

Groundings on *Rasanblaj* with M. Jacqui Alexander

M. Jacqui Alexander | University of Toronto

In 1998, at the “Uprootings and Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration” conference at the University of Lancaster in the UK, I heard M. Jacqui Alexander utter words that would continue to resound in my head. With her usual calm and authoritative disposition she declared, “Colonialism was about dismemberment.” The ideas and issues raised by this phrase, which I have reiterated *ad infinitum*, are preoccupations of Caribbean scholars, artists, and other cultural and knowledge producers in this so-called New World. They remain significant to Alexander’s body of work, as much in theory, as in praxis.

In her book *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (2005), Alexander elaborated:

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment. (281)

Grounded in a transnational feminist imperative, Alexander’s ongoing analyses of activist mobilization, memory, and migrations underline the impulse and thinking that has spurred my own crossings. Indeed, over the years, *Pedagogies*—a constant reminder that life is not lived along narrow disciplinary lines—inspired me to dare, to imagine, and to insist on exploring borders and interstices within academe. More specifically, in the last decade, my decision to anchor fundamental elements of my work in performance has been driven by a quest to identify and recognize manifestations of this dismemberment with the aim of ultimately subverting and displacing its pain.

This fascination or obsession with fracture and integration are central features in the inaugural call for participation in this virtual gathering. Since acts of violence in its myriad formulations, from the visceral to the most cerebral, are instrumental mechanics of colonization and empire building, the concept of *rasanblaj* then, in countering these processes, is inherently polysemic. Indeed, given the breadth of her works, interests, and extensive teaching, Alexander (Emerita Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Toronto) is a key interlocutor with whom I wish to further examine this. Our meditations on the topic considered aesthetic, feminist, political, praxis, and spiritual imperatives at play in the new concept. Unsurprisingly, crucial points in this interchange strongly resonated with and complemented numerous responses from artists, activists, scholars, and practitioners in this special issue. Elizabeth Chin’s “Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology,” Carlos Ulises Decena’s “Fè yon Rasanblaj,” Idle No More’s round dance revolution, Sibylle Fischer’s

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philosophical analysis, Alanna Lockward's multimedio "Dual Wounds," Sally Price's "Femmage," Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's review of María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Sinclair Thompson's narrative analysis of the reconstitution of the dismembered Tupak Katari, and Misty De Berry's "little sister" are just some examples with points of intersections.

I sought neither definition nor coherence, but a space to begin to consider some of the contours of this new concept.

I first began interviewing Alexander by phone, but I soon realized that there were limits to a fiber optic encounter. Committed to transforming theories into conscious daily practice, Alexander had recently relocated full time to Tobago to develop the Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality (www.latierraspirt.org). Situated in the woods in Connecticut, I was steeped in the world of #BlackLivesMatter protests, via social media. Our initial conversation concerned events in our respective environs. But there was a familiar sense of urgency as if we had talked about this before. Even though I was focused, I caught only snippets of her points: "We are being besieged as a race, as humans and as Black people . . . it is one crisis after another . . . Can we reconcile these far-flung parts of who we are . . . at a time when the Earth itself is going through such rapid transformation . . . We know all the shortcomings of capitalism . . . What are we doing . . . when we come to that realization?" The poignancy of that last question sat in the silence, marking our distance. A disturbance . . . I could not do presence *in absentia*. Indeed, there was a malaprop irony in discussing *rasanblaj* (as a organizing principle, of sorts) without even attempting to do a *rasanblé* (gather as people), especially knowing the nuances and multi-layered significations in this term. It is defined as assembly, compilation, enlisting, regrouping (of ideas, things, people, spirits. For example, *fè yon rasanblaj*, do a gathering, a ceremony, a protest). My embodied dissonance confirmed that this conversation needed to occur in person, on the ground, on the Land, in the region.

Early this January, then, I made my way to Tobago. Alexander and I sat down to resume our conversation. I reread the call to her as it is written and muttered something that I had said in passing when we first spoke of her participating in this issue. "We need to do this on *sept pwen*, seven points." She responded immediately and proceeded to riff on the significance of seven as a seal, the idea of bringing things to completion, the number of Y?m?ja, its sacred constitution, the mystic presence of the Ocean. . . Derek Walcott's *The Sea is History* . . . The Middle Passage. The sea as movement . . . Kamau Brathwaite's *Tidalectics* . . . of water's capacity to change the shape of things . . . to chisel resistant rock.

We talked over a couple days and settled on an arbitrary beginning.

-Gina Athena Ulysse

I An Ideological Reassembly of Another Kind

In chapter five of *Pedagogies*, I was attempting to do a *rasanblaj* of sorts, though I didn't call it by that name, an ideological reassembly, thinking purely in "secular" terms. This is after years of trying to figure out and wrestle with this question—what my dear friend and writing companion Chandra Talpade Mohanty and I call "a transnational feminist methodology." She's a person with whom I have done the most thinking about this. In that chapter, I stage a conversation between sexuality studies and transnational feminist studies in order to move away from the then absence of sexuality in transnational feminism and the absence of viable formulations of sexuality within transnationalism. I had also been wrestling with the ghosts of the binary tradition and modernity paradigm that ascribed violence to tradition alone, and, in so doing, carved out a space for modernity that was always free from violence. Within this context, I wanted to take apart the violence that was imbricated in state practices of heterosexualization. Here is how I framed it:

Methodologically, all those sites that *appear* not to be heterosexualized—welfare, militarism, the patriot, the citizen, the immigrant, the tourist, the soldier, the enemy—will be made to carry heterosexual freight.

Remember that, at this time, the U.S. is at the height of war in Iraq and elsewhere!!
And here is the *rasanblaj*:

We will conjoin practices that appear to be bounded by binary materialized temporalities and spaces, so that they constitute an *ensemble*, and work in mutually paradoxical ways. We will destabilize that which hegemony has rendered coherent or fixed; reassemble that which appears to be disparate, scattered, or otherwise idiosyncratic; foreground that which is latent and therefore powerful in its apparent absence; and analyze that which is apparently self-evident, which hegemony casts as commonsensical and natural, but which we shall read as gestures of power, that deploy violence to normalize and discipline. (2005, 192)

Pedagogies was published in 2005, spanning a decade, though that particular chapter was written around 2004. It was still cast in purely secular terms. But, I want to add that a number of different people were thinking of this idea of reassembly out of the recognition that many of the methodological tools at our disposal were not getting us closer to revolution, if you will. I'm thinking now of what Roderick A. Ferguson calls *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012). To think about this new theoretic, this new "re-ordering," we just had to figure out something differently—and let me just say that a whole bunch of people were in conversation, coming to the realization at different moments that we needed to think differently. Knowing that a reassembly was important, all of us who worked in the academy and outside of the academy, with one foot in and one foot out, were just trying to figure it out. Scholar activist, activist scholar, Angela

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Davis, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Julia Oporah, Andrea Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa *Ìbà yé*, and many more all wrestling with the discomfort about where we sat. The search. The clothes did not fit well any more. Perhaps they never did. But I want to mark here, just parenthetically for the moment, the point that metaphysics operate in the physical realm, whether or not we are aware of it, because when people from different areas, different reaches, different geographies, different disciplines, different practices are all calling for the same thing, some Spirit of re-assembly is already at work.

And that Spirit of reassembly is calling upon us to behave differently, to form this new moment. I think about *rasanblaj* now differently if we are to take the phrase “Spirit of reassembly” seriously—that is, to make Spirit mean something.

It's the practice. It's the call. It's a way of being. It's the yearning. It's all of those things, all of them together. You don't know it ahead of time. We can't see it in its full manifestation without our practice. It means then that we bring a level of consciousness, of absolute consciousness and reflection, what Buddhists refer to as mindfulness, to how we live, what we do, how we think, who we know, how and what we decide to *be* in the world, and fundamentally, I think, how we align ourselves with our destiny, which I feel is our charge, which is the fundamental charge of *rasanblaj*—aligning ourselves with our destiny. So that's an anchor right there. How we do that is the methodology, or what we can call, charting certain pathways through water. The water metaphor here is intentional since we will always be dealing with change.

Let's look at this “methodology,” then, this way of being in the world that has not yet fully manifested itself but that we know we want, that we yearn for. It's just not going to say: Here I am. It is a constant act of creation, recreation, reflection, imagination, living in community, however we constitute that, possession, radical self-possession, radical collective self-possession. So I'm now throwing out a set of terms that are in conversation with the terms with which you identified *rasanblaj*. All of those pieces have to do with who we want to be in this time that I'm beginning to understand as *the now of slavery*. And what I understood at an earlier point is important, but now I feel even that, too, is limited, quite limited.

II Collective Time

The call for *rasanblaj* at this moment, this present moment, which is at once past, present, and future, you know, comes at a perfect time. At a time when we most need it. This time of catalytic change when we are at a crossroads, a time when we most need the imagination. Because the imagination does not only present itself in the mind, the imagination is not a “product” only of mind. Imagination has everything to do with the operation of Spirit, which is why so many artists are also spiritual people. I

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am thinking here about the provocative ceremonial multimedia performance work of Raúl Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, his piece [Mariposa Ancestral Memory](#).

You know Audre [Lorde] talks about it. Sufi poets talk about it, that muse that is at once both spiritual and imaginative, who whispers in one's ear. It is at once spiritual and poetic. It is at once poetic and erotic. In this *rasanblaj*, the binaries, the divisions, which we have inherited, are more congruent with misnaming and misrecognition than with the fluidity with which many people live their daily lives. So when I say "we," I'm clearly referring to those communities for whom these divisions have been made to matter. Probably preaching to the choir here. There is a whole bunch of people for whom this is not the case. Indigenous, First Nations, Aboriginal peoples. Ancient mystics and practitioners of old spiritual traditions. So we need to be very clear about that. There are communities who do not ever think in these binary terms, who didn't inherit them, and therefore, do not live by them. To call these modes of living "alternative" is to set up binaries as the pervasive norm, to continue to have a hegemonic ordering of history. Still, I think it's important to do inventory of the seductive ways in which we continue to live lives of segregation, which is another way to think about this.

Part of this project, of this *regroupment*, is taking inventory of those things that have been made to function as disparate in our lives, the cordoning off of ourselves from ourselves, the deep alienation that has been produced as a consequence of all of this separation, all of this forgetting, all of this cordoning off from that which sustains us, all the talk about the modes and forces of production without ever having *any* kind of relationship to Land, all of the not knowing how to think about what sustains us, where it comes from, in a material sense, or, if we do know where it comes from, it's thought from the most meta sense of theorizing where we disappear the people who are involved in those very productive works on which we rely. There is a psychic cost to living hegemony, which we have disavowed . . .

So this call, this project of reassembly, is a necessary one. It's a terrifying one. "Terror" because some folks haven't ever met the folks about whom they are theorizing and don't really want to live within the communities that they have imagined. But, to recognize terror is an important recognition. Audre would urge us at this very point to dig deep down inside ourselves in order to see the face that terror wears. It's a necessary piece of work; it's one that troubles terror. Not paradoxically, it's also a beautiful one. What else could be more beautiful than coming to know, or coming to see, the wholesomeness of who/what you are. What more beauty is there in coming to recognize yourself in your full expression of your possibilities, the full expression of your birthright?

What more beauty is there in thinking collectivity, with all of its complications, its un-romanticized dimensions, as James Baldwin would say, but thinking of collectivity as necessity because none of us could bear this *now of slavery* alone. None of us could bear it alone. None of us could do the re-imagination alone. So this is not a solitary thing . . . So it has to be a necessarily large project. It has to involve *all* of those who have been scattered. And

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it has to involve a constant element of supreme self- and collective reflexivity.

Why that reflexivity? Because the ego is sneaky. It has an important job to do in assisting us in asserting will, when that is needed, in assisting with certain elements of our “survival,” which is not unimportant, but it becomes threatened when it sniffs out change, especially the kind of change that can signal its near demise. I’ve read somewhere that we are never to underestimate the power of a dying ego. So reflexivity is about the constant internal work we must do in order to be alive. And for that we need witnesses. Some of us think that if we add “critical” to some set of social relations we are attempting to analyze, we’ve made a revolution. We don’t have to change much, just add “critical” to it. But we know enough to know that hegemony does not simply disappear. And some of us believe that we are revolutionaries, but we still hold on to the binaries that have been created out of normative European modernity, which fetishize that separation among mind, body, and Spirit. So now there has to be a “struggle” to put Spirit back when it was always already there. It never went anywhere. The only element in its apparent disappearance are the segregated frameworks that we’ve utilized to serve our own denials. Spirit is never, ever missing.

III Binaries or the Forgetting

I also do believe that fewer and fewer people in the academy, for instance, are holding on to these binaries. The dogged work of activists has produced enough internal fractures to make that clear. The point is we cannot only live in spaces of domination, spaces of hegemony, if we want to think and act radically—and by “radical” here I am meaning “the root.” For true radical thinking to occur, one has to move outside the academy, in this instance, however one wants to constitute that outside. The psychic and emotional work of decolonization, if we want to use that term here, will take hold only when we live in other spaces and are able to create a different kind of traffic between and among them. I am not saying leave the academy. I am saying that we need to complicate our stay there with different forms of knowing and being, which are not always already shaped by the imperatives of the institution. My dear friend and colleague Alissa Trotz spends her time between working with [Red Thread in Guyana](#), writing the diaspora column for Stabroek News, teaching at the University of Toronto in Caribbean Studies and Gender and Women’s Studies, and learning how to travel to these apparently different places with a politics of accountability. My sense is that working in this way puts some checks and balances on that crafty institutional self, which, if we are not vigilant, would assert itself as *the* dominant self.

The timing of your call is on point in the sense that it reminds us about memory and the deep forgetting that has occurred. In Chapter 6 of *Pedagogies*, I write about the idea that we have forgotten so much, we have even forgotten *that* we have forgotten. In the scared Ifá texts of the Yorúbà people there is a story in which we left “heaven” and hugged the tree of forgetfulness. So what makes us forget? Why is amnesia more seductive than

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remembering? This is where supreme clarity and supreme thinking has to happen. When Spirits now say: "We have to be everywhere," let us be clear about what they are saying. They are not saying that we now have to enter the academy. What they *are* saying is that *you* have split us off. *You* are the ones who split us off from here. So this work of reassembly, "re-memory" as Toni Morrison calls it, is a spiritual coming out, making Spirit public and not consigning Them to the underground, the basement, or the non-existent. We don't want to forget this whole subtle universe out here by being overly preoccupied with a life of the mind that concerns mind alone.

But it's not that "we" have all been in the basement or the underground. In Chapter 7 of *Pedagogies*, I was attempting to find a way to render this idea of the ubiquity of Spirit particularly at the time of The Crossing. I wrote:

Once they crossed, they graced all things with the wisdom of Ashe. Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder. They deposited it in *otanes*, stones, in the mossy underground of treacherous caves; in the caress of elegant waterfalls; in forests imposing enough to assume the name Mountain; in water salt and sweet to taste the opposite in things. All winged creatures including the butterfly. All four legged. And two legged. And those who slithered on the land, the color of coral, while their sympathies lived in Sky. And with those yet to be born. *For once they intuited that the human will was long intent on capture, they all conspired to rest their Truth everywhere.* And in the simplest of things. Like a raindrop. And therefore the most beautiful of things, so that Truth and Beauty would not be strangers to one another, but would rely one on the other to guide the footprints of the displaced and those who chose to remain put; of those only once removed and those who had journeyed far in the mistaken belief that books were the dwelling place of wisdom; those who thought that the lure of the concrete would replace or satisfy the call of the forest; those who believed that grace was a preoccupation of the innocent and the desire to belong a craving of the weak. *Being everywhere was the only way, they reasoned to evade capture and to ensure the permanence of change—one of the truths of the ocean.* (2005, 289; emphasis added)

They are everywhere, but we don't always see. Like those underground messages embroidered in Black women's quilts, "hidden in plain view." And of course here we remember Julie Dash's film—*Daughters of the Dust*. So They are already everywhere. But we don't see Them.

So, blowing apart that pronoun, that *we* in relationship to ourselves, when we receive that message of *rasanblaj*, Spirit is saying, "We're everywhere already." Why? Because that's the nature of universe. But *we* didn't stop being everywhere, because *you* decided to separate us. We didn't stop. Because we're not partial in that kind of way. We're not sometime-ish like you all. There's this expression used here in Tobago: "You *too* sometime-ish." You behave this way one day, and tomorrow another. You sometime-ish. We're not as sometime-ish as you, Spirits are saying. That's why

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when people talk about “soul murder” and “spirit murder,” we get the point about the effects of racism, say, on one’s spirit. But that’s spirit with a small “s.” Spirit with a big “S” does not die. It’s not possible. Now we are the ones responsible because Spirit is also saying: Since you all have created the separation, you are the ones responsible for the *regroupment*. That’s what accountability means. It doesn’t disappear in the realm of the sacred.

So *now* here is the question: what tools, what methodologies, if you will, do we need to develop to coax memory back into work, to mute the seduction of forgetting and make re-memory irresistible? Of course I am thinking of the late Toni Cade Bambara here and her invitation to make revolution irresistible. How do we develop these multiple methods, pathways of sight, and seeing? They are there and there is no one recipe. This *rasanblaj* is one pathway. But it means coming to a conscious choice point, to the point of the crossroads, where È?ù, Papa Legba, reside. When we enter those crossroads, we must make a choice. It doesn’t mean that if we go north it’s bad in relationship to going south. No, it means we’re going to encounter different worlds since this is the place of possibility and potential. But precisely because È?ù, Papa Legba dwell at these crossroads, one of the possibilities is that of confusion, which is not necessarily a bad thing. We need that confusion to produce the desired epiphanies that come when things rub against each other. What it does mean is that we need a prayer at that moment—and all I mean by prayer is bringing our power of intention to bear on the various possibilities. The prayer at this point is the prayer for supreme discernment, discernment. Each of us will be forced or enticed to sojourn at these crossroads at some point in our lives, willingly or unwillingly. Either way, it requires consciousness, a point to which we will return later. After the crossroads comes the fire, if not, how else would we know, as in “determine for ourselves,” whether that choice, the path taken, suits us, as in being in alignment with who we really are, that true self, not the institutional self that basks in fleeting rewards, but the True Self. Then, and only after then, can we prepare ourselves to receive.

IV Discernment Teaching

So, I understand the work in my teaching as work, as work I’ve been given to do. For me the classroom is a sacred space. And I’ve been fortunate in the sense that over the last few years of teaching, I’ve been able to devote more and more time to really making that tangible, and palpable. Since 2004, I begin all of my classes with a 10 to 15 minute meditation that has really transformed the quality of students’ capacity to listen to each other. In one feminist graduate methodology course, my yoga teacher generously agreed to hold six sessions at various times during the semester. It made sense to me to have yoga provide a different kind of knowing about the (racialized) body. I spent a lot of time fashioning three courses: *Migrations of the Sacred*; *Aboriginal, Black and Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*; and *Dreams of Freedom*, where I have been intentional about foregrounding the sacred. In all three of them, I invited students, (required

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would be more accurate), to do aesthetic work, because I felt they needed some beauty to counteract all of the violence we were encountering in our respective lives, and in some of the texts we were reading. It is always amazing for me to see students dive into that deep place, dive past their fear, and do the work of creating art.

One semester, Andrea Fatona and Chiedza Pasipanodya, two colleagues from the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), came in and did a beautiful piece of work with the students about mounting an exhibition of their work, professionally. They engaged the students as artists: “So what’s the theme? What are the pieces that go together? How should we begin?” “What story do you want the work to tell?” In the end, family oral histories of *Sacred Migrations* and *Dreams of Freedom* were combined and installed in the lounge of the Women and Gender Studies Institute, gracing the halls for close to six months. It was one of the most moving teaching experiences I’ve ever had. You know, I am not trained as an artist, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is one’s willingness to “go there,” to ferret out those dimensions, internal spaces beyond comprehension, beyond “rationality,” where one can create and bring that creation forward.

I’m also committed to reading widely across and within “disciplines,” a word that I’ve increasingly come to believe is not useful to characterize a field of study. I spent a lot of time reading Howard Thurman, the African-American philosopher theologian, for instance. I went in search of him after my father’s death in 1985, where I came upon his work for the first time. Thurman talks about the discipline of freedom, so very much different from the idea of freedom as individual indulgence, but really wrestling with this idea of freedom and responsibility. I read Sikh teachings, the *Salok Mahala 9* that was penned by Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib as he awaited execution in a Delhi prison. One of my former students, Tejpreet Kaur (then head of the Sikh Coalition in New York City), pointed me to this. It was just after the massacre of the Sikh temple in Milwaukee in August 2012. I wanted to probe whether or not freedom looked different across spiritual traditions and whether one could experience a sense of freedom under the most grotesque of circumstances: slavery, occupation, the internment of Japanese women in Canada, the holocaust, and imprisonments of different kinds. I wanted to know whether “secular” expressions of the struggle for freedom had a sacred counterpart. Reading those texts was important. It gave me this incredible opportunity to read within and across spiritual traditions, alongside them, put them in conversation with one another, and to cross-reference. Because there’s really one source, only multiple iterations of this Oneness, which we presume to be hard and fast difference, because we’ve made it such. Not only did all of this generate new knowledge, but also, it helped me to see the world differently, which brings us back to the point we were making earlier about the tools we need to develop for different ways of seeing. All of this has been integral to my teaching.

In an important sense, these courses were all precursors to, and companions of, the work of the Tobago Centre. Though the idea of the Centre had lived with me for a while, some of its elements began to take shape during a project I undertook in 2007

that was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC). The project, *Migrations of the Sacred: Gendered Spiritual Practices in an Era of Globalization*, was a way to track the effects of globalization and displacement on the spiritual communities of Aboriginal, African, and African descendant women, and to examine the spiritual technologies they used to heal themselves and their communities in the face of it all. It began in 2007, but the course itself was really intended to speak back to some (feminist) thinking that immigrant women jettisoned their spiritual selves in order to constitute themselves as “modern” metropolitan subjects.

But in the course of the interviews for the project and in conversation, elders noted that plant medicines were disappearing. The elders who possessed the deep knowledge, that *connaissance* of plant medicine, were dying, without leaving a written record. To me that was a crisis of a different kind, which was singularly responsible for my changing the content of *Migrations of the Sacred* and *Aboriginal, Black, and Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*. I designed both of those classes so that plants became the subjects—they were our teachers, we, the students. Aboriginal women and women of color share a metaphysical cosmos with plants at the center; and we can't talk about the sacred elements of our existence without talking about the sacred medicine of plants—those were the links I wanted to establish. And deep down, I wanted to move away from frameworks in which this whole existential universe was simply missing. The response I received was a study in itself. Of course, one presumably finds plants only in Environmental Studies. Folks would ask: “What’s your discipline?” I would say “Women's Studies.” “Women's studies is doing that?” I'd say: “I don't know about women's studies, but I'm doing it.” What I know is that I am doing the work that I am charged to do. Spirit gave me this work to do and that's what I'm doing. I didn't say this publicly, but it was the truth behind the force driving me. But it's all spiritual work. If we did not hold to these binaries between sacred and secular, then we would know that all of what we do can be constituted as sacred and spiritual since it concerns the deepest dimensions of our lives that are themselves linked to the subtle rhythms of the universe.

Back to the class. On the first day, I said to them, “You know, plants are going to be our subjects.” “Plants?” they responded incredulously. And I handed out a syllabus where the course description took an entire page. Well, about a third of the students in *Aboriginal, Black, and Immigrant Women* left. Of course, those who stayed engaged. The whole point of this was to move away from the idea of plants as use value, and embrace instead the idea of plant intelligence, hardwired with a perfect DNA system, a circulatory system that's incredible. We had to wrestle with this idea of species dominance, the belief that human intelligence trumps everything—thinking that is pervasive even within environmental movements. For a semester-long assignment, I asked students to choose a plant and to write a book about that plant. By the end of the semester, they came to the realization that the plant had in fact chosen them. They began to see the strong links between the plants' personalities and their own. We had a fabulous panel discussion that included both classes as part of the final with

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about 50 students cramped into the Women's Studies Lounge, with food, of course. Some students brought their parents. They, in turn, gifted these books to the Tobago Centre, which we graciously accepted. All of this can be found on the Centre's website. Just very, very precious moments in my teaching life.

Of course there are other pedagogic models and pedagogic spaces in the form of a [mobile classroom](#), for instance, where knowledge moves outside of and beyond the traditional four walls. These makeshift spaces help us to situate our work in the context of communities from which we draw so much of our spiritual, epistemic strength and inspiration. Our job is to consistently bring that knowledge back into the classroom as a point of theorizing, not of empiricism. In the end, it's our link with communities and our location in community that will give us the political and intellectual vigor and rigor we so sorely need now.

What have I discerned after more than three decades of teaching? I have changed and grown as a teacher, sometimes teaching the things I most need to learn; that I've come to understand interdisciplinarity in a different way—as the commitment to ferret out answers to my deepest preoccupations and follow those threads to wherever they might lead; that we need to cultivate a genuine sense of humility in the face of all we do not know, especially so when our humility is interpreted as *naïveté* or arrogance; that as important as social justice projects are, and as necessary as our engagement with different forms of violence and hierarchies is, we need beauty, we need art, we need forms of expressions that push beyond “disciplinary” borders so that we show how “other worlds are possible.” Some of these “other worlds” are already alive. And perhaps, the most humbling: whilst I call myself a teacher, I do not teach *all* of my students in the *same* way. They teach me how to teach them, much like the plants taught them.

V

The Now of Slavery

Charleston Thomas, a musician friend of mine, has composed a piece he calls *Still Crossing* as a way of wading through the “bloody waters” of slavery's present. David Rudder's calypso, *Haiti am Sorry*, sings this phrase: “They say that the Middle Passage is gone, but how come overcrowded boats still fill our lives?” Angela Davis describes the recent events of police violence in Ferguson, Missouri, as an extension of slave relations since the blue print for establishing penal institutions and the attendant penal culture existing *now* were developed *then*. These are just three examples of the contemporary crisis illustrating that the continuity between *then* and *now* is both stark and persistent. There are many, many others.

The crisis also has another dimension, at the crux of which is the seduction to move far away from the foundational truths of our existence, by which I mean there is a learned tendency to hold on to binaries and to flee from those crucial questions that Audre Lorde and others have continuously posed to us: Who are you? Why did you come? Are you doing the work you came

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here to do? To these I would add a fourth question: Who walks with you? These questions are not new, but we must answer them. To put it simply, inside of all the violence we experience we cannot continue to live fragmented lives—of the kind that was generated as part of that earlier colonization and slavery—yet hope to create holistic institutions. It just cannot happen.

So I see this crisis as also existential. The *then* and *now* also lives inside of us, at the very cellular level. We did not live back *then* but the Souls of our ancestors keep coming back. To the extent that we are doing Spirit work, it is to that extent that our ancestors are consistently calling upon us to do the *rasanblaj*; it is to that extent we know that there are spirits who walk with us, who lived *then*. If we develop multiple understandings of the “I,” in the terms that Gloria Wekker suggests in the *Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (2006), then we know that “I” to be plural because the “I” does not walk alone. There is sacred accompaniment. All of those spirits of the deep, who went down in the Middle Passage and in those rickety boats, *now* are walking with us as well. They can assist in pointing our paths to healing. In many instances, they, too, need to be liberated. Finding ways to wrestle with the crisis in existential terms, rather than purely secular ones, finding ways to weld the political and the existential would help to disrupt *the now of slavery*.

VI

Metaphysical Currents

The spirits have never left. It is just our consciousness in relationship to their presence and our interpretations of that presence that shift. That's why one of our collective petitions is to be endowed with the gift of interpretation, with the practice and grace of interpretation, so that when dreams come, we are able to *know* what they are telling us; so that when we receive the signs, we are able to read them; so that when we hear the messages, we would be able to decode them. Because the messages do not come in the form of a lecture where A presumably follows B to whatever point, and conclude by saying *do this*. They do not come like that. They come in the way that resembles Toni Morrison’s description of her process in writing *Jazz*. She saw first a feather on a couch, which little by little developed into a character. That's how the messages come. They do not come all at once. And they do not come once and for all.

All of that is to say that I understand that the basic part of what we are about is to become spiritually evolved as human beings. Any time we are born and manifest in flesh is a part of that spiritual evolution. Let us return to the question about who walks with us because it is a deep spiritual question. And because it is a deep spiritual question, it can only be answered fully through spiritual means. All of the ancient metaphysical systems have developed tools to address this. In Vodou, it takes the form of the *lavé tête*, a washing of the spiritual head; in Ifá/Lukumí/Candomblé, it takes the form of the *Oríbibo*, both of which are sacred practices of alignment to coax the self back

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into its spiritual purpose, to celebrate and feed *Orí*. To be sure, this process is life-long. It will probably take several incarnations. But we owe it to ourselves to address this rebalancing of mind, body, and Spirit in at least one of them.

Beneath all of this lies consciousness. Take the word, *Oríbibo*, for instance. Yorúbà metaphysics pays a lot of attention to this concept of *Orí*, the inner head, inner consciousness, which is not bound by, or limited to, the physical head. There is a beautifully poignant sacred story—*itan*—which Wándé Abímbólá recounts in *Ifá: An Exposition of the Ifá Literary Corpus* (1997), about three friends who decide to leave heaven for Earth. But in order to make that journey, they must first go to Àjàlá, the potter who makes heads, to choose their heads (meaning their consciousness). Only with their chosen heads will they be able to fulfill their sacred destiny. Let me say that whenever the concept of destiny is introduced, it is often immediately viewed as being antagonistic to the modernity's free will—the misconception being that destiny forecloses will. But that's not the case. As human beings, we are constantly making and remaking our destiny. There is really no abrogation or suspension of will, because these acts of creation require consciousness. So what happens to will in the context of destiny? This is where the Kreyòl *sojème* and the Spanish *entregar* are helpful to us as they introduce the idea of surrender and a handing over of the self. That's the consciousness. You hand over yourself to service. You hand over yourself to be a medium. You hand over certain desires to be transformed. You hand over your allegiance to supreme individualism, if this is what pervades your culture. You hand those things over so as to transform, not in any neat, prescriptive way free of raucous challenge, but you decide to hand them over. In the face of mystery, this handing over is a supreme act of consciousness and willfulness. When you read the *itan* you will see that it has nothing at all to do with fatalism or the denial of the self.

VII

The Return to Land

It's the call of the forest. That's our spiritual DNA. The forest. Land, with a capital "L." She is a living, breathing entity. We know Her by that name. Communities, nations live in the forest even in the face of massive deforestation. We escaped and went to the forest as captive peoples; we called it *maroonage*. We were and still are hunter-gatherers. That's what we come from. (*She laughs.*) We were hunting and gathering, that's what we were doing, and we were doing that *in the forest*. That's where we developed our sensibilities; how to read, how to read tracks, markings on the ground; how to develop respectful relationship with animals. That's where we learned about plants. That's how we knew what was "poisonous" and what was not "poisonous." That's how we developed the cure and the antidote. That's how we came to know that it resided in the same place. That in the forest, the poisonous plant and its antidote lived next to each other. That's how we came to begin to name plants. That's how we came to know the *doctrine of signatures* that the plant's biology resembled the function it

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played in the human body, that cellular and metabolic affinity between human beings and plants. That's how and where we, as a species, learned all of those things. That phrase in Chapter 7 of *Pedagogies*: “Those who thought that the lure of concrete would replace or satisfy the call of the forest,” came out of the recognition of the costs of our departure, hence the necessity of the return. It's a sacred call.

The Centre itself is adjacent to Tobago's Main Ridge Forest, which is described as “the oldest protected reserve in the ‘Western Hemisphere.’” Protection is clearly important, but this claim need not be boastful in relation to the “West,” for had it not been for the fact that this tiny island (of 300 km in size) exchanged (euphemistically speaking) European colonial hands thirty-three times, yes, imagine thirty-three times, the idea of the sacredness of Mother Earth as a living entity might have been more pervasive. What, then, does this claim mean from an historical standpoint? It's also a very paradoxical claim for us. What does it mean that indigenous Carib peoples right here in Trinidad and Tobago have to “go begging” the State for Land, and have been waiting for that Land to be given back to them. Being adjacent to the Main Ridge also means that we share the same biological corridor as the forest, the flora and fauna are the same. Thus we have a particular responsibility to preserve the Land's bio-diversity in the midst of the very precarious drought conditions of the last few years. In our last [fundraising call](#), we said that we have a mandate to put our environmental inheritance to work. That's how we understand it. We understand that we are stewards of the Land. It's a sacred trust.

One day, about three months ago, I was walking down the path that leads to the Land when I heard very clearly this question: “Are you ready to receive the generosity of the Earth?” Are you ready to receive My generosity? I was startled and of course it provoked me into gratitude, to think about this immense generosity and immense grace of the Earth. If we were to think about it in a “secular” way, we would have to think about all of the work it takes to produce us. All of the people who have sewn our clothes, made our shoes, harvested our food; all of the people who have produced us, just for one morning. Let's not even go through the entire day; let's just take the morning. Consider all the people that it took to produce us that we didn't have a hand in. We didn't have a hand in the rising of the sun. We didn't have a hand in the appearing moon. We didn't have a hand in any of those things, and yet, without them we wouldn't know life on this planet. This exercise in intersubjectivity, I've given to various classes countless times, but now the question hit me in a different way. My answer: “I will work to make myself ready.” And I make a lot of mistakes. I am learning to become more observant and to be more present, more mindful, moment to moment.

When we are working on the Land, we devote ourselves fully to doing only that—working on and with the Land. There are no conversations about other matters. We do not plant and chat about personal things. We do not plant and talk about political things. We do not plant and talk about any of that. We plant and deal with what is in front of us. The soil, its constitution, how it's

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moving, finding those creatures that support it, looking at the movement of the butterfly to figure out where to seed the bird and butterfly bush. I couldn't find out where to put those bird feeders that you gifted the Centre, Gina, until we saw some of them move that day. The birds had to tell us where to put them. Seeing how they move in flight we could say, "Well, it seems that this is how they move." We put up the bird feeders and bird seed when we were leaving, then Curt who helps with the planting comes and says, "Well, now we'll see what they do." Indeed. Now we see the birds are coming more and staying more. We would miss all of that if we indulged our own preoccupations. How are we able to identify the birds? Do we know who they are? Their personalities? There is also an important listening dimension to all of this as well. When they chirp what are they saying to us? All of these creatures whose home this has been long before our arrival. We are re-learning how to share.

We have also noticed the species in the rainforest differ from the same species inside the forest. Take vervain, for instance. Outside the forest we know it as a running plant, at times growing upright to about one and a half to two feet in height. But there in the forest, the same species can climb to three and half to four feet in height, standing up like a small tree!!

So we are back to this question of generosity, the immense generosity and immense grace, the immense knowledge of the forest. Millennia of memory stored there, which is why we ask permission to enter the forest. What else can we do in the face of such immensity? How much is gained from that knowledge and generosity? There is a lot that we must do in preparing and tilling the soil, but the Earth carries Her own capacity to grow seeds, to make medicine. Take the smallest piece of Land. Any one of us as an individual would not be able to eat all of the produce that can come from that small piece of Land. We won't be able to eat it alone. You know, a banana tree never produces just one banana. So let us be clear, whatever we put in is disproportionate, is totally disproportionate to what we receive from the Land. She reciprocates, immensely. I have been reading this exquisitely written book by Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (2015), which puts forward "the principles and practices that govern the exchange of life for life" (180). It is central to the indigenous canon, this principle of the Honorable Harvest with detailed protocols and guidelines for sustainability, at the heart of which is the caution: "Never take more than half" (182).

I see the work of the Centre as absolutely necessary at this juncture. That's the way of Spirit, bringing together the far-flung, dismembered parts of ourselves, into one place that is anchored in the Land. She, like Ocean, has the capaciousness to hold us. This is our foundation, in this Earth that we have so mistreated, though clearly, She must go through Her own heavings. It's in that capaciousness that we plant food, learn to make medicine, and come home to our whole selves. It is spiritual work in the deepest sense, a spiritual practice. This, of course, raises the question of whether each of us has a daily spiritual practice? Do you have a spiritual practice? You've got to have one. What is your spiritual

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practice? And the companion question: What is your *daily* spiritual practice? We could get all theoretical about the spiritual practice, but what is the daily work—in other words what do you do every day? What do you *do*? How is it constituted? How do you constitute it, and how does it constitute you? Even with this barrage of questions, I recognize that the Centre is only one path out of multiple possibilities.

The *Rasanblaj* that has taken form in this collection is another path, different, but it is a path. You, Gina, had to do a great deal of work to find the term that fit. You opted for Kreyòl and not French. You had to provide pointers about pronunciation because word vibration matters. This is really where the poets help, together with artists, who sense the limits of language. The poets who receive the messages in every crevice of their body and make that intelligible. The point here is about culling and crafting new vocabularies out of new practices. This, too, is what *rasanblaj* is doing. Forging a new interdisciplinarity. Once we look at the moving river and understand that the current on the surface differs from the undertow, how, then, do we move more consciously into the flow of our lives?

Acknowledgments

I borrow the term “Groundings” from Walter Rodney model of transborder political work. With gratitude to Spirit and to all of my ancestors upon whose shoulders I stand and to all of my teachers; to Gina Athena Ulysse for the invitation and to Kate Rushin and Dawn Piscitelli for translations of different kinds; and dear Gloria I. Joseph, my perspicacious friend.

M. Jacqui Alexander is founding director of the Tobago Centre for the Study and Practice of Indigenous Spirituality and Professor Emerita of Women and Gender Studies, University of Toronto.

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