



Learning
to (Re)member
*the Things We've Learned
to Forget*

Endarkened Feminisms,
Spirituality, & the Sacred Nature
of Research & Teaching

CYNTHIA B. DILLARD

PREFACE

Memory—of what has been, of acts of commission or omission, of a responsibility abdicated—affects the future conduct of power in any form. (Soyinka, 1999, p. 82)

Colonial and racialized histories have created fragmentation, dislocation, and dismemberment for many African ascendants¹ and other people of color. These entanglements and genealogies of diaspora and location strongly influence the consciousness of African ascendant women throughout the world, even as we negotiate the countless influences that shape and impact both our individual and collective consciousness and particularities as feminists/womanists. These are always and in all ways contested spaces and locations that are deeply spiritual, situated, and embodied. In *Learning to (Re)member the Things We've Learned to Forget: Endarkened Feminisms, Spirituality, and the Sacred Nature of Research and Teaching*, I explore the ways that these histories and spiritualities have shaped Black feminist consciousness and more collective notions of Black womanhood as a cross-cultural diversity of nationalities, socioeconomic classes, sexual identities, spiritual beliefs, and generations.

But what is the center that holds feminism in this diversity *together* for the African ascendant woman, particularly in diaspora? I argue here that a critical part of the answer to this question is found in learning and being *engaged* in our lives and resisting the temptation to compare or create hierarchies of oppression between and among the collective understanding of Black/endarkened feminisms (Lorde, 1970). Such engagements include a deep recognition of the ways that we have been collectively seduced into forgetting who we are as African ascendant women (or have chosen to do so), given the weight and power of our memories and the truly radical act that (re)membering represents in our present lives and work as teachers, as researchers, and as cultural workers. Through the ravages of oppressions such as colonization or slavery and their ever-present inequitable outcomes, we have learned to be both complicit and vigilant in this process of figuring out who we are, who we are becoming. But in order to heal, to put the pieces back together again, we must learn to remember the things that we've learned to forget, including engagements and dialogues in cross-cultural community that theorize our varying spiritualities, experiences, definitions, and meanings of Black womanhood. In this way, (re)membering becomes a

1 Given the epistemic nature of language, I use the term "African ascendant" to describe people of African heritage. In contrast to the commonly used term "descendent" Kohain Hahlevi, a Hebrew Israel rabbi uses the term to describe the upward and forward movement of African people on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora. I subscribe to this naming and will use this term throughout this book.

radical and endarkened response to our individual and collective fragmentation at the spiritual and material levels, an endarkened response to the divisions created between mind, body, and spirit, and an endarkened response to our on-going experience and understanding of “what difference difference makes” (Wright, 2003).

Feminist research has both held and contested *experience* as a category of epistemological importance but primarily as a secular one. Absent any attention to spirit, experience is also constructed as absent the sacred. However, the sacred is fundamental to a Black/endarkened feminist epistemology, teaching, and research, given the historical and cultural experiences of African ascendant women worldwide. How can (re)membering bear witness to our individual and collective spiritual consciousness and generate new questions that can inform feminist theory and practice? This book explores that question. Theorizing through sites and journeys across the globe and particularly in Ghana, West Africa, this book explores how spirituality, location, rootedness, experience, and cultural memory engage and create an *endarkened* feminist subjectivity that both (re)members and opens possibilities for research and teaching as sacred practice, as practice that honors the wisdom, history, and cultural productions of African ascendent women particularly and persons of African heritage more generally.

Learning to (Re)member is also a very personal response to Alice Walker's (1983) artistic and political call for Black women to write not only what we want to read but “*all the things [we] **should** have been able to read*” (p. 13, emphasis mine). Here, I seek to enact and recognize both the intellectual and creative legacy of African ascendant women as a powerful, provocative, and important “first step” in (re)membering ourselves and in understanding how our knowing and being is rooted in and constantly informed by African wisdom. Even in diaspora, at least part of our ground lies in (re)membering Africa: From my view, this is a critical, sacred, and legitimate space from which the African ascendant can enact teaching and research that also affirms ourselves and our communities. It is also from this exploration that we might embody new visions and models of endarkened feminisms that are truly *transnational*, spiritual, insightful, and creatively *generative*. Ultimately, the work of (re)membering is, as bell hooks (2000) says, all about love...

So this is a call to love,
African women scholars and teachers,
creators of life, of learning.
Because who we are as (re)searchers
is best understood by knowing
what we're struggling *with*,
(re)searching *for*,

what we're trying to bring into being,
 our "projects" in the academy.
 But at it's core,
 it is all about love.

We are sisters seeking wholeness,
 building bridges, and
 shaping community
 for other courageous scholars.
 That means we are sisters making a way for
all
 to be who we really are and
 to be academic at the same time,
 helping us
all
 navigate spaces that too often assume we've arrived in the academy
 solely because of affirmative action and
 not our inherent brilliance,
 helping us
all
 see that our presence
 does not require an extraordinary explanation,
 but it does require a whole lot of responsibility and care.
 It requires love.

How we love our work and how it blesses us!
 We love the drama, the trauma,
 the joys and the struggles in our scholarship.
 We love it so much that
 we are inviting you into the *messy-ness* of it,
 into the *regular* parts of our lives,
 inviting you to engage in
reciprocal dialogues
 that by necessity
 question and push,
 prod and proclaim and
 that always, always, always touch our spirits deeply.
 We give homage to those whose work it has been to
 sit with us,
 talk with us,
 feed us,
 bandage us up,
 hug us,
 and remind us of the legacy of African people

who have come before us.
They are the ones who whisper
(and sometimes holler)
“Make a commitment,
tell your truth,
loudly, strongly,
without apology!”
So that’s why we do what we do,
that’s why we are who we are,
African heritage women,
(re)searching, looking anew for ourselves.
And we are blessed to see her
in the eyes and hearts of each other
and in your eyes too.

Each chapter of *Learning to (Re)member* is based on knowledge and wisdom that we, as African ascendant people generally and African ascendant women particularly, have *learned* to forget. For example, although Chapter 1 suggests that African ascendants have generally forgotten the power of our own memories, Chapter 2 points out that we have also been seduced into forgetting that we are not simply a mind, but body and spirit as African people, too. Chapter 3 takes up the important need to affirm and love Blackness. Chapter 4 and 5 discuss the need to (re)member our rituals and traditions and the importance of naming in African culture, respectively. Chapter 6 suggests that, in these challenging times, we need to (re)member community, a commitment to *Ubuntu* as our lived spirituality. Finally, Chapter 7 reminds us that, from a spiritual and endarkened perspective, we can create the world that we want and need as African people, one that connects the African continent and her diaspora: Spiritual activism and education are the keys to that creation.

And just as we have *learned* to forget, we can also learn to (re)member. This is especially important for those of us whose vocation is teaching and re-search. I have tried, in each of these chapters, to put forth new questions and possibilities for remembering African wisdom within the powerful work of education. I pray that this book might be a step in that direction for us all.