistics have pushed Black feminists in Brazil to demand the protection of the private life within the political realm, citing sexuality, gendered violence, and domestic work as important factors to address in achieving the health and well-being of Black Woman (Araujo 2001). These discrepancies in statistics demonstrate clearly that Black Brazilian women are not being equally protected, honored, and served under the rights and responsibilities of a Brazilian citizen.

### **ACTIVITY**

- *Imagine that you will have to go to the doctor's office for a routine checkup.*
- *What are the sensations that you sense arising in your body?*
- *What are the feelings and impressions that you hold of your health institutions, like the hospital?*
- *What were your parents' ideas about the formal health institutions that existed within their vicinity?*

When Black women seek care from traditional health institutions, these same systems of oppression are most often impregnated within these health systems. Black women are treated poorly, given less pain medication and subject to more pain because of underlying idea that they are tougher, stronger and can handle it. (Kaufman, Gamlin 2008). As Foucault points out, our medical system, which has been designed and bolsters most of the ideas of our Europatriarchal knowledge and power encourages disenfranchisement and a sense of ownership of the body. The patient is encouraged to allow the doctor to control the body, and any forms of touch are generally to reinforce a hierarchy of patriarchal control. (Srathern and Steward 1999) Patients'

narratives about their own illnesses are most often discounted, as the doctor is given the expert award and the ultimate power to identify and treat them. (Foucault 1973). These are all powerful examples of the differences in embodied citizenship and in the stories that we hold each day about ourselves. Black Brazilian women do not share full protection, full health, full political representation, full citizenship, nor full erotic agency.

This is why recognizing this reencounter with the Afro Cosmic Pleasure praxis and the erotic as power, with pleasure, and with our interior lives is so fundamentally important for us as Black women.

#### **ACTIVITY:**

- *Think back to your childhood. If you were experiencing some type of pain or discomfort, what was the reaction of those around you?*
- *What were the ideas that you were taught about how to understand signals of health, wealth, and wellness within yourself?*
- *Were you told that you could understand your own body, and that you were an expert on your own health?*
- *If you are then told that listening to your body and your health are completely unimportant, how does that affect the way that you listen to yourself?*

Black bodies, both male and female were degraded, and all hegemonic positions of power were used to prove the inferiority of these beings by medical, judicial, and social means to justify their enslavement and their mistreatment. Though there are incredible silences within the literature about true existence of Black women within Brazil, we can see the scars of this slave



regime are present today in their glaring inequities in Brazilian society. All of these assumed uses of the Black Brazilian Body provide serious limitations to the erotic sovereignty and embodied freedom that Afro-Brazilian women might experience on a day to day basis.

### **ACTIVITY:**

*BODY SCAN: Listen to the following guided meditation that will lead you into a deep, listening and conversation with your body. Focus on 3 different parts of the body that have called to you and then read them back to yourself.*

- *What is your body saying to you?*
- *What are the ways that you may have ignored this body before?*

### **Prevalent Images of Black Brazilian Women**

In the first part of our journey, we explored the power of stories and narratives and how they affect our body, our lives, the ways that we think and act, and the ways that the world goes around. According to Black feminist scholars, there are two narratives of Black women that are present throughout the Americas, particularly present in Brazil.

Our stories of unequal valuation of Black Women's bodies as well as a systematic neglect have historio-social roots in The Transatlantic slave trade. Although there is surprisingly little written about the daily lives of Black females, Brazilian theorists have established two concepts of Black womanhood, that also exist within the United States as common simplifying images of Black Female Sexuality. The first concept is the *mulatta*, the golden child of miscegenation, who is available to serve, entertain, and for sexual pleasure. The second concept of black

womanhood is the *Mãe Preta*, or the Black Mother, and is similar to the *Mammy* figure in the United States. She is a dark, black, round, and caring mother of all, who willingly sacrifices her labor and her body in the name of the nation. She is the woman who takes care, serves, feeds, and is socially accepted in her role of someone “born to do for others” (Nogueira 2017, 52).

As black feminist theorist Lelia Gonzalez reiterates, “Black women, naturally, are cooks, maids, servants...or prostitutes. They are nothing more than the mules that carry other people’s families on their backs.” (Gonzalez 226). These words show us the naturalization of the role of Black Woman that was institutionalized within the national story due to slave labor and the continuation of the systemic colonial rule in Brazil.

**Activity:**

- *What are the messages that you’ve received around domestic work from your family and community?*
- *What were the messages that you received about cleanliness from your family and from your maternal figures?*
- *Were your responsibilities chores or expectations in the domestic realm different than those of your siblings? If so, why?*

As Caetana Damasceno (2000) has demonstrated in her work, being more phenotypically Black makes it more difficult for a Brazilian woman to get a job that does not rely on the “utilization of the black female body”. Phenotypical blackness does not constitute what Damasceno describes as a “positive aspect”. The farther from looking European that her phenotypical characteristics are, the more difficult it is for her to find jobs that involve public relations or leadership, and it dramatically decreases her chances of ascension within the

workplace or within social classes. (Damaseno 2000) As hooks confirms, the Black Female body was destined for “cleaning up everyone else’s mess.” (hooks 470).

Even now, the role of the Afro-Brazilian woman has not strayed much from its colonial past. The expectations and visible reinforcements that Black bodies are for labor or sexual commodification are rampant in Brazilian society. Black women in Brazil make up 75% of the population of workers outside of the traditional economy. Close to 80% of all *domesticas* or domestic laborers are black women. Afro-Brazilian women are still heavily recruited to work within the sexual industry, and yet black woman make on average 45% of what a white person does. (Barbosa 1998)

### **ACTIVITY:**

*Listen to this recording of sexuality educator Elina talking about an experience that she had with young adolescent women in regard to Black women “cleaning up after others”*

- *Why do you think that 12-year-old Black girls have such pronounced ideas about domestic work?*
- *Do you feel personally that there are expectations of you as a black woman within the domestic sphere?*
- *How do you feel when you have to clean up in the house or in your private or domestic realm?*

Black Brazilian women are enchained to the constant theorizing and ratification of their trauma, but they are consistency inscribed globally as a commodification of exotic sexuality. (Nogueira 2016) Empirically, the old Brazilian adage continues to ring true: “A Black woman to work, a mulatta to fuck, and a white woman to marry”. Afro-Brazilian women are both less

likely to be in and stay in stable long-term relationship, despite their expressed desires to have or maintain them. Those who are identified as phenotypically “Black” and have more Africanized features, are way less likely to marry, as studies show that African features, such as a wider nose, coarser hair, and blacker skin are not valued within Brazilian society. (Nogueira 2017)

Please note, that in quoting these statistics, I do not seek to reify the heteronormative idea that marriage, or long-term relationships are inherently better or more moral than other types of relationships, but with the limited data on Black Women, this is one of the few studies that shows the societal ideas of Black Womanhood. Though Brazilian media continues to show Afro-Brazilians to be sexually available, in actuality, the rates of dissatisfaction among Black Brazilian women with both their self-image, body-image, and self-esteem are incredibly low, as are their rates of sexual satisfaction. (Cruz 1994)

**ACTIVITY:**

*Examine the statistics surrounding Black Women and relationships in your region. What are the statements, stories that you’ve been told in your life regarding your worthiness in relationships, worthiness to be in partnership, and your worthiness to be loved?*

*Now write down these messages and images that have been passed on to you. Now, write down a series of affirmations that counteract these statements.*

*Listen to this guided recording to begin the process of making positive affirmations directly related to the stories that exist within your head and body.*

*Affirmations only function in the subconscious mind if you make a practice of saying them daily for a suggested minimum of 100 times. Incorporate your affirmation practice into your altar*

*practice or into a daily activity that you perform, such as driving, yoga, or walking up stairs.  
Track your progress and the results in changing the subconscious stories within our minds.*

### **Overtuning a Politics of Silence: Politics of Articulation**

Sex is constantly invoked on the television and on the lips of the average citizen in cities like Rio de Janeiro, however, this verbal visibility does not necessarily equate to an emancipation or an autonomy. As Hammonds continues, “In overturning “the politics of silence” the goal cannot just be to be seen; visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop “politics of articulation”. (Hammonds 141) A lineage of Black feminists has begun to engage with this issue of politics of articulation to move past solely theorizing or talking about sexuality to finding methods of actually practicing a type of black feminism that incorporates our erotic wholeness.

#### **ACTIVITY:**

*Take a few moments at your altar, in private time, to draw or journal about the first messages that you’ve received about sexuality.*

- *How do you feel when around you engage in conversations about sex, about sexual pleasure?*
- *Have you ever been asked to articulate by a family member, a sister, a friend exactly what it is that gives you pleasure within your life?*

*Listen to the recording of this guided meditation which will bring you into your desires. It is called the “I want, Fire Meditation”*

### **Current Interventions of Black Feminism: Enough is Enough**

Within the academic and political realm of Black Feminist thought, there have been many proposed theories and writings and works about every single one of the issues spoken about before. Black Feminist Theory, Womanist Theory, and Intersectional Work is now, especially more recently a familiar term, even to those who disparage it. There are clear lines of ideologies throughout these stories that are told about Black Women. One of the stories speaks of the many years of sexualization, disparaging treatment, and quotidian abuse the Afro-Brazilian woman has faced. Yet, precisely because of this over sexualization, abuse, the other lineage of Black Feminist thought has noticed a pattern of completely silencing the Black Female Body and its sexual desires or urges.

Because of the threat of abuse, oversexualization, misunderstanding, theorists such as Hortense Spillers write that “Black women are the proverbial beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, mis-seen, not doing, awaiting their verb” (Spillers 2003, 153), she so vividly described both the academic and quotidian void of true engagements with multivalent possibilities of erotic life and sexual enunciations for Black women. Spillers spoke to the long-documented idea of a ‘politics of dissemblance’, where Black women guard the intimate details of their sexuality as a secret (Hines 1994), in relation to a politics of respectability, through which many Black women attempt(ed) to disassociate themselves from any traces of their sexual selves while adopting acceptable dominant values to avoid oversexualization, exoticization, and scrutiny as objectified others (Higginbotham 1993). Hammonds, in her essay Black (W)holes, imagined black women’s sexuality as a black hole, an enigmatic mystery which appears to be empty space but is actually full and dense. Hammonds emphatically calls for a politics of

articulation of Black sexuality, the airing out of more complex possibilities for Black Women to exist as erotic beings, without needing to exist “in opposition to” or “in spite of”.

As long as respectability politics has functioned to order Black bodies into sidelined silences, there have also been those who have pushed back upon this void, while centering Black women’s desires as worthwhile.

As Black women who loves Black women, what do we do?

As Afro-Cosmic Women who also love ourselves, love our Gods, and love our divinities, and privilege our inner lives while understanding that we can use this strength to organize our outer lives, what can we do?

How can we prioritize our lives, ourselves, and build towards a more embodied, spirited and safe existence for ourselves, without constantly sinking the lowest common denominator, or arguing with stories, narratives and types of knowledge that do not acknowledge our existence?

#### ACTIVITIES:

Listen to this guided “the black whole meditation” where we explore Hammonds’ theory and how it interacts with your own stories, body, and life.

Within the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, we stand with Black Feminism, but recognize its limitations to transcend all of these external power structures and woes. Though it may be argued that the forces and the resistance of Black Brazilian women should be better served by traditional politics; why then should our focus fall on erotic and pleasure-based action? Why then do I advocate for the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis as a way of practice and action?

I do not, underestimate, nor do I find traditional problems such as health care, violence, lack of political representation to be of little concern to Afro-Brazilian women, however, I argue

that by harnessing the power of The Afro-Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, we tap into a pantheon of activism that not only seeks to resist or to survive from these oppressive structural forces, it insists on autonomy and seeks to thrive by embodying one's desires, and therefore, one's deepest selfhood. By engaging with the erotic or the sensual-self, one must acknowledge one's own desires. By engaging with erotic power, one must engage with subjecthood, even if most systematic pressure is whispering about your objecthood. By engaging with the Afro Cosmos, we are invoking systems where we are magical and whole, natural and wise, and tap into a lineage of technology that includes rather than disparages our presence.

Throughout most theoretical Black Feminist interventions, the deep wounding of the black collective body, spirit, and land has been made very apparent and an incredibly important part of understanding modern society, however, the ways of healing that are provided most often continuously replicate and validate the same structures that produce these violent process. I suggest that it is only through the decolonization and deconstruction of the entire system of analysis that is involved that we can truly enact a new and innovative loop towards healing.

Even the categories and the ways that Black feminism, sexuality, and gender is imagined within these methods of intervention are based on and built upon Europatriarchal knowledge and theory of sexuality, gender, religion, and feminism. The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis seeks to center the wisdom of Afro Cosmic meanings of time, space, place, gender, and sexuality to rediscover constant integration and equilibrium rather than eradication or condemnation of any iteration of Black womanhood.

#### ACTIVITY:

- What are the images and ideas that are most proliferated about black women?



- What are the depictions that you see?
- How can you play out those depictions?

Listen to this guided somatic role play regarding the depictions of Black women.

**ACTIVITY:**

*Create your own self-portrait with Annie Ganzala. Listen to this guided practice to create your own version of self.*

As we mentioned earlier, we can't think ourselves out of the traumas that we've been through and the stories that we've been inculcated with as Black women. We can't feel away the trauma that Afro-Brazilian women feel every day; we can't ignore the reality of the structural systems that work without our consent and favor -- we as Black women need a way out of the trauma-loop within which Black Feminist Theory has gotten stuck.

Our constant loop of wounding and protectionism of our image and representation has not left us with many ways of articulating our own sexuality or even finding spaces for creating "Black Interior Worlds" (Morgan). The Black Interior Worlds provide us the possibility to initiate ourselves into our own power, to understand the ways that we can be most useful, and the most pleasurable pathway to that purpose.

**VII. INITIATION BEGINS:**

**From Diane to Joy**

My personal initiation story is one of rebellion and trials, failure and tribulation. After about a decade of constant searching between practices, Chinese Medicine, Yoga, Tantra, various psychedelic traditions, I was finally led to the Central African tradition of the Bwiti or Eboga.

In the forests of Gabon, I was bathed and sang to like a baby, I was dressed and undressed like a child, I was then brought to face my own courage in undertaking the rites of passage during initiation. I was held and yet pushed to my limits. I brought to rebirth by near-death.

And then I was given a new name.

This new name was quite a climactic experience. I sat in front of a row of elders, wrapped in traditional initiation cloth and told them about my visions and all that I had learned in the two-week initiation period.

The elders would take a day or two and deliberate and when they were ready, they would call us out for a blessing and naming ceremony. I was the last to know about my name. One of the other banzis, or babies who went through the initiation with me was named after the lion, one was named after the highest feminine principle, one was named after the cosmic boat that carts believers back and forth between worlds.

And I was given the name narenoungha meaning 'joy'.

Joy!

It's a beautiful name and has an incredible significance, but I'm not going to lie – I was a bit underwhelmed. I wanted to know the symbolic meaning behind this word. I wanted to understand its complexity, its foundation, its spirit and its life. What was it that made these elders choose this name for me and my soul as it transited my babyhood to spiritual adulthood?

Was Joy a real mature name? Could I really be named that?

So, I got up the courage one day to ask about the naming process. Was it difficult to choose the names, I asked?

“No, not for you it wasn't!” The elder answered.

“Really, how come?” I questioned, awaiting the vision that would have sparked this name, the esoteric meaning that I would contemplate in my cosmic ruminations.

“Because, that's what you are.” He answered simply and shrugged.

Now, it might seem like an honor to be called “a joy” by your spiritual father in your initiatory tradition, but as a cerebral over-analyzer, how could I not long for something more complicated? I wanted to be a symbol that I would have to pick apart over my lifetime, one that would keep me up at night, one that would bring me answers little by little. Instead, I was “a joy”. Does this mean this incarnation was just for fun? Did it mean I could continue to throw parties as has been my beloved pastime for a decade?

It has taken me some time to really accept the karma and the central purpose of this naming ceremony. It has taken me some time to accept the centralization and the power of joy, and what

it takes to maintain a state of joy. Joy is truly a part of our spiritual life and the core of our Afroc cosmic conception of transcendence.

The word joy can often be spoken about a happiness but perhaps we allow Sensuous Knowledge author Minna Salami to preach to us about the difference:

*“By joy, I am not speaking of its close relative, happiness. I’m referring to an inner quality that is itself political in nature. By joy, I mean the type of emotion that may emerge if you had a near-death experience but survived, because to thrive under a system of oppression requires such intentionality. I mean the presence of hope. I mean being yourself even if it clashes with the approved perceptions of how you should be. I mean ease and lightness of being. I mean, in essence, freeing yourself from predefined notions of identity. An identity that is a vessel of joy does not mean the absence of association with specific groups. (Salami 78)*

As Salami tells us, joy is not only a quality of our inner life but cultivating this quality within our inner life also has an external affect – a cultivation of this inner quality that is political in its external ramifications and nature. Joy, as she extrapolates, is a freedom that only the inner, spiritual, and invisible world knows, and that is what makes it free from adherence to identity. However, as we discussed before, our external vessels are also part of our current pathway and karmic life. This means that when certain bodies exhibit joy within our systems, it is a wholly political act. It is a political act as, as we have seen most of the Euro patriarchal structures of governance are meant to regulate or perhaps commodify our joy.

## ACTIVITY

- *Set aside 30 minutes to listen to this guided meditation on joy at your altar. You will need a speaker, comfortable clothes to move in, three pieces of paper, colored pencils, markers, glitter, anything that you can decorate your joyful self with.*

As we saw prior within our particularly Brazilian context, the paradise and the joy that are harvested from the nation of Brazil are directly dependent on the suffering, the violence, the labor, and the death of black bodies.

As we trace the history of erotic power, and the power of African and African Diasporic resistance, it is generally created from the pocket of joy, as systems of colonization, slavery, servitude are most often created to dampen the spirit, snuff out our own forms of personal empowerment and create a hopelessness that defeats any thoughts of rebellion, change, or deserving of freedom.

Joy then exists at every level within our hierarchy of needs. Joy is at the core of our survival. Joy is at the center of both our existence and resistance. And joy is at the center of transcendence into altered states and our highest form of being. Joy is the superpower that initiation into a community brought to me, and brings to us, and joy is my purpose. Joy is that which I center in my inner and outer work.

Joy is an integral part of my journey and realization within the project of the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis. It is only through this understanding of what brings us true pleasure, true belonging, true understanding, and true purpose can joy be a part of our inner and outer lives.

### **Joy within resistance.**

Joy is a vessel from our inner cultivation but, it doesn't imply that one does not recognize the day to day emotions or inner turmoil. It doesn't mean that one doesn't feel affected by the structural violence of daily life, it just means that our life, our identity, and our actions on the outside, whether they are part of a resistance to any system of oppression, are a source of inner nourishment as well as a source of fulfilment first and foremost to ourselves.“

In this sense, joy is one of the greatest powers and weapons that we have against the external powers that may marginalize, exclude, or disown us. As we explored, Afro-Brazilian women are expected to work, be sexual objects and clean up the mess of others in the country's national imaginary. They are the care givers to the children, the emotional laborers in the family.

As 33-year-old erotic artist, Annie Ganzala said in an interview “we were never meant to be bodies with pleasure. We were never meant to be bodies with joy. So many people tell me I should be painting about the genocide about murder and sadness, and so they don't want to support my art because it is about love and pleasure. How can I possibly sustain that?”

As Salami corroborates, in one way or the other, as Black women, we were meant to live absent of joy. This is why the biggest “fuck you” a black woman can give to Europatriarchy is to take genuine pleasure in being alive. (Salami 79)

To be able to free the Black female identity from the apotheosis of suffering, we need to first of all grasp that we are collectively robbed of is joy and its accompanying sentiments of reactivity, hope, ease, security and freedom. (Salami 80)

## **IX. YOUR GUIDES**

Each of these Black Brazilian Women has chosen a path within this Afro-Cosmic Pleasure Praxis. Each is different, but each one engenders her work with African world view and centers pleasure within their methods of treatment. Each of these leaders comes together in ceremony, works with the power of story, and understands the incredible power of polyvalent meanings of knowledge.

### **ANNIE:**

Annie is an erotic artist and workshop leader. As an initiate into the Candomblé tradition, her art is queer, fat-loving and Afro-Brazilian, showing many of those who have never seen themselves in art, as beautiful, as magical, as mystical and as deserving of desire and loving eyes.

### **What is her magical power?**

Art as liberation. Queer pleasure as subject. As Audre Lorde says, “poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde), it is a vital necessity for women’s existence because it is through poetry that we fashion a “language that does not yet exist”. (Lorde) The fusion of what Lorde referred to as the “European mode” of knowing. To think of poetry as a luxury is to discard “what we need to dream”. It is to neglect precisely what we need “to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise” It is, in essence to claim that our very “woman-ness is a luxury”. (Lorde 35)

### **ACTIVITY**

Take a look at this artwork by Annie Ganzala. Meditate with it upon your altar for at least 5 minutes. Invite it into your sacred space.

Gather your journal, pencils, colored pencils and art supplies.

- How is joy represented in this painting?
- How is spirit represented in this painting?
- How is love represented in this painting?
- What are the first words and sensations that arise in the body when you contemplate this painting?

Listen to this guided meditation to create your own representations of joy, spirit, & love.

### **CLARICE:**

**Clarice** is a psychologist, yoga teacher who focuses on ovarian breathing and cleansing as a mode of reconnecting with the true pleasure of the body. Her magic power is her vision. She is a power seer and does readings of the soul's imprint and can direct and guide and hold a space with ease.

### **Activity:**

*Listen to this guided meditation to participate an ovarian breathing session. Set aside at least one hour to participate in the meditation and post reflection.*

### **BELA**



**Bela Guerra** is an orgasmic therapist who uses a mixture of Reichian therapies, OSHO active meditations, and Brazilian tantric massage to assist women in reconnecting with the pleasure in their bodies. She's also an incredibly erotic musician.

Her superpower is in her orgasmic movement. Her music brings you to a point of climax as she skillfully moves you and her therapies guide women towards their own orgasmic epiphanies, harnessing their own erotic powers within meditations and tantric massage.

**Activity:**

*Listen to this guided meditation to practice an active meditation. Put aside at least one hour and a half to explore the entirety of this meditation.*

**ELANIA**

Elania is a sexuality educator specifically working with young girls and teenagers in the favelas. Her superpower is the education of self-love and self-care within the world of the orixás. She transforms often bleak existences within difficult material situations into wonderlands of internal empowerment by using the orixás as characters for emulation.

**Activity:**

*Listen to this guided meditation to explore self-love as a daily practice and explore the ways that we can often misuse and ill-define, while limiting our concept of self-love.*

Each of these women wields her Afro Cosmic Pleasure in a different manner. Each one has her own superpower but also wields their erotic power for a collective good in a very different iteration. Each one has special connections with Black Brazilian women.

## I. **SEPARATION**

This first part of our initiation journey is a concerted observation and then objective separation from the ways that you might be used to thinking and observing problems, spiritual, material, and political.

### **POWER in the material realm (of discourse)**

As Audre Lorde attests to in the erotic as power, everything that we do, every action we take, and everywhere that we take our bodies is also a political act, and so the power that we hold with ourselves, and our bodies are at the same time, physical, mental, spiritual, and political.  
(Lorde)

Power is defined in many different ways and understanding and cultivating our own definition of this power is very important to our definition of all that follows. This is one of the most important concepts in understanding how we make decisions and how we move in the world.

According to Foucault, power is the thing that lies at the core of all existence. This is the thing that surges through our body, the concept that most spiritual traditions work with as much as the thing that most engineers, physicians work with. Those might call it “Ki”, some might call

It “Prana”, that indescribable energetic force that works through us. Axe “a philosophical concept that describes a quality that is immanent in everything.

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis advocates know that a central tenant to our work is empowerment, but what does this word mean? What does it mean to indulge in your own power and what does it mean to understand how to deploy power for yourself and for the good of your people? We find that there is a tendency to think of power as within every construct but not the tendency to first turn to our own devices and understand the power that circulates within us first.

### **INTERIOR POWER: THE EROTIC AS POWER**

Audre Lorde has most famously defined this term as “the erotic”

*“The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect, we can require no less of ourselves”.* (Lorde 2)

This means that there is a marker of fulfillment. A sense of profound satisfaction and it also points to the communal aspect of *eros*...

#### **The erotic as power:**

In 1978, Audre Lorde delivered a speech urging a group of academics to not allow pornography to shroud the view of an innate power source that women, particularly possessed—the erotic. The erotic, she defined is “a source of power that is deeply feminine and spiritual, located in a hidden, sacred, and intimate potential of a woman’s most sacred desires”. (Lorde 4)

The erotic, she warns, “is often confused with pornography, but this is only a patriarchal way of distorting and coopting this source of power for its own profit” (Lorde 4). The erotic then, is a force, a source of power that has serious influence and the possibility to alter any dynamic of power.

Lorde’s concepts were specifically relevant for Black women, who at this time were beginning to redefine their feminism towards womanism which foregrounded the significance of race, class, and nation when thinking about gender and sexuality. Authors, historians, have written about the erotic and how it can be harnessed and employed through the bodies, minds, and spirits of Black women throughout history and used it to alter existing structures of power.

Lorde defines the ethereal concept of “the erotic” to explain how power, desire, sexuality, and sensuality operate in an intersectional energetic flux. If all things possess energy, it is important to understand exactly how Black women throughout history tangibly put force behind this potential energy rather than suppressing it as they have been “taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society” (Lorde 4).

We might not recognize the word “erotic” in common interpretations of our actions however, you might find an adherence to the words pleasure, play, leisure, joy, self-expression, and the images of reclaiming and re-owning the black body have all been employed. To facilitate the possibility of recognizing the erotic at work within our historical accounts, I put forward a working interpretation of the erotic as power.

There are multiple layers to the concept of the erotic that may be carefully unfolded. First, to embody the erotic, the body must be consciously claimed as a subject, as this power comes from a place within autonomous desire. This implies viewing oneself through sovereign

eyes, one can “begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic...to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.” (Lorde 10)

**ACTIVITY:**

*Watch this spinal release and yoga class to awaken a creative energy within the spine. Leave yourself at least 45 minutes to complete this class.*

The second layer implies that the body acts as a political entity. When Lorde warns the reader that the tendency to separate political and spiritual entities as dichotomies “[results] from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge” (Lorde 6). she implies that even our most private, intimate, and individual acts can be considered political, and when informed by psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest within us” (Lorde 10).

**ACTIVITY:**

*Listen to the guided journey on this somatic exploration as we understand the phenomenological lines that we walk in our bodies. The way we style ourselves, the way that we dress, the way that we walk, move, and look at others is often very political. Even the partners that we choose are quite political.*

Third, when a Black woman embodies erotic force, she may act as a vector of force oppositional to the system of Euro patriarchal capitalism. When Lorde writes, “this charge is not shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively Euro-American male tradition,” (Lorde 7) she positions the erotically-embodied, Black, female as a vector of counter-cultural that challenges this hegemonic field power and that will not “adapt to it”. (Lorde 10)

Fourth, indulging in erotic force propels the body to seek and relish in its own joy; it refuses to be reduced to labor for the sake of labor; work for the sake of work; winning for the sake of winning. As Lorde reminds the reader “any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need...is profoundly cruel”. (Lorde 5)

**ACTIVITY:**

*Listen to this somatic guided meditation about the importance of the body as a site of pleasure and adornment. You'll need to have with you, some materials and some pieces of accessories that make you feel beautiful.*

The fifth layer shows that discovering one's erotic potential encourages resistance. As Black women's consciousness recognizes the deep joy that it has in its potential, it naturally resists the forces that hinder or reduce this joy and “will not settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected or the merely safe.” (Lorde 7)

**ACTIVITY:**

*Follow this somatic guided exploration to explore deepest layers of our desires – and to make friends with the word desire, and to explore our most extravagant and most worthy desires.*

The sixth layer assures us that our acts of resistance can in turn be in the form of pleasure and joy. Lorde specifically lists dance, song, writing, intimacy and adornment as products of erotic empowerment. Understanding this definition, we can understand one of the core kernels of the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis. It provides us with the building blocks to conceptualizing this

importance of pleasure, how joy, how the feelings of “yes” can lead us into a personal and elevated generosity, it can bring us into our perfect role in a chaotic dance of perfection.

ACTIVITY:

*Participate into this erotic life fantasy. Let's play the YES game! What turns you on physically? Mentally? Emotionally? And spiritually? Let's practice asking for it, and let's practice giving voice to exactly what it is that we want.*

As we will explore within the experiences of Black Brazilian women, the dominant stories that plague the Euro patriarchal structures of knowledge, and the erotic stories that bring us to giggle and cackle and dance. Throughout history, the use of the erotic has carried an extreme amount of importance as the brutal, insistent, and blatant systems of oppression hissed at African-American women's feet at every turn, while the judicial, medical, and political system most often responded with the same extreme level of violence rather than protection for the Black women.

This means that purposely living from this place of Afro Cosmic Pleasure and purposely fleshing out and flushing out our erotic as power we can understand our own meaning of power. We can understand power in a multitude of ways and recognize the different ways that power works within us, without us, upon us, around us. We can choose how we would like to engage with this power, and we can have a real understanding of what power actually means to both of us.

When we center the erotic as power, we can center pleasure as a compass for our fulfillment and empowerment.

### **Pleasure as part of the Afro Cosmic Web**

As we've explored the Afro Cosmic elements, I'd like to suggest that, actually, pleasure is a natural part of our Afro Cosmic world view. I've discovered that within this praxis of living, of believing, of being and of worshipping – pleasure is actually at the center. At the core.

Let's return to the original story that began our exploration. Let's go back and listen to the recording. This origin story from the Central African rainforest actually holds the philosophical understanding of the core of the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis.

**ACTIVITY:**

*Watch the video recording, listen to the accompanying music of the story. Of this origin story, of this cosmic story that orders the realm of life for some people what are the things that you notice in this story?*

- *How do you feel about the story?*
- *What was important about this story?*
- *Which symbols were central to our learning of this story?*
- *How was pleasure conceived or thought of in the story?*

As often are in mystery traditions, stories and meanings are revealed very slowly and this origin story was only discovered after all of my interviews and research in Brazil had come to a culmination. The songs, revealed by my teacher, were so connected to all of my discoveries in the area of pleasurable research. It was only discovered long after my own initiation into a Central African tradition.



And yet it tied together so many of the thoughts and ideas and understandings about why I chose to study pleasure. Why was a pleasure praxis such an important field for me to explore within the Afro-Brazilian realm, and how would this pleasure actually reverberate out into other realms of our life?

Within the Fang Bwiti tradition, the word *Elula* is the central reason why the universe was created. The word *elulua*, pleasurable things, was the desire, the longing, the vision that brought the original creator of all to create the earth and humans. Now this idea of pleasure or pleasurable things, at its most complete translation is not just any type of pleasure—it is a collective pleasure, one that brings joy to all of those who are involved.

*Elulua* is a pleasure that occurs within community. It is a joy of living, a joy of sharing family, a joy of celebrating win:win situations. These are pleasurable moments that we would refer to as *eudaemonic pleasure* versus a *hedonistic* pleasure. Eudaemonic at its core is “the type of happiness or contentment that is achieved through self-actualization and having meaningful purpose in one's life.” Within an Afro Cosmic world view, each individual person's purpose and self-actualization would serve a greater purpose within the ecosystem of their community. Ironically, often the definitions of hedonism are related to a constant conquest of pleasure. This hedonistic pleasure can be a limiting factor if it is a short lived and instant pleasure that my limit the well-being of others, and does not contribute to a win:win harmony for the community ecosystem.

Pleasurable things that we might refer to as the eros within the erotic pleasure of Audre Lorde. Pleasurable things that are connected to community. Pleasurable things that bring out the joy of living. Pleasurable things that naturally elevate and illuminate our life and our cosmology.

This *elulua*, is then what has brightened up all of creation. This *elulua*, then became what inspired each human. This *elulua* was what inspired the Gods to create existence in the first place.

You'll notice, at the end of the origin story, there is a similar fall from grace as we see in the Bible. However, this fall from grace that brings humanity into mortality is not a question of an act of sin or lust. In this case, it comes from actions that were not in alignment with *elulua*. As the story says, the original thoughts were forgotten, meaning the nature of these humans had fallen out of alignment with joy and *eros*. A pleasure that takes into consideration our own joy, our own love and care – but also a pleasure that brings into consideration all of the community, the earth, the nature, the ritual, the traditions around us.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Listen to or read this account of pleasurable activity by the anthropologist Fernandez from Gabon:

*The village was contrasted with the forest. It had warmth and light, and most important, it had the activity of man. One of the basic pleasures and greatest sources of prestige for Fang was the production of "pleasurable activity" (elulua) in the village, whether by dance or ceremony or the visits of relatives or the arguing of disputes. The means was of less importance than that elulua should exist. Activity dispelled the solitude of the forest and the coldness emanating from it. This activity constituted for Fang the most rewarding manifestation of man's social nature. The village in olden times was the arena of that activity, the focus of the many euphorias of Fang social life. Later villages became backwaters, and the ndok dulu "the passion for voyages" away*

*from them) became an overmastering impulse and source of malaise in many villages.*

*(Fernandez 101)*

## **ACTIVITY**

Coming back to your altar for reflection and contemplation:

- what is your definition of pleasure?
- How do you define it in your life?
- Where are the places where you find yourself most at ease and in pleasure?
- How do you recognize pleasure?
- What is your relationship to it and when you are around it?

As a somatic sexuality educator, I would define pleasure to a client as harmonious balance of excitement plus relaxation.

Adrienne Marie Brown, author of *Pleasure Activism*, defines it as “a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment.” (Brown 8)

This cosmic story is in line with the type of pleasure that Adrienne Marie Brown also considers as part of the “measure of freedom.” It’s something that takes both “trust in intimacy” as well as the ability to “notice what makes you feel good and what you are curious about” (Brown 5). It doesn’t involve “shame or scarcity thinking” as well as “denial or repression” as many religious doctrines might have us believe. (Brown 5)

Let’s think of some common forms of thinking about pleasure within our Euro patriarchal civilizations. Within Christian or other religious traditions, it is common that there might be

shame around certain types of pleasure. Perhaps, pleasure is attached to leisure time, which means, it shouldn't be attached to work or something of value. Pleasure can be the signal, the moment, the idea, the thing that makes us point to our aliveness. The sensation that brings us to awaken to our own superpowers and vibrate in our joy.

Pleasure activist, Adrienne Marie Brown centers pleasure within her methods of activism, just as do all of those who were interviewed during this project. She compiles a list of ways that we might use pleasure to improve our lives and our existence:

- recognize that pleasure is a measure of freedom;
- notice what makes you feel good and what you are curious about;
- learn ways you can increase the amount of feeling-good time in your life, to have abundant pleasure;
- decrease any internal or projected shame or scarcity thinking around the pursuit of pleasure,
- quieting any voices of trauma that keep you from your full sacred sensual life;
- create more room for joy, wholeness, and aliveness (and less room for oppression, repression, self-denial and unnecessary suffering) in your life;
- identify strategies beyond denial or repression for navigating pleasure in relationship to others;
- and begin to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing!

**ACTIVITY:**

*Reflect on this list of “pleasure to-dos”, make yourself a pleasure journal and, write down each day, how you lived up to these life-improving methods of pleasure.*

### **PLEASURE and POWER**

Though pleasure can sometimes be sidelined within our day-to-day lives within the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, it holds a great importance. This is because, arguably, our pleasure is very connected to our sources of power. It is very much connected to the power of what awakens us and what gives us electricity to live, what gives us inspiration.

What is this sensation that we connect to? What is this force that moves us into activating our bodies? What is the energy that brings us into a pleasurable state? What encourages us to find our pathways towards honoring our own pleasure? As in the story that we heard, the God, the creator was moved by a desire for pleasure – for pleasurable activity—this brought him to create the entire world.

As Audre Lorde said, that the deepest identification that we can have of this sensation of true pleasure, of the fulfillment of a pleasure that is both individual and communal and collective. A pleasure which is in line with the idea of “pleasurable things”.

## XI. ORDEAL: EXPLORATION OF AFRO COSMIC

### Tenants of the Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis

#### **DIVINITY:**

- Do you believe in God?
- What is the story of your God?
- How can you communicate to this God? And how do they communicate with you?

According to Olupona and various scholars who study the Indigneous African worldview, there is a central spiritual quality to all things. The material and the spiritual realms are both sacred. Spirituality is never separate from the mundane, and the mundane is never exempt from a spiritual origin.

Faith, prayer, spirituality, or religion are a constant in the global African and Afro-Cosmic world view and as Malidoma Some says, “every physical problem has a spiritual root” (Some) And so, within our Afro cosmic world view, we are told that all of us is a divine being, with a fate, and *ori*, and a purpose. (Akbar).

Within our Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis, the first step in understanding yourself is to understand that you are divine being. This means that your first relationship is with your divine, your physical body, and that this being, intelligence, greater force is connected and part of you at all times.

In the Kemetic tradition, Muata Ashby explains that we are rays of sun that come down from the divine. A belief in our own divinity and our own ability to communicate and connect with

this divinity provides a completely different viewpoint for understanding not only our purpose on this planet but our pathway to honoring this purpose. This means that an AfroCosmic modality of establishing an understanding of our own identity is beyond the constraints of Europatriarchal sciences and cohabitates with the deepest mysteries, the unexplainable intelligent and forces that animate our human existence.

If our understanding that we are all part of the divine, and that we have the possibility to create, then there is a serious need to cultivate an interior part of our life, a subjective inner world. It is here where we find the inspiration and the potential to create in the material.

### **Erotic Subjectivity**

The Afro-Cosmic Pleasure Praxis may serve as a productive orientation based on the strategies of self-identifying Black Women who practice somatic, pleasure-based embodiment work for the collective rediscovery and exploration of Black women's existence as desiring subjects and erotic agents. These strategies can lead to embodied agency by orienting us inwardly, or towards our own subjectivity. The concept of "erotic subjectivity" or the "exercises of individual agency towards developing who we are in changing worlds, despite who we are told we are or ought to be – is thus political because it challenges the status quo allocation of social and material capital, moving the individual towards improving her or his own felt/lived experience by critically reading one's own experiences and objective relations to the world. (Allen 13). In other words, in encouraging Black women to follow our pleasure inwardly, we can find one important example of the embodied erotic agency.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Follow this guided meditation to create an I Want list...

This possibility of arriving at our own erotic subjectivity can provide us with a Black Female Interiority that works “specifically to excavate a broad range of feelings, desires, yearnings (erotic or otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the politics of Silence. So, these organizers and educators provide us with the possibility to move past silence, and move toward articulation, exploration and then a wholistic embodiment of our subjective erotic identity, embody our erotic agency, and yes, feel the fuck out of all of it.

The Afro-Cosmic Pleasure Praxis provides a space that incorporates Afro-Diasporic sensibilities and realities, concepts of gender, images of time, while also leaving a space for the particular temporalities of Brazil and the embracing of the “whatever” (Stallings) of Blackness that does not have space or time for making judgements about which types of images, art, or representations are “good” or “bad”, “moral” or immoral or even productive or unproductive. Centering the Afro-Diasporic concepts of equilibrium, I argue that a more productive way of interpreting Black Feminist Images, is understanding their possibilities within an Afro-cosmic potentiality.

### **The power of the Word:**

In order to encourage this inward agency, let us remind ourselves of the possibility to create within the Afro Cosmic worldview. As part of the divine creation, within our brains, within our bodies is the possibility of creating reality.

First, listen to Bokaye in his explanation of the song *maboga* – the origin of creation brings us closer to the understanding of how words are so critical in shaping our belief system.



**ACTIVITY:**

Listen to the following story as told over the song and reflect on your ideas around it.

**MABOGA:**

The beginning of the beginning is called the silence.

The silence calls upon a thought.

The thought contains a vision.

And what is that vision? The vision is the creation of the world.

So, what is the beginning of creation?

It is a vision that permits us to obtain the word and that word is called *montumbo*.

What does *montumbo* mean -- *ngoba nomenongo*

It is the beginning

When we speak about the beginning, we speak of a God that calms, and of the spirit that manifests with the world and that spirit is called *ngouba*

It is God that we call Iboga.

Iboga is the color of God.

It is in our thought that we manifest the world. It is within our thoughts that we manifest creation. And it is that the thought that came from the silence, where the word comes from that God, appears.

This means that our stories are often much more important than we imagine them to be in our day to day life.

These stories make up the ways that we think, walk, talk, and even gesture. They provide us with possibility or limitation depending on the ways that we imagine ourselves.

#### ACTIVITY:

As Bokaye plays the song of Maboga and reads out the story of creation as told in yet another way, create a dance, a somatic actuation of the tale that Bokaye plays. Dance along with the audio and the guided moving meditation.

Afterwards, journal about how it felt to move your body to the song. How did it feel to act out this song?

#### **Self Determination:**

Our powers of self-determination and recognition also come from being able to see ourselves in our own light. Developing a space of “interiority” allows us to filter away many of the constant messages that we receive about our bodies, their desirability, our identity and what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

Annie Ganzala runs workshops by creating self-portraits with artists and those who consider themselves “non-artist”. This allows them to practice the idea of drawing our own portrait of ourselves, rather than subscribing to anyone else’s.

Annie says,

*“Caymmi, Caetano Veloso, and all of these White men talking about “o que a Bahiana tem”, what a black woman is like, and always presenting the Black women under a light that is always sexualized, exotified, and animalized, and so I think, I have to be there...because, anyways, I’m tired. I’m tired of seeing my sisters being represented through a White gaze, I think that the artistic movement in Brazil owes us a lot...*

*There’s always art that is talking about pain about suffering, about who can demonstrate, how much you have to sacrifice yourself and bleed. Because, whiteness doesn’t want us to see us celebrating in our art in plain pleasure and in ecstasies.*

*They don’t want to see our pleasure.*

*So, thinking about our art. Our love. Our care. In exposition in galleries—that is also a political act.”*

### **ACTIVITY:**

What is extremely interesting about this interview is that Annie Ganzala identifies the white gaze, and yet names the artists who were white and some artists such as Caymmi who is Afro-Brazilian. This brings us into an interesting philosophical perspective of the white gaze, as

particularly within the necrophilic Afro-Paradise that is Bahia – a gaze that is created by a Euro patriarchal knowledge and assessment of value – even if it is wielded by a black man.

It seems that Annie is calling for a more accurate and more nuanced perspective on the ways that men (Black and White) can engage with the sexuality of a Black Brazilian woman, as Annie does in her own visual work. Annie takes on the task of recreating her own gaze, without needing to refer to any of the classic tropes of Bahian womanhood.

### **ACTIVITY**

Start with a simple mirror.

Take a few minutes and now write down the first 10 words that come to mind when you look at yourself in the mirror.

Examine the words that come through on the page. Which stories are present? Which stories are most negative? With the same affirmation practice that we explored in the earlier chapters, let's revert the negative descriptions by making them into positive affirmations.

Now, gaze at yourself long enough that your ideas about yourself become loving or at least neutral. Work here with the affirmation that you have written.

Continue to repeat this affirmation now out loud.

First, without looking away from the mirror, sketch yourself with the other hand.

Second, sketch yourself by looking back and forth from the mirror.

Now, imagine yourself in a state of pleasure, of excitement of joy, sketch yourself in this state.

Annie expands upon the value of this activity:

*“It always works this way because most people don’t have any artistic orientation about technique. They have the simple things that the schools teach us about how to make a drawing. But when the people realize that it is really simple to make a face, then the next step is to make your own face. So now that you know how to make a face, then you’ll do your own face, do it the way that you see yourself, the way that you feel yourself. it’s really incredible the way that people, through this, really begin to open something up, about their own inspiration. Both about the ways that they imagine themselves or the ways that they desire to be. So, for me it’s a methodology that works, in the way that everything begins with us, from inside to outside.*

*So, generally, a person will only need the absolute minimum technique to bring forth a new space of learning and then they can do anything.*

*Because they say “Wow, now that I can do this...” Now from that, everything else just follows.”*

#### ACTIVITY:

Let’s continue our orgasmic yoga practice by incorporating affirmations. Listen to this guided orgasmic yoga practice to incorporate our daily affirmations.

It can be a powerful process to use the affirmations while also connecting to the force of pleasure within your body. There is a somatic practice called orgasmic yoga, where we use

breath, self-pleasuring and focused and concerted effort and intention to create a transformational and pleasurable experience.

Listen to Bela Guerra explain why:

“I think that in this city that we live, we have to look again at the way that we live our sexuality. We need to access this place of discovery because this sexual energy is the creator of life and the creator of all things. There is a lot of potential in this--not just in the meaning of sexuality but in the orgasmic therapy, I like to redirect that energy to diverse places and aspects. Every person is going to have their own orientation. And I appreciate the quantic power, to direct and redirect from that place.”

### **ACTIVITY:**

#### **Touching Chakras Lovingly**

*Listen to the following recording that will guide you into an orgasmic yoga practice. Make sure you find a comfortable space. Creating affirmations for each of the chakras. Creating a practice of pleasure. Connecting with this energy of the creator and breathing this energetic source throughout the body.*

### **Identifications**

As you begin to work with affirmation in your life, particularly connected to your orgasmic potential, explore your relationship with the words that you are using each day. There are many terms or words that might be mainstream or implanted within our lives that may not be the words that we would choose to use for ourselves.

Annie speaks on this when asked about the ways that she identifies:

“In a sense, I don’t feel comfortable with the term lesbian or with the category of feminist because, I don’t have a way to disconnect it from my own ancestry. Black, Yoruba, from what I am now. And every day, more and more, I would like to disconnect from every Eurocentric concept that was imported to us as if it were a universal concept as if it were a concept that works for all of us, because it doesn’t fit. “

The Afro Cosmic Pleasure Praxis grew out of this same desire to explain a concept that I could explain but where the terms that I knew did not quite fit.

Naming and renaming is a powerful practice that is used often in the Afro Cosmic and African Worldview. Your taking on a new name purposefully or being given a new name by elders is something incredibly important and transformational. Whether it is after an initiation ceremony, or someone like Malcolm X or Mohammed Ali, who took on their own names after rejecting the European names or “names of the slave owners” that they had been given, renaming is quite a powerful practice.

### **ACTIVITY:**

Defining yourself in your own terms, literally.

Let’s play a naming game. Brainstorm the ideal ways that you’d like to be recognized in this world. These words can be as ridiculous, as silly, or as serious as you’d like to make them. The point is to imagine yourself in your own terms.

- Describe your sexual orientation

- Describe your employment
- Describe your race
- Describe your gender
- Describe your name

### **Monotheistic:**

Our African and Afroc cosmic traditions are monotheistic. Ours are traditions that believe in one universal and divine force. A connection that moves, organizes, decides, and maintains the laws of nature, the earthly laws that we live by, but also our divine laws—such as karma, and reincarnation. In our first cosmic story, this one God is called *Megebe* and is way beyond our comprehension of form, a force that is removed from the earth.

This can be confusing to an outsider who may recognize that many of our traditions incorporate spirits or gods, such as the Orixá, orisha, the saints, the lwa. These figures, though we may refer to them as Gods as they have transcended the laws of human nature, are actually imbued with the divine. There is one force that animates all, yet there are many forces of elements that are all part and unified with that animating force.

Whether we refer to Ifa, Candomblé, or even Maasai traditions, one of the most important parts of being able to order our identity, our knowledge, our sensations, our dreams, and our decisions. This divinity is always impregnated into the elements of the landscape and the language.

### **SPIRITS**



The orixás, the spirits, can always teach us about ourselves just as the rivers and the waterfalls can; just as the earth and the mountains can; just as the fire and the ash can. If we understand their stories, perform profound meditation and moving mediation on their form, the orixás can show us the right course of action.

## **EXU**

When connecting with the orixá, giving thanks, giving offerings or asking for their favor, the first orixa that we always must pay our respects to and acknowledge is Exu. This is because Exu is the messengers beyond this world. And Exu is the mouth of the world – always hungry.

Annie Ganzala relates our power of the erotic with the powers of creation and Exu, with our sexual potentials.

*“Because I think that idea doesn’t exist actually. I think about the energy of Exu. Which is the energy of the reproduction and virility, and it’s who we ask if we have problems with, ya know, any sexual problems. So that he can bring us vitality and strength. And our sexual energy is our solar chakra, so it isn’t anything that is disconnected from us. it’s not anything that is isolated. It has to do with our creative power, and it is also related to Exu.*

*It’s all related, so if we have the capability of maintaining a healthy spirituality, we have the capability of connecting and maintaining this erotic power.*

*Because it’s this, it’s all energy. When we talk about eroticism it’s also about how much we can create of energy to be shared. When we are putting our energy out there in the world, from where are we getting that energy?*

*We are getting from nature, from herbs, to water, to river, to fire.*

*Of all of that medicine that is there.*

*It's how we can actually manipulate the herbs.*

*Ginger and cinnamon, all of this”*

## **Ogum**

Clarice was just one of the women who recognized the power of the orixá to not only recognize a cycle that she was in, but recognize how to use both the power of the story and the understanding of that orixá how she could create a different understanding of that orixá in her life.

### **ACTIVITY:**

*Listen to Clarice talk about Ogum and how he represents the transformation of anger and the establishment of boundaries within her own life. Within this somatic moving meditation, we will listen to a story of Ogum and using an Ogum dance, imagine and practice creating clear boundaries and cutting away obstacles.*

*Just as we've played the YES game with the deep, deep need to nourish your desires. It is just as important to know how to define our boundaries and our firm NO within our pleasure practices.*

*Listen to this guided meditation of the YES/ NO game and then find a practice partner.*

*“I didn't have enough energy of metal. Metal is what creates limits. Ogum. If you are treating me badly. Go get fucked up the ass. Go find your mom because I am not your mom. But I have that tendency, because I'm a child of Yemanjá, everyone becomes my child. Even though I don't like this word very much, my process of empowerment went through cycles through the emotion of ANGER. And I realize that this anger is quite ancestral. One of the images that most*

*clearly came to me was of an ancestor, a black woman who had this image of knives inside of her vagina, knives, and tools, as if the only way to use her sexual energy was to liberate herself from certain types of abuses.*

*It's as if, through these ancestors, this sexual energy was used to get revenge. I was able to access a lot of these black female ancestors who had suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of men.*

*Anger is an incredibly important element in our lives to recognize within the Afro Cosmic Pleasure praxis. As we traverse systems that we know are not fair or that do not nourish us. When we see the carnage, the violence, the damage that is often done to our communities and our bodies, anger is one of the most common emotions that we can accept might arise.*

#### **ACTIVITY:**

**Listen to this guided meditation which includes Audre Lorde as she speaks about the transmutation of anger into boundaries.**

The following is a series of guided meditations, dances, and rituals that you will perform on your own. Try not to move ahead in the series until you've finished all of these rituals with confidence.

#### **RHYTHYM:**

The Afro Cosmic is rhythmic in nature. Our rhythmic nature is present in the way that we understand both reality and spirituality. "This constant flow of harmony to disharmony to harmony again indicates a subtle rhythm that provides the rhythmic aspect of classical African knowledge (Maat 963)

This is a core part of how our lives are lived and our spirituality is played out in the material plane. Instead of an elusive “heaven” that we go to, instead of a “hell” or a devilish figure who punishes us after we’ve been naughty, we have constant fluxes between harmony and disharmony and our understanding is that coming back to equilibrium, always, coming back to equilibrium is the center of our practice.

Ma’at in the Kemetic tradition means equilibrium, the balance, the incorporation of both our duality but also the acceptance and incorporation of many forms, ways, peoples that may be very different from us.

Our natural rhythms are played out as celebrations and harvests, of celestial, solar, or lunar cycles. Though “they are often discussed as elements of mathematical time, but they are in essence rhythms” (Maat 963)

Furthermore “these pre-established celestial rhythms, there are the more commonly considered polycentric movements and rhythms of African dance and music (Welsh-Asante 1993) which are expressed during rituals, festivals, and life celebrations. These rhythms facilitate the continuation or reestablishment of harmony within an individual, family, clan, village, or nation. Rituals are the instruments that play these rhythms because rituals help prevent and reconcile disharmony” (Martins)

### **ELEMENTS:**

The earthly elements that we explore within an Afro Cosmic path are not just incidental parts of our lives and landscape but forces of nature that exist for us to interact with, learn from, and

engage with. They are part of a scientific order, but they are also part of divine order and nature. As African spirituality author says “science/spirituality”

As Naim Akbar repeats, “such knowledge becomes the foundation for establishing new cultural forms that maintain the true inner self. Knowledge must be universal as reflected in the divine order of the natural world”. (Akbar 104) Within each and every African tradition there is a tendency to revere, observe, embody, and in some ways worship or give honor to these amazing and grand forces that drive our nature.

The wisdom of the elements not only provides us with the scope to see ourselves at their most gentle and ferocious, but it gives us the possibility to observe the coexistence, play with multiple elements as well as the communication and constant rhythm of each of them.

### **AIR: IANSA: Breath as a tool for inspiration**

This exploration began with an exploration of the understanding of air, the wind, as the creative and animating force—the force that makes the world dance. Therefore, one of the incarnations of life itself.

As Leonard Orr posits, to recognize the life animating force of air, we learn to bring in each breath, not just as an air into the lungs but as a tool of healing, as a force of life.

Within this practice we can recognize the movement that proves to work with our desire, our lower extremities, the uterus, the womb, our force of creation, the place where the erotic as power sits. We open our arms and our hearts to the creator to integrate each of these desires, with this, we allow our head to vacillate from seeing both the sky and the earth and taking into

consideration these two forces. The ovarian breathing that Clarice teaches and shares with women in her circles encourages the women to cycle through elements and seasons with each breath cycle.

**Activity:**

Listen to this guided meditation, and ovarian breathing course with Clarice.

**Waters: Yemanja/ Oxum**

Connecting with the element of water can bring us into understanding with the origin of who we are and where we came from. It can connect us with our rhythms and circulation. It can bring us back into the loving laps of the waters or the intense and crashing waves of the ocean.

**Activity:**

As we cultivate our inner world, let's take a moment to journal and recognize the external structures that have tried to limit us in our purpose. Let's journal about the stories that we learned from institutions who have had the power to inculcate us with powerful stories that we did not believe. Let's talk a minute to journal about the ideas that we've discovered smeared across our faces, deep in our bellies, that we know are not true. Let's take on a ritual to wash them away.

Listen to this guided meditation to create your own ritual bath, and to consciously wash these ideas, stories, and limitations that do not serve us from our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits.

## **EARTH: Obatala: Replanting the seeds of our stories**

As we wash away all those parts that don't serve us, let us connect now to the entities of earth. Our earth represents a receptivity, the possibility of molding, planting, our fertility, our ability to serve our purpose.

### **ACTIVITY: Listen to this story of Obatala**

After taking on our ritual of waters and giving ourselves a bath and washing away any ideas, images, and stories of ourselves that are not serving our highest purpose. Let us imagine working our inner life, our interiority as a way to plant our most just ideas in the inner and outer world.

As we explored internalized ideas and stories of oppression and how they live in our bodies, now let us explore how to plant our highest ideals in the soil. It is important to understand the ways that Euro patriarchal systems have interacted with the ways that we view ourselves as a way of empowering our own vision and potential.

One of the most common stories that I heard while interviewing these five women who work with sexuality is idea that "there must have been something wrong with me" and then the moment where there was a realization of systemic hurt or oppression that was actually the problem.

Clarice & Bela gives us examples of these realizations:

*"I went to ballet in a school of white people. And I was never treated like the white women, I never was, I was treated like the rogue because I was funny, because I was crazy, because I was irreverent, but I wasn't pretty. I wasn't part of the stereotype of the pretty, or anything most*

*liked, the example of anything or anything like that. Even if I was an excellent student, it didn't matter. And then I started understanding why. Because I was discriminated against, but it was only posteriorly that I recognized that. I had to go live in the extreme polarity to realize that and re-signify my own story."*

If we can understand the systems and structures of power that operate around us, then we can recognize the strategies that we can learn to recognize their use to empower ourselves and others, in spite of their forces upon us. We can resignify the story and the internalized emotions or reactions that we may have had around these

This is a strategy of decolonization that works with the ability to plant in our own patch of earth rather than invading others.

*"Decolonization of the mind should instead cause a sense of unity and calm in the mind. It is not removing thought patterns by force but instead gently inserting new insights, which eventually reshuffle and do away with harmful thoughts. Imagine the mind as a garden. Our traditional idea of decolonizing it would be like vigorously chopping down a poison ivy that is threatening to infest the garden with its toxic branches. But decolonizing the garden of the mind is more about planting new, rare, forgotten, and hybrid trees, herbs, and flowers that eventually do away with the ivy. It is decorating the trees with bowls where birds can rest and sing songs of freedom. It is creating a wild meadow in the center of the enclave and finding time to just lie in this green place." (Salami 71).*

Activity: Listen to this guided meditation that will lead you through the process of planting your intentions in the earth.



### **FIRE: Xango + Oba, transmutation of anger**

Fire represents the possibility for transmutations. Here we can gather and burn things to ashes and then plant again on fertile ground. It is also a very useful way to transmute our anger, jealousy, guilt or the other emotions that are most commonly mentioned when interviewed Black women.

### **Elania talks about the ability to recognize and redirect our anger.**

*“There is an author here in Brazil; he’s a white man. His name is Paulo Freire. He has a text where he talks about the importance of anger. There is another author, called Audre Lorde, and the text, it’s called the Uses of Anger.*

*Anyways, it’s a text that talks about the importance and the uses of feeling anger.*

*So, it is important to feel this “anger” and then construct strategies to understand where my anger is directed. And what strategy will I use to make sure that this anger doesn’t destroy me? So yea, when we talk about care, we are going to talk about self-love, self-care, and the ways that we can have healthy relationships with other.*

*But when, you are in a position of anger, of genocide, of racism, and the state is who is promoting this, how is it that we use the anger that we feel in a strategic form so that this doesn’t override our self-love?”*

### **Activity:**

*Let’s take some time to really map out the places in your body and your life where anger emerge. Though there is a constant talk of overcoming anger in all situation, let’s recognize anger as a*

*recognition of injustice, of violence, and recognize it as an emotion that is ok, as long as it is part of a cycle of transmutation.*

*Let's remember some of the stories that make us most angry. Imagine those stores in your head. Notice which parts of your body awaken, and which parts of your body deaden.*

*Let's then examine the story behind those stories, the structures that created them.*

*As Clarice talked about above, there is an anger that arose from not understanding why she was treated the way that she was. This is one of the most common narratives that I heard upon interviewing. An internalization of an external system of oppression that hindered ones' own access to self-love, self-joy, and pleasure.*

*Journal about these particular experiences and then listen to the following guided fire meditation.*

### **Polyrhythmic**

If you've ever been lucky enough to listen to the drumming within a Candomblé temple, or even just hear the ngoni or ngombi playing of central Africa, you may have been taken by its polyrhythmic quality.

Within the Central African Bwiti tradition, these polyrhythms are played during ceremony, activating multiple parts of the brain and the body. Within the Fang tradition of Bwiti, the harp is always played at a polyrhythm. This rhythm is made specifically to deconstruct the habitual patterns within the brain.

Scientists have shown that this is accurate. Polyrhythms and listening to polyrhythms can actually help the brain to evolve to hear and sense new things, it can interrupt our default-mode network which is used to figuring out patterns or hearing things before we've actually heard them. (Pollan)

This is in a sense how Afro Cosmic traditions, families and therapies exist. Not only are African tribes and societies well versed in living and co-existing with multiple languages, cultures, belief systems, and iterations of their own traditions but our ways of understanding life are also polyrhythmic.

Even if we define one culture, our memory cannot stretch far enough back to remember how it was before, what name it had taken on, and whether it spoke another language, worshiped different gods, wore different clothes, and worshiped another god.

It is rightly from this flux that the Afro Cosmic world view is most at home.

Traditional knowledge is polyrhythmic because "it simultaneously negotiates human, familial, communal, earthly, and celestial rhythms." (Martin 108)

Malidoma Some explains that Afro Cosmic ideas of existence do not focus on going from duality to non-duality, instead there is a more polyrhythmic understanding of how existence and all of its parts interact.

"One could say that there is a dualism within the understandings of earth and sky, and often times between male and female (as people are sat within the temples) however, in reality "even a five-sense-driven description of reality is limiting because it leaves us with just two options.

There are other realms that must be considered. The unseen realms are usually that of the spirits, but there are reports of encounters with phenomena that are physically real but are not originating in the physical or material world. Instances such as altered states, dreams, visions, and life forms from other dimensions are acknowledged as sources of knowledge.” (Some 94)

This polyrhythmic understanding of existence creates possibilities of living simultaneously within and without the binaries that we are used to in Western society. As we will explore later within our sexuality and gender portion – each element has its masculinity and femininity. Most rites of passage and well as rituals are divided by biological sex – however, the spirits gender, the way that you dress, they do not discriminate or choose you based on gender.

Furthermore, androgyny is one of the clearest forms of harmony within many Afro Cosmic traditions – the highest figures are often androgynous characters. Those like Obatala, Logun Ede even Xango are androgynous figures who can facilitate between genders– whereas Olodumare, the highest form has no gender whatsoever.

### **Exploring Gender through polyrhythms.**

As Black Feminist theorists repeatedly indicate, Black women in the Americas and around the world have both been hyper-sexualized and yet decoupled from their gender, however, as LH Stallings retorts, these gender roles that Black Women were supposed to adhere to were not present or fixed within the material structures of Afro Cosmic religions. The concept of gender within Afro Cosmic religions, as underlined by African feminists actually differs quite starkly from traditional gender roles that most Euro patriarchal ideas of gender rely upon.

For example, in the tradition of Candomblé and the religious leadership of majorly Afro-Brazilian women, who have been at the command of these organizations for hundreds of years is one example of the ways that In Brazil, as Sueli Carneiro points out, “represents an unusual phenomenon in the heart of an evidently patriarchal and prejudiced society.” (Nascimento 65). Whereas the woman within Western society has been portrayed as fragile, Carneiro points to figures such as the Candomblé goddess Oba, “head of the secret feminine society of Geledé, who refuses to take orders or accept masculine superiority in any shape or form” (Nascimento) have provided constant models of multi-faceted feminine figures within the Afro-Brazilian context of possibility.

This is compounded with the fact that masculine and feminine within the Afro-Diasporic traditions, specifically Candomblé are quite different than the Western secular images that inform even the most secular sexuality theorists. “The origin story links the man and the woman as the earth as the sky are linked – by two differing but complementary roles.” (Nascimento 73) She goes as far as to say that beyond the obvious roles of power and direction that Afro-Brazilian woman have within the *terreiros*, the fact that these powerful women do not marry, as well as the process of what Carneiro calls the “sacredalization” of domestic labor that is done daily within the Candomblé temple, gives a completely different context or a “new dimension” to the ideas of gender roles within this Afro-Diasporic context.

**ACTIVITY:**

*Watch this guided dance meditation where we hear the stories of Oba and Oya and we explore their movements, their postures, their stories and their ideas of womanhood and femininity within the Candomblé tradition.*

*Though there is a dominant societal and often Europatriachal system that is enacted upon Brazilian women and Afro Brazilian women, it seems that systems within Candomblé give rise to and support very different versions and ideas of femininity.*

Candomblé was not only built on a “city of women” but the figures that are within Candomblé stories and temples are quite different than those that shape the “classical” roles of gender. (Nascimento).

The rhythm and the acceptance and maintenance of multiple rhythms at one time, particularly within ritual is actually an incredible part of the unity that forms within African cosmology. The rhythm of a song, a beat, a dance or in an atmosphere of work gives way to a sense of oneness, lessens the distinctions and begets unity.

It reignites our “ties of togetherness” and reaffirms our sense of oneness and lessons our distinctions. This brings us to the next part of Afrocosmic philosophy – integration.

### **INTEGRATIVE:**

An Afrocosmic vision is rooted within what Naim Akbar refers to as the “extended self”. This means that though there is definitely a space for each person’s individual soul and journey, there is a deep understanding that one does not just make decisions for the individuated self. It is the understanding that it is through your tribe, your clan, your caste, your family, that your individuality can truly arise and be nurtured.

This very much clashes with the way that we've been taught within our Western world of education and even contradicts much of the work of psychologists like Freud, who preach a form of individuation that are just not recognizable within African traditions.

Within this world view we seek a sense of interdependence, that prioritizing a rhythm of socialization versus isolation, a priority of communal connection rather than the freedom of radical individual choice.

Now, this may sound a bit limiting for those of us who have grown up in the West within a society where we have been socialized to feel that our individual decisions, and our individuality are what should define our freedom. However, this *extended self* as Akbar defines it, shows that our individuality finds its highest purpose within the community.

Historically, initiation rites were designed to instill this sense of corporate responsibility and collective destiny. When we examine closely the African philosophical tradition, we recognize that from this an *extended* definition of self-evolved. That is to say, the African self-concept is, by philosophical definition, the "We" instead of the "I." (Akbar)

As Malidoma Some says, "Without community you cannot be yourself. The community where we draw the strength needed to effect changes inside of us. It is formed each time more than one person meets for a purpose. Development of community depends on what the people involved consent to. What one acknowledges in the formation of the community is the possibility of doing together what is impossible to do alone." (Some)

### **Ancestral Technology:**

As we delve deeper into the process of self-initiation, let us recognize these meditations, movements, and rituals as part of the integration of multiple parts of ourselves, multiple dimensions, and our inner and outer realms. It is true that, “as rituals are the patterns and relationships that order externally our internal order, they give us a sense of mastery” (Akbar 100), but they also bring us into a magical fold.

As we connect with the unseen realm, with the senses, with our faith belief, bodily, mental, and emotional faculties, the continuum of time and space, our imagination in specific ways, we tap into a pantheon of ancestral technologies. Though Blackness is often perceived to be limiting on the material plane, as Franz Fanon argued that colonized, racial subjects could not possibly experience the “autonomous corporal schemas” that were employed by Merleau-Ponty as universal to the human experience. He argued that colonial subjects “lacked their own modes of recognizing their racialized bodies-in-the-world” and were left “without an embodied consciousness” (Ponty 30) due to the act of being “blackened” by the etic gaze (Scott 2010).

However, theorists like Jennifer Nash purport that “blackness can be used to reify racial stereotypes, reinforce domination, but it can also be a tool for arousal and pleasure. Blackness can be harnessed and galvanized for destruction, but the sensorial possibility of “feeling black” or “knowing blackness” can also be employed to create new cosmic possibilities and meaning making.

Africana phenomenologists take that moment of “blackening” or feeling Blackness as a potentiality for self-discovery. Beliso-De Jesus (2004), an Africana phenomenologist insists that the blackening through somatic and religious experiences (in her locus of study, Santeria) can



actually reinforce spiritual power of practitioners, and acts through electric spiritual currents that feel like “chills, shivers, tingles...and an electrification of the body”(Beliso-De Jesus 20).

These electric spiritual currents may have both the effect of recognition of “embodied consciousness” as well as the effect of “disorientation and serve as a sight of orientation where emotions and bodies come together (Ahmed 10). Nausea, giddiness, and dizziness are all intensification of bodily awareness of and in space (Ahmed 4), which can help “define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects” (Ahmed 10).

For these Afro-Brazilian women within the Afro Cosmic pleasure praxis, this electric spiritual current and its possibility of *disorientation* may cause a recognition of the self as existing as both object and subject. These electric currents as disorienting agents are important potentialities in the engagement within in orgasmic and erotic experience, as orgasmic experiences of breathwork or touch may bring us to a vibrating supraconsciousness from bioelectric currents, often experienced as a vibrating “electrifying” current.

Orgasmic experiences are an integral part of the Afro Cosmic pleasure praxis as they can bring us into individual and autonomous pleasure, and erotic agency, therefore we begin to recognize ourselves as subjects. However, it is important this orgasmic experience is part of an act of consciousness, embodiment, and an act of self-care. Therefore, self-care, and erotic embodiment, act as decolonizing vessels to reorient ourselves to our own erotic subjectivity.

### **Activity**

*Listen along with this guided meditation that is specifically oriented towards bringing you into a state of altered consciousness. When an altered state of consciousness comes on, it has a*

*scientific explanation which is the slowing of certain parts of your brain and the lighting up of others. What this means is that it can bring us into revelatory experiences, or places we couldn't have arrived at if we just thought ourselves into a solution. (Pollan)*

## **II. HOMECOMING**

Congratulations for getting this far! It has been a serious journey, a difficult and demanding ordeal, and now here you are again, yourself, with yourself.

In the last stretch of your initiation, you are celebrated and invited to be a participatory member into a community. Your accomplishments are lauded, you are embraced, sung about, and your individual purpose is revealed to your loving community members.

### **Activity**

Listen to the recorded homecoming ceremony. You will be invited to create a ceremony for yourself, and to invite your members of the family into a circular practice of co-regulation.

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