

I Feel Therefore I Can Be/long:

Cultural Bearing as Maternal Activism

This is a story that illustrates the consequences of a purposeful and conscious maternal pedagogy that effectuates cultural, racial and identity consciousness. Through the transference of cultural knowledges, the homeplace becomes a site of maternal activism (hooks 2007). In this story, I underscore the centrality of the African mother in engendering a strong sense of self in African children, arguing that the African mother activates her maternal activism through her embodied Afro-indigenous knowledges. In this way, she becomes a site from which the African child reads to discover meaning.

Introduction

This storied memory emanated from a larger arts-informed narrative inquiry on the relationship between mothering and teaching among women of African descent. It marks the beginning of my self-reflections on and exploration into the pedagogical consequences of “mothering peoples” (O’Reilly and Ruddick 31) of African descent and in particular women identified African mothers who are actively engaged in the socio-cultural, identity and educational development of African children. This story attests to the potentialities of a purposeful African feminist maternal pedagogy where the African mother’s body becomes a pedagogical site and a site of knowledge production. Importantly, it witnesses maternal and child empowerment through rootedness in traditions, herstories, and through the transmission of Afro-indigenous generational and embodied knowledges. The story’s framework holds that African descended mothers through their culturally specific motherwork, serve as transformer activist for African children and by extension the larger African community.

I'm a Black girl

“Mommy, look, the sun is waking up.” She stirs the sheets, nudges my shoulder and sways her legs back and forth under the covers. When I pretend not to hear her, she peels back the curtain slightly. A steady streak of incandescent sunlight splashes over my face.

“Damn it!” I mumble under my breath before covering my head to keep the sunlight out of my eyes. I fall back into sleep mode. She continues to duck and dive under and out of the sheets beside me. A cacophony of sounds in the distance—the roar of the city traffic ten floors below, cars honking a series of interminable honks, dogs barking as their owners take them for their early morning walks, sirens screaming, and wailing drunkards who had been hollering from the night before continue into the early morning—pull me out of my abysmal dream. I lay, now half awake, with the sunlight seeping in through my once darkened cavern of sleep.

Still groggy, peeling back the sheet a little I peek through half-opened eyelids at my daughter now kneeling upright in bed with her shoulders taut.

I feel for my cell phone. It vibrates as I am trying to locate it.

It is 6:30 a.m. And even though I have grown accustomed to the early morning stirrings of my three-year-old alarm clock, I lay anaesthetized unable to fathom how it is that no matter how I had exhausted her the night before, she could awake and, just like my cell phone, sound off an alarm at that precise hour each day.

“Okay, baby, okay,” I say, slowly opening my eyes. The curtains screech across the iron rod as she pulls them farther apart. She returns to where I am laying, jerks my shoulders and pries my eyelids open with her tiny fingers. I awake to a now unrestrained sunlight barreling through the neat part in thick curtains my daughter just created.

In a high-pitched tone she repeats, only this time yelling, “Mommy wake up! The sun is awake and the moon is gone to sleep, time to get up!”

“Ma’at, Mommy’s tired. Just a few more minutes, I just need a few more minutes, okay?” I say pleading with her.

She doesn’t hear me. She tells me instead, “But Mommy, I want something to eat.”

“Alright, alright. What do you want to eat for breakfast?” I ask even though I know she will say, “sweet honey and peanut butter on bread and chocolate milk.”

Now, having my full attention, she scampers off the bed, skips off through the bedroom door, and twirls down the short hallway into the kitchen. I slip out from under the covers, quickly tighten the robe about my waist and follow her.

Reaching into the cupboards, I pull out a jar of almond butter and agave nectar. I spoon a dollop of almond butter, drizzle some agave nectar onto a slice

of bread before spreading them on the slices of bread. I walk over to her small play table in the living room area where she sits waiting. I place the stainless steel plate before her with a glass of chocolate almond milk.

“A sandwich, Mommy,” she says, doling out a command. “Squish it together like a sandwich.”

I fold the bread in half, one side covering the other. She beams her approval.

Seated at my desk I open the laptop, click on *iTunes*, and select a song from my reggae dancehall playlist. I open up the browser and go to my e-mail inbox.

The subject line of 50 unread messages flash across the screen in bolded black—a reminder of people I have yet to get back to. I close the browser, tilt my head and look off to the side where Ma’at sits. I watch as she frets bread edges before meticulously laying them out onto her silver plate in a series of triangular shapes. Our eyes meet. I smile. She smiles back sheepishly with her stuffed jaw knowing that I will ask her to eat the bread edges because they are good for her. She chews, places her half-eaten almond butter sandwich down, hums, dances in her seat and taps her feet.

A fast beat dancehall song starts to play. She rises up and the chair careens from under her legs on the floor.

She screams excitedly twirling towards me. “Look at me Mommy. Look. See me dancing,” she continues with her hands at her side, waist twisting and hips grinding in awkward circular motion.

“Ma’at,” I ask smiling. “What are you doing?”

“I’m dancing, Mommy. I’m dancing! Now it’s your turn to dance, Mommy.”

She marches toward me, pulls me up from the chair and screams, “You have to stand up, Mommy!”

Bass pounds at the foot of the table. Vibrations travel shaking pens, books, and bits of papers on my desk. The tiny lamp perched beside my laptop glides and jerks to the beat. I feel the hardwood floor quake beneath my feet as reggae artist Beenie Man’s “Sim simma whose got di keys to ma bimma (Simmer who’s got the keys to my BMW)” blasts through the speakers.

“Child, that’s not how you wine. Do like so,” I say crouching with my legs spread slightly apart demonstrating a smooth grinding motion.

She imitates, her waist moving rapidly off beat.

I laugh loudly at her ungainly hip movements.

“Yu way too stiff Ma’at. Free up yuself gyal. Yu dance like a white girl (You are way too stiff, Ma’at. Free up yourself, girl. You’re dancing like a white girl)”, I say to her chuckling.

She continues her awkward hip thrusting motion. “No,” she responds giggling. “I’m not a white girl, I’m a black girl, Mommy.”

I stop sedated, my hands spread out to the side still suspended mid air from my half completed demonstration of *The Butterfly* dance. I stare at her quietly,

trying to understand whether she knew what she had just said. I wanted to stop the music and probe her. I wanted to explain to her how important that knowledge of self was.

Instead, I take her hands and pull her towards me. I lift her to my chest and lower her to the ground. Laughter spills from her lips as I spin and twirl her rapidly in the air.

Eventually dizzied, we collapse. Her juice-stained TV blanket receives us as we meet with the floor. We lay panting heavily. I hear the music selection switch and Bob Marley and The Wailers' *Babylon System* fades in:

*We refused to be what you wanted us to be
We are who we are that's the way it's going to be
If you don't know
You can't educate us for no equal opportunities (Talking 'bout my freedom)
Talking 'bout freedom, people, freedom and liberty ...
Babylon system is a vampire
Sucking the children day by day. Yeah
Babylon system is a vampire (Vampire)
Sucking the blood of the sufferer. Yeah
Building church and university
Deceiving the people continually....*

There lying on the blanket, the side of my head pressed up against my daughter's, I feel a strange feeling of happiness and relief overcome me. Reaching for my cell phone, I shoot off a text message to her village aunts and uncles: "You wouldn't believe what Ma'at just told me as we were dancing. I'm a Black girl! She tells me she's a Black girl. Lol!"

The phone vibrates almost immediately in my hand. A text message flashes across the display screen. "She's got it, no need to worry Mamma, our little girl has got it."

My heart flutters, my lips part into a faint smile. My mind dissolves melding with the sweet sounds of the Bob Marley as he wails on....

*Tell the children the truth
Tell the children the truth
Come on now, tell the children the truth.... (Rebel, Rebel)*

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