

Into My Mother's Womb: The Violence of Narration

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Acknowledgements

To my mother,
Who has swallowed more grief
Than her stomach can bear
Who has carried more heartache
Than her back can withstand
Who has walked through more struggles
Than her feet can allow
Yet every morning
She gets up to keep fighting
As if her bones do not ache for rest
As if her heart does not long for peace

And my father
Who never had a father
Yet became the best
Who never had soil and water
Yet bloomed into a rose
Who never had anything to believe in
Yet learned to have faith
Who never belonged
But managed to fit in
Who was never taught how to be a man
But grew into a great one.

-Thank you

“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly”

-Timothy 1:8

Abstract

Slavery was the first attack on the Black family unit, making it nearly impossible for family formation, let alone stability and security within these bonds. During slavery, Black mothers were renowned for trying to protect their children and keep the family together. Nearly 200 years later violence against the Black community persists. Many of these evil acts have been justified in systematic ways: The Black Codes, Jim Crow, mass incarceration and police violence. Karl Marx argued that capitalism seeps down even into the family unit, and so I ask: does not structural violence do the same? Through ethnographic interviews with Black mothers and archival research, my hope is to bear witness to the voices that have been drowned out and turned into statistics. I am interested in exploring how violence enters the home shaping subjectivities and relationships, psychic experiences, and bodily presences. For centuries, Black families have had to navigate an extremely violent America. This research project posits to understand just how parents teach or do not teach their children to circumvent societal strain and trauma. As a society we've separated the private from the public, I aim to express just how interconnected the domestic and the social really are.

Keywords: structural violence, chattel slavery, narrative, Blackness, motherhood

The Slave in American Media

“Nkrumah, Nkrumah”

*Sometimes I say this at the end of my prayers,
As a reminder of the once hope of acceptance,
Of community,
Of home.
Rejection.
Estranged my body is foreign in all its parts.
Slave.
My only origin found
within my mother's womb.*

I was in the sixth grade the first time I was asked where my family was from. Oddly enough, it was no eleven-year-old girl at recess who asked me this question. Instead, it was my history teacher asking me not only where my family came from; but the names of those family members as well. All the students were assigned a family tree which we would later present to the entire class. That day I rushed home to ask my Granny all about our ancestors. Now my Grandmother had twelve siblings, and she told me all about them, as well as her Mother and Father. After that however her answers became vague, struggling as she tried to tell me about my Great Great Grandmother. She said she was a Native American but that was about it, nothing about her character, just simply race. Nonetheless one thing she was adamant about was this: our ancestors were slaves.

For centuries Hollywood has worked to try and give the public an understanding of Slave life. Nevertheless, this depiction has always been watered down so that it would be more fitting to public comfortability. In D.W Griffith's 1915 silent film *Birth of a Nation*, he depicts the American slave as happy and enthusiastic about the servitude in which they were forced to provide to Anglo-Saxon Americans. It wasn't until 1977 when the happy joyous slave representation was counteracted by Alex Haley's 1976 book *Roots*. In an article written by Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture they write;

Roots marked the first time America witnessed slavery portrayed in detail. Along with the scenes of transporting, selling, and trading men and women, were scenes showing the brutality African Americans often suffered at the hands of slave owners. The depictions of abuse and cruelty were limited, of course, by the medium and by what American society would accept at the time. In keeping with the series' marketing campaign, the show focused heavily on the family's ultimate triumphs. For all of *Roots'* firsts, and there were many, it was ultimately a story of resiliency (Slavery, Hollywood, and Public Discourse, n.d.)

Having said that, America continues to try to move forward. Three decades later we see movies like critically acclaimed *12 Years of Slave* within the Hollywood film industry. Smithsonian continues saying,

Unlike prior motion pictures and television shows, *12 Years* does not retreat from the brutality many Blacks endured. The movie is not for the faint hearted, as the violence and cruelty it portrays is not the highly stylized violence found in films like *Django Unchained*. *12 Years* is true to the reality that for years many Americans treated fellow human beings with ruthless brutality — and that reality is harder to face. (Slavery, Hollywood, and Public Discourse, n.d.)

Slave Narratives have often been viewed as first-hand accounts of slave life. Yet, when given a deeper look, one is able to see how these narratives have also been translated to suit the White American political agenda and level of comfortability. As slavery flourished in the United States helping the country gain power and economic success, the image of slavery was that of the happy joyous slave, content with the labor forced upon them. However, this narrative conflicted with that of the fugitive slave hoping to flee the horrors of the institution. These narratives opposed the stereotypes created by slaveholders to justify their barbarism. Nonetheless it was not the tragic tales of mothers and fathers, sisters, and brothers, that qualified their publication in abolitionist journals, but the economic value. An article published by the Library of Congress writes;

Their often sensational revelations of the realities of slave life provided a persuasive challenge to Southern justifications of slavery. During the antebellum period thousands of autobiographical and biographical accounts of slave experiences were published and generally promoted and distributed by abolitionist propagandists. These narratives enjoyed immense popularity, were eagerly sought for publication by abolitionist journals, and proved financially successful. (Slave Narratives from Slavery to the Great Depression, n.d.)

Following the civil war, the tone of slave narratives changed. As American government fought to prevent another war, they once more sought to shield the population from the horrors that constituted slave life. The Library of Congress explicitly writes,

A nation weary of war and intent upon reconciliation expressed little desire to be reminded of the realities of life before the war. Most of the narratives that did appear in the half-century following Reconstruction [...] reflected a radically different conception of slave life. Now the narratives were employed almost exclusively as a nostalgic and sentimental reaffirmation of the "plantation legend" popularized by Southern local colorists. (Slave Narratives from Slavery to the Great Depression, n.d.)

It was not until the 1920's and 30's that White America again gained an interest in the everyday activities of the Slave. This time, however, there was a sociological aspect to the research that was conducted. Black people were given questionnaires that sought to capture the just of slave affairs. Many projects that populated the slave narrative discourse at this time claimed that these stories would soon vanish as the number of ex-slaves rapidly diminished. Yet an article published by the Library of Congress argues one should be hesitant to accept this answer.

This fact was often cited as a motivation by those compiling the narratives. However, while it goes far toward explaining the sense of urgency that inspired the several narrative-gathering efforts, it is insufficient to account for the heightened awareness of the narratives' value at this particular time. The underlying sources of this interest must be sought elsewhere. (Slave Narratives from Slavery to the Great Depression, n.d.)

The use of slave narratives in America's political agenda is clear. As the antebellum period began to fade so did the truth regarding the horrific nature of slavery. Instead, Slave narratives were used as political propaganda to ensure that another civil war would not break out. Thus, the disgusting truth of White America's actions were once more hidden in plain sight. In Christopher Lasch's 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in The Age of Diminishing Expectations*, he describes narcissism as a cultural crisis in America. He argues that this blatant denial of the past has led to a superficially progressive and optimistic society, that on closer analysis truly embodies a people who are unable to face their future(18). But how do we acknowledge a people that historically, and systematically, have been wiped out of history? How do I write a narrative of survival if there is refusal that any harm was ever done? If slavery was purposeful for our country, then there is no story of survival. America's inability to account for the gruesome nature of slavery within it means that we have yet to acknowledge the Black body as a whole. Every institution in America actively ignores the cries of my Black brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. However one's identity cannot be separated from "the scars left by forgotten episodes and hidden discourses" (Arextaga, 125). This rings true for the Black community in contemporary America today, and the current political climate is a testament to that.

So I ask, how do we acknowledge the Black body in a way that is not out to accomplish some political agenda? What writing methods does one employ to begin to see the slave, the outsider, the foreigner, those transformed into commodities, property, and statistics? Zora Neal Hurston's ethnography, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*, rings loud in the back of my head as I pray for revelation. Kassula's (the last living slave to have survived the middle passage) story begins to pour into my heart. As she writes about the life history of Cudjo, it is as if I get a side to a story America always thought was not worthy of telling. The story of my own ancestors who in all their bravery and strength managed to live through the horrors of the Middle Passage yet were unable to loosen chains. Cudjo's story is no narrative, it is a history textbook, a survival guide, and Hurston tells it as such. Through the language she provides we become immersed in not only Cudjo's life, but his grief, joy, and loss. We begin to see his life as less of a series of unfortunate events, and more as a testimony of resilience. So yes, I cry with Kassula, because as I read his story it is as if it is the language in which my own sadness is derived. His loneliness feels all too familiar, his grief all too

homely. Cudjo speaks the language of my ancestors. The native tongue of memory, the saving song of grief, the careless cry of loneliness, the grim gospel of Black cargo. A lineage who's burdens only Christ can bear.

I do not wish to bring up the horrors of one of the most violent institutions in the world to make my people once more a victim. For I do not choose to classify myself as someone who barely survived, and neither will I subject my fellow brothers and sisters to such a language. However, to call my ancestors survivors instead of victims, humans instead of slaves, I must acknowledge the pain that the Black body has been made to not only endure, but thrive in. I must first expose the follie that Western historicism (which seeks to find the general in the particular), has tried to ascribe some ontological meaning to: Chattel Slavery (Chakrabarty 2000, 23).

The Slave

Prior to The arrival of English men in Virginia, one of the greatest of the thirteen colonies, England was without any laws that established humans as property. When Africans were first brought to America they were classified as indentured servants not slaves; meaning one could eventually earn their freedom. In an essay entitled *Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property*, Paul Finkelman expresses the confusion surrounding slave freedom:

The first Africans in Virginia were treated as indentured servants, held for a term of years, and then eligible for freedom. ‘Antonio a Negro’ came to Virginia in 1621, and was listed as a servant. He later became free, changed his name to Anthony Johnson, and ultimately accumulated land, held whites as indentured servants, and would later own a black slave.¹³ The earliest legal records of Virginia illustrate a confusing process. Some Africans were held in lifetime servitude; others were free.(Finkelman 2012, 107)

While never stated in political discourse, Africans worked as slaves alongside many European indentured servants. However, it was not until 1660 that a Virginia law finally reflected the use of the Black body as slave labor. As Finkelman describes, this was the first time the Black body was seen as a mere commodity in political discourse;

In 1659–60, a Virginia law recognized slavery for the first time, although without defining it. The law provided ‘That if the said Dutch or other foreigners shall import any negro slaves, They the said Dutch or others shall, for the tobacco really produced by the sale of the said negro, pay only the impost of two shillings per hogshead, the like being paid by our owne nation’.²³ By this time slaves were seen as commodities being imported into the colony. This was the first clear statement that Africans in new British colonies were considered ‘things’ or prop-erty, rather than persons.(Finkelman 2012,109)

What then is the definition of the word Slave? As a child, I pondered this question hoping one day I might sit in a class and find the origin of this unspeakable history. In Saidiya Hartman’s book, *Lose Your Mother*, she defines the Slave as a stranger, one “[...]torn from kin and community, exiled from one’s own country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider” (Hartman 2006, 5). It wasn’t until the Transatlantic Slave Trade that the concept of race was attached to what it meant to occupy the position of the outsider or the slave. Prior to this, the word Slave or “Slav” was used to define Eastern Europeans who during medieval times constituted the slave population. Hartman writes;

The very term “Slavery” derived from the word “Slav,” because Eastern Europeans were the slaves of the medieval world. At the beginning of modernity, slavery declined in Europe as it expanded in Africa, although as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was still possible to purchase “white” slaves... Iberians can be credited according to one historian “for restricting bondage... to peoples of African descent.” It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the slave and the free...hardened into a color line. (Hartman 2006, 5)

Throughout my life, I have clung to a Blackness in which I was told slavery was its only origin. This answer has always felt incomplete, making my own identity feel as if it could never be known. I was left wondering where, then, is the home of the stranger, the outsider, those torn from kin, or the Slave? Hartman describes how many African Americans in the fifties and sixties migrated to Ghana hoping to find a state in which their human rights would be protected, a place where for once they could find freedom from violence, and a sense of homecoming. How fast must one run to try and escape the horrors of Jim Crow, the Cold War, the backseat of the bus, a trail of slain leaders... what they called... second class citizenship (Hartman 2006, 17)? They arrived in Ghana with bruised feet and the hope of freedom in their back pockets which quickly dissolved. After only a short time under the rule of Kwame Nkrumah, also known as the *Black Messiah*, it felt as if God had once again forsaken them. African Americans were once more exiled and made to be foreigners. Those who remained found themselves living only as a means of survival,

A small community remained and stuck it out, weathering more coups and food shortages. Typically, those who stayed were...the stateless ones who were unable to erase the image of a fourteen-year-old boy's bloated corpse dredged from the Mississippi, or four dead little girls buried in the rubble of a church in Birmingham, or Malcolm's slumped figure on the floor... or Martins body in the hotel Balcony in Memphis, or the bullet-shattered bodies of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark (Hartman 2006, 36).

Surviving and Blackness go hand and hand. Black people living as a means of survival is in our genetic blueprint. In New York Quaker Samuel Wood's 1805 article, *Injured Humanity; Being A Representation of What the Unhappy Children of Africa Endure from Those Who Call Themselves Christians*, he details the horrific nature of the slave trade. Silence and slavery are two terms I now know to be synonymous. There however is a difference between the silence one maintains to deny wrongdoing, and the silence that fills the room when language no longer describes the sorrow one feels. In Wood's article he describes the latter,

Even those who, from motives of interest, still favour or engage in the trade, have been obliged to be silent upon the injustice of first procuring the Negroes, and have not had the hardiness to excuse or palliate the horrors of the *middle passage*: but still they assert, that the treatment the slaves meet with in the West-Indies amply counterbalances their previous sufferings; nay, they have not scruple to extol a state of servitude as a happy asylum from African despotism, and calmly maintain, that the condition of the laboring poor in England is much harder than that of the Negroes in the West-India islands (Woods, 1805).

Wood goes on to describe the lack of care and consideration for kinship when sales were made. At no point during the buying process was consideration for kinship ties considered. Instead, husbands and wives were split apart, and children were ripped out of the arms of their parents. This would be the start of one of the most vicious attacks on kinship ties.

Slave: an umbrella term that has kept my people from ever really being seen. Slave: a word without gender, home, or humanity. The general classification ascribed to my Great Great Grandmother, a term she would spend her whole life trying to outrun. Black, a color I spent most of my childhood attempting to wash off my skin, spending hours in the bathroom trying to brush off my gums. Maybe I am no different than my ancestors hoping to pass as White or taking refuge under a Native American identity. To be a woman and Slave is at its core intersectional. It is in the very breath found within the female Slave that we see lust and disgust collide, romance and power entangle, breeding and childbirth become one.

Slave breeding is often one of the most unspeakable aspects about the slave institution in America. Maybe it is too hard for Americans to believe that White slaveholders in the south actually took on the role of God? Perhaps it is too hard to fathom that they decided they too could produce a new human race in which at the time they considered animals: Blacks. Slave Breeding was a common practice in the South. One slave woman could easily be forced to give birth to over a dozen slaves. These slaves were often sold off at slave auctions or used to add to the master's property. Georgy D. Smithers gives a slave's account of their master's breeding practices, in his 2012 book *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History* writing,

“My master . . . started out wid two ’omen slaves and raised 300 slaves.” So testi- fied John Smith, a 108-year-old former slave who was interviewed by a Works Project Administration employee in the late 1930s. Smith’s testimony was as sensational as it was disturbing. He recalled that “Short Peggy” and “Long Peggy,” the two women his master “started out wid,” were prized for their fe- cundity. The sexual exploitation that Smith claimed these women experienced led to the reproduction of slaves who enriched Smith’s master through their labor or sale. But Smith also insisted that the exploitation of enslaved women like “Short Peggy” and “Long Peggy” resulted in the master appointing them to positions of authority among fellow slaves. Smith explained, “Long Peggy, a black ’oman.... Master freed her atter she had 25 chil- luns. Just think o’ dat,” Smith concluded, “raisin’ 300 slaves wid two ’omen. It sho’ is de truf, do’ [though].” (Smithers, 1)

One mother and 25 *chilun*, seen as nothing more than cattle. Chattel Slavery or Slave breeding was never explicitly spelled out in the laws regarding the early slave institution in America, yet many laws made it clear that Black women were not only denied the right to protect their own body, but their children as well. Just two years after declaring African people as utter commodities in which Virginia landowners could purchase The House of Burgess wrote a statue with catastrophic implications, Finkelman writes,

Thus, in 1662 the white men in the House of Burgesses wrote a statute with far reaching implications: ‘WHEREAS some doubts have arisen whether children got by Englishmen upon a negro women should be slave or free [sic], Be it therefore enacted . . . that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother . . . ’.³⁰ This

law left slave women vulnerable to all white men, because the law simply would not take notice of sexual activity that resulted in mixed-race children of slave women. Masters had free sexual access to their slaves without legal sanction. Non-slaveowners could, in theory, face a trespass suit from a master of a slave woman for having sex with her, but no such lawsuits appear to have been filed. This law helped define slaves, by denying a slave woman the right to control her body or have any control over her children. (Slave fathers similarly had no control over their children). The law also led to a particularly disgraceful aspect of American slavery which would continue until final abolition: masters would be the owners of their own children fathered with slave women and would treat them as property, to be bought, sold, used as collateral, and gifted. This law reduced the children of all slave women to property and, perversely, led generations of white southern men to treat their own children as property. (Finkleman,112)

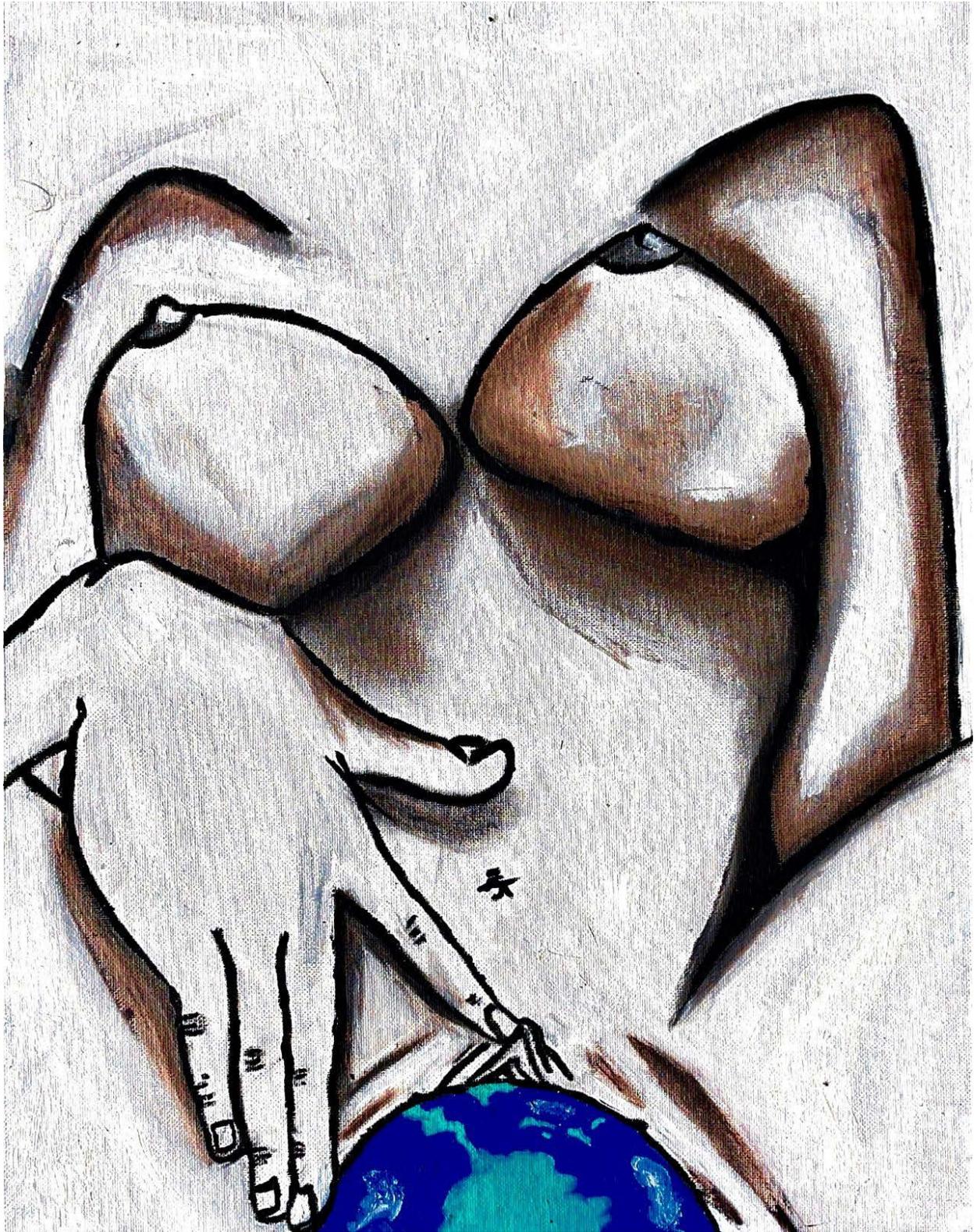
From then on, the God-like political leaders of America would go on to use the Bible to justify their barbarism, and because Africans were not “Christians,” it was morally acceptable to enslave them. Despite the fact that Baptism freed the Slave from their pagan status, the chains around their hands and feet continued to tighten. Ultimately keeping them in bondage to their Slave master for the entirety of their life. Therefore, I aim to understand how Black people have not only navigated but survived in an environment in which they have become the target of structural violence. Oftentimes finding our identity hidden in the blood shed by our ancestors. I suppose it is the paradox of Blackness to be invisible only up to the moment of death.

One: Emmett Till
 Two: Paul Archer
 Three: Breonna Taylor
 Four: George Floyd
 Five: Treyvon Martin
 Six: Unknown Negro

So, would you believe me if I said I had PTSD? After only a week of reading up on my history I have not been able to find sleep. I do not rest. Instead, I listen to the cries of my ancestors, strong enough to make it through the Middle Passage, but unable to break out of chains. I often struggle to breathe from the noose around my neck, the hangman’s knot piercing the back of it. My mind works from sunup to sundown, like my ancestors on plantation fields. All to understand this identity in which I’ve been ascribed, unwillingly I am Black. What then is the origin of Blackness: the foreigner, the outsider, those torn from kin, and turned into commodities; Black prisoners who once more occupy the place of the slave in contemporary America? I suppose my only origin is my mother’s womb.

*“For you created my innermost being;
 You knit me together in my mother’s womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 Your works are wonderful,
 I know that fully well.”*

-Psalms 139:13



Jaiden Grayson

While the purpose of the term intersectionality is to make way for the multitude of experiences that Black women go through, oftentimes we find ourselves hidden due to this terminology. And no longer is intersectionality a term about personal experiences, but rather about stereotypes. I met Jaiden through Instagram, and while we never met in person, I now consider her a friend. I would easily describe her as a Black mother and social justice activist. But what happens when activism and motherhood intersect for Black Women? Perhaps it isn't any psychological experiment or survey that can provide us with this answer but a testimony. A testimony where one does not seek any political or economic gain, only the truth. I long for the truth, Jaiden's truth:

¹I don't get the ability to really hide anymore... it comes with the work it comes with the territory and especially the new age of social media that we're in, it is a part of it now so you just take it and it's unlike anything else. Like I'm an artist, you know, so I was saying to my partner, the other day wow if all of this type of care or attention was coming from towards my art, you know. If I was having the experiences that I am like going to the grocery store and people seeing me and identifying who I am and things like that it would be a completely different experience. yeah um and this one, where people who are on the outside looking in that exude maybe jealousy or wish to be in a position, like this aren't, taking into consideration that, like any of these interactions when i'm at the store, when i'm out to eat, when i'm with my child I don't know why someone's walking up and based on the work I do they could obviously feel really good about it or really not good about it. And so it's a constant feeling of paranoia a lot of the time. And as i'm looking further into activists who have done real work just the suicide rate. The tendency to fall victim to just the circumstance of people and the way that they respond to doing this kind of work has really opened my eyes, a lot of people forget I'm a mom...

How is it that we could so easily forget that Jaiden is a mother? That her body once broke for what she now breaths for: her son. But there are no familial ties when it comes to property, only ownership. I posit it is the right to motherhood that was stripped away by The House of Burgesses in 1662. Historically Black women did not have the right to motherhood. For a slave to give birth to a slave there has to be no familial ties involved, only property. Jaiden's history, my history, American history, made us into nothing more than land. Our ancestors worked the land and gave birth to it, yet somehow never owned it. Never possessing a right to anything, especially our children. So I am not surprised that people forget; to be Black was to once be forgotten. It was to be that very moment in which you both exist and cease to be all in one, to merely live in the shadows. But how thankful I am for the truth. That we are the light of the world, and a town built on a hill cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14). Therefore even though America tries to once more drown out and make the Black body invisible through statistics; there is a story of humanity behind every one of those numbers, and that is the narrative in which I choose to tell.

According to the Center for Disease Control, for every 100,000 live births by Black women, 44 women will die during the process. Pregnancy is often seen as a beautiful experience, where a woman is

¹Grayson, Jaiden. (2021, Jan 30). Personal Interview.

Note: All the following Quotes are from an interview done with Jaiden Greyson on Jan, 30, 2021. Quotes are left unchanged for authenticity and accuracy.

surrounded by friends and family, and her support system comes together for her. Nonetheless, there is a violence that comes along with this single story, the violence of invisibility, of being forgotten. I refuse to forget Jaiden. With closed eyes Jaiden began to detail her own pregnancy experience saying,

Having a child I had a lot of issues with depression with undiagnosed issues. Really...not feeling comfortable going to see someone because I feel like they're not going to really see me, and not really be able to help me. Having a lot of blanket terms and having to figure out my own mental health. To having a child and being thrust into postpartum. Yeah which resulted in a psychiatric stay and then became a tool to use and weaponized against me as a mom by my son's father. That experience was the most life (i've been through a lot) changing experience ever. There's so much conversation about how beautiful having a child is...and ... there is the other conversation about how hard it is to be a single mother, but there is not a big conversation about being a human being who has now been assigned mother and is still themselves, and the disconnects. The deep disconnect that they physically go through of removing something from their body. And then having to be who they were before with all of these new titles. Show up in the same ways that they were before and how it doesn't happen and the fallout from that. I went from being a full time, independent, living on my own supported person to being a single mom on food stamps with no help anywhere. In an abusive relationship, I'm an educated person...a pretty strong willed person. I think that's clear to a lot of people. It's not easy to picture me in that situation. Based on the statistics. So there's either something missing in the statistics, or the statistics aren't telling the story that they should.

Numbers will never have the capacity to tell a story the way a soul can. No wonder Jaiden feels as though something is missing from these numerical representations. A life is lost when we turn it into a number, a voice disappears into the void. There is no longer anything left for a family to mourn, or a mother to hold. Furthermore, you would think that just maybe in the process of creating life, the creator would be made known, but instead she evaporated into the thin air that engulfed her.

But what happens when the number is too small, and the time is too short? Like the number seventeen. The amount of years in which Treyvon Martin got to live, and the amount of minutes in the presence of Minneapolis police officers that it took for George Floyd to die. But my heart breaks at the sound of the number eight. The amount of time the officer spent with his knee on his neck. People all over the world watched these eight minutes over and over again from our homes, and suddenly this very public death now took up space in our private lives. On May 29th, immediately following the death of George Floyd protests began in Seattle. Jaiden details her experience,

I spent 250 days straight on the ground. And the first month I took off, after those 250 days of missing out on my son. Missing out on those at home conversations, missing out on a lot. And I'm taking on the police, who are obviously going to be wondering who I am and where they can cut me short. And, seeing that I'm a single mom made me a target for sure. But after coming back from those 250 days ... I in the first month started getting messages from people ... calling me out for not being there. All of a sudden. And I had to figure out how I was going to address this because. Because of cancel culture, because they felt entitled to my presence being on the ground, and at that point, I had to come forward and say “You know, I have a son,” which shocked a lot of people. Okay well now you've been on the ground are you a good mom if you haven't been there? you?...and it turned into this back and forth conversation. I had to ask myself how do I really address this? ...I

have to assess the same way I tell everybody when they arrive at a demonstration, I have to assess my skill set. My skill set was becoming depleted being on the ground. Every day I was dealing with unbelievable PTSD and trauma responses to the point that I wasn't sleeping anymore...I would have night terrors mixed with demonstration terrors and abuse. They were all just kind of blending together at that point, and it was like I had to get right because, while I'm fighting for my son's ability to live in a different world... I'm not present in his current world, which is changing it. And I'm not showing up anymore safely to demonstrations, ultimately, because my mind is now at home with my child that I'm missing out on. And in that process I'm going to start making mistakes. I'm going to potentially be putting people in danger, so I had to make that call for myself. I didn't know it would be a call I had to explain, but again that's that loss of freedom, that loss of privacy. Yeah and coming forward with that changed my entire activist life. It changed everything, because now I had people targeting my son. For these white people out here, and hopefully some brothers and sisters too that may be in areas where they're not getting this information or people who just don't know goes out the window. Yeah all of it. All of my efforts stop the moment that something happens to my son. Everything that I stand for and have done stops, and there's one sharing of a manifesto and then I'm popping like I really don't know what else to say. It erupts something in me... and to have my son be targeted in that way, he's two years old, he shouldn't have to hold the weight of this and I shouldn't either...I'm not advocating for anything other than black liberation and yet that has resulted in almost the loss of my own life multiple times and my son's.

I cannot forget my trail of slain leaders, my Black Messiahs, and Black Marys sacrificing their lives, their sons, and their daughters so that the Black body might for once be free. Nonetheless like Jaiden I am afraid. I worry that maybe I should stop writing this paper? I am not sure I want to partake in the dangerous mission of fighting or perhaps writing for Black liberation. I do not know if I am ready to pick up my cross and crucify my body so that I can for once be unchanged from the White gaze. I, too, am confused like Jaiden as to why the Black journey for freedom must always end so soon. In 2020, we seen young leaders such as Oluwatoyin Salau stripped from us as well. So, I pray every night on my knees that they too might resurrect and wake from the sleep of death. I write till my fingers blister so that their sacrifices might not be forgotten. So that Jaiden's sacrifices might not be in vain,

I don't think people really recognize how much sacrifice goes into this and that it's only because of social media, I was an activist long before this...and it never got any type of social media attention because...you're trying to be as anonymous as possible....If you're not someone who didn't do this for clout who didn't want that type of attention to have it is terrifying. To not be able to go to the grocery store by myself, to not be able to go get gas by myself to not be able to let my son go to the park...To having cameras suddenly outside every moment, I'm a very private person to not have any of that anymore and also not have the financial safety that you would think would come with this type of attention. I'm without a job. It is very hard for me to get a job in Seattle, because all of that shit that i'm talking to people about is happening in real time when I go to apply for a job, it could bring a lot of negative or positive attention to their business having me working there....A lot of people don't want to take that risk in a pandemic.

There is a big difference between risk and sacrifice. Every move Jaiden makes is a risk. She has sacrificed her entire life in hopes that there is a light at the end of this dark tunnel. And there is no greater love than this: for one to sacrifice their life for their kin, for their friend, for what has not even lived. Yet in all her giving she has found no life; she speaks as if lost comes everyday like a thief in the night. So

yes, I will continue to write, even when fear creeps up my spine. I resort to numbers because that is the language in which you are most fluent. Most people in America know about the wealth gap that exists. I am sure that you are well aware that Black households hold 3% of all household wealth in America according to research done at Brooking University. But If I am honest with you my friend, I've grown tired of constantly repeating that fact over and over again. Numbers do not translate the pain of this experience to you. Therefore, I will no longer accept numbers as an explanation for genocide, as if the Black body could be explained through simple mathematics. The question should be why is it that such a large wealth gap still exists in America? Why isn't anybody asking that? Is it because we must first speak the unspeakable, and detail the horrific nature of Chattel slavery? If that is the case, I will no longer hold my breath, so I don't disturb my neighbor. I shall confess only that God's beloved children were once more enslaved for four hundred years to build up a new land; this so-called "great" country of America: the contemporary *Babylon*.

*"This is what the Lord says— your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the Lord, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens,
Who spreads out the earth by myself,
Who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners,
Who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense,"*
-Isaiah 44:24-25



Alice Johnson

I met 70-year-old Alice Jonson in an African American studies class. She spoke with so much knowledge that I sought to learn the story of how she acquired such wisdom about the world. However, the first time we met she described herself as not having a story: “I’m just an old woman who decided to go back to school.” She describes her reasoning for taking on such a task,

²Now that they have African American history, because they didn’t have it when I was growing up... we might have had Booker T Washington, and George Washington Carver, and Nat Turner because he turned the slaves into a revolt. When I first started back to college, the first thing I took was African American History, and I did a report on Sojourner Truth, and my sister said go see what they are doing at the schools, and I went to the middle school and she said well we just have a little bit and the high school does from reconstruction up to present...As they said the daughters of the confederacy rewrote history because they had to honor their heroes, and I'm thinking heroes, what heroes?...my brother lives in Virginia and the first time I went back there, because I love museums all this stuff, I said well do they know they lost? Because like every 500 feet is a monument, a historical marker.

As a result of the death of George Floyd, there were numerous efforts made to get rid of these historical markers of slavery and racism that Alice speaks of. Many people sought to tear down and even vandalized these monuments that praised slave holders for their unrighteous acts. However, historical markers are not just limited to material objects. Language has forever been used as *historical markers*, as well as a way to classify the world. During slavery, many slaves took on their master’s last name to signify to whom they belong to. Ergo, when slavery was finally abolished and the Black body went from property to human, slaves’ last names transformed into reminders or *historical markers* of the tribulations they had previously faced. For this reason, immediately following emancipation a lot of newly freedmen changed their last name. Perhaps there is something liberating about eradicating and redefining what once was, potentially freeing? Alice shares a memory of her own family's history which speaks to this:

...my mother doesn't discuss her family. Once she left I guess whatever happened she didn't discuss it anymore. But my father’s family always had family reunions so I went there and we've been talking. Found out they have one last name but they changed it, but nobody knows why it was changed...and no one discusses it. So it's a lot of buried history in all uh African-American families, there's a lot of history that they don't talk about ...ones that have white in their family if it's really close they really don't want to talk about that so ...I say all of us have white in us. Look at the statistics of how many women were raped and stuff that's why we all look different colors and when you have a family we're all different shades so it's the history of uh of slavery and they act like they don't, uh they don't want to talk about it.

² Johnson, Alice (2021, Jan 28). Personal Interview.

Note: All the following Quotes are from an interview done with Alice Johnson on Jan, 28, 2021. Quotes are left unchanged for authenticity and accuracy.

Slavery and silence are two words that go hand and hand. I can only assume silence allows us to hide from the truth. That if it is not spoken, I suppose it does not exist. Nobody wants to talk about slavery, or the slaves, or *us*. So, our Black skin is a reminder of a genocide nobody deemed worthy enough to record. Perhaps that is why the population at UC Davis is only 4%. A classroom cannot have too many elephants in the room, they just won't fit. But that does not mean we are lost or even forgotten. Maybe that is the difference between a narrative and a life. A story must come to an end while a life lives on, with their names often ringing louder in the afterlife. Thus, you cannot tell a narrative of slavery in America, as if the slave and the master ceased to exist when the pages come to an end. Both the slave and the master live on, and so does the violence. Alice explains:

I will never forget when I was in [...]my first sociology class at my junior college and the shooting that happened in Pittsburgh and over all that weekend and when I got in my class I told my teacher I said you know what I'm tired of hearing, that this is n't America. This is America. This is what America does, and he says "Alice who's gonna..." I don't care if anybody follows me, but this is what America does and this is what we live with. So why don't you go get those pictures of those people that went to those lynchings and let's match them up the way you do Black people. Let's go get those pictures of those people at those lynchings that it was a picnic and they're cutting off because I went to the the uh the equal justice museum and we went visiting that. Oh my god it's so it's powerful everyone should go see that and we found out in my family on my father's side a distant relative was lynched. They found that one of their relatives, my uncle said that's why he left, they were worried about his safety, so they said you know when you're a teenager it's time for you to leave and that was in the 50s. It may be better for you to go someplace else.

Oh Alice but where do we go? Where do we run to flee the Blackness of our skin that seems to hide the humanity within? What happens when one cannot flee a country to escape violence? What must one do when the poverty, violence, and genocide of your people is ignored by the rest of the world? How do you navigate a world in which your suffering has become a part of the ordinary?

You try to make a safe environment for your kids. I think the interesting story about Fannie Lou Hamer was so cute. She said her mother would always be singing, maybe working in the fields picking cotton, and she didn't realize until she was older then why her mother always kept them together. They had like 20 kids um but in her mother's bucket she had a gun out there in the fields. So if someone did come to mess with them she would be prepared because what she had. And when you talk about violence um a lady my sister know she was a young girl and they were working in Mississippi and one day this man this black guy didn't do anything right, and this guy just killed him! And they just kept on working, no police came she said nothing was done. And you know so did we get immune to this violence that you come to just accept the part of life because there's nothing you can do? Is that what we get? Is that what our kids see in the inner city that they just get immune to it because they can't do anything about it? Yeah when you see your friends killed by a bullet and nothing is done?

Can one ever get immune to death? Does not grief become the blanket that tucks you in at night? Do the dead not come back to haunt our dreams, and roam the streets? My people, whose feet blister and arms ache from carrying the burdens of ancestors. Whose soul hardens just to numb the pain from being passed down another generation. My Black Marys' trying their best to protect the true lineage of Abraham crafted inside your womb. My Black refugees moving cities to run away

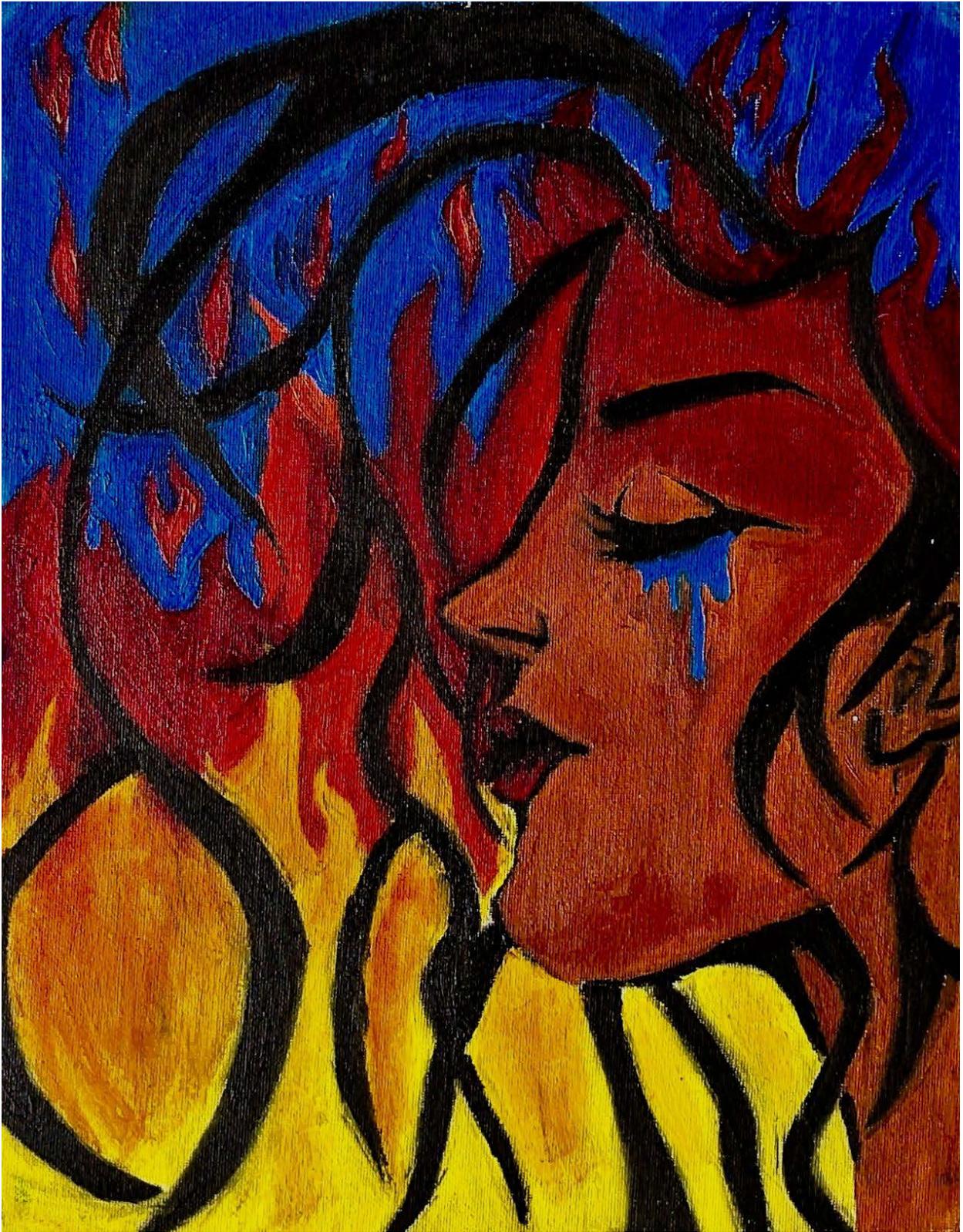
from the beatings, murder, lynching, and lack of resources. I fear we may be running out of places to hide. I often pray that we don't lose the families we fought so hard to keep together, but they seem to be fading. Black people make up 13.4% percent of the population, yet 31% of our children are in foster care. America is once more stripping our sons and daughters from us, yet no one seems to hear our cries for help,

...everyone doesn't have like you said two parents... especially now a lot of Black children are in foster care so...how do you make that child feel well? I don't have a mother. I can't go and say we're going to have a party at school. Who do I bring? Who do I bring to the school? so... it's a lot of pain I think in the Black community. I think it's even more pain now because we're more divided. I'm seeing more kids in foster care, except when I was growing up we had a couple of kids. But i'm seeing more kids that are in foster care and that's a lot of pain because you're not really part of a group you know. You're like ostracized and you're like set aside and you really don't ever feel secure because you don't know how long you're going to be in this foster family ...you can be moved ...so they're never really putting themselves out there because they don't know...how long they'll be there. Where are you going to be protected? And then they have that violence in the certain foster care and they're not protected so nobody to go to. Yeah so we got that violence going on because kids are abused in foster care... and then you realize that all you are is a paycheck to them. That you're not part of that family, all you are is a check. They get money for you, but you're not included that's what i'm seeing ...when my grandkids were younger some of their friends were in foster care and uh yeah...they didn't do anything they were just there. They had a place to stay but they were not included in that...and they end up... getting into trouble

My people, we were only supposed to wander the wilderness for forty days, but instead we've spent a lifetime wandering the streets of America. Like Black Jesus we do miracles; but instead of turning water into wine we make families with no home; wealth with no money, all while turning hatred into love. So take a break from the fight. Let your bones rest, and your spirit finally find peace. Let out the cry you sing to sleep. Release the breath you hold so you don't disturb your neighbor. My Black brothers and sisters whose suffering cease to end so healing never starts. I often worry we've been forced to make a home out of war. Nevertheless, our God has not forsaken us.

*“My people have been lost sheep;
their shepherds have led them astray
and caused them to roam on the mountains.
They wandered over mountain and hill
and forgot their own resting place.
Whoever found them devoured them;
their enemies said, ‘We are not guilty,
for they sinned against the Lord, their verdant pasture,
the Lord, the hope of their ancestors.’
“Flee out of Babylon;
leave the land of the Babylonians,
and be like the goats that lead the flock.
For I will stir up and bring against Babylon
an alliance of great nations from the land of the north.
They will take up their positions against her,
and from the north she will be captured.
Their arrows will be like skilled warriors
who do not return empty-handed.
So Babylonia will be plundered;
all who plunder her will have their fill,”*

declares the Lord.
-Jeremiah 50:6-10



Sabrina Edward

One of the first people Sabrina told me about was her mother, describing her as if she was the motherland. She told me how her mother had spent most of her life in the mental hospital. I found this to be intriguing being that the most common narrative in the Black community is that we don't "do" mental health. Talking about our feelings is often not an activity that is acceptable in our homes, thus therapy is not likely to be seen as a necessity. However, this dominant narrative fails to account for the fact that 21% of the patients in psychiatric facilities around America are Black, with Sabrina's mother being a part of that percentage.

³We just...started having a relationship with my mom. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia. And...she's been in the hospital for most of her life...she spent her entire life in the psychiatric hospital in fact. My Grandfather...he was very...harassing and abusive towards her and she stabbed him and went to prison, but she was crazy so they sent her to a mental hospital. She stayed there for 15-20 years. She just went back recently because she almost threw ...a glass at my aunt's head so um yeah....my mom actually is very sick. She is so sick that ...you can have a conversation like this, my mom start talking about puppies. She ...not there at all so. Then ...when your mother has Schizophrenia, you have a 10% chance of getting schizophrenia. And then, after that birth it's 1%. So i've always been...you know my family's always been a little bit nervous about ... how I might...get sick, but I didn't get sick and I'm way past the age, now that you know I would be sick....and so that was an issue and now i'm just kind of rebuilding my life. And ...I was taking care of my mom you know every day and going to school, working, taking care of my daughter. I've taken care...of my mom you know every day and going to school working taking care of my daughter.

Sabrina went on to describe how since the pandemic, she hasn't been able to see her mother. Instead, she has only been able to bless her with food, not her presence for almost a year now. She describes the experience in this way:

Like you know feeding her and making sure that she feels safe and I feel bad because we haven't been able to visit her. Since COVID so that's been a year we haven't been able to visit her unless it was like on video conferencing. And she doesn't understand it's like you know, having a small child somewhere away from you. And so it's really sad. And she just got COVID so she was on a ventilator and she barely survived. She just came back from the hospital a week ago but she's still in the mental hospital. She went back from the hospital to the mental hospital. That's the big thing right there. So like, all I could do was send her some food, I DoorDashed her some food.

They say the fastest way to the heart is through the stomach. That is fifteen times truer if you find yourself locked within the walls of a psychiatric hospital. I always abstained from eating during my time in the valley of death. Constantly wishing I would have known that my last meal at home was going to be my last supper. However, there are a multitude of other narratives outside of the one me, Sabrina, and her mother share. The story of the homeless man who finds himself a warm bed for the night, or the story of the woman who just needed food to eat, and a safe place to rest. Or the one about the little Black boy trying to navigate the world with no food stamps or money. Or perhaps the homeless woman with no more hotel vouchers. All these narratives, lives, and testimonies behind those psychiatric walls. Schizophrenic, Manic-depressive, psychotic, Insane: all identities, lives, and ultimately stories silenced by the powerful language of the DSM-5. With one diagnosis your sanity,

³ Edwards, Sabrina. (2021, Jan 29). Personal Interview.

Note: All the following Quotes are from an interview done with Sabrina Edwards on Jan, 29, 2021. Quotes are left unchanged for authenticity and accuracy.

liberty, and credibility are stripped from you. In an instant, identity is hidden under the gaze of abnormality. And now a book meant to be as prophetic as the Bible, simply simplifies the truth. Sabrina details her last time in the hospital saying;

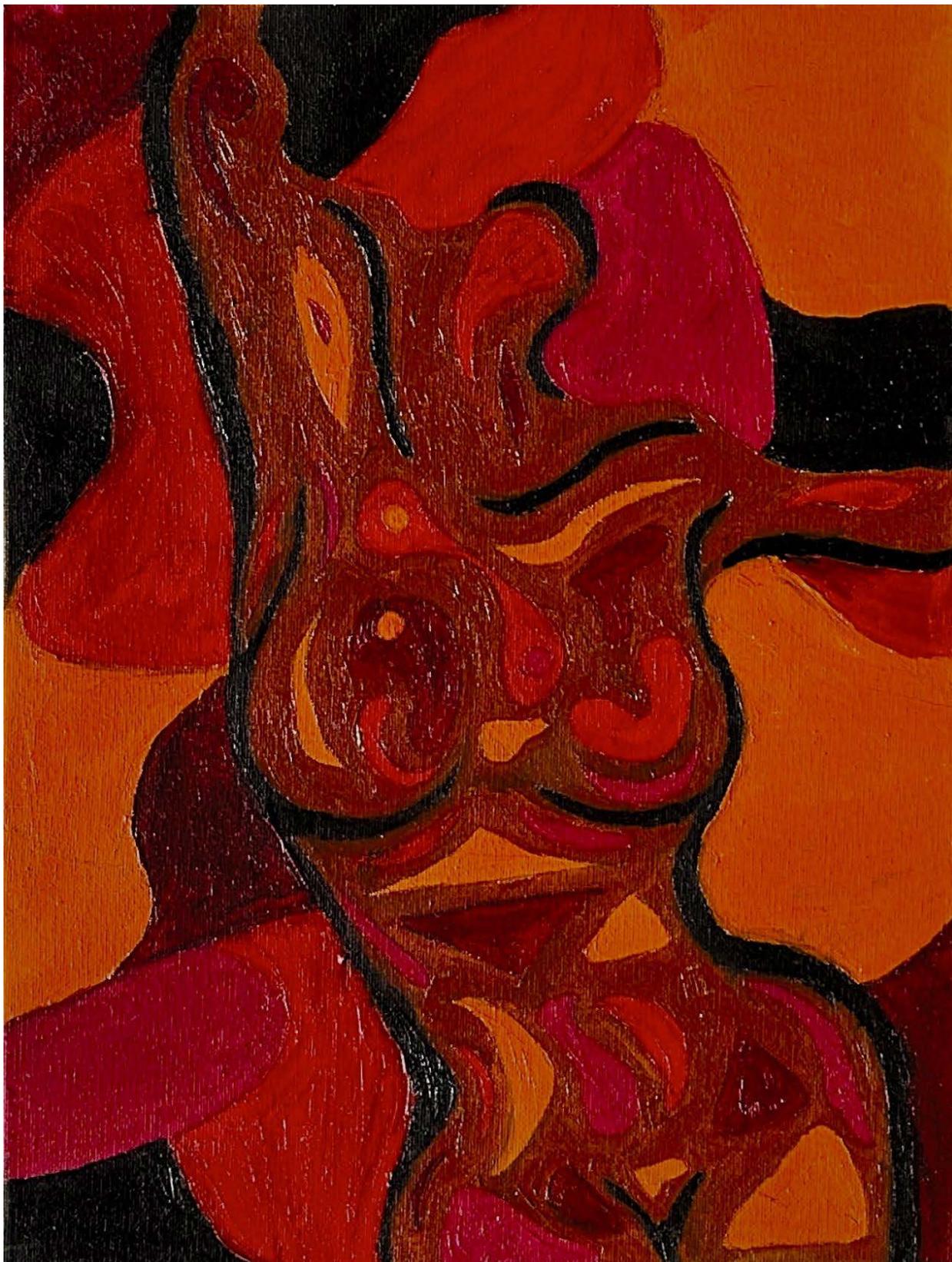
And I've been in the mental hospital at least three times. I was just in the mental hospital, a year ago yeah. I got into it. and they were like we need you to *calm down*. So we're going to take you to this hospital, and so I was in the hospital for two days and... because you know how ...you can tell them that you want to appeal it, or so I appealed it and got through so I got out in two days.

Can someone tell me what is soothing about cop cars, and sirens? Do you think we will find rest back in chains? Is one supposed to be calm while handcuffed to a hospital bed, with their freedom once more stripped? In Jonathan Metzl's book, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease (2010)*, he describes what happened when physicians sought to *calm down* civil rights activist:

Thus was the case with schizophrenia in the 1960s and 1970s. Far beneath the national glare of bus boycotts, sit-ins, and marches, another hidden civil rights-era history unfolded in response to national events. Here, the currency was neither liberation nor equality, but containment. And the result was not increased voting rights, legal protections, educational access, or other hard-fought liberties. Instead, the civil rights era catalyzed a shift in the structure of buildings, institutions, diagnostic codes, and even in the structure of minds, attitudes, and identities. Schizophrenia literally, and then figuratively, became a black disease. And prisons emerged where hospitals once stood. (Metzle 2010, 26)

Today, the largest mental health facility in America is the Los Angeles Twin Towers Correctional facility. How is it that in the land of the free, one can find oneself classified under both prisoner and patient?

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."*
-Matthew 5:3-5



The Violence of Narration

One of my mother's favorite sayings is this, "I didn't raise children, I raised little people." So, I wasn't surprised that this was the first thing she said when I sat down to speak with her. I had heard this all my life, and for a long time it saddened me that she never saw me as her *child*, just her person. For so long I blamed her, thinking that it was her who robbed me of my childhood. Every missed opportunity, every unheard cry, and sleepless night was my mother's fault. It all started with her so who else could it be? But I was wrong, my mother never robbed me of my childhood; America did that. I supposed when your job has been to birth workers for so long, there is no childhood. It all begins and ends with labor. How did the Law go? Oh yes, a *slave* merely gives birth to a *slave*.

Have I not made it clear? There is a violence that comes along with narrative. The violence of loss and what must come to a finish. As one picture is painted another is lost, and thus never known. And as a result, when a story comes to an end, one is led to believe that so does a life. And although we walk around as though the dead cannot speak, it is their very grave that we walk upon. The bones of the slaves shatter like glass beneath our feet. I can hear their cries in my sleep, or is that the mourning and weeping of mothers facing defeat? I refuse to live in a world where there is no victory left for me. Where my ancestors cease to be because we refuse to acknowledge Chattel Slavery. Where Jaiden is nothing more than a rioter on the street, and Alice's stories never find a place in history. Where Sabrina's voice is merely empty, and all the work of the generations before me is nothing more than vanity.

There is a violence to narrative, and who gets to write down the words I speak. White America documented the slave trade, but never Chattel Slavery. Because what a disgusting collision for one to have to see, their holiness and barbarism highlighted for all the world to see. So, they documented stories not for truth but to cover up follie. Yet the truth remains this: The Black slave in America was never set free. Thus, I urge us to stop telling this narrative of Chattel Slavery, where the slave and master no longer exists. Since all things live forever through language and memory, and perhaps even numbers.

"And they will rise again.

*Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life,
and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment."*

-John 5:29

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