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After traveling to Senegal, Seinabo Sey, a mixed-raced woman with paternal roots in the Gambia, penned the song “Breathe.” A song that in many ways captures our Diasporic Soul experience. In the song, Sey explains that in Sweden, where she lives, they are scared of her, so scared that she became scared of herself.

Yet, in contrast, Senegal affirmed Sey, giving her space to move forward, never backwards. Space to experience joy. Space to breathe when life gets rough and the going gets tough. Space to imagine her own future in her own terms. In Senegal, she does not have to explain that she is magical or valuable, or beautiful for that matter. In contrast, Sey laments that back in Europe they tear her soul apart. While in Senegal, she has the sense that the nothing that she is perceived to be in the face of anti-black racism can actually be loved into something.

Sey’s experience as a Black woman in Europe is one that our students understand. They too, like Sey, have had their souls torn apart by epistemic violence, white supremacy and anti-black racism. They have, put another way, experienced what Dr. Gail Parker\(^2\) refers to as racial stress injury and what Resmaa Menakem\(^3\) refers to as racialized trauma. Scholars like Malidoma Patrice Some\(^4\), bell hooks\(^5\) and Gay Wilentz\(^6\) characterize these experiences as cultural and spiritual dis-ease.

Like Sey’s “Breathe,” our students’ Django Praxis\(^7\) autobiographies give their accounts of grappling with trauma as well as their capacity for both resilience and resistance.

Our students’ Django Praxis accounts remind us that they, like many Black students, have first-hand

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\(^3\) Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Central Recovery Press, 2017


\(^7\) Django is a term that means “I awake.” It means to take a situation that seemed doomed to fail, and turn it into an overwhelming success. Django praxis is the process of enacting and embodying lessons and skills learned from situations that were intended for your demise. Django praxis is about resurrecting, recovering, redirecting, and realizing who you truly are. The term Django praxis describes the use of critically conscious autobiography as public intellectual activism.
experience with the ways that anti-black racism, epistemic violence and the constant threat of perceived intellectual inferiority produce anxiety, trauma, and general unpleasantness for them. They have expended psychological and emotional energy to manage stress in academic and social contexts, as well as systemic and everyday racism, which can be overwhelming and taxing. They have not had the luxury to ignore the significant injustices of societal racism and the toll it takes, even when they appear to be the tough and excel academically.8

This racial trauma, like other forms of trauma, creates an imbalance in the body and in the spirit. In the body, trauma triggers a fight, flight, freeze response in the limbic system that produces stress chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline9. Trauma gets stuck in the body. Historical trauma, intergenerational trauma, institutional trauma, personal trauma vicarious or secondary trauma often interact.

As traumas compost and new ones occur, our minds, bodies and spirits experience greater and ever-increasing damage. Deep, persistent traumas live in many Black bodies. These compounded traumas contribute to a long list of common stress disorders in Black bodies such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), learning disabilities, depression, anxiety, diabetes, high blood pressure and other ailments10.

Spiritually, trauma affects us at our root chakra, the energy center in our bodies associated with our sense of safety, security and belonging. Thus, racial trauma short circuits our sense of safety, security and belonging, which are fundamental human needs that must be met in order for us to fully develop, evolve and flourish.

Put another way, trauma tears us apart and leaves us with deep wounds to heal. These wounds can manifest even if an institution is well-intended and committed to creating a space of belonging.

Yet, like Sey, our students experienced healing in Senegal.

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Menakem 15, 44
During their Diasporic Soul experience in Senegal, they experienced restoration and renewal as well as the opportunity to recognize their capacity for resilience and resistance.

In fact, their Diasporic Soul experience in Senegal allowed them to breathe and gave them room to imagine a future in their own terms, to recognize that they are both magical and valuable. As well as space to settle their bodies and heal from having their souls, spirits and hearts “torn apart.”
The willingness to extend one's self for the well-being of another.
“Our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being and recovering from trauma.” At the heart of this restoration is love. Love defined as the willingness to extend one's self for the well-being of another.

We experienced that kind of love during our time in a culture where relationships and community trump task virtually all of the time.

We first experienced this love within hours of arriving in Senegal when our drivers, Auri and Mansour, who are considered to be the sons of our hosts, stewarded us off the beach as the season's first storm quickly and unexpectedly pressed down on us.

We experienced this love and sense of community with our guide at Gorée who sincerely recognized our grief and pain and comforted us in the slave house. A generous shopkeeper in Toabab Dialow extended himself by taking the time to explain the relationship between Senegal's religious history and its intersection with resistance to French colonialism. We experienced it with the artist tucked away behind the market stalls in Sebikhotane who painstakingly explained the importance of ancestors to Senegalese spirituality. And with the son-in-law and “sons” of our hosts who ate freshly grilled fish with us on the Corniche after a long day of shopping for fabric.

We felt a sense of belonging and love when our hosts’ niece helped us to navigate the confusing back corridors and tight, hidden passageways of HLM 5 market to find the fabric our hearts were set on. That love and sense of belonging, of community was evident at the African Renaissance Monument when we were greeted with a warm, welcoming smile and only charged the African rate of entry because we were, in fact, as diasporic souls, connected to the continent. We were family; we were home.

It was that love and sense of community we felt from our fellow conferees from South Africa, Senegal, the Caribbean and the U.S at the Dakar Institute for African Studies’ (DIAS) International Conference who enthusiastically responded to our Django Praxis.

We felt that love each time we convened to eat, always together, never apart, and more often than not from a communal plate out of which we all ate. The love was around the table and shown by the three women who

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12 hooks. *Sisters of the Yam*. 110.
served us Senegalese cuisine each day. *Theibbu Dieune. Mafe. Yassa Guinar.* We felt the love feeding our diasporic souls each morning as we convened and (re)connected over breakfast featuring Looky’s millet beignets and Ta Ta Phyllis’ bakes.

We felt the love of Yaay Ibo who spent a full day making a special traditional Serere dinner for us to eat after our day on Gorée Island. We felt it from Ta Ta Amie who made cowrie shell anklets for our trip to Gorée Island and cowrie shell bracelets for us to take home as souvenirs.

And, we experienced the sense of community and the importance of relationships with the tailor and the sculptor who created the outfits and sculptures that reflect our connection to Senegal specifically and the continent in general.

We experienced love and a sense of community on our community farm visit. On the farm, we were given mangoes upon mangoes upon mangoes from a community member with longtime ties to *Ton Ton Eddy.* Mangoes so red they looked like huge purple grapes.

Beautiful red beets were given to us after being generously picked and cleaned one by one with guidance for how best to prepare them. We took them back to the house where they were cooked for our dinner that night. Most of us had never had beets; we enjoyed them and they, as bright red root veggies, contributed to our spiritual rooting and grounding during the first few days of our experience in Senegal.

It was so apparent that these mangoes and beets were gifted to us because of the ties of our hosts have with their community. And, we felt that connection each time we were introduced to someone new during our journey. We felt that love when we left as each member of our hosts’ extended family, from the youngest to the oldest, came out to wish us bon voyage. It became apparent that we were taken care of because we were connected, because we ‘belonged’ to our hosts and by extension we belonged to their family and their community.

The love we experienced showed us that our capacity for renewal, restoration, resilience and resistance is tied to the relationships we have and the communities to which we belong. And, that sense of community, that sense of belonging, that love, the willingness of others to extend themselves for our well-being was healing and restorative. In part because, like Sey, we felt valuable, magical and beautiful in ways that often unfortunately elude us in the United States.

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13 Red is the color associated with the root chakra and ancestors.
YOGA OFFERS US A VEHICLE FOR NOTICING AND BEFRIENDING THE SENSATIONS IN OUR BODIES THAT CAN PRODUCE PROFOUND CHANGES IN BOTH MIND AND BODY THAT CAN LEAD TO HEALING
The connection we experienced in community was complemented by our yoga practice throughout our Diasporic Soul experience. Our yoga practices served as vehicles for healing as we heal primarily in and through the body not just through the rational brain. Yoga offered us a vehicle for noticing and befriending the sensations in our bodies, which can produce profound changes in both mind and body that can lead to healing from trauma. Yoga gave us space to be still and to (re)connect with ourselves. It gave us a space to reflect. It gave us a place to release what no longer serves us. And, room to renew and restore. It gave us a place where we could breathe, deeply and freely.

Like Seinabo Sey, we learned how to breathe. We learned that our breath is connected to spirit as we understand it - the life force, the great spirit, the universe, god, ancestors, all energy.

(Re)connecting to our breath occurred first through our pranayama practice. We learned the three-part yogic breath as well as how to breathe during restorative yoga practice to trigger our parasympathetic nervous system, which manages the body’s relaxation response. Maintaining our connection to our breath was also part of our asana and meditation practices. Our asana practice consisted primarily of restorative yoga, which offered us the stillness we needed to recognize the sensations we felt in our bodies, to connect with our breath and to foster our healing and resilience.

Our yoga practice also included an invigorating morning warrior session under a lush mango tree in the middle of a beautiful plant-filled terrace. This early morning practice that we did prior to going to Gorée Island focused on our manipura chakra, which is considered the energy center for courage, confidence and personal power. The session allowed us to center and ground ourselves while recognizing our collective capacity for resilience and resistance. Our capacity to be warriors.

We enjoyed yoga so much that we found ourselves pulling out blankets, mats, lavender-scented eye pillows and bolsters to relax and restore even outside of our formally-led yoga practices. Some of us even took bolsters to bed with us. And, we also took to striking warrior poses to express our joy, happiness and enthusiasm. Adrian Parker’s declaration upon our return, “I miss restorative yoga,” captures the importance of yoga to our healing and restorative experience in Senegal. I expect that yoga will be a part of our students’ ongoing self-care practice.

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14 Van Derk Kolk 277

(Re)connecting with nature also played an important role in our healing and restorative experience in Senegal. We renewed our relationship with the earth, which hooks asserts in her seminal book on healing, *Sisters of the Yam*, is necessary for our [c]ollective black self-recovery.\(^{16}\)

(Re)connecting with nature meant frequently visiting the ocean and exploring Sebikhotane, a farming community just outside Senegal’s capital city, Dakar. Shortly after arriving we went to the ocean in Sendou, a small fishing village, where we expressed gratitude to Mami Water, who is revered in Senegal and throughout much of the Black Atlantic. We spent time on the beach in Somone and Toabab Dialow. On our final day, we returned to the ocean in Popenguine and the fishing village of Yenn where we thanked Mami Water for the gifts of renewal, restoration and healing.

In fact, when we first arrived an unexpected, violent thunderstorm that included whirling sand, wind gusts and a darkened sky ushered us quickly off of the seashore. That tempest reminded us of nature’s strength and ferocity while simultaneously introducing us to the fact that our arrival coincided with the beginning of Senegal’s rainy season. We quickly learned that in spite of the disorder and chaos the storm created, this storm, and the rain showers that would follow, ultimately allow Senegal to grow a myriad of crops without irrigation and allow the nation’s most revered tree, the baobab, to flourish.

The baobab tree is sacred in Senegal. In Sebikhotane, we met three massive and highly respected baobabs, including one at the entrance of town that residents know to be their protector. We walked Gorée Island’s baobab row. We visited Somone Lagoon’s sacred baobab. We saw baobabs at the center of family compounds and villages. And, we ate *confiture* made from the fruit of the baobab - *buoye* - almost daily.

We learned that the Baobab is known as the “Tree of Life” in part because it can sustain itself throughout the year from the water it absorbs during rainy season. And, because the leaves, fruit, wood and bark of the tree are all used in some fashion. As a result, we came to associate this sacred tree with own journeys, our (re)connection with nature, our restoration as well as, most importantly, our collective capacity for resilience and resistance.

Additionally, we learned that plants and other natural resources are used in traditional healing and spiritual practices.

\(^{16}\) hooks 139.
Understanding the importance of nature to Senegalese culture is just one way that our Diasporic Soul experience offered us the opportunity to develop our global awareness and inter-cultural competence in the process of our healing and restoration work. In addition to observing our host country’s culture, we developed our cultural self-awareness by reflecting on how our intersecting identities and prior experiences influenced our responses to the cultural differences and similarities we experienced.

In that vein, developing our cultural self-awareness included considering how we see ourselves. Sey’s declaration that she learned to be afraid of herself is an example of how the wounds of anti-black racism include a deep self-loathing, which means that our healing often requires us to confront our internalized sense of defectiveness and self-hate.

Therefore, we considered, as part of our healing, how our attire, informed by Senegalese couture, might give us more options for celebrating ourselves and for resisting anti-black racism. How might what we wear allow us to show up and unapologetically take up more space? How might we adorn ourselves in affirming ways? In what ways might we dress ourselves that make us feel magical, valuable and beautiful in a world that continues to tell us otherwise? How might affirming ourselves through couture associated with our various Black identities foster our capacity for resilience and be a creative form of resistance?

At the same time, developing our inter-cultural competence included learning about Senegalese aesthetics. Each day we were struck by the attire that people wore, and wore so regally. Typically in bright, vibrant, warm colors - - Orange. Gold. Red. Purple. Deep Rich Blues and in so many pattern varieties.

And, we learned, later, how the attire we saw each day on our excursions was tied to commerce and the Senegalese economy. The tailoring of outfits is an integral part of the Senegalese economy. We learned how fabric is sold and about the significant role of tailors and seamstresses in the culture. We learned that Senegalese couture, specifically hand-made tailored outfits, offer the Senegalese a way to express themselves. Typically, while ready-to-wear attire is available, new traditional outfits are made with great fanfare for special occasions such as both Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr, weddings and baby namings|baptisms.

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Eid al-Adha is also called the “Festival of Sacrifice”, is the second of two Islamic holidays celebrated worldwide each year and considered the holier of the two. Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan.
Our Senegalese couture and commerce experience included spending a full afternoon in the HLM 5 market shopping for fabric. At times, it felt overwhelming - searching piles and piles of fabric in what felt like hundreds of prints and patterns and navigating the throngs of people, selling and buying, shoes, jewelry, ready-wear outfits, fabric and implements. In the heat and humidity.

We also had design consults with a local tailor who took our measurements and talked with us about the outfits we each imagined for ourselves. We showed him pictures of what we hoped for and he created sketches for each of us in his design notebook to which he attentively affixed a small swatch of our selected fabrics. Having the experience of being measured and fitted for an outfit made especially for you felt transformative. You feel special. You feel magical. You feel valuable. You feel beautiful. You feel affirmed and celebrated because for most of your life you have worn what the dominant culture insists is appropriate for you to wear. Having an outfit made that is informed by your own sense of self, your own self-concept and that reflects your intersecting identities, including the one(s) tied to Africa is truly powerful. And, to wear it, back home, we hope will have us showing up unapologetically full of pride and self-confidence.

And, the experience also, forced us, as Americans who are typically task-oriented, to breathe and trust the process as well as the relationship that our hosts had with the tailor.

And, in the process of our design consults and market visit, we continued to observe and learn more about other aspects of Senegal’s rich and vibrant culture and people.
Healing often involves a fair degree of discomfort. Mending our wounds requires us to unpack, unwrap and clean sometimes nasty wounds that cut deep, beyond what we can see with the naked eye. And, nothing, no wound seems to make us as Americans more uncomfortable than those associated with race and slavery.

Yet, we cannot heal or experience restoration or renewal on any level without acknowledging how our nation’s history of enslavement, Jim Crow and systemic white supremacy has left us wounded and scarred. How our bodies and spirits were and continue to be brutalized. How our souls have, to quote Sey, been torn apart.

So our healing and restoration experience in Senegal included a visit to Gorée Island, memory island, which is a place integral to our wounding and the trauma of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Gorée Island, one of the first twelve UNESCO world heritage sites, is a place that owes its singular destiny to the extreme centrality of its geographical position between the North and the South, and to its excellent strategic position that offered a safe haven for anchoring ships. Gorée was at the center of the rivalry between European nations for control of the slave trade since the trade’s inception in the 15th century. Gorée Island was prized by various European nations that successively used it as a stopover and slave market, fundamentally making the Island a warehouse consisting of over a dozen slave houses until the abolition of the trade in the French colonies.

It was deeply unsettling and painful for us to stand in a room where our ancestors would have been weighed to determine where they could be sold into slavery. And, it was difficult to learn that if he, she, they did not meet the requisite weight then they would be forced to eat black-eyed peas (nebi) and palm oil to fatten up. Those who did not achieve the requisite weight would be put into service in one of the colonial cities - Saint Louis. Rufisque. Dakar. Gorée.

We experienced and observed sensations in our bodies as we tentatively entered tight, dark rooms. Cells, actually. Designated for men bound with a 5 kg metal balls attached to their legs to discourage escape. Women shackled. And, the most haunting, the holding cells for children, all ripped away from their parents. And, the special cell set aside for female virgins who were required to pleasure the colonizers; the only cell that offered a designated hole for them to relieve themselves.

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And, then there were the even tighter, smaller spaces used to punish and to crush. The disobedient. The recalcitrant. The resistant. The rebellious. And, the narrow rooms adjacent to the door of no return, holding cells for the sick, who could easily be tossed out to sharks if they did not get well soon enough for the journey. They were disposable; there were always more bodies to ship.

And, we stood in the door of no return.

Remembering. Recognizing.


As well as our strength and fortitude.

Our Resilience.

Our Resistance.

Reminded of our collective and Individual capacity for both.

In that doorway, we looked out at the gorgeous blue sea and acknowledged our ancestors, praying:

Thank you.

We are grateful.

We are so very very sorry.

Rest in Peace and Power.

Please guide and walk with us as we go forward, facing and embracing our futures.

That evening, after seeing the rest of the Island, we returned home to reflect, fill up on love and feed our diasporic souls with millet couscous and sauce de neba die, a fortifying meal fit for resilience and resistance, fit, perhaps, for warriors.

Our visit to Gorée Island was complimented by a subsequent visit to the African Renaissance Monument, which bolstered our connection as diasporic souls to the African diaspora and served as another reminder of our collective capacity for resilience and resistance.
In addition to our day on Gorée Island, our Diasporic Soul experience also included engaging in Django Praxis at this year's Dakar Institute for African Studies (DIAS) international conference. We used our autobiographies to challenge and resist the imposed and colonizing standards, traditions, and epistemologies that maintain white supremacy and perpetuate anti-blackness in the academy. Our resistance included combining our testimonies with music, critical inquiry, poetry, and storytelling as vehicles for healing. Like Sey, we loved our nothing into something, something liberating, something healing, something powerful, something restorative.

We resisted convention by not to sitting behind a table and reading our papers as is the “norm” at academic conferences. Instead, we centered our culture by singing, drumming and making music. Haunting, soulful music that transformed the space, opened hearts and allowed us to change minds and shift conversations.

After introducing ourselves by giving our names and stating our purpose, we broke out into four small groups where each of our students shared her/his testimony and led his/her small group in an activity designed to heal, designed to to shift how we understand race, education and healing. Each of the students focused their learning activity on their respective journey, talents and purpose.

Diamond led her group to create a collaborative poem that they presented to the full conference upon reconvening. Ese used storytelling, specifically developing a collaborative character sketch of a diasporic soul, who could serve as a counter-narrative to under-developed, stereotypical characters of African-descent that continue be ever present in western television and movies. Taylor used collective inquiry to explore the themes of fear and forgiveness as they relate to racial trauma, anti-black racism and epistemic violence. And, Adrian, leveraging his musical talent, generated, with his breakout group, a music playlist to foster resilience in the face of anti-black racism and white supremacy.

Our presentation was very well-received. In fact, in a heated debate on the second day of the conference, it was evoked as a cogent reminder of how anti-black racism and white supremacy operate in the academy in deeply painful ways, ways, sadly, not fully understood by those who too are victims of it throughout the Diaspora. Our fellow conferees expressed appreciation for our perspectives and praised us for disrupting conventions. They thanked us for telling our stories and being creative. They were excited to learn that our students’ Django Praxis is an integral part of my forthcoming book *Anti-Black Racism and Epistemic Violence (Sentio 2018).*
Thank you for supporting our journey of restoration and healing. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to recognize our collective capacity for resilience and resistance. Our Diasporic Soul experience was transformative. We look forward to sharing our experience with you and other members of the Xavier community this fall. We will be inviting you to come to our salon, silent auction and book signing to learn more about our students’ transformative experiences.

As outlined in the Working Group on Xavier’s Connection with Slavery final recommendations, we will take additional students to Senegal for their own Diasporic Soul experience. It is our hope that our next group of 4-6 students will travel to Senegal in December 2018 with another group of the same size going in Summer 2019 for a total of 8-12 students during the 2018-2019 academic year. We will do the same for the next two academic years for a total of three academic years.